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Foster Parents' Sense of Belongingness Through an Ecological Counseling Perspective

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2023

Abstract

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by

Ashley Hershberger

MS, Lock Haven University, 2016

BS, Lock Haven University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Foster parents occupy vital positions within our community. Foster parents assist with the care of children who cannot reside in their own homes due to being placed in legal custody. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of foster parents' sense of belongingness among relationships and community with particular attention to the rural setting. This study is a phenomenological investigation through a hermeneutic lens. This research used nine participants. Data analysis is completed through semistructured interviews, defining meaning units from interviews, reviewing interaction and meaning units, synthesis, descriptions of the phenomenon, and the description of the hermeneutic circle. The results are described through the tenets of an ecological perspective in counseling. Presenting themes included: (a) building supports within the community, (b) desire for creating and connecting familiarity within families and various communities, (c) emotional responses to fostering, (d) continuous contact with foster children and parents following the foster experience, (e) interaction within the community, (f) the need for tangible support from the community, (g) educating and spreading awareness of fostering, (h) active extended family involvement with foster parents and foster children, (i) shared foster parent experiences, (j) expressing identity and active advocacy of fostering, (k) active spiritual involvement, and (l) experiencing care from the community. Bringing awareness to the sense of belongingness may assist with continued support for foster parents, counseling approaches, provide awareness to professionals with foster families, and engagement in the foster care system.

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to all of my family, friends, colleagues, and Walden University faculty who provided me unconditional love and support for my work, no matter how small or large of an involvement. The questions, kindest words of encouragement, or demonstration of interest meant so much. Celebrating each accomplishment kept me working throughout this program. I also dedicate this work to my daughter, Amelia, and husband, Braucht. Braucht, thank you for always being supportive during the challenging times of late-night schoolwork, being an active listener to all of my thoughts, your ongoing motivation, and understanding my long-term goal. To my astounding Amelia, here is to being blessed with you during my PhD journey, writing papers while you were sleeping, and working with me on days when I needed to study or write while you worked on something of your own right beside me. Amelia, you can do anything you put your heart into, you continue to inspire me to see the magic in daily life through overflowing love. To my mom, you are a constant light and cheerleader throughout any dream I have, thank you for your endearing, caring, and loving support. To my late father, you always shared with me the thought that we can do anything, and you pushed to help me see that ability. To both of my parents, I wouldn't be here without the love and support you two showed me. To my in-laws, I can't say thank you enough for your help during all my studies and for the continuous support. I dedicate this dissertation to myself, for all of the work, emotions, experience, and grit to achieve this goal.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

In this chapter, I illuminate the basis of relevance for my research study. There exist many studies on foster children, foster parents, and the effect of trauma on foster children (Cooley et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2021). However, there are limited studies that explore the effects of foster parenting within belonging in their communities. I conducted a phenomenological study on belongingness among foster parents through an ecological counseling perspective which encouraged expression of experiences from foster parents which provided a further understanding of a societal group. Through highlighting foster parents' sense of belongingness in their community a reflection of their lived experience provides insight into foster parent needs. Counselors who work with foster parents may increase their ability to work effectively with this population. This research provided counselors with enhanced knowledge of foster parents' sense of belongingness within their communities and the effect on retention rates; with this awareness counselors can provide a form of treatment geared specifically for foster parents.

Background

Human beings are social creatures who experience numerous aspects of life, including emotions. To work through their experiences, humans require protective influences, for example, a sense of an authentic self as well as belonging to your authentic self and who you are as well as in your community (Tompkins, 2020).

Belongingness is explored within a variety of relationships and settings. Lambert (2013) described belonging as increasing meaning in life.

Identifying belongingness among foster parents is a relatively new concept. A foster parent is an individual through the foster care system that provides care for children whose biological parents are unable to care for them (Foster Care, 2020). Characteristics of successful foster parents include parental tolerance, faith, concern for children, and organization (Buehler et al., 2003). Although research is present within foster care units, literature did not identify the sense of belongingness within foster parents and the parental team. Rates of foster parents decline after their first year of being foster parents (National Council for Adoption, 2018). Multiple aspects influence families for not engaging in continued fostering but building awareness to foster parents guides us to make some potential changes in these rates.

Shdaimah and Rosen (2020) described foster parents as "semi-professional extensions of child welfare agencies" which include interaction with an emotional venture, the potential for challenging relationships, and the opportunity for building bonds (p. 2). The foster parent relationship has many variations and the need for mental health awareness and community engagement affects both the children and the foster parents. Connect, a program focused on the foster parents of foster teens through building parenting skills and awareness of attachment securities (Moretti & Kelly, 2019) aims to assist the parents and teens in forming a bond. Although the goal of this program is significant, there is limited research regarding foster parent experiences of belongingness and areas for building belongingness. The mockingbird family model is another example

of support for foster parents (Support, 2019). The mockingbird family model began through the Department for Education's Supporting Families to keep families together as well as build a safe community environment; this focus is within the foster care network itself, not the community (Support, 2019).

Overall, limited research was presented on the importance of foster parents' lived experiences which displayed a need for further exploration of foster parent experiences. Fees et al. (1998) completed a longitudinal study on demographics, training, and prior parenting experience on foster parents due to retention rates. Although this study was insightful towards satisfaction, it did not focus on community belonging. Additionally, Gillis-Arnold et al. (1998) completed a study on understanding the motivations and attitudes of foster parents on adopting versus nonadoptive in parenting. The researchers identified valuable parts to fostering and engagement in care, yet the limitation is within an awareness of foster parents.

Research Problem Statement

Belongingness is omnipresent and embodies psychological connection to others (Baskin et al., 2010). The human need for belonging is key to socialization and building healthy lifestyles. Support is the top reason foster parents cease services, average length of foster parenting is approximately 1-5 years (Ahn et al., 2017). MacGregor et al. (2006) discussed themes associated with foster parents' motivation, support, and retention. In regards to building retention rates among the foster parent community MacGregor et al (2006) reported improving supports is an approach to improving retention. Rural communities are approximately one-fifth of the population, limitations with rural

communities include fewer resources in turn increasing rates of maltreatment, limitations to employment, education, and poverty (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). A dearth of resources includes foster parents also known as resource families, social workers, mental health professionals, including counseling services where services are needed for the population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Additionally, the focus on support and belongingness may be useful to assist with increased retention rates among foster parents.

This research study assisted with properly understanding the lived experiences of foster parents. Counselor educators and counselors will benefit from this research through being well informed of competencies that need addressed to adequately counsel foster parents. An increased understanding of belongingness among foster parents provides an increase in awareness of the needs of the community, building advocacy for mental health, and further discussion on the importance of belongingness. Therefore, this research focuses on the participant's sense of belongingness, perceived history of belonging, community engagements, and their lived experience as foster parents.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to explore the lived experiences of foster parents' sense of belongingness in rural settings. I collected data through semistructured interviews with foster parents in rural areas and used thematic analysis. Findings could increase understanding of foster parents' sense of belongingness and underlying reasons for lower retention rates. An increased understanding of belongingness to foster parent retention rates may increase counseling

services related to foster parents, raise awareness of the community's needs, build advocacy for mental health, and increase support. With the identification of the foster parent's sense of belongingness, researchers may continue to build awareness in our field and community to build change and resources. The phenomenon of interest is the lived experience of belongingness that foster parents' experience.

Foster parents provide care to children who are deprived of parental care (Chernova et al., 2020). Munford (2006) described how each foster parent works with vulnerable youth from a variety of settings including abusive, addictions, violence, poor support, health struggles, and mental health concerns, which displays the need for awareness to foster parents' lifestyle. There is an increased concern over low retention rates for foster parents and increased foster children (NCFA, 2018). However, limited information focuses on the effects of belongingness on foster parents and retention rates. Given that foster parents promote foster children's well-being through consistent engagement it is important to identify the dilemmas that effect the foster parents' abilities (Mallon, 2019). By allowing foster parents an opportunity to express their lived experience, this study aims to fill a gap in qualitative literature relative to foster parents and their sense of belongingness and the influence on retention rates.

Increased knowledge through this phenomenological study allows for building mental health counselor awareness to foster parent needs and supports. For counselors to effectively assist foster parents, counselors must utilize culturally competent strategies in pursuit of social change. A culturally competent counselor engages in continued education to assist with ethical decision making, facilitating counseling relationships,

respecting, and valuing culturally diverse clients (Hays et al., 2017). Hence, this study focused on enhancing the understanding of the lived experiences of foster parents' sense of belongingness. Through this hermeneutic phenomenological study, awareness brought to counselors may inform counseling practices which could be used to develop new treatment methods, bring awareness to supports, and overall build mental health of foster parents and their families.

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of belongingness among rural foster parents in their communities?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The foundations for this research include a theoretical framework of phenomenology as defined by Heidegger and a conceptual framework focusing on Conyne and Cook's (2004) ecological counseling perspective. The conceptual framework builds off the theory of phenomenology and harmonizes with the lens of ecological counseling perspectives to assist with detailed foster parent experiences.

Phenomenology

This was a hermeneutic phenomenological study; therefore, hermeneutic phenomenology was the theoretical framework of this study. Phenomenology was originally created by Edmund Husserl to study experiences "of the world as such" (Heidegger & Macquarrie, 2008. p.77). Heiddeger (1962) described the term phenomenology as a methodological conception which is displayed by "let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (p.

58). Heidegger identified interpretation with *Being* as the entity as structure described previously as "something for something" and fore structure previously referred to as *Dasein*. "*Dasein* can discover tradition, preserve it, and study it explicitly" (Heidegger & Macquarrie, 2008. p.41). The beauty of this approach included the ability to question and focus on human existence. This framework allows a phenomenon to show itself and its meaning through being. Researchers use qualitative inquiry through studying participants experiences to derive meaning of a phenomenon. This phenomenological study focused on foster parents' sense of belongingness in their rural communities to conceptualize belongingness and needs within the rural community. Heidgger's use of fundamental ontology was phenomenology to focus on Being where inquiry was an interpretive process of understanding through experiences. The hermeneutic circle of interpretation evolves through *Dasein* by new understanding, being circular in interpretive to identify meaning. The purpose was to describe a lived experience based on the experience itself and themes of meaning.

Ecological Counseling Perspective

The ecological perspective was the theoretical approach for this study which is based on understanding human behavior and essentially as humans we are connected to everything in our environment (Cook, 2012). Cook et al. (2012) described the building blocks of the ecological perspective as "its personal and contextual nature, its interactional nature, and the importance of meaning making" (p. 6). From a counseling perspective the use of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems described the impression of systems on individuals compared to just human behavior without the

environment. In which an ecological perspective describes the importance of

environment on an individual's behavior. This included the interactional aspect of human

behavior within an environment and reactions. The last part of the ecological perspective

was the focus on meaning making, which demonstrates how individuals perceive and

understands experiences differently and how this influences their lifestyle. A counselor's

use of ecological perspective was to assist clients with developing a more "satisfying,

productive, and meaningful lives" (Cook et al, 2012, p.7). The ecological perspective

assisted with structuring of semistructed interview questions and provided guidance to

results from participants. The systems created by Bronfenbrenner (1979) microsystem,

mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem described in Chapter 2 support

the awareness that systems have a direct influence on human behavior, relating that

ecological perspective encompasses a thorough interpretation of human behavior.

Ecological counseling perspective is derived from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems

theory. The ecological counseling perspective is not considered a theory more of an

approach to thinking about human behavior; through individuals, lifestyle influences,

interactional behavior, and mean-making (Cook, 2015).

  A goal within ecological counseling perspective is assisting individuals to develop

a meaningful life for themselves by building awareness and understanding to their life

influences and ability to engage in meaning-making (Cook, 2015). Use of an ecological

perspective provides multiple opportunities for assessment to build growth and change

for an individual through creative pathways to assist with individualized well-being and

development (Shallcross, 2013). Cook (2015) described four propositions within the

ecological perspective including behavior as personal, behavior as contextual, behavior is interactional, and all behavior is associated with meaning. This perspective emphasized the importance of clients being their own experts and utilization of strengths (Shallcross, 2013). The ecological counseling perspective was the lens within hermeneutic phenomenology to analyze data for this study.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was qualitative which used a hermeneutic phenomenological design. The phenomenological approach is a method and philosophy that explores the lived experience of a phenomenon (Ravitch et al., 2019). Hermeneutic analysis allowed the researchers to have a deep understanding of the data or of participant lived experiences. The hermeneutic approach allowed for uncovering meaning in human interactions (Suddick et al., 2020). Therefore, this design allowed for the exploration of the lived experiences and increased understanding of meaning for foster parents. Kafle (2013) identified that phenomenological research focuses on a phenomenon within its original form to identify hidden meaning. A goal of this study was to illuminate the foster parents' sense of belongingness to build interventions to assist counselors in creating appropriate means for building supports and build effective outcomes for clients in therapy through use of appropriate approaches and plans for treatment.

Definitions

This phenomenological study encompasses unique terminology, in this section I provided definitions of words or phrases to provide consistency, understanding and meaning.

*Belongingness***:** A feeling of or potential development of acceptance, inclusion, respect, contribution to a group and within oneself (Walton & Brady, 2017).

Foster parent: A temporary care provider for children who are deemed unable to stay in their home by the courts and are in the custody of the county's children and youth agency (Department of Human Services, 2022).

*Rural***:** Open country and nonmetro areas with a population density of less than 500 people per square mile and areas with less than 2,500 people ("What is rural?", 2019).

Lived experience: A representation of an experience itself with meaningful interpretation, through hermeneutic circles (Frechette et al., 2020).

Dasein: The experience of human beings in which being is understood by being among oneself through presence (Heidegger, 1962).

Hermeneutic circle: A cycle in which we interpret text, through understanding each individual part and how each part influences on the whole experience (Heiddegger, 1962)

Assumptions

There were several assumptions that helped guide this research process. Assumptions for this study included participants willingness to disclose honest information regarding their experiences of foster parenting and belongingness. I also assumed that the experience of foster parents was different from biological parenting and adoptive parents. Additionally, I assumed that my background experience of counseling foster parents and foster children enabled me to develop rapport and a strong working

alliance due to my work among the fostering community. My hope was that foster parents would be open, honest, and informative regarding their experiences with me, demonstrated through trustworthiness during the data collection process. I assumed that this study would educate and cause interest from not only counselor educators, other professionals, foster parents, programs, and institutions which engage in fostering. Due to these assumptions, I focused only on foster parenting in this study. However, a follow up study on parenting and adoptive parenting experiences with belongingness is needed to compare on their experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this research study was building awareness to the lived experiences of foster parents in the rural setting through an ecological lens. I built awareness to the data for this study, a qualitative methodology was selected that included semistructured interviews with foster parents in the rural setting. There were several areas of delimitation in this research. The first delimitation resulted from the deliberate focus of the study on experienced foster parents. Participants were able to enlighten this research regarding development and engagement in fostering and belongingness. Value would be in future research specifically comparing foster parents to adoptive parents' experiences.

