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Child Abuse & Neglect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg

Profiles of adults most likely to become a foster family: A latent profile analysis

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Foster care
Intention
COM-B model
Latent profile analysis

ABSTRACT

Background: The shortage of foster families to protect maltreated children requires urgent and effective solutions supported by theoretical and evidence-based frameworks. However, most research has focused only on the perspective of foster parents and has not been theoretically grounded. To the best of our knowledge, profiles of prospective foster families with representative samples from the general population have not yet been identified.

Objective: The current study aimed to identify the profile(s) of Portuguese adults most likely to become a foster family through latent profile analysis, exploring socio-demographic variables and factors related to capability, opportunity, and motivation (COM-B model) as predictors of profile membership.

Participants and methods: A representative sample of 1082 adults (Portugal) completed a survey comprising several self-report measures aligned with the theoretical dimensions of the COM-B model.

Results: The results revealed three profiles: *Ready Responders* (highest scores on awareness, willingness, and intention), *Willing Waverers* (high scores on willingness and moderate scores on awareness and intention), and *Reluctant Bystanders* (lowest scores on all indicators). Having children, contact with the child protection system, conscientiousness, social well-being, parental self-efficacy, family communication, and family-related, self-oriented, and child-centered reasons were significant predictors of profile membership.

Conclusions: These findings highlight the value of theory-informed profiling to inform targeted recruitment strategies for prospective foster families.

1. Introduction

Parental abuse and neglect pose significant risks to children's development (Magalhães & Camilo, 2023). Under these

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2025.107486>

Received 3 December 2024; Received in revised form 9 April 2025; Accepted 30 April 2025

Available online 9 May 2025

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circumstances, the removal of a child from their birth family may be necessary to protect the child. Placing children in foster care should be prioritized over residential care, particularly for younger children (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023). Foster care provides an alternative family environment which is appropriate for a child's development and a setting in which children are most likely to reach their full potential (Li et al., 2019; Quick, 2024; United Nations, 1989). A comprehensive meta-analysis by Li et al. (2019) revealed that children in foster care consistently experience fewer internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems and reveal a more positive opinion of care than those in residential care. These findings suggest that foster care's more personalized, family-oriented environment better supports children's psychological well-being and social development (Li et al., 2019). Therefore, it is essential to develop and maintain a strong foster care system that effectively recruits and retains foster families capable of providing a stable nurturing environment for children placed in alternative out-of-home care (Ott et al., 2023).

Studies in different countries, such as Australia (Cooper, 2020), Portugal (Magalhães et al., 2022), Sweden (Lind et al., 2025), and The Netherlands (Zeijlmans et al., 2018) have identified a widespread shortage of foster families. In England, the number of children in alternative care has been rising, while the number of foster families has decreased since 2018 (Ott et al., 2023). A review of the English system (Narey & Owers, 2018) found that there is not an absolute shortage but rather a mismatch between foster families available and children who need a foster family, based on factors such as geography and characteristics of both children and foster families. However, recent studies indicate that there is indeed a genuine shortage of foster parents, especially for ethnic and cultural matches (e.g., Somali or Muslim-heritage foster parents) (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2025; Chowdhury, 2021). The shortage of foster parents has been linked to lower standards of matching between children and foster families (Narey & Owers, 2018; Zeijlmans et al., 2018), which can lead to additional placement moves and, consequently, negatively influence children's developmental outcomes (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). Moreover, this may compel social services to outsource foster care provision to private agencies (Narey & Owers, 2018) or place children in residential care (Magalhães et al., 2022). Both options increase placement costs and, in the case of residential care, may lead to worse outcomes for children (Li et al., 2019).

Several studies have explored why individuals can be discouraged from applying to become foster parents, drop out during the application process, or discontinue the role. Lind et al. (2025) found that the demands of the role, such as time commitments, home conditions, and a perceived inability to meet children's needs were the main barriers to becoming foster parents. Furthermore, Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. (2025) and Chowdhury (2021) highlighted that individuals from diverse ethnical backgrounds face socio-cultural, political, and theological barriers, often linked to negative views or concerns about engaging with social services. Ott et al. (2023) noted that individuals may withdraw from the application process due to poor timing, financial limitations, or the development of negative perceptions of social services. Additionally, some foster parents decided to discontinue the role due to a lack of adequate financial or broader support from social services, or because they felt disrespected or undervalued. These barriers align with the findings of a systematic literature review on foster parent intention and retention factors (Gouveia et al., 2021).

Portugal presents a particularly challenging context, as it has the lowest rate of children in foster care relative to the total number of children in alternative care in Europe (Eurochild, 2021). Despite legislative reforms introduced in late 2015 to prioritize foster care placements (Protection Law 147/99, update 142/2015) and further statutory guidelines in 2020 encouraging the recruitment of new foster families (Ordinance nr 278-A/2020), progress has been limited. The percentage of all children in alternative care placed in foster families rose only modestly from 3.2 % in 2016 to 4.1 % in 2023, and a more significant but still limited increase among children under six (from 1.7 % to 11.4 %) (ISS, 2017, 2024). This persistent shortfall highlights the need for urgent and effective solutions to grow the pool of foster families in Portugal.

Understanding what encourages or discourages individuals from becoming foster parents is key to developing effective interventions to recruit foster parents. Interventions are more likely to succeed when based on thorough behavioral analysis and supported by evidence-based theoretical frameworks (Flannery et al., 2018). Theories not only guide the development of interventions but also help identify the core elements required for sustained behavior change (Boyd et al., 2020). The "theory of change" framework emphasizes that theories allow to establish a clear link between intervention components and the outcomes it aims to achieve (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020).