Limitations

Limitations within this research included the sampling selection. I deliberately selected participants who were foster parents within a rural setting. Due to selection of a specific topic and population this is limiting towards results. Therefore, the restriction

was present on the location and type of participant being interviewed, which encompasses generalizations.

Significance

The potential effects from this research included solid implications for social change. The greater demand for foster parents played a role in society due to the rates of children in foster care. Additionally, this phenomenological study bridged the gap in counseling literature pertaining to foster parents' belongingness through an ecological counseling perspective. There was a need to develop an understanding of the experiences of foster parents and identify areas of belongingness to refine counseling approaches as well as societal implications on foster parenting. For the researcher, the study helped uncover areas in foster parent belongingness where research was limited on exploration. Thus, future researchers can support awareness of foster parent experiences, the influences of belongingness in rural settings, and approaches to treatment.

Summary

In conclusion, Chapter 1 presented the background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research question, framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitation, and significance. Each section provided insight into the hermeneutic phenomenological research study of foster parents' sense of belongingness in the rural setting. In Chapter 2, I provide a comprehensive review of literature related to foster parents, framework, and concepts relevant to the phenomenon of interest.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

A thorough review of scholarly literature pertaining to foster parents' sense of belongingness regarding counseling revealed a dearth of information. There was a significant body of literature which examined parenting, supports, community, and family, that included interventions within counseling (Metcalf, 2021; Sweeney, 2019). Vanderfaeillie et al. (2020) discussed the effects on foster parenting with foster children regarding satisfaction, support needs, finances, collaboration, training, and characteristics of children, and illustrated the importance of further interventions for foster parents. Researchers associate numerous factors within foster parenting retention (Ahn et al., 2017; Strickler et al., 2018). Belongingness effects a person's wellbeing, fulfillment, and cognitive capabilities (Allen et al., 2018). A limited body of knowledge exists regarding the effects of belongingness of foster parents.

There is a need for counselors to build competencies regarding belongingness within foster parents and the limitations on retention rates to assist with counselor development and treatment. This literature review aimed to consider these limitations and their effect on foster parents. Therefore, I provided a comprehensive review of the literature focusing on literature search strategies, the theoretical framework, and concepts related to retention, support, belongingness, and systems.

Literature Search

The literature search strategy for this study began with established keywords and among multiple combinations of each term. I used the following search terms

belongingness, foster parents, retention rates, adoptive parents, foster care system, support, rural settings, and counseling interventions. The literature search included the Walden University library databases, ERIC, Thoreau, CINAHL, EBSCOHOST, and MEDLINE. I refined my search through publication dates of 2017 to the present to display the most current research available on the topics. Older resources provided a perspective of this topic when present data was not available. I illustrated the scholarly resources available and disclosed the opportunity for further knowledge on this topic.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Phenomenology

It was useful to break down the term phenomenology to understand the approach of this study. Phenomenology, a Greek term known as phainómenon, which means "that which appears" (Smith, 2013). The suffix "ology" means "the study of" connecting the two means that phenomenology is the study of that which appears (Smith, 2013). Heidegger's philosophy of phenomenology focused on "being" as s scientific and interpretive process. Heidegger's philosophy asserts *Dasein* as providing the existence, focusing on the philosophical stance of what it means to be and the piece of understanding (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger's (1962) tenets of phenomenological philosophy include the being with also known as *Dasein*, the existential totality of being, and the temporality of *Dasein*. Heidegger acknowledged for researchers that preconceived notions and judgements were present but need to be explored by each researcher including acknowledging experiences through culture (Heidegger, 1962). Phenomenology is a direct study of an experience that builds awareness and an

understanding of a lived experience. While a phenomenological approach displays a lived experience, epoché and reduction are required in phenomenological research to ensure the orientation of meaning behind the research (van Manen, 2017).

Hermeneutic

Heidegger reconfigured Husserl's phenomenological approach. Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology consists of an interpretation of a human experience with the researcher's perspective in conjunction within data, encompassing more than data but "being" (Rodriguez, et al., 2018). As the researcher, I focused on the experience that was derived from data, while not utilizing bracketing as Heidegger expressed bracketing as affecting the interpretation of an experience due to preconceived understanding (Neubauer et al., 2019). A primary use of hermeneutic phenomenology includes the hermeneutic circle of interpretation through capturing *Dasein* also known as being there (Heidegger, 1962).

Hermeneutic work uncovers meaning through the situation itself, the interpreter, and their derived understanding, a "play" that provides definition through perspective and sharing upon the topic (Suddick et al., 2020). Heidegger (1962) described the researcher's role within the hermeneutic circle as an "endeavor to leap into" (p.363) in which an assembly of meaning was derived through; a focus on what was displayed and drew meaning of the experience. This study utilized this approach through exhausting the literature on the topics as well as interviews with foster parents, which then provided an interpretive understanding of the situation through thematic analysis. The study looks at bringing forth foster parents lived experiences to describe meaning within their

experience of belongingness. Alongside the application of phenomenology according to hermeneutic principle is the use of the ecological counseling perspective.

Ecological Counseling Perspective

Bronfenbrenner developed ecological systems theory in 1979 describing developmental reflections of environmental systems; microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Shelton, 2018). Bronfenbrenner continuously worked on his theory of human development throughout his career, due to the addition of time and biological process. Guy-Evan's (2020) described Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems as interrelated due to the effect each system has on development. Bronfenbrenner's systems are multifaceted for understanding the influence of human development from childhood into adulthood.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) described the microsystem as relationships between a person and their direct surroundings. For example, their home lifestyle, schooling, and work environments. The next system is mesosystem which consists of interactions from microsystems, which two parts of a person's microsystem engage with one another, they are interconnected (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The exosystem is a layer of additional social influences and structures on the individual which may not have an immediate engagement with the individual but influence their relationships and settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Macrosystem focuses on an individual's cultural influences including ethnicity, belief systems, socioeconomic status, culture, and location (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The chronosystem pertains to the patterns and transitions throughout a person's life, including environmental changes, experiential changes, and

milestones an individual faces (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Each system provides clarity to why humans behave differently due to many environmental and social influences.

Cook (2015) expounded upon and described the ecological perspective as interlocking systems which all depend upon one another. Therefore, we cannot exist without each system that surrounds and nourishes our lives. Cook described ecological counseling as a perceptive of helping individuals develop meaningful, nourishing, and productive lifestyles through themselves, interactions within their life, the roots in which they developed and their mean-making process. This approach within counseling focuses on a person's unique environment and building interventions within their systems to alter their lives. This framework was appropriate for my study on multiple levels: (a) foster parenting, (b) differentials in support networks, (c) parenting among others who do not foster, (d) networks of foster care agencies, (e) differentials within counseling foster parents and the lack of skills prepared for foster parent's needs.

A phenomenological study with a hermeneutic principle and an ecological counseling perspective considers how systems affect different aspects of foster parenting experiences, challenges, retention, and relationships. My study completed this through semi-structured interviews with foster parents on their sense of belonging within their rural community. I explored whether belongingness influences their systems and involvement as a foster parent.

Literature Review

In this section, I provided a comprehensive literature review that supports the need for an understanding of foster parents' experiences. I began with a review of

counseling approaches to explain the enhancement to an ecological perspective. I

followed with an explanation of foster parents' systems, retention, and the importance of

belongingness. Finally, I concluded with how influential this research would be for

counselors and other professionals working with foster parents.

Counseling Approaches

To assist foster parents an awareness to psychological, behavioral, and emotional

concerns is necessary. According to Adkins et al. (2018), a brief psychoeducational

intervention allowed foster parents to mentalize as individuals and a unit, therefore

providing the potential opportunity to reduce challenges within the home which then can

increase retention and satisfaction within foster parenting. Adults who participate in

counseling that struggle with belonging can work on areas such as acceptance of others,

sharing differences, building healthy relationships, and awareness of personal needs. A

history of approaches to family therapy allows for further understanding.

The counseling process holds a variety of approaches and theories to suit the

needs of each client. Within family counseling a review of Bowenian family systems

theory, contextual therapy, symbolic-experiential family therapy, structural family

therapy, brief strategic family therapy, and an ecological counseling perspective provided

awareness to approaches for family systems.

Bowenian Family Systems Theory

Bowenian family systems theory was created by Murray Bowen through his work

mother to child (Thompson et al., 2019). Concepts within Bowen's theory include

differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional process, family projection

process, emotional cutoff, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, and societal emotional process (Thompson et al, 2019). Differentiation of self describes the ability for individuals to maintain a strong sense of self and thoughtfulness while engaging in family systems (Messina et al., 2018). The purpose of this is to ensure stability within oneself and regulate emotions throughout family situations to assist with healthy interactions. Triangles focus on the incorporation of three individuals, a two-person relationship was described as unstable in a stressful encounter and the third person involvement allows for processing and managing high emotions specifically within child welfare families (Thompson et al, 2019). Looking into nuclear family emotional process entails subsystems within the family being dysfunctional causing the whole family system to face challenges (Thompson et al, 2019). Brooks (2017) describes family projection process as parents project their emotions onto the children which backs dysfunction. Emotional cutoff was a person's ability to handle emotional contact within the individuals in the family system and how they separate themselves as children become grown individuals (Thompson et al, 2019). Multigenerational transmission process describes emotional pathways created and passed to each generation, individual with child welfare involvement has demonstrated a continuation of services later as adults (Thompson et al, 2019). Sibling position describes birth order with behavioral and attitudes and societal emotional process describes taking these concepts and viewing them within societal groups outside of the individual families (Olson, 2020). Counselors utilized these concepts to normalize family challenges, discuss and reduce emotional challenges, promote differentiation along with understanding and healthy functioning.

Contextual Family Therapy

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagi founded contextual family therapy focusing specifically on multigenerational relations, individualism, and elements of close relationships involving understanding, trust, and communication (van der Meiden et al., 2018). Contextual family therapy focuses on balancing responsibility and eliminating destructive interactions. Boszormenyi-Nagi and Krasner (1986) focused on entitlement, loyalty, parentification, revolving slate, and ledger merits. Entitlement discusses the guarantee to be cared for within family relationships along with loyalty in this situation is seen as invisible due to forces that influence personal choices linked among generations (van der Meiden et al, 2018). Parentification is a common term in counseling which described an adult encouraging a child to function in a higher than age-appropriate responsibility (van der Meiden et al, 2018). A revolved slate portrays unresolved, unbalance, and unfairness among individuals within the family system throughout and transferred among generations which influences injustice (van der Meiden, 2020). Ledger merits provide a description of the give and take within the family system to build an awareness of responsibility and fairness (Hanson et al, 2019). A counselor's focus with contextual family therapy includes the ability to model and education on interactions within family systems, building the wellness of each individual, and relational fairness.

Symbolic-Experiential Therapy

Carl Whitaker developed symbolic-experiential family therapy which engaged in personal growth, power among experiencing emotions and feelings in addition to the symbolic world (Martin, 2011). Whitaker's approach to theory is unique due to his

beliefs on obstruction of theory in the counseling process and the application of involvement in sessions. Symbolic-experiential therapy views problems within family units due to diminishing emotional expression (Roberts & Chafin, 2020). Martin (2011) described the therapist role as creating a new experience in the present to focus on each experience rather than dissect the past. Gehart (2017) described how Whitmaker focused on observations of family responses, emotional processes within the family, identifying structural organization, including boundaries, and flexibility. Emotional process is examined through tolerance, conflict management, playfulness, loyalty, problem solving, and responses to numerous influences (Gehart, 2017). This approach to counseling was unique by its use of adding confusion and disorganization within sessions to reduce rigidness and to allow an alteration to processes of thinking (Gehart, 2017). This approach provided direct, humorous, and playfulness within counseling.

Structural Family Therapy

Structural family therapy started in the 1960's by Salvador Minuchin (Minuchin, 1974). Structural family therapy utilizes a systemic approach to the family dynamics reviewing organization, emotional boundaries, and alliances (Eddy et al., 2021). Within family systems the counselor works on the subsystems within the family to define roles and boundaries to create the most advantageous functioning. Subsystems within a family include spouses, parents, children, and siblings all of which are influences by one another, environments, and life cycles (Eddy et al., 2021). In reference to family system structure, Minuchin (1974) "defines structure as the interactional dynamics found within a family system." In consideration of roles, boundaries, reactions to one another,

functions a family can demonstrate disruptive or functional relationships and cohesiveness (Eddy et al., 2021). This approach focused on the communication between family members, reduction of blame focus, refocused functioning roles, and parents at the top of the hierarchy. Minuchin created this approach to initially work with low-income families, this approach and interventions continue to display engagement with high-risk youth, youth involved in gangs, substance abuse, and foster families (Eddy et al., 2021).

Brief Strategic Family Therapy

Brief strategic family therapy (BSFT) is a short-term therapy which focused on family treatment primarily for youth demonstrating behavioral concerns (Lebensohn et al., 2019). BSFT works on altering the patterns within family interactions by maintaining focus on the problem, building plans, and practical interventions. BSFT's core principles include family-system approach, family patterns influence on behaviors, and targeting the patterns of concern and altering the patterns to improve family functioning (Szapocznik et al., 2012). BSFT incorporates techniques of joining, tracking and diagnosing, and restructuring to build healthier interactions (Szapocznik et al., 2012). Joining includes engaging with the family system, tracking and diagnosing includes identifying concerns within the family unit or individuals and building strength within the family ("Brief," n.d.). Lastly, restructuring looks at transitioning poor behaviors to reduce problems within relationships ("Brief", n.d.). Lebensohn (2019) described a therapist's interaction as incorporating structural changes immediately through enactments in session, then following with reinforcement of interaction.

Theories and Perspectives

The theories above provided awareness to common theories and applications among family systems. Each theory has benefits and limitations. An ecological perspective in this research study allowed for a well attuned approach to the multiple influences. Foster children may present with cognitive, social, and mental health concerns that require a perspective to counseling that is multifaceted and designed specifically for the family unit and individual (Morrison & Mishana, 2006).

Foster Parent Systems

The concept of systems throughout any lifestyle was imperative to understand a person's behavior. Piel et al. (2017) reviewed the importance of ecological systems within foster parents to encourage use of various systems to allow guidance, expertise, and support within their construct and overall, the transitions within utilization and application of systems over time. While I reviewed Piel et al.'s work, awareness was brough towards foster children and their systems of impression. These systems were a part of the foster parents as well, plus additional areas depending on foster parent employment, personal and family lifestyle. Overall, this indicated numerous systems in place which can influence a person's wellbeing. Piel et al. concluded that foster parents benefit from an ecological system which allowed for contribution, growth, and development to assist with well-being, and safety for the foster parents and children. With an awareness of an increase in emotional demand and varying role definitions of foster parents, it is implied that their systems are complex and alter without much notification. Therefore, a strong system in place is crucial for success. Richardson et al.

(2021) strengthened the perception that foster parents supports is helpful both formal and informal to assists with levels of stress and engagement in foster parenting.

Scientifically it is proven that social supports add quality to our lives and assist with emotional stressors, therefore increasing levels of happiness (Feeney et al., 2015). Not only do foster children going through transitional stages, but foster parents also experience alterations in households (Lietz et al., 2016). Managing schedules, transitioning households, and changes within the family unit were concerns within foster parenting, yet a significant concern is the increase in emotional distress (Lietz et al., 2016). To assist with emotional distress, the use of self-care is necessary, and one domain of self-care is personal (Phoenix, 2013). Miller et al. (2019) discussed the use of self-care for foster parents highlighting the importance and necessity of supports. Miller et al. (2019) identified the use of supports help with the responsibilities of a foster parent but in the same regard one challenge was finding other foster parents to define as a social support with a similar lifestyle. Piel et al. (2017) described foster parent use of emotional support through professional and informal networks, the use of informal support assists with reduction of foster parent stress and increasing stability within placement. Within self-care behaviors comes the use of relational and social supports, a major domain of self (Miller et al., 2019). The studies mentioned above remark on the value of self-care and the need of supports for foster parents due to stressors within their role and changes in their lifestyle.

Lietz et al. (2016) described the phases within foster parenting for coping and adapting as follows: (a) survival, (b) adjustment, (c) acceptance, (d) growing stronger,

and (e) helping others. These phases described the context in which foster parents were engaged in by ongoing adaptation throughout their lives. To absorb these transitions, foster parents needed to maintain a healthy support system. Lietz et al. (2016) identified that resilience is a process for foster parents not a goal. In consideration of the term resilience, we were looking at survival and adaptation which directly correlates to social systems and attachment. If foster parents must continuously engage and adapt, we must ensure their engagement with supports. Feldman (2020) described resilience with three tenets plasticity, sociality, and meaning which includes finding strength in the face of trauma. A person's ability to be resilient was significantly influenced by supports, protective factors, and a sense of belonging (Nowicki, 2008). As described by these studies, foster parents are forced to transition through the process of parenting and one way to assist foster parents was by ensuring their needs were met. A challenge with having supports was building them which coincides with the process of belongingness.

Further, the current body of literature offers few examples of belongingness within foster parents and their systems. This study allowed information to surface from the literature provided regarding foster families, and the use of supports.

Retention

To conceptualize the needs within the foster parent community, the construct of necessity and retention must be examined. Researchers have examined foster parent retention rates focusing on foster parent demographic variables (Ahn et al., 2017; Strickler et al., 2018). According to Strickler et al. (2018) in the United States, over 400,000 children are in the foster care system, with approximately forty-five percent

living outside of kinship. This means that nearly half of the foster children are living in a household which were not related to their biological families. These statistics indicated the significant need for foster parents including recruitment and retention (Ahn et al., 2017). Strickler et al. (2018) discussed the importance of a satisfied foster parent and the implications on retention, recruitment, stability, permanency, and child outcomes using The Treatment Foster Parent Satisfaction Survey (TFP-SS) and the creation of the Treatment Parent Satisfaction and Retention Collaborative (TPS-RC). The use of TFP-SS and the TPS-RC provided information on standardization of programs and foster parent satisfaction. Overall, Strickler sheds light on practices within organizations for foster parents, the value of engaging and understanding foster parents' needs within the agency practices.

Ahn et al. (2017) follows similarly to Strickler with a study of foster parent demographics and satisfaction surveys within agencies in regarding to retention. Ahn (2017) found that most foster parents discontinued services due to a life change or discontinued services after the first year due to the intricate needs of the children. Additionally, Ahn et al. (2017) discovered that younger foster parents who were married, completed a college degree, and fostered less children had increasing odds to discontinue services compared to demographics of other foster parents. The primary focus of Stickler and Ahn were foster parent satisfaction and awareness on agency implications, both identifying areas of concern and areas of strength. Parental commitment was a significant variable among retention, this included investment in child and desirability of the relationship, most specifically to foster parents the challenge was associated with the

lack of awareness of permanency of the relationship (Cleary et al., 2018). Together, these studies confirmed that foster parents are significant in need and engagement and retention.

Cherry et al. (2018) discussed treatment "parents" also known as foster parents training involvement with the influence of attitudes and readiness to engage in foster parenting. Cherry et al. (2018) identified that foster parents are taught approaches and linking skills to assist with behavioral and mental health concern of their foster children, the study identified no significant difference between willingness and dedication through training within the agency. The importance of this information was the study at an agency level regarding foster parenting services. Miller et al. (2019) continued to support the concept of high turnover rates within foster parents due to a continued small community of foster parents. All the studies above reinforced the awareness of foster parent retention including satisfaction and numeracy. The focus within retention was to build awareness to the needs within the foster parent community to ensure continuity of childcare.

Belongingness

The terms support and belonging become misconstrued due to the lack of awareness to the definitions. In this study belongingness was described as a state or feeling of belonging to a group or an essential party. Our human response was to have an emotional need for engagement and acceptance into a group. Addy (2021) studied foster parent and children in Ghana exploring the formal foster arrangements and connectedness to both biological and foster families. Due to the exploration of both foster parents and

children Addy (2021) identified first that foster children gain a sense of belongingness from foster families who treat them as their own biological children. Addy (2021) reviewed multiple studies on foster families on the effects of belonging, Addy completed semi-structured interviews with foster children and then foster parents, the importance of foster training, increased standards of living, educational, nutritional, and foster parent engagement were all correlated. The review of literature and study depicted key indicators of the effects on belongingness primarily for children. The interviews included four foster parents, one theme displayed was entitlement to the foster children, additionally the concept of belonging to a family while having sustainable relationships. Addy (2021) was able to remark on the importance of belonging from a child's perspective and minimal parental perspective as noted due to COVID limitations. Continued exploration along with Addy will highlight foster parents lived experiences.

Fyllkesnes, et al. (2021) completed a study on foster children in Norway regarding their lived experience on what constitutes help and support. Fyllkesnes et al. (2021) found belonging as a theme of importance within foster care as well as the understanding that it takes time to develop this sense of belonging for foster children. The researchers of both studies found significant effects of belongingness for foster children. Small but nonsignificant foster parent awareness was found for the effects of belongingness on foster parents. I reviewed social systems to assist with further awareness to function and needs within foster parents.

Rural Communities

Family functioning and adverse childhood experiences were examined in rural settings, among the study negative correlations were displayed through child maltreatment yet in the rural setting social cohesion was discussed as important for wellbeing and health with reduction of adverse childhood experiences (Schofield et al., 2018). The reflection of social cohesion on mental health encourages more research on belongingness and foster families. Rural communities display challenges and limitations with health and overall resources, Anderson (2020) confirmed rural disparities in health care and access to mental health. The rural setting for foster homes was reported as sparse and daunting (Pollack et al., 2020). Consideration of foster parents and individual needs were important to assist with building healthier communities. Foster parents specifically in the rural settings are limited on training opportunities due to distance and timeframe limitations (Kaasbøll et al., 2019). Limitations within resources and trainings influence foster parent engagement within rural communities.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed my literature search, included search terms and databases. I summarized literature in regarding to areas influence of foster parents. I divided these concepts into retention, support, belongingness, systems, and counseling. Within this research I reviewed articles relevant to my study, yet I located limited research on belongingness of foster parents and no research specifically on belongingness within foster parents and the effect on retention and counseling approaches. Counselors should be aware of appropriate interventions and needs of foster parents to best assist

them. Utilizing a phenomenological hermeneutic approach with an ecological theory will describe the lived experience closely. Chapter 3 will be a thorough review of my research method including sample selection, data collection, and thematic analysis.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand and explore the lived experiences of foster parents' sense of belongingness in the rural setting. The awareness gained form this study would potentially inform and educate counselors about how they may counsel foster parents as individuals and as a family unit. Due to the scantiness of information on foster parents specifically on their experiences of belongingness the gap that I identified in research demonstrated the importance of continuing to research this population.

As the researcher, I used a hermeneutic phenomenological method due to the depth of description and understanding human experiences (Neubauer, 2019). While a qualitative case study would focus on the group as a whole whereas a hermeneutic study investigated the experiences of individuals. A grounded theory would focus on the social patterns which were important but did not discover the underlying experiences of each individual. Additional approaches are used in qualitative research, yet phenomenology provided the descriptive aspect which were required to assist with understanding foster parent experiences.

In Chapter 3, I presented the research design and rationale for exploring the lived experience of foster parents. I defined my role as the researcher and discussed participant criteria, selection and sample size, instrumentation, and data collection procedures. I disclosed areas of trustworthiness including ethical procedures, credibility, transferability, and further specifics. Understanding the experience of foster parents may increase awareness of changes within counseling techniques and foster parent needs.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of belongingness among rural foster parents in their communities?

Research Tradition and Rationale

The central phenomenon of the study was the lived experience of foster parents who primarily reside in a rural setting and the influence of belongingness. The goal of using a phenomenological study with hermeneutic approach was to describe the lived experience of individuals through an interpretive process where the researcher reflected the essential themes and their own experience (Neubauer et al, 2019). In this aspect, the use of Heidegger's hermeneutic circle describes the possibility of interpreting the phenomena of foster parents where the researched subject's positioning can be re-evaluated through another researcher at any period. The hermeneutic circle is a process of interpretation to build an awareness of an experience. Hermeneutic circles were described as cycling through context and text, first through examination of an experience through understanding building new context, secondly through identifying common themes, and thirdly exploring expressions of humanness, it is the process of moving between small and large units of meaning to allow a fuller understanding of the experience and further meaning to each unit (Heidegger et al., 1962; Whitehead, 2004). Therefore, a hermeneutic phenomenological study of foster parents' sense of belongingness in the rural setting matched interpretivism due to the research goal of making meaning of their world experiences (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020).

According to Heidegger (1962) the basis of phenomenology was understanding a phenomenon through "something as something" (p. 411), this approach disclosed that everything that was understood together may also be separated from one another through interpretation, yet the bond exists between each something. George (2020) described hermeneutics as "it's basic nature, scope, and validity, as well as its place within and implications for human existence" (p. 2). Hermeneutic research by Heidegger included the understanding of human beings and human existence to interpret our being, also known as ontological structures (Heidegger, 1962).

<p align="center">**Role of Researcher**</p>

As the researcher I was aware that I was the main instrument in the study. Being the researcher, it was imperative to identify the elements of this role which included areas of gatekeeping, relationship with participants, research bias, and ethical procedures.

Positionality

I chose this research topic due to my interest in the phenomenon of foster parents. Gadamer (1976) referenced hermeneutic sensitivity as a skill for social researchers which was individualistic through researcher's use of common-sense including awareness of limitations, ethical sensitivity, and providing a maieutic interaction. Within the role of researcher, I provided an environment which the interviewee was comfortable through creativity, hermeneutic sensitivity, listening to interviewee needs, flexibility to allow responsiveness with answers, and transcribe information accordingly. As the researcher, I disclosed to my participants that I am a PhD student and informed them that this information was being used for my dissertation. Additionally, I am a Licensed

Professional Counselor (LPC) in the state of Pennsylvania, National Certified Counselor (NCC), and a Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS) residing in a rural community. As the researcher I planned to interact with each participant. Although I was an instrument within the study, my role was observer due to being an interviewer to the participants as well as interpreted data from participants.

To begin my research and interaction with participants, I informed them of my role in this process. Polit and Beck (2014) defined bias among research as any influence that may distort the study's results. VanLeeuwen et al. (2017) described a researcher's preunderstanding as a contribution rather than bias specifically within hermeneutic research. Preunderstanding within this research study would include my clinical work with foster parents and their expressed emotions and thoughts. Although this experience occurred, it was what guided my interest in this phenomenon versus a bias to the topic. I have worked in the mental health field for over six years. I hope that my discoveries within research increased social benefit.

Methodology

Participation Selection Logic

In hermeneutic phenomenological studies, participants are selected due to their distinct lived experiences and knowledge regarding a specific phenomenon (Ramsook, 2018). I studied lived experiences of foster parents in the rural setting, and the participants selection would be within rural Pennsylvania through foster care agencies. The participants of interest were foster parents who reside in the rural setting. Purposive sampling permits the researcher to select participants based on the study needs due to the

need of specific characteristics of participants, this study included criterion sampling due to the predetermined criteria which is necessary for participant selection (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In addition, due to the study's narrow focus snowball sampling was added to encourage referrals by other participants or people who are aware of other potential participants (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Selection of participants included: (a) adults 21 years of age or older, (b) present foster parents, and (c) reside in rural Pennsylvania. This sample selection consisted of participants who met the lived experience, displayed willingness to engage in the study, and encompassed individualized experiences. I chose to select between six to ten participants which allowed for saturation.

Instrumentation

Instrumentation in this qualitative study began with myself as the researcher, my role included creating research questions, conducting semistructured interviews, and data analysis. I recruited participants through a flyer (See Appendix C), sent participants consent to participate, and collected data via semistructured interview questions (See Appendix B). Semi structured interviews are in-depth with fixed open-ended questions which allow participants to openly engage in conversation (Jamshed, 2014). The questions created are arranged the same for all participants, which allow a similar sequence and predetermined wording of questions for consistency. In addition, semistructured interviews allowed the researcher to explore participant responses with follow up questions to delve deeper into feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. Participants provided additional information which can be viewed through an awareness of verbal and

non-verbal responses. Each interview question was based upon the foster parent's opinion and experience to understand their interpretation of belonging, interactions, prospects, and desires. The purpose of these semistructured interview questions was to collect data regarding the foster parents lived experiences. The data which was obtained from the interview questions focus on understanding the phenomenon in which foster parents experienced with a goal to identify needs of foster parents.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Collection of Data

I recruited participants from agencies in Pennsylvania and through local children and youth services and various social media sites. The organizations' identity will not be published in the reports. I reviewed potential agencies through a search for local fostering agencies on childwelfare.gov which provided a list by each state. Agency results displayed 82 potential opportunities; I then reduced size through limiting to rural settings. Following review of each agency, I reached out to providers, created, and sent email invitations (See Appendix A).

Data structuring included 60-minute interviews with participants. Prior to the interview I reviewed informed consents, voluntary engagement for interactions, and reviewed permission with clients for audio recording and transcription of interview. I conducted interviews face-to-face and virtually if needed. I engaged in member checking through follow-up interviews for clarity regarding information obtained in initial interviews for 30 minutes or less.

Data Analysis Plan

   Data analysis for hermeneutic phenomenology included the hermeneutic circle. This type of analysis included a described text, identifying one's understanding of the text and its relationship to each part, their interconnectedness (VanLeeuwen, 2017). The purpose of analysis was to explore, describe, and understand the lived experience through an ecological counseling perspective. The qualitative research approach for hermeneutic phenomenology supports the researcher by engaging in direct experiences with of the participants who are directly involved in the phenomenon. Hermeneutic phenomenological research entails the hermeneutic circle. To begin this process, I journaled any experience and biases to account for any influence among interviews or data analysis. I used follow-up interviews to clarify participant data and any preconceptions. I engaged in data analysis through the following steps:

- I read and reviewed each interview transcript in its entirety, captured the participant's lived experience, deleted irrelevant and filler language such as repetitive statements like "um", "you know", or "like", ect.

  - "Um, so I just was looking for, um you know, maybe foster parents who have been in it longer."

  - Revision: "I just was looking for maybe foster parents who have been in it longer."

- I created preliminary meaning units of data through phrases and sentences that provided information about the phenomenon of foster parent lived

experiences. The preliminary meaning units reveal a feature of the phenomenon. Example - higher belief influence

- Participant E10.02: "I reached out and we were denied that services because we don't have a faith-based community. They only work with people who already have established church communities."

- Participant M10.7: "the church that my gram goes to, they do what they call an angel every year and they pick a family…my grandma was like, you know, everybody wants to do it for you."

- Participant N10.9: "the church community is the one that is starting this program to reach out to foster."

- I generated final meaning units also known as themes from the preliminary meaning units after completing the steps above for an understanding of each participant description. I incorporated Cook's (2015) tenets to arrange themes through the lens of an ecological counseling perspective.

- I synthesized final meaning units into situated narratives by incorporating direct quotes from participants to highlight each theme.

- I created general narratives from the situated narratives by organizing data and highlighting the participants meaning of their lived experience into each category.

- I fused participants' themes into a phenomenological reflection detailing the phenomenon of the lived experience of foster parents' sense of belongingness.

In addition to the use of hermeneutic analysis I used an ecological counseling perspective to view the data. The interview questions were designed with an ecological perspective in which participants reflect on concentric circles of their lives.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

Credibility within research encompasses many aspects including authenticity and trustworthiness using methods for hermeneutic research (Patterson & Higgs, 2005). Hermeneutic analysis with the hermeneutic circle demonstrated further credibility due to discussion, transparency, fusion, and analytics visibility (Patterson & Higgs, 2005). Additionally, self-awareness was relevant to credibility due to the researcher's involvement in the study which was why I described above my history in working with clients as well as educational history.

Transferability encompasses the ability to transfer the study to another researcher at any point and applied to any other context (Ramsook, 2018). This transferability was based upon the use of thick descriptions and can be passed to ensure qualitative validity. Thick descriptions of participant selection, data collection, process within collection, and analysis are all used to describe the phenomenon and allow transferability. Dependability within hermeneutics included audit trails, including interviews, data notes, and themes identified. These methods assisted with data collection and awareness assist with creating

lived experience descriptions. Specifically, each participant that agreed to engage in the research study had their own folder with collected information, for example, organized informed consents, participant responses to interview questions, analysis, and commentary from the results. This audit trail allows for an in depth understanding of each participant, including the opportunity to review information as frequently as needed.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical procedures can be vast due to the study of a human lived experience. This research study abided by Walden University ethical considerations. To begin an awareness on ethical procedures, participants were required to complete an informed consents to research. This informed consent notifies participants of the research problem and goals of conducting this study. Additionally, due to the study being based on rural Pennsylvania a need for electronic files is necessary to assist with completion of files and accuracy of delivery, all files have password locks and are only used for this research study. These files are stored on my personal computer with a password protected folder with files for each participant separated. Participants within the study are kept confidential to protect themselves.

<div align="center">

Summary

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This chapter described the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology, ethical procedures, and trustworthiness. The lived experience of foster parents' sense of belongingness s represented in this research study. The following chapter provides the results of the study and data analysis and interpretation.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research was to explore the lived experiences of foster parents' sense of belongingness in the rural setting. In this chapter, I present demographic information pertaining to participants and data analysis of the interviews I conducted, which explored the research question: What are the lived experiences of belongingness among rural foster parents in their communities? Offering an informed understanding of rural foster parents' lived experiences through hermeneutic phenomenology and a conceptual lens of the ecological counseling perspective, I expound on themes and experiences to increase understanding of belongingness to foster parent retention rates which may increase counseling services related to foster parents, raise awareness of the community's needs, build advocacy for mental health, and increase support.

Setting

For this study, participants were offered the option of in-person face-to-face or virtual interviews through videoconferencing on Zoom.us. I recruited nine participants who each completed an individual semi-structured interview to explore foster parents' lived experiences. The use of videoconferencing allowed for the recruitment of participants from all areas in rural Pennsylvania. All participants chose videoconferencing due to convenience based on timing, location, and comfort within their environment. Each interview consisted of semistructured open-ended questions to explore foster parents' lived experiences of belongingness in the rural setting. Each

participant met the inclusionary criteria of: (a) current foster parents, (b) adults 21 years of age or older, and (c) residing in rural Pennsylvania.

Over the videoconferencing, a few nuances were presented, including being interrupted by outside interactions, animals, or at times a family member. Two participants who engaged in videoconferencing had family members in other rooms, one participant's spouse interrupted the interview and commented to the participant about foster parenting. At this time, I reminded the participant that the interaction for the interview was private, and the participant reported an understanding and safe environment. The other participant had a child and spouse interrupt, I reminded the participant of confidentiality and privacy, and they agreed to privacy and individual engagement. Lastly, one participant was at work during the interview and needed to take a brief pause to address a work matter and returned. None of these interruptions or issues seemed to create a problem, discomfort, or lack of continuity in the interview process.

Data Collection

Data collection started after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board through Walden University. The Institutional Review Board approval number was 08-22-22-0990373. I interviewed nine participants who were recruited using purposive sampling. I posted a flyer to various social media sites and provided flyers to rural children and youth county agencies to display (see Appendix C). In addition, IRB approved recruitment through snowball sampling; however, I did not use this due to having enough participants. I scheduled 60-minute interview times with participants.

All participants chose videoconferencing for convenience based on time, location, and comfort within their environment. I used Zoom.us for all interviews and audio recorded each interview to assist with data collection and analysis. Despite the few issues with brief interruptions, I completed each interview with no problems related to the issue of videoconferencing or location variation. I used semistructured interviews with each participant to assist with engaging in further responses regarding their answer to my structured questions.

Recruitment Process

The recruitment process began with the distribution of the research flyer, and related directions provided for potential participants to contact me. Potential participants contacted me via email as directed in the research flyer. All participants provided email consent after reviewing the informed consent to engage in the study.

Data Collected

I collected data over a 4-month period with nine adult participants that met the inclusion criteria. The data collection includes nine audio-recorded interviews with adults over the age of 21 years, who reside in rural Pennsylvania and are current foster parents. Each participant engaged in a videoconferencing experience with a semistructured format, as described by Jamshed (2017) to openly engage in conversation. Participants showed signs of interest and engagement with no report or sign of distress throughout the interview process. The use of hermeneutic phenomenology allowed for unique individual participant experiences to be narrated and understood.

Data Analysis

I completed the interviews and engaged in transcription. I listened to each

recording in its entirety. I used Microsoft Word to transcribe the interviews, creating a

word-for-word hand typed transcription to assist with the coding and analysis process.

As suggested by Van Leeuwen (2017), hermeneutic phenomenology includes the

hermeneutic circle, describing and understanding text to then provide interconnectedness.

After completion of transcription, I read through each transcript in its entirety. van

Manen (2017) described the importance of being submerged in the participant narratives

to assist with meaning and understanding of the lived experience. I eliminated filler

language and created preliminary meaning units of data. Next, I examined the

preliminary meaning units and created final meaning units. The preliminary meaning

units include: (a) expressed emotions, (b) connection, (c) backing from community, (d)

ongoing communication with fostering, (e) family interactions, (f) social interactions, (g)

use of physical support, (h) telling others about fostering, (i) relatable fostering

experiences, (j) community expressing care, (k) speaking out about fostering, and (l)

higher belief influence. I used general narratives to integrate themes and produce

descriptions. These descriptions then helped unite the major phenomenological themes.

As I engaged in this process, I used an ecological counseling perspective as a lens to view

data. Human behavior through an ecological counseling perspective is embraced as

behavior as personal and contextual in nature, behavior as interactional, and all behavior

associated with meaning-making. As described in the results section, the tenets of the

ecological counseling perspective are used to classify themes of the lived experiences of

foster parents (See Table 2). I engaged in data analysis through the following steps:

1. I read and reviewed each interview transcript in its entirety, captured the

   participant's lived experience, deleted irrelevant and filler language such as

   repetitive statements.

2. I created preliminary meaning units of data through phrases and sentences that

   provided information about the phenomenon of foster parent lived

   experiences.

3. I generated final meaning units and incorporated Cook's (2015) tenets to

   arrange themes through the lens of an ecological counseling perspective. A

   table was created with tenets, themes, and participant engagement in theme.

4. I synthesized final meaning units into situated narratives by incorporating

   direct quotes from participants to highlight each theme.

5. I created general narratives from the situated narratives by organizing data and

   highlighting the participants meaning of their lived experience into each

   category.

6. I fused participants' themes into a phenomenological reflection detailing the

   phenomenon of the lived experience of foster parents' sense of belongingness.

In the results section, I provide information regarding meaning units and

participant quotes to allow depth from the interview to support each unit. This experience

allowed me to see dependable overlap among participants. Due to each experience being

individual, at times participants reported a singular instance of an experience that

presented as individual rather than the overall experience of each participant. Data saturation was met with continued supported themes of participants. Due to data saturation, I was secure in the effectiveness of nine participants and did not see a reason to collect additional data.

<div align="center">**Evidence of Trustworthiness**</div>

The exploration of the lived experiences of belongingness among rural foster parents in their community required engagement in semistructured interviews and participant narratives. I outlined the foundations of trustworthiness in Chapter 3 including hermeneutic analysis with the hermeneutic circle. Future researchers can follow this description of hermeneutic phenomenology through an ecological counseling perspective if they choose to expand on this topic. The issues of trustworthiness were outlined in Chapter 3 to authenticate credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Patterson and Higgs (2005) explained the importance of credibility through discussion, transparency, fusion, and analytic visibility. Transferability described by Ramsook (2018) supported the use of thick descriptions from data collection and analysis.

Credibility

Semistructured interviews allow data collection through interviewing participants with structured and unstructured questions for data collection, and interpretation of the meaning of themes derived from participant narratives (van Manen, 2016). I increased credibility through a couple of methods during this study. To begin the process, I journaled my experiences and reviewed any biases to account for influence within interviews or data analysis. Hermeneutic analysis through the hermeneutic circle

demonstrated credibility by understanding each part and how each part references the whole. Patterson and Higgs (2005) discussed the credibility due to the use of discussion, transparency, fusion, and analytical visibility through the researcher being a part of the circle, interpretation of text as parts and whole, and understanding the emerging phenomenon. This phenomenological experience is the lived experience of belongingness of foster parents. The design of interview questions, data collection, and analysis aligned with the approach. I clearly explained the research study, interview process, and member checking to participants. Credibility is demonstrated through the literature findings, framework of the study, and the connection of themes to the tenets of ecological counseling perspective.

Transferability

Themes emerged from nine participant interviews with consistent content regarding their experiences as foster parents. Due to the interviews being semistructured, narratives were analyzed to establish shared experiences. Saturation was met following participant narratives and themes reporting consistent overlap. The meaning units which were derived from the narratives were pulled out as a shared experience. Individual experiences that other participants may not have reported did not qualify as a theme, although valued, consistent reporting was necessary to complete theme identification.

Dependability

After multiple reviews and examination of transcripts themes were derived. Member checking was completed with participants through follow-up interviews for clarity regarding the narratives. I did not use triangulation, reflexivity, or expert

consensual validation from others because it was not required by the type of analysis process I chose. Member checking creates and demonstrates credibility due to participant responsiveness and original data from narratives (Dangal & Joshi, 2020).

Confirmability

To guarantee confirmability that the information reported as themes and experiences of the participants, I provided quotes from participants to assist with understanding of themes. These themes identified connect them back to the data. Journaling was an additional process that assisted with confirmability. I journaled prior to my engagement in interviews to explore any biases not to direct the study. Journaling continued as I collected data, developed meaning units, interpreted meaning units, and created my final meaning units. During the interview process, I repeated the content shared to assist with confirmability through the participant narrative. This allowed me to engage fully in the interview process and interpret their lifeworld.

Results

This study focused on foster parents' lived experiences of belongingness within the rural setting. The research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of belongingness among rural foster parents in their communities? Foster parents' lived experiences were explored via semi-structured interviews. Emergent themes and meaning units were derived from the interviews and coordinated with the research question which explored the lived experiences of belongingness among rural foster parents in their communities.

Demographics

I interviewed nine participants and assigned a code to each as a pseudonym with the first letter of their first name and a sequential number as the date we met. The demographics I obtained include age, race, ethnicity, gender, marital status, and duration of foster parenting (See Table 1) and subsections.

Table 1

Participant Demographic

Participant	Age	Race	Ethnicity	Gender	Marital Status	Time foster Parenting
E10.2	31	Caucasian	Non-Hispanic	Female	Married	1 year
M10.7	39	Caucasian	Italian	Female	Married	6 years
N10.9	43	Caucasian	Did not report	Female	Married	3 years
B10.15	36	Caucasian	German, Irish, and British	Male	Married	3 ½ years
P10.18	59	Caucasian	Non-Hispanic	Female	Married	20 years
S10.23	78	Caucasian	Scottish, Irish, German American	Female	Married	31 years
C10.28	37	Caucasian	Non-Hispanic	Female	Single	4 years
A12.5	35	Caucasian	Did not report	Female	Married	4 years
H1.27	52	Caucasian	Western European	Female	Married	14 years

The ecological counseling perspective is the lens within hermeneutic phenomenology in which data was analyzed. I will discuss each emergent theme in concordance with the ecological tenets (See Table 2). Below the table, results are described within each ecological tenet and the appropriate themes.

8

Themes and Participants

Tenet	Themes	E10.2	M10.7	N10.9	B10.15	P10.18	S10.23	C10.28	A12.5	H1.27
Behavior as Personal and Contextual	Building supports within the community	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Behavior as Personal and Contextual	Desire for creating and connecting familiarity within families and various communities	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Behavior as Personal and Contextual	Emotional responses to fostering	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Behavior as Personal and Contextual	Continuous contact with foster children and parents following the foster experience			X	X	X	X		X	X
Behavior as Interactional	Interaction within the community.	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Behavior as Interactional	The need for tangible support from the community.	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Behavior as Interactional	Educating and spreading awareness of fostering.	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
Behavior as Interactional	Active extended family involvement with foster parents and foster children	X		X	X		X		X	X

Behavior as Meaningful	Shared foster parent experiences	✕	✕	✕		✕	✕	✕	✕	✕
Behavior as Meaningful	Expressing identity and active advocacy of fostering	✕	✕	✕	✕		✕	✕	✕	✕
Behavior as Meaningful	Active Spiritual Involvement	✕	✕	✕		✕	✕	✕	✕	✕
Behavior as Meaningful	Experiencing care from the community	✕		✕	✕	✕	✕	✕	✕	

Ecological Tenet 1: Behavior as Personal and Contextual in Nature

Behavior as personal and contextual in nature describes not only a person's unique biological, social, and psychological attributes but also the effects of the groups in which a person engages and their patterns of behavior, values, and environmental effects (Cook, 2015). Participants discussed contextual behavior through multiple avenues of relationships, location, and connections to groups. During the interviews with participants, I asked about their experiences and thoughts regarding belongingness and engagement within the community which reflected on the participant's personal behavior and contextual experiences.

Theme 1: Building Supports within the Community

All participants reported an interest in building support throughout their foster parenting experience. Social interactions can include feelings of belonging, connectedness, and acceptance (Jennings & Bamkole, 2019). Social support and engaging in relationships are crucial to social development. These supports varied among each participant, but the recognition of need was present. Building support included online support groups with foster parents, growth within the community,

reaching out to other foster parents that were known to the foster parent, and reaching out and engaging in spiritual support.

Participant E10.2 described the experience of needing support from the community to assist with her abilities as a foster parent. Participant E10.2 described an experience of reaching out to resource opportunities to "be better parents if we did … get those things and so I was like, this is set up to do that for us." Participant E10.2 discussed the challenges within building supports, "I reached out and we were denied that services because we don't have a faith-based community." Participant E10.2 reported that although that specific experience did not work out for support, she was able to connect with another support.

Participant M10.7 discussed an interest in support groups due to lack of opportunity to express herself fully in previous social experiences, she described:

> We kind of formed like our own little group…I would actually like to be able to have a group, I guess, you know like a support group for foster parents in the county ... I want it to be a place where foster parents can come and you know talk about their frustrations and not have to worry … I would love to be able to make like, a safe place … to where we just, don't just feel like we're stuck by ourselves.

Participant N10.9 discussed hearing and engaging in building supports "I've had a couple of people reach out to me about this too, and …a lot of churches want to…help foster families out." Participant B10.15 described continuous involvement through his local foster care agency which allowed for awareness to their involvement:

I feel belonging with that group because … I mean they check on us all the time

to make sure we're good, mentally, physically. You know, we're still in good

shape… keep good track of all of us to make sure, you know, we're still in this for

you know, the good cause.

Participant P10.18 shared their experience of active engagement in a support

group, with a history of involvement in a few different support groups throughout their

span of foster parenting. P10.18 discussed, "We're in a support group now. We've had

different support groups over the years, as a foster parent belonging in the community.

I'm pretty, we're pretty well integrated into the community." Participant S10.23 shared

experiences of building supports within the community of her church, yet expressed

challenges with being able to schedule "trying to get together to support one another, like

as foster, adoptive parents…that's been really halting and difficult and minimal, I would

say." Participant S10.23 shared the challenges were during the timeframe of COVID. In

participant C10.28 experience she reported awareness to two other foster parents in the

general area "I really wish that I was able to connect with more foster parents in my

community." Participant C10.28 discussed that her community was limited on the

number of foster parents as well as building connection depending upon scheduled.

Participant A12.5 discussed building supports through awareness to other foster

parent situations. Participant A12.5 shared that a foster child she worked with engaged in

therapy and the therapist taught them about diagnosis and symptoms which then caused

her to discuss the situation with a foster parent who engaged in a similar experience, "I

did reach out to a foster parent who had gone through that, so that is where the help came,

just being able to talk to somebody that went through it." Participant A12.5 also

described an attempt to create monthly meetings for foster parents, "it was going to

work…we actually for one meeting at their house, had a few people, went pretty good,

and then COVID hit." Participant A12.5 discussed that the support group did not

continue after COVID. Participant H 1.27 discussed support groups in which she

expressed working among the foster community as well as their personal experience as a

foster parent:

> I run a support group for foster and adoptive moms and it is a really, really neat
>
> group of ladies…who are very compassionate, understanding, don't give too
>
> much advice. Um and there just seems to be some common language, some
>
> common emotions, some common experiences, and it's a place where I feel like I
>
> really belong.

These social interactions assist with building a deep cultural sense of self and

building relationships and values with others (Cook, 2015). These social connections and

interests continue within the next theme of continuous contact with foster experiences.

Theme 2: Desire for Creating and Connecting Familiarity within Families and Various Communities

Creating and connecting familiarity is demonstrated through communication,

which arose in various ways for all participants including foster parent communication

towards others in their family and community or communication directed toward the

foster parent.

Participant E10.2 discussed the experience of communication between their immediate family, their foster child, and their extended family. Participant E10.2 shared an experience as "We always just talk about like, your mom loves you…we are very glad that this is happening and we have dialogue around the kids but we also have had it with everybody in our lives."

Participant M10.7 reported use of communication to assist with feeling understood about their experiences and limitations in communication throughout fostering. Participant M10.7 discussed meeting a peer who encountered similar experiences within fostering and the opportunity to "be able to talk to somebody who gets it, you know, it doesn't make it better, but at least you know you're not alone." Participant N10.9 shared that in her experience being open in communication has assisted in relationships with biological parents, sharing:

> I opened up the communication lines and the first thing I tell them right off the bat is, look we're not in this to adopt. We're only here to foster and help these kids get to their next step and I think that takes a lot of the pressure and there, you know what I mean, because a lot of people that are fostering to adopt and then you know, the family is like 'you're trying to take my kids' and it just makes a really bad turmoil if you ask me.... I am very big on open lines because so many things get like the telephone line.

Participant B10.15 expressed that communication continues within their experiences in their immediate family, extended family, and previous foster children and their families. Participant B10.15 discussed relationships as based off of continued

communication stating, "I mean from the get go, our family's been really supportive of us doing this…when they call us, you know, they ask how all the kids are doing. So they're making the effort along with us." Participant B10.15 provided the direct example of having family reach out and communicate with him. Participant P10.18 shared experiences of hearing words of affirmation and encouragement from the community, statements of "oh you're just so wonderful" and discussed her responsiveness as "this is just who we are." P10.18 also expressed the importance of communication within their household stating,

> We're always trying to figure out why, we're always trying to anticipate, so I think that's the key with keeping us all together.

Participant S10.23 discussed words of affirmation from community members including, "that's wonderful you do that," and being thanked by biological parents for being a foster parent. Similarly, participant C10.28 discussed building communication within the community to support themselves and others, stating to community members "I can't always pay it forward financially. So let me pay it forward by telling you about these good things and these good resources." In her experience she is able to provide communication about resources and experiences. Participant A12.5 stated that she communicates with community members and expressed at times feeling this in waves, where they are actively engaged and then notice communication slowing down or stopping. A12.5 discussed "I see people who struggle quite a lot. I don't know where they come from and what not, so in comparison with those, I'd say we have a really good community." Additionally, A12.5 discussed communicating her needs, "…. because

that's the only way anything gets done or halfway understood is communication … and there's always room for improvement, like absolutely."

Participant H1.27 shared their experience of communication through their support group as:

> There just seems to be some common language, some common emotions, some common experiences, and it's a place where I feel like I really belong.

> Foster parents report that communication assists with the demonstration of taking action within their life and the act of communication is contextual as social support is a potential cultural factor. Cook (2015) identified that social supports are essential in human life including communication of love and value. Foster parent reports above validated this concept.

Theme 3: Emotional Responses to Fostering.

According to Cook (2015), emotions are a part of behavior as a personal characteristic (p. 13). Throughout the interview process, seven participants reported experiencing a range of emotions concerning experiences of foster parenting. Participants disclosed experiences of social involvement which cued emotional reactions for themselves due to acceptance and engagement within themselves and their foster children, discomfort in social situations due to other community member responses and interactions, conscientiousness of others, and heightened awareness of the foster parent overall interactions.

Participant E10.02 shared emotional variations based on social interactions including going grocery shopping and physical presence of herself and her foster child:

There is also…this like uniquely rural situation where…an older white lady sees you at Walmart with a black baby and suddenly it's the cutest baby she's ever seen…That also makes me feel like I need to like, somehow explain to the stranger … which is obnoxious, I don't need to tell a stranger who I am. I am very conscious …because I want to do a good job.

Participant M10.7 discussed their thoughts regarding emotional expression and the need to be able to experience emotions without consequences:

Sadly one of the things that made me feel like I belonged during our short time doing this was realizing that … it's not just us who experience problems or just being treated the way that we get treated and that actually brought myself and about three other, four other foster parents from my community together…We shouldn't be afraid to be able to speak what we're feeling or we should be able to be frustrated and angry and aggravated and you know what I mean, not have to worry about what's going to happen because we made somebody mad.

Participant N10.9 shared their experience of fostering twins whom were brought into services due to an overdose situation. N10.9 discussed emotional response in thought of "How does a 2-year-old overdose? Right, so sad." N10.9 shared that, "we transferred them to a pediatric nurse who could give them the care that they needed." Participant B10.15 described a situation where they were working with a foster child on transitioning from a field trip to return home and the child was emotional regarding leaving. Participant B10.15 expressed that they understood what the child was experiencing at that time and that it took time to transition to home but in the meanwhile

people who witnessed the occurrence called law enforcement due to the child's behavior. Participant B10.15 described the experience as:

> Embarrassing, but at the same token I understood why it was going on and it was frustrating me to a certain extent because people weren't grasping that, they just assumed … he was harming … harm to someone else and to the public. They didn't know him, so I think they just judged, misjudged him so for me it was … embarrassing because it was happening in front of my work.

Participant P10.18 shared emotional variations with foster parenting providing examples of extended family interactions in which, "I don't feel like we're excluded, but I don't, I never feel like it's easy for us to be included because it's like we always say, 'we're the clown part,' the circus like we pull in and…we just kind of descend on people, so yeah we're tolerated." Additionally, P10.18 disclosed, "when we first starter, we felt pretty isolated."

Participant A12.5 discussed an experience of emotional concern about their foster child's experience of living among their lifestyle:

> [It] can be nervous, nerve wracking at times cause, if you take a kid out into an experience, you don't really know if they've ever done it before. They might react ok, they might react not okay…you don't know how they might react or you might have a meltdown right there, or it might be really good, but I would say in the beginning mostly nervous.

Participant H1.27 shared their thought on belongingness within the community by:

It depends on who's in front of you as to the sense of belonging. … if they engage in conversation back, or if they look at me and smile and realize obviously this kid's different, you know. I can tell you're doing the best you can then, then you obviously feel like you belong more than when somebody tries to run the other way.

Behavior as personal and contextual relates to emotional expression because of how a person will engage in life. In the examples above, foster parents described their emotional experiences of fostering. Foster parents identified not feeling understood or cautious of their emotional expression due to other people's influence and engagement with them.

Theme 4: Continuous Contact with Foster Child and Parents Following the Foster Experience

This theme reported participants engaging in continuous communication or awareness of foster children's experiences. Six participants reported engagement in continuous contact with either the foster child or the foster child's biological family following the completion of foster care experiences. This interaction is described by foster parents as a positive engagement specific to fostering and viewed as an area to build transparency. Foster parents reported being open about their intended experiences as a foster parent to their biological family to assist with their relationship. Foster parents discussed continuous contact or awareness of their previous foster children's present lifestyles and updates from their biological family. Foster parents reported enjoyment of

experiencing continuous engagement and relationships with biological family and foster

children.

Participant N10.9 stated that she continues contact with foster children and their

biological mother:

> I opened up the communication lines. …Yep, well I still keep in touch with the
>
> twins. Like I said I can't wait for them to get to go back with her and so yeah,
>
> but that's another weird belongingness too, … you never find out the real truth or
>
> the any of the real story until you know you actually talk to the real person…I
>
> am very big on open lines because so many things get like the telephone lines.

Participant B10.15 shared that they continue to communicate with previous foster

children and their biological parents, expressing that their eldest child continues

communication as well. Participant B10.15 shared a biological parent to a previous

foster child expressed "I plan to send you pictures and updates…I know you guys had a

close bond with them so I don't want to ruin that for you guys. I want you guys to still

have some way on contacting me or anything…that you need to." Participant P10.18

reported continuous contact and engagement with their adoptive daughter's biological

and foster families, "this past weekend, our daughter, her former foster moms and her

biological sister met us for a weekend in Lancaster and they're family now. I mean, they

call themselves the aunts."

Participant S10.23 shared an experience of picking up a foster child from the hospital and

being told that her family would have the child for a long time. S10.23 shared the

experience below which would not have occurred without continuous contact regarding the child's situation at the time:

> Six months later, maybe five and a half months later, they called and said they were moving her immediately to be with her sister in a different foster home…we were upset because we thought something difference was going to happen… It's a very long story eventually we actually adopted her two and a half years later, along with her sister.

Participant A12.5 discussed a situation, "We had a little girl from …one month old to ten months old, went to live with her parents. Her parents got it together. We're family now. She's our niece as well as her new little sister." This example demonstrates continuous contact influencing relationships.

Participant H1.27 reported multiple placements and continued contact with foster families, stating:

> We have been very blessed to be able to keep in contact with most of our foster kids. We've had … some really good relationships with biological parents after kids have gone home, which has been really neat. Give them a sense of belonging like this is … healing for them like we didn't just look down on you because you couldn't have your kids, like we were welcoming you into our family when this is all over … when it's appropriate.

Human systems are developed to meet individuals' needs and maintained through various relationships. Foster parents reported building their systems and connections with foster children and their families.

Ecological Tenet 2: Behavior is Interactional

Behavior is interactional focuses on a person's engagement with their environment, both the influence of situations in which they engage and also how they influence context due to their interaction. Behavior is interactional and describes the multidirectional interaction between a person and their systems. Cook (2015) describes the interactional process as understanding how a person-environment interaction unfolds a person's life through situations and patterns. Foster parents provide a variety of experiences within behavior that is interactional as described below.

Theme 1: Interaction within the Community.

Active involvement within the community brought awareness to both in person and virtual lifestyles. Community engagement was reported by eight participants as a resource utilized if they chose to actively engage in the community.

Participant E10.02 shared an experience within daycare resources continuing to support placements for immediate openings to foster children to ease any transitional period. Participant E10.2 described an experience with the director of childcare within the community, "She basically was like, yeah, let me know when you get a placement, we'll get them in…immediately upon having a placement letter, like they were enrolled and they started two days later." Participant E10.2 discussed this interaction as positive for her experiences within fostering.

Participant N10.9 expressed, "I would say the community is you know, if you look for it, it's there." One part of community interaction is the participant's choice to engage or not, but they are clearly stating it is an opportunity in their lifestyle. In the

beginning of their interview N10.9 shared the experience of people reaching out to offer support and considering "what would help the most and like a lot of things is just like a babysitter…whoever I would trust with my kids I can trust with the foster kids." This experience describes involvement in which community members actively sought interaction. Similarly, Participant B10.15 expressed "community wise like we're all very involved in the community between coaching and everything." B10.15 also provided the example, "we're a small community so we all know each other. When one person feels bad, we all kind of feel bad so in that way." Additionally, Participant P10.18 shared, "We're pretty well integrated into the community. I work for the school district and am involved in the community, my husband works for headstart, so we're out and about and we're involved in the community."

S10.23 discussed involvement within social groups of choice as well as community within her church:

The community of my church is more of a place where there's belonging, I would say …So trying to get together to support one another…We talk a little like after church or we text each other but as far as actually coming together to be together, it doesn't happen a whole lot.

Participant C10.28 shared their experience of virtual community, "I'm also part of several foster groups on Facebook, one of them being more local...I do a lot of information sharing, sharing strategies, things like that." Additionally, C10.28 discussed an interest in immersion in the community locally to be involved.

Participant A12.5 shared their active involvement in holiday events, charity, and donations every year. A12.5 discussed "I like to help, I like to be able to help out here and there, and I know other people would reciprocate that in the community. So, it's really nice to have."

Participant H1.27 shared their experience with their foster agency as being very logical and reported "our community is very blessed in that our Children and Youth Services is very logical, so they do prudent parenting so my babysitters don't need to be certified…makes our foster journey a lot easier." Participant H1.27 described the ease of this experience providing community involvement of her choice. Participant N10.9 shared a similar response with prudent parenting due to the engagement with families they care for and shared trust.

As individuals engage with one another they continue to influence one another. Interactions within the community were apparent in various opportunities. The next theme looks into the need for tangible support for foster parents.

Theme 2: The need for tangible support from the community.

Tangible support was described in a variety of ways including face to face social interactions with foster parents, foster children and assisting with a need for example childcare, clothing, and food. Foster parents discussed the need to receive or provide physical support to assist with the needs of foster children and assistance with functioning as a family unit. Eight participants reported the need for tangible support.

Participant E10.02 reported an interaction within her personal community of an organized meal train by a neighbor. Participant E10.2 shared, "You know the community

on the street…bringing us meals and helping coordinate, you know what size clothing they are in, are you needing anything specific has kind of made it so we didn't necessarily need to use as many resources that the community at large offers."

Participant M10.7 also reported an interaction of sharing items within their household with other parents to assist with care. Participant M10.7 expressed, "I would rather give it to somebody who needs it than take it to the Salvation Army and then they have to pay for it…to save somebody else the aggravation of having to do that. I think it would be easier to just have our little group and you know if somebody needs something and that way…it's there."

Participant N10.9 reported a positive experience with a local organization assisting throughout the formula shortage due to her continuous support and donations to the organization. N10.9 described the experience, "I don't use or won't need …baby cereal that you get from like WIC and I take it, donate it there. So, I got a little baby during the formula crisis and they couldn't find formula for him so I called them up and was like, 'do you by chance, do you guys have this?' They're like absolutely you always help us out, come on down." Participant N10.9 discussed the positive aspects of physical support through a challenging timeframe.

Participant B10.15 reported an abundance of support and stated receiving donations from the community:

> We literally put a Facebook blast out there, "Hey, if anyone has any 4-year-old clothes that you're getting rid of we'll," and the amount of clothes in less than a day, we had like 10-12 garbage bags full of clothes.

Participant P10.18 shared an experience of needing assistance within the community stating, "What I needed was for him to say, 'how about I talk to some folks and we give you guys a break.'" Following this experience of not receiving tangible support, P10.18 reported that she altered her social interaction to find more support.

In regard to physical support C10.28 reported an experience of having peers assist her while moving, as she experienced transportation issues, "they helped look out for me when I … needed help moving or the car broke down, somebody would lend me a car." For example, A12.5 stated:

> A lot of donations from the community and…people were really like, they really enjoyed helping the foster care kids and it was really nice, so we got over all these donations that were just spilling out over the area of storage.

Participant H1.27 shared they also assist with the preparation of meals to assist other families when in need because in their words "That's like one of my go to easy things that you know when you're already cooking…it's not a big deal." This act of tangible support demonstrated a positive interaction among foster parents due to needs being met for their families. Among tangible support foster parents describe the next theme of educating and spreading awareness regarding fostering.

Theme 3: Educating and Spreading Awareness of Fostering.

Participants reported building awareness in the community regarding their role as foster parents or feeling understood by community members to assist with the education and awareness of the foster parenting experience. Seven of the participants reported involvement in educating and spreading awareness of fostering. This included

interactions of conversation among community members, reaching out for support, and educating health providers and educators on the needs of fostering children.

Among this theme participant E10.02 shared an experience in which the director of the daycare was also a foster parent and was able to assist with engagement with teachers, family, and transitional processes for the foster child to return to their biological family and management of the faculty response, described by E10.02 "it was nice to not put the emotional labor into that." E10.02 shared "At this point, it feels like a lot of an educator, when people find out that we're foster parents, they have a lot of questions." Participant B10.15 identified advocacy through his choice of becoming a foster parent, "it's my way of giving back because the foster system was such an important part of my life." Participant B10.15 shared within "19 years, I was only ever in three placements and in 19 years, that's pretty rare for someone to be especially that generation, that timeframe." Participant B10.15 discussed within the interview process his thoughts on building awareness to foster parenting and experiences working with children and youth services, expressing "I think once people understand that more, I think the more willingness there will be to become foster parents."

Participant P10.18 discussed sharing awareness of her experience of fostering and expressing:

> That interaction with the community is kind of, don't put us on a pedestal because you don't know. We're just as dysfunctional as everybody else but I guess that's supportive, that's affirming, that's encouraging…No, we're not,

we're nothing special, you could do this so you could do this too, you should do

this somebody should do this.

Participant S10.23 discussed being open in conversation about the opportunities to foster

for others:

The other interesting thing is, though, when you're out in the community, say like

at the store or somewhere if you have a baby, people, especially older women

often stop and want to see the baby and all this stuff and talk to you and I'll say

well you could get one too. That's how I usually put it, trying to think maybe

they would really be interested … I like to put it out there because I mean, they

need good people to take care of these kids.

Similarly participant C10.28 shared their experience and awareness to the community as:

One of the worst things that I ever hear about being a foster parent is, I could

never do that, I would get too attached and I tell people constantly like that, that's

what they need. Like they need that attachment and is your level of heartbreak

that you're going to experience with these kids worse than these kids never feeling

love and I'm constantly like 'oh, hey, you're really good with kids, why don't you

become a foster parent.' I've tried that, not been successful as of yet getting

anyone to be a foster parent but you know, I'm constantly like my friends' group

or you, you know, like if I go with friends to something and you know … foster

parents are needed and that's what kids need. They, they need love, they need

attachment and if you're able to give it to them, you're going to make them feel

like a family. You're going to make them feel like they do belong, and they do

deserve those things.

 For example, A12.5 stated their experience for advocating is demonstrated through

expression to family members:

Building belonging, it's mostly making awareness of the actual lived experience

of being a foster parent…I'm like 'yeah, me either but you just meet them where

they're at' and every one of our family members has done so.

Participant H1.27 discussed interactions among the community which demonstrated a

need for educating and building awareness:

We have to, as foster parents do a lot of education on teachers and administrators

and doctors and all the specialists you deal with.

The use of educating and spreading awareness of fostering demonstrates the use of

communication and interaction within the community. The next theme looks into the

foster parents experiences within their families.

Theme 4: Active Extended Family Involvement with Foster Parents and Foster

Children.

Six participants expressed experiences with family members' active engagement

with the foster parent and foster children during their timeframe of foster parenting.

These participants shared experiences of family inclusion, celebrating holidays and

birthdays, being asked about their experience and how the foster child is doing during

their placement and the inclusion of foster parents and children in activities with the

extended family which was then expressed to encourage belongingness to the participant.

Participant E10.2 described their experience involving their mother whose reaction to fostering included their expectations of engagement with foster child and designated names. Participant E10.2 described a conversation with their mother stating, "We're not going to have the kids call you grandma, your name is Regina. You know, they're going to know you're my mom, and if they choose to call you grandma that's great, but that's not where we're setting up for this." Participant E10.2 described that their mother wants to be involved within their experiences but also E10.2 has boundaries within the relationship.

Participant N10.9 shared that their mother-in-law comes every year for two weeks to assist with family involvement. N10.9 explained, "When his mom comes, she comes every year for two weeks in August. She loves on the babies, whatever babies we have." Similarly, family involvement supports belongingness as reported by B10.15 by mentioning:

I mean from the get go our family's been really supportive of us doing this …

they come around all the time and visit us, and when they call us, you know they

ask how all the kids are doing. So they're making the effort along with us.

Participant S10.23 identified within their household when her children were younger and living at home, they would express an interest in foster children and placements, "they would jump up and down and say yes, say yes, say yes" when they were asked about having another foster child placement. S10.23 reported "obviously they're all grown, my youngest child now is nineteen and three of them are married and have families and so on" as she discussed her family involvement as adults.

For example, A12.5 stated:

> We have a very supportive family, that was the biggest key … My husband's
>
> sister … they did great for a couple of hours just doing adventures and crafts, and
>
> all of that. Every one of our family members has done so, just embrace the …
>
> kids as they come in.

Additionally, H1.27 reported active family involvement with their older children and

engagement in decision making by stating:

> We are very careful to make sure everybody is on board even before we take a
>
> placement, we call our adult children who no longer live at home and say … here's
>
> what we know. What do you think about this? Because it impacts them too, it
>
> impacts our holidays, it impacts them coming to visit and impacts us going to visit
>
> them. So, it's really important for us to have all our kids feel like we all belong in
>
> this decision. This is not something that's made in a vacuum.

Among this theme, foster parents identify family members as active in their life,

whether it pertains to physical interaction or communication of checking in with one

another. The identified engagement is supporting families as an interpersonal resource,

importance within one's life, and the multidimensional aspect of interconnectedness

within roles. Foster parents describe the interactional process through multiple themes

and move into behavior is concerned with meaning as the next section related to

belongingness of foster parents.

Ecological Tenet 3: Behavior is Concerned with Meaning

Meaning making reflects on the participant's perspective of interactions, people, and any aspect of their life. Cook (2015) described meaning making as accomplishing three tasks; communicating shared symbolic systems, understanding the significance of things, and predicting aspect and adaptive qualities of control.

Theme 1: Shared Foster Parent Experiences.

Shared foster parent experiences are reported among eight participants. Foster parents described the importance of feeling a sense of acceptance and understanding. This included simple forms of communication with others and the relation of fostering experiences, building connections, feeling comfort and capability to express thoughts, and an overall awareness of the experience of foster parenting. Shared experiences were reported to assist with connectedness and a sense of meaning.

Participant E10.2 reported a connection with a daycare director where their foster children attended due to the director reporting their history of fostering to the parent. Participant E10.2 described the experience of "the first day that we got there to do a walk through with this placement, I found out that their director is a foster mom…so that immediately was just like a big sigh of relief like ok, this just got so much easier." Participant E10.2 discussed the value they experienced in this interaction due to the understanding of the experiences of a foster parent and the transitional phases in fostering when children are placed back with their biological family or in another placement which allowed Participant E10.2 to not have to educate everyone on their foster child transitioning out of their home. Participant E10.2 shared, "some of the teachers were

crying and they're like it's so sad and the director is like … this is the point, this is what they're supposed to do."

Participant M10.7 shared an experience of developing a friendship through experiences of fostering:

> We actually became really good friends, our adopted son that we just adopted over the summer had a second birthday in July and I invited her and she has three adopted boys and then she's fostering three girls that she's had for a couple of years and we became such good friends, unfortunately through such horrible experiences that…we talked for every day."

Participant N10.9 described, "I've met several people that are licensed to foster, but either adopted the kids or whatever, and they're you know, 'anytime you want us to watch them' and they've actually done respite for us." N10.9 discussed throughout the interview having open communication about their fostering experience within the community and being in public at a gymnastic event with foster children and biological children and a woman asking if she was a foster parent and after responding yes, the woman sharing, "me too, that's why I asked." Participant P10.18 described engagement in a support group with other foster parents which allows for expression of experiences and areas for building connections with other foster parents based on their shared experiences, "Through the support group people are supportive, yes."

Participant S10.23 described interactions with foster and adoptive parents as:

> We … support each other, talk to each other, that kind of thing, help each other like, right now I'm going to ask one of my friends if she knows where to get a

good haircut for a little African American boy because their hair is different and you don't want to just take them anywhere, so I'm going to talk to her about what she does with her boys but yeah that kind of thing.

Participant C10.28 reported a shared experience with another foster parent who engages in therapeutic foster parenting. C10.28 discussed talking with this foster parent about the differences they experienced in fostering and learning "she was able to give me some information that she had learned because she's therapeutic that I didn't learn that I could utilize."

Participant A12.5 discussed her thoughts with building shared experiences and stated:

You can start to feel quite alone…I just was looking for maybe foster parents who have been in it longer, who can help understand your situation or you know, navigate you in a way to get you through certain situations and mostly that sharing experiences that might lead you to helping a little bit, make it a little bit easier in some certain situations. Just somebody else, someone else who's been there is very helpful, just a listening ear is very helpful for sure.

Participant H1.27 shared that they engage in relationships with peers who experience similar interactions which has been beneficial for learning and connection as well as peers who understand dealing with children who have a history of trauma and awareness that parenting is not easy. H1.27 expressed a support group with the name REAL moms, meaning relatable, encouraging, authentic listeners as a group that provides encouragement and awareness to individual experiences of fostering. Participant H1.27 shared in this group she feels:

The desperation of moms who are working within child welfare to have a place where they feel safe to share things that other people don't understand unless they're living the experience.

Eight foster parent reported that shared experiences led them to feeling understood and connected to others. The following theme of experiencing care from the community identified additional meaningful experiences for foster parents.

Theme 2: Expressing Identity and Active Advocacy of Fostering.

Advocacy and expression of identity as a foster parent are described by eight participants. Participants reported sharing their experiences as foster parents, expressing their advocacy for fostering, and reasons for why they chose to foster. Foster parents also discussed the use of educating others about fostering to assist with awareness. Participant E10.2 discussed their experience as an educator within the community discussing aspects of foster parenting to others stating:

When people find out that we're foster parents, they have a lot of questions. Which is fine because a lot of people haven't interacted with people like us, and I realize that.

Participant M10.7 described an interest in active advocacy in the future stating:

I would actually like to try and get people who can make a difference and can make changes to the system to actually sit and listen and you know agree to those, or you know, consider or something, I just you know, I just feel that the, the system itself needs, needs to change you know.

Participant N10.9 shared that in their experience they discuss with community members who are interested in fostering the opportunities and challenges associated with fostering and are open about their timeframe and interactions while fostering children. N10.9 shared, "That's another thing I'm very open with…you can't do this and make your life miserable… So that's what I tell people all the time. If you do it and it's just causing problems, it's not good for you or the kids that you're trying to help heal."

Participant B10.15 reported their experience to become a foster parent was inspired by his foster experience:

> That's why we did, we started this whole thing because you know…we want more kids like me being successful when they leave the system to know that you know they can still turn their lives around…It's my way of giving back, because the foster system was such an important part of my life, I had to get back in one way and this is the only way I could think of giving back was to help other foster kiddos out.

Participant S10.23 shared their religious beliefs and active involvement in foster parenting stating:

> I'll be upfront saying, I'm pro-life and I feel if I'm going to be saying to women, you can't just eliminate your baby, then I need to be a person who's will to step in and say I will do what I can to take care of the children. They aren't necessarily the same children, so you know it's not a complete connection but I just felt like it was one way that we could say, yes, I'm willing.

Participant C10.28 shared her experience attending a conference which brough communication topics:

> We talked about, you know, the hardship of fostering, but also the positives and how do we keep the course and keep going through the years and things ... I advocate for anything that I am involved in.

Participant A12.5 discussed advocacy within foster in a variety of ways including "I also started the Tioga County foster closet…so that was started three years ago we had collected a lot of donations from the community and it was, people were really…enjoyed helping the foster care kids."

Participant H1.27 disclosed experiences of educating providers about the needs of foster children and foster care as:

> Other areas are more difficult, like teachers don't understand, doctors are very unknowledgeable about foster and adoption medicine…They don't understand attachment, they don't understand grief and loss… We have to as foster parents do a lot of education on teachers, and administrators, and doctors, and all specialists you deal with.

Advocacy and expressing identity for foster parents describe opportunities of providing continued growth within the community and experiences for foster parents. Advocacy assists with supporting individuals and making informed decisions about a person's lifestyle. The next theme focuses on spirituality and its effects on foster parent experiences.

Theme 3: Active Spiritual Involvement.

Eight of the participants reported active involvement in spirituality. Cook (2015) reported that faith community support can be a resource for coping and building well-being (p.272). Through discussion, some foster parents reported spirituality as their means of awareness to engaging in foster parenting and others reported receiving supports from spiritual domains.

Participant E10.02 reported a history of not engaging in religion in a religious setting, more so reaching out for assistance after becoming a foster parent and "I reached out and we were denied that services because we don't have a faith-based community. They only work with people who already have established church communities." Participant E10.02 discussed after this occurrence another religious community reached out and provided meals to the foster family on a continuous basis which Participant E10.02 discussed as a positive experience, "the meal train set up is because they all go to the same church like they meet up at church on Sunday...they are all Christians, but they don't care that we're not."

Participant M10.7 shared that they experienced support from their grandmother's church through an angel assignment during the holidays. M10.7 shared that they experienced assistance with gift cards for groceries and items for the children, "the church that my gram goes to, they do what they call an angel every year and they pick a family…my grandma was like, you know, everybody wants to do it for you." Participant M10.7 shared due to this involvement with the angel opportunity she plans to continue the process of assisting the next angel participant.

Participant N10.9 discussed a few areas of spiritual engagement due to fostering, expressing "a lot of churches want to help foster families out" as she discussed people reaching out to provide assistance and "the church community is the one that is starting this program to reach out to foster." As she described having health concerns and the members assisting their family with transportation.

Participant P10.18 discussed experiences in the past in which engagement in church did not meet her needs. In recent interactions P10.18 shared:

> It's just like we're just so accepted there for who we are, and they're just grateful that the kids are here. The preacher even says, 'I feel like if you guys all get here on a Sunday morning, that's a plus.' So, it's just difference and where you would expect acceptance and didn't find it and then you find it sometimes in the least likely places.

Participant S10.23 expressed church as a place of belonging due to support from one another through engaging in conversation and prayer. S10.23 shared "God helps me do it. I know this is what he wants me to do and then I also think you kind of say goodbye to all of your children in one way or another." Additionally, participants identified the support of spirituality and connection to others. For example, C10.28 stated:

> I'm part of a church and I honestly would say that um, I have felt more belonginess even in my church than I did my own family…I see them multiple times a week outside of church, we do all kinds of things outside of church as well.

Participant A12.5 discussed engagement in a small community church "it's my husband's grandfather who's a pastor, so it's a lot of family there. We do the luncheons and dinners and they have a youth group for those kiddos."

Similarly, H1.27 shared an experience of:

> We show up at church and our, our bonus kiddo, is um, he stands out in a crowd and they are very accepting of him…they don't let it bother them and…it's helping our foster son belong in the community and in turn helping us belong in the community because if he was, if he was not welcomed, then we'd be like, well, what do we do, like where do we go to church?

Behavior as meaningful is demonstrated through meaning making religious and spiritual beliefs and experiences due to the ability to assist individuals with purpose in life. Cook (2015) discussed religion as assisting with coping throughout life and identifying meaning within lived experiences. The last theme presents as experiencing care from community.

Theme 4: Experiencing Care from Community.

This experience came from the community, where foster parents described an interaction which was motivational and encouraging to them. Experiencing care from the community identified by seven participants which included verbal statements of interest and welcoming, offering a kind gesture of physical support, acceptance by others, and providing support for childcare. Experiencing care is displayed in a variety of ways. Participant E10.2 expressed an experience of meal trains being provided for their family

and the participants who created the meals were of a different religious background than Participant E10.2. Participant E10.2 stated:

> They are all Christians, but they don't care that we're not ... so to have them have it not be a factor at all, has really helped foster that sense of like, ok, we're good, like these are our people.

Participant N10.9 shared experiencing care through a local preschool, after identifying the need for services for their foster children, Participant N10.9 expressed "Manor preschool…sometimes, have waiting lists and stuff like that but every time I've called, they have gotten my kiddo in right away. They…have rearranged schedules. They had changed people around." Participant N10.9 discussed this situation as helpful to their family knowing that they would have care for their foster children. Participant B10.15 discussed experiencing care through their report of community, "like I said, community, they respect us, they appreciate everything we do." B10.15 reported support systems even among previous relationships assisting the family, stating "she'll even drop whatever she's doing and come help us…if we need her to, so like even outside of family."

Participant P10.18 expressed care through:

> There have been times we've gone out for dinner and people have picked up our check or given us at least like a coupon for 20% off or whatever, I mean that's always encouraging. That's I feel supportive, just to say, I see what you guys are doing here, I want to buy your dinner and just words of encouragement

sometimes. Words of encouragement, sometimes just from strangers that will just

say bless you, I see what you are doing.

Participant S10.23 shared experiences of meaningful statements "some people admire

you…and they always say, 'How can you do that? …I couldn't do it' that kind of thing."

Participant C10.28 expressed care was demonstrated while having awareness that her

earlier life experiences didn't stop her interaction in a community, that she was accepted

as herself and felt included because as she stated "I was welcomed with open arms."

C10.28 shared "It didn't matter that my son was biracial and we're in a predominantly

white area, it didn't matter that I wasn't married. It didn't matter that I had…tattoos and

piercings and wore jeans and you know, not modest clothing all the time, it didn't

matter."

Participant A12.5 shared experiences with community reaction stating "I have a lot of

people who say I don't know how you do it. I don't know how you do it and I'm like,

'yeah, me either but you just meet them where they're at and every one of our family

members has done so just embrace the … kids as they come in." Foster parents

experiencing care from others demonstrated connections and meaning within their

lifestyle.

General Narrative

In the first ecological tenet, behavior as personal and contextual four themes

emerged. All nine participants reported experiencing some form of building supports

within the community. Participants reported engagement with online support groups,

involvement within the community, reaching out to other foster parents, and spiritual

supports. All nine participants reported experiencing a form of desire for creating and connecting familiarity within families and varies communities. This was demonstrated by participants through creating open lines of communication with immediate family, extended family, foster children, and within the community. Seven out of nine participants reported experiencing emotional responses to fostering. The emotional responses encompassed experiences of public situations, having limited ability to express their thoughts, direct emotions related to fostering itself, personal situations, and family involvement in foster care. Six out of nine participants reported experiencing continuous contact with foster children and parents following the foster experience. Continuous contact was demonstrated through open lines of communication, sharing updates about the foster child, and foster parents reporting the continuous interactions within their lifestyle as family.

In the second tenet, behavior as interactional four themes emerged. Eight out of nine participants reported experiencing various interactions within the community. Participant reported interactions ranging from involvement with daycares, offering support, social group interactions, virtual opportunities, and involvement with foster agencies. Eight out of nine participants reported experiencing the need for tangible support from the community. Tangible support by participants related to meal opportunities, clothing, babysitting, and transportation. Seven out of nine participants reported experiences of educating and spreading awareness of fostering. Educating and spreading awareness for participants described opportunities for informing others about fostering, being open to conversations about their fostering experiences, and educating

others about how to foster. Seven out of nine participants reported experiences of active extended family involvement with foster parents and foster children. Extended family involvement included verbal communications and checking in with foster parents, providing support to foster parents by engaging with their family and visiting, as well as discussion on how to engage within the family.

In the third tenet, behavior as meaningful four themes emerged. Eight out of nine participants reported shared foster parent experiences. Shared foster parent experiences described opportunities for connection with other, having an understanding of foster parent experiences, and opportunities for supporting both physically and emotionally. Eight out of nine participants reported experiences of expressing identity and active advocacy of fostering. Active advocacy and expressing identity included experiences of sharing the reasoning for engaging in fostering, providing awareness to local communities, and sharing resources for others to engage and support fostering. Eight out of nine participants reported experiences with active spiritual involvement. Active spiritual involvement varied based on active involvement with religious engagements and support offered by local churches. Seven out of nine participants reported experiencing care from the community. Experiencing care demonstrated opportunities for verbal affirmations and appreciation as well as assisting with needs.

In conclusion, participants process of foster parenting of being in the world allowed them to building belonging in a way in which they were comfortable exploring personal behavior, social and community supports, and meaningful interactions of expressing oneself and purpose within fostering. Resonating throughout all participant

narratives was the experience of the amount of involvement they chose to put into belonging, which when pursued provided a greater sense of belongingness in the rural setting.

General Structure

In the first ecological tenet, behavior as personal and contextual four themes emerge. Foster parents in rural setting build experiences of building supports within the community through online support groups, involvement within the community, reaching out to other foster parents, and spiritual supports. Foster parents experience a desire for creating and connecting familiarity within families and varies communities through creating open lines of communication with immediate family, extended family, foster children, and within the community.

Many foster parents report experiencing emotional responses to fostering. Emotional responses encompass of public situations, having limited ability to express thoughts, direct emotions related to fostering itself, personal situations, and family involvement in foster care. Most foster parents experience continuous contact with foster children and parents following the foster experience with use of open communication, sharing updates about the foster child, and foster parents report the continuous interactions within their lifestyle as family.

In the second tenet, behavior as interactional four themes emerge. Most foster parents have interactions within the community ranging from involvement with daycares, community members offering support, social group interactions, virtual opportunities, and continuous involvement with foster agencies. Most foster parents report a need for

tangible support from the community. Tangible support includes meal opportunities, providing clothing, babysitting, and transportation. Most foster parents have experience educating and spreading awareness of fostering through opportunities for informing others about fostering, being open to conversations about their fostering experiences, and educating others about how to foster. Most foster parents experience active extended family involvement with foster parents and foster children which includes verbal communication and checking in with foster parents, support to foster parents by engaging with their family and visiting, as well as discussion on how to engage within the family.

In the third tenet, behavior as meaningful four themes emerge. Most foster parents experience opportunities for connection with others, having an understanding of foster parent experiences, and opportunities for supporting both physically and emotionally. Most foster parents experience opportunities to express identity and active advocacy for fostering through sharing the reason for engaging in fostering, providing awareness to local communities, and sharing resources for others to engage and support fostering. Most foster parents experience active spiritual involvement through religious engagements including attendance within spiritual life and support offered by local churches. Most foster parents experience care from the community through verbal affirmations and as assistance with needs.

Phenomenological Analysis

Rural foster parents who engage in opportunities of belongingness are able to make meaning through understanding their lived experiences, the ways in which they perceive life through experiences, and the meaning around them. Behavior in all forms

verbal and non-verbal assist with explaining culture, systems, and the meaning within a lived experience. Rural foster parents are able to identify their experiences of being in the world, through describing their experiences of interacting within themselves, their families, and social communities.

This phenomenon can change through how they choose to engage within their systems. Foster parent fore-sight demonstrates the perspective from which they understand and interpret their lifestyle. Each occurrence of fostering changes a foster parent experience, their world, and how they engage within their world. Foster parents may experience opportunities for building supports, creating and connecting with families and communities, and have emotional responses to fostering interactions. They may experience a variety of community interaction, have a need for tangible supports, an interest in educating others about fostering, and have family involvement within fostering. They may also have shared foster parent experiences, opportunities for expressing their identity as a foster parent, active spiritual involvement, and occasions of experiencing care from their community. It is not uncommon for foster parents to feel a need for personal, contextual, interactional, and meaningful changes within their world. When a foster parent experiences belongingness or a challenge within belongingness this causes a reflection. Following each reflection, foster parents demonstrate the opportunity to create and supporting belongingness within their world. Foster parents' sense of belongingness can influence their willingness to continuously engage in fostering. They share a variety of lived experiences which provide a deeper understanding to their needs within the lived experience of being a foster parent.

Summary

The research question pursued exploring foster parents' sense of belongingness in their community as a reflection of their lived experience, the meaning of their lived experiences, and the themes identified from those experiences. Each level or proposition from the ecological counseling perspective assist with identifying foster parent experiences. The participant narratives offer depth to their experiences as foster parents. The findings suggest that foster parents seek support, engage in supports where they feel comfortable, and continue to attempt to educate and inform others about foster parenting. In the final chapter, I will discuss findings, review the limitations, and make recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the results of foster parents lived experiences of belongingness in the rural setting through their narratives and structure the results of data through an ecological counseling perspective. This is a phenomenological hermeneutic study exploring the lived experience of foster parent sense of belongingness in a rural setting. In this study, I interviewed nine foster parents in rural Pennsylvania. I sought to understand the lived experiences of foster parents through semi-structured interviews to collect data, these were audio-recorded, and I transcribed each interview. The research question for this study is: What are the lived experiences of belongingness among rural foster parents in their communities? Foster parents expressed awareness to areas of belongingness, engagement, acceptance, and inclusion through which I processed through Cook's (2015) ecological counseling perspective focusing on behavior as personal and contextual, behavior as interactional, and behavior as meaningful. Foster parents reported awareness of their personal behavior, involvement with community, and meaning within their lifestyle. This study provides a deeper understanding of the essential role of foster parents.

Key findings are derived from the review of foster parents' interviews and organization into themes through the ecological counseling perspective. I found clear descriptions of foster parents' sense of belongingness through direct and indirect experiences. The themes presented connect the participant experiences to meaning-making and connection to the sense of belongingness. I summarize the findings discussed

in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I discuss the limitations, future study recommendations, and implications of foster parent reports.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings from this study extend the knowledge on the sense of belongingness that foster parents' experience between themselves, systems that they interact with and how systems influence their behaviors through the lens of an ecological counseling perspective. Twelve themes emerged from the participant interviews. I connected the themes to the ecological counseling perspective's tenets and engaged in member checking with participants, which added to the credibility and results of the study.

Behavior is personal expands on the thought that a person's behavior has unique characteristics, genetically or based upon experiences and behavior is contextual includes behavior as influenced by circumstances in a person's life, including physical aspects, quality of lifestyle, and human connections (Cook, 2015). Conyne and Cook (2015) described the importance of relationships as the ability to affiliate and empathetically connect with one another as a part of personality and social development. The themes building supports within the community and continuous contact with foster child and parents following the foster experience demonstrate foster parents' interest in building connection, having a capacity for connection, and assisting with feeling not alone. Participant B10.5 expressed that the fostering agency:

check on us all the time to make sure we're good, mentally, physically. You know, we're still in good shape, so we keep good track of all of use to make sure, you know, we're still in this for you know, good cause.

Participant B10.5 continued to express how the openness and communication assisted with feeling connected and welcomed. Similarly, Participant H1.27 expressed that they participate in a support group which "there just seems to be some common language, some common emotions, some common experiences, and it's a place where I feel like I really belong." Building personal connections is an aspect of human life due to the importance of the involvement in everyday life and communal values. Foster parents expressed having supports within the community and continuous contact as a positive relation within their foster experience.

The theme, desire for creating and connecting familiarity within families and various communities is demonstrated by foster parents through communication. Conyne and Cook (2015) described that our lives as humans are a triadic interaction, one piece of the triad includes our own choices and actions. The choice to communicate allows foster parents to express themselves. Participant A12.5 expressed "the only way anything gets done or hallway understood is communication … and there's always room for improvement." Participant N10.9 shared that they open lines of communication with biological parents to assist with the experience of foster. The skill of communication assists with belongingness due to the expression of information to assist with reduction of feeling misunderstood or potential for conflict in relationships. Foster parents disclose the importance of communication within their relationships to assist with continuing the process of fostering.

Foster parents reported emotional responses to foster parenting which correlates with Lietz et al (2016) reported that foster parents experience emotional distress due to

alterations in the household to which Pheonix (2013) disclosed the importance of self-care to assist with managing emotional struggles. Participant M10.7 shared that they felt they "shouldn't be afraid to speak what we're feeling." Emotional responses are normal human behavior that needs to be processed for overall wellbeing. Cook and Conyne (2015) discussed the importance of exploring personal factors that effect personal behavior, emotional expression provides awareness to personal factors that directly influence behavior. Participant P10.18 disclosed "I don't feel like we are excluded, but I don't, I never feel like it's easy for us to be included." This described personal factor plays a role in foster parents' direct behavior. Looking into the next tenet of behavior as interactional, the focus takes the tenets of personal and contextual and begins to transition into behavior as interaction and how a person chooses to engage with their environment and systems.

Behavior is interactional supports behavior being influenced by how a person perceives life's context and chooses to behave within their life (Conyne and Coook, 2015). The interactional aspect of foster parent behavior displays the awareness of social connections and building relationships that cause value. Richardson et al. (2021) strengthened the need for foster parents' support, reporting that this interactional aspect can be both formal and informal, all of which assist with the reduction of stress. Foster parents within this phenomenological study reported their needs and interactions among behavior as interactional due to their choice to perceive and engage within others. Building the interactional process in a foster parent system may influence needs to be met.

The theme, active extended family involvement with foster parents and foster children demonstrated foster parents feeling inclusion through celebration of events with extended family and having extended family express or provide care for foster children. Participant B10.15 expressed "they come around all the time to visit us, and when they call us, you know they ask how all the kids are doing." Reporting that active family involvement assisted with the process of fostering. Participant N10.9 expressed that her mother-in-law assists with physical care and involvement with her family which demonstrates care. Foster parents' expression of extended family involvement presented as filled with connection and support.

Interaction within the community presented among eight foster parents. The types of interactions varied based on virtual supports or local community interactions. Feeney et al. (2015) described the importance of utilizing social supports to improve quality of life and increase happiness levels. Participant H1.27 expressed that their experience within their foster agency and prudent parenting opportunities made their fostering experience easier. As Participant N10.9 stated, "I would say the community is you know, if you look for it, it's there." Utilizing the community supports was reported by participants and described by Cook et al. (2012) as how a person chooses to respond.

The need for tangible support from the community emerged as a theme based on foster parent report of receiving items such as clothing and food from members in the community. Tangible support also incorporated physical support moving and transportation assistance. A behavior as interactional focuses on patterns of possibilities (Cook et al., 2012). Foster parents throughout the interview process expressed the ability

and need to engage in tangible support to assist with their household. The use of tangible support demonstrates the interplay and value between relationships.

The final theme in this tenet is educating and spreading awareness of fostering. Foster parents expressed telling others about fostering and educating community members and providers about their experiences. Participant H1.27 shared, "We have to, as foster parents do a lot of education on teachers and administrators and doctors and all specialists you deal with." This education was described as providing others with information to receive appropriate care and to assist with healthy interactions. Participant S10.23 reported in their experience they mention to others the ability to be a foster parent due to their awareness of the high need of fostering. A person's perception about what experiences are an option and experience in their life limit their range of possibilities (Cook et al., 2012). Foster parents build the education and awareness of fostering to their communities as an interactional process which assists with feeling understood. In addition to the interactional component of a person's behavior, we also look into behavior as meaningful.

Behavior as meaningful focuses on what people derive from their life and interactions. Behavior is concerned with meaning is displayed through how a person perceives their life and situations (Cook et al., 2012). Piel et al. (2017) brought awareness to foster children and their systems, including influences on a person's wellbeing including contribution, growth, and development. Piel et al. was brought to attention for this study to assist with the awareness of the need of researching another aspect of systems and their influences on lifestyle. Throughout this study, foster parents disclosed

the importance of systems including family, spirituality, shared social experiences, demonstrating the importance of meaningful interactions. As Lietz et al (2016) identified the foster parenting experience is not a goal, the interaction of being a foster parent if a process for resilience.

The theme of shared foster parent experiences demonstrates an interest of foster parents engaging with others who can relate to their experiences. Miller et al. (2019) identified the use of supports help with the responsibilities of a foster parent but in the same regard one challenge was finding other foster parents to define as a social support with a similar lifestyle. Participant C10.28 reported learning and sharing information with other foster parents to assists with difficulties they experienced. Participant A12.5 shared that fostering at times can "feel quite alone" and having others who shared the experience feels helpful. As foster parents engage in shared experiences they are reflecting on the importance of relationships.

The theme, expressing identity and active advocacy of fostering reports an interest in why foster parents chose to foster and how they advocate for the fostering experience. Participant M10.7 expressed that she tries to see where she can make a difference in the foster parenting community due to seeing areas in need of change. Participant S10.23 shared their experience in foster stemmed from personal beliefs for pro-life. In this experience the use of expressing identity and sharing their beliefs with others assisted with advocating for foster parenting. As described earlier language is a building block to providing expression of identity and in order to advocate and exert control within their life.

Spiritual and religious beliefs assist with meaning making due to being an area in grandest ecosystem which demonstrates the ability to develop a strong sense of purpose, direction, coping, and connectedness (Cook et al., 2012). Six participants discussed being involved in spirituality. Participant C10.28 stated, "I felt more belongingness even in my church than I did my own family." While Participants S10.23 and Participant P10.18 reported spiritual involvement started their fostering services due to awareness of fostering and overall spiritual beliefs. Participant S10.23 expressed, "The community of my church is more of a place where there's belonging." Active spiritual involvement provides validation with personal and material support and solace among stressors.

The final theme identified is experiencing care from the community which emerged as a theme from all seven participants. Experiencing care from the community includes verbal expressions of interest, offering gestures of support, and feelings of acceptance. Participant N10.9 reported feeling care through daycare opportunities for her foster children which with their previous knowledge daycare openings felt limited. Participant P10.18 shared hearing words of encouragement by community members which made them feel supported. Meaning making in this theme is demonstrated through communication of experiences, learning about the significance of the interaction, and how they perceive the interactions.

The use of the ecological counseling perspective demonstrates areas of belongingness for foster parents. To have a belief in the opportunity to influence life and find meaning foster parents need resilience. To achieve a sense of resilience, a person needs to have a sense of belongingness (Nowicki, 2008). Belongingness is demonstrated

through behavior as personal and contextual, behavior as interactional, and behavior as meaningful. I explored foster parents through the process of the hermeneutic circle of interpretation captures *Dasein* by exhausting literature, interviewing foster parents, and interpretive understanding with thematic analysis. Foster parents lived experiences provided a wealth of information due to the lack of literature on foster parent experiences, their active engagement in the interview process, and analysis of their experiences provided clear themes of belonging.

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to this study. The first limitation is the nature of the study as phenomenological, demonstrating the potential for researcher bias, authenticity, and trustworthiness which can influence the interpretation of data. This limitation is credible through hermeneutic analysis's discussion, transparency, and self-awareness (Patterson & Higgs, 2005). I used journaling prior to engaging in the study and throughout the study as well as member checking to address researcher bias. The second limitation to the study includes the sample of participants from rural Pennsylvania. This is a limited geographic example of rural foster parent experiences of belongingness; the findings are to be understood as the beginning to a larger exploration. The foster parents also volunteer to engage in the study which displayed a filtered perspective.

Recommendations

The narratives of foster parents that were derived as a result of analyzing data in this study included three tenets and identified themes. These themes are means for counselors to increase their ability to work effectively with foster parents. Counselors

have an opportunity to use the ecological counseling perspective with enhanced knowledge of foster parents' sense of belongingness within their communities and the effect on retention rates, with this awareness counselors can provide a form of treatment geared specifically for foster parents. Counselors should remain current on foster parents' lived experience

The study demonstrates the need for continued research on foster parent experiences. The lack of history and literature based on foster parent experiences could be enhanced by continued exploration and expression of foster parents lived experiences. A further understanding of foster parent experiences could equip and inform present and future counseling practices. Therefore, more research is needed to capture the foster parent experiences of belongingness. As described in Chapter 2, literature indicated information on foster children, fostering statistics, and motivations for adopting foster children. Further research could inform resources, supports, and needs of foster parents to assist with building higher retention and positive engagement in fostering.

My next recommendation is increasing supports for foster parents. Participants stated an interest in community, support, use of resources, and overall, an interest in feeling understood by others. Mallon (2019) shared it is important to have an understanding of dilemmas that effect foster parents. By exploring foster parent needs and lived experiences we may be able to make changes after the awareness is built on limitations. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of foster parents' sense of belongingness in the rural setting. This study was limited to present foster parents in rural Pennsylvania, it would be helpful to

gather experiences of foster parents in a variety of settings and understand their sense of belonging.

Implications

In the experience of counseling, social justice implications are significant. This study shed light on the lived experiences of foster parents. Understanding the lived experience of foster parents helps counselors become better equipped to counsel foster parents based on their needs, foster parents can inform clinical practices, and how to clinicians can provide services that are inclusive for foster parents. The research of foster parents builds a deeper understanding into their meaning, experiences, and lifestyle to enhance the community. This study expands on the understanding of foster parents lived experiences and building belongingness. Social change can be influenced with the continuous awareness of foster parent experiences, a significant need for foster parents is present for both recruitment and retention (Ahn, et al., 2017). This research provides an understanding of rural Pennsylvania foster parents lived experiences and assists in closing the gap in lack of literature on foster parent experiences.

Conclusion

Foster parents are essential members in society who provide a vital opportunity for foster children and the community. Strickler et al. (2018) discussed the importance of a satisfied foster parent and the implications on retention, recruitment, stability, permanency, and child outcomes. In order to assist foster parents an increase in knowledge on their experience of belongingness is crucial. This qualitative research provided a profound insight into nine foster parents' lived experience of belongingness

which in turn assists the community, counseling profession, and builds opportunity for

social change.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Material

Dear (Research Participant),

Thank you for taking the time to read this email. I am a Counselor Education and Supervision PhD student at Walden University. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation about foster parents' sense of belongingness in the rural setting. In order to assess participants' appropriateness for this study, I ask you to please consider the following criteria. Inclusion criteria for study participants are (a) adults 21 years of age or older, (b) present foster parents, and (c) reside in rural PA. If you fit the criteria and choose to participate, I will ask you to attend a 60-minute interview and complete an informed consent agreement to document your voluntary participation in the study.

If this interview would be of interest to you, I would appreciate your participation. Additionally, if you know of other foster parents who might be interested in participating, please feel free to share this information with them. There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to my research and findings are the key to building a greater public understanding of foster parents' sense of belongingness within the community in a rural setting. My email address is ashley.hershberger@waldenu.edu. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ashley Hershberger

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Considering belongingness as a feeling of or potential development of acceptance, inclusion, respect, contribution to a group and within yourself. Please tell me about a time you experienced belongingness.

2. What created that experience of belongingness for you?

3. What is your experience as a foster parent for building belongingness within your family?

    a. What is your experience as a foster parent for building belongingness within your community?

4. Can you describe how you experience foster parenting within the community?

5. As a foster parent, tell me about a time when you experienced acceptance in your community?

6. What are your experiences of interactions within the community as a foster parent?

7. Can you provide some experiences of how the community supports foster parents?

Appendix C: Flyer

Foster Parents

Needed to volunteer for a dissertation study, for more information please email:
ashley.hershberger@waldenu.edu

Please take one:

Interested volunteers please email:
ashley.hershberger@waldenu.edu

Interested volunteers please email:
ashley.hershberger@waldenu.edu

Interested volunteers please email:
ashley.hershberger@waldenu.edu

Interested volunteers please email:
ashley.hershberger@waldenu.edu

Are you eligible:

• Adult 21 years of age or older

• Present foster parents

• Reside in rural Pennsylvania

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of foster parents' sense of belongingness among relationships and community in rural Pennsylvania.