The COM-B model and the associated Theoretical Domains Framework (TDF) are established tools for understanding and designing behavior change interventions (D'Lima & Lorencatto, 2024). The TDF synthesizes 33 theories and 128 psychological constructs, providing a comprehensive method to explore the psychological determinants of behavior. This framework initially featured 12 domains that can be grouped into three core elements, Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation, which form the basis of the COM-B model (Michie et al., 2011). The COM-B model posits that behavior (B) is a product of the interaction between an individual's capabilities (C), opportunities (O), and motivation (M). Specifically, Capability refers to an individual's physical (e.g., physical agility or mobility, skills) or psychological (e.g., knowledge, psychological strength, skills) capability. Opportunity includes external factors that facilitate behavior, such as physical (e.g., financial resources, housing conditions) or social (e.g., social norms). Motivation covers internal processes that can also foster individuals' behavior, including reflective (e.g., making plans and efforts) and automatic processes (e.g., emotional responses) (Michie et al., 2011). The COM-B model is central to the Behavior Change Wheel (BCW) (D'Lima et al., 2020), a framework that provides a systematic method for developing interventions by identifying the behavior sources to be targeted. The model underscores the interdependence of capability and opportunity on motivation, which drives behavior. This suggests that effective interventions must target one or more of these components, depending on the specific needs identified (Michie et al., 2014; West & Michie, 2020). Furthermore, without the presence of both capability and opportunity, behavior change cannot occur, regardless of the strength of motivation (West & Michie, 2023).

The COM-B model has been successfully applied across various settings and behaviors, such as health care (e.g., Mantzourani et al., 2024), family-based and parenting interventions (e.g., Younas & Gutman, 2022), evaluation of youth mentoring programs (e.g., Hatzikiakidis et al., 2021), and societal change issues (e.g., ecological change, covid reduction of transmission and mobile phone use

while driving) (e.g., [Demir et al., 2024](#)). Moreover, it has been used in different study designs, such as to analyze and compare results from systematic reviews (e.g., [Mather et al., 2022](#)), and to guide data collection and analysis in qualitative and quantitative studies ([Speranzini et al., 2020](#)). In the context of foster care, only one study applied the COM-B framework to explore factors associated with intention and willingness to foster ([Ferreira, 2024](#)). This study found that child-centered reasons (motivation domain) and self-efficacy (capability domain) were positively associated with willingness and intention to foster a child. Additionally, the study revealed that having available time (opportunity domain) was associated with willingness, but not with intention ([Ferreira, 2024](#)). However, the study used only a limited number of variables within domains, recruited a convenience sample, and did not identify the profiles of potential foster families.

1.1. Research problems and the current study

This study uses the COM-B model ([Michie et al., 2011](#)) as a theoretical framework to map and understand barriers and facilitators in the context of foster care. While most research in this field has focused primarily on reasons or motivations for fostering, with some studies expanding to risk and protective factors ([Cooley et al., 2017](#); [Dowdy-Hazlett & Clark, 2024](#)), we selected the COM-B for its heuristic value and its conceptual ability to frame behavioral outcomes as arising from the interplay of individuals' capabilities, opportunities, and motivations. Accordingly, the present study aimed to screen and examine potential foster caregivers within a representative sample of the general population using a set of variables related to capability, opportunity, and motivation to become a foster parent.

[Gouveia et al. \(2021\)](#) conducted a systematic literature review on foster parent intention and retention factors and at the time identified 49 studies. From these, most included samples of active foster families or individuals who had experience fostering ([Geiger et al., 2013](#); [Keys et al., 2017](#); [Randle et al., 2017](#)). However, broadening the scope of the field to include participants who are not yet engaged in the system is needed, as it can give new insights into awareness, willingness, and intention to foster, which facilitates the identification of different motivations and barriers across demographic groups ([Davi et al., 2021](#); [Goodman et al., 2017](#); [Lind et al., 2025](#); [Magalhães et al., 2022](#)).

Previous studies have consistently shown that child-centered motivations (e.g. providing a safe environment for the child and avoiding their placement in residential care) are crucial for successful foster placements and high retention rates ([Contreras & Muñoz, 2016](#); [Gouveia et al., 2021](#)). Consistent with this evidence, studies in the Portuguese context have demonstrated that motivations to foster are predominantly focused on child-centered reasons ([Anjos et al., 2023](#); [Diogo & Branco, 2020](#); [Magalhães et al., 2022](#)). However, there is a gap in our understanding of variables related to opportunity and capability. These domains are important, as they may provide guidelines for recruitment campaigns and can be enhanced through supportive measures from the child protection system (CPS). Therefore, this study examined multiple variables related to the COM-B model domains, including capability (personality traits, mental health, physical health, and parental self-efficacy), opportunity (social support and family functioning), and motivations (reasons for fostering).

We also account for sociodemographic variables - including gender, age, having children, education, income, and contact with CPS - as previous research has shown that these variables can be linked with the decision to become a foster parent ([Gouveia et al., 2021](#)). For instance, lower education ([Magalhães et al., 2022](#); [Ott et al., 2023](#)), higher income ([Magalhães et al., 2022](#)), and greater familiarity with and knowledge of the CPS ([Anjos et al., 2023](#)) have been found to be associated with stronger intentions to foster. Findings on gender, age, and parental status are more mixed. Women often express higher intentions to foster ([Lind et al., 2025](#); [Magalhães et al., 2022](#)), though men may be more likely to apply ([Ott et al., 2023](#)). Younger adults tend to report higher intention to foster ([Ciarrochi et al., 2012](#); [Lind et al., 2025](#); [Magalhães et al., 2022](#)), but older (65+) adults may be more likely to apply after an initial inquiry ([Ott et al., 2023](#)). Having children appears to increase the intention to become foster parents ([Lind et al., 2025](#); [López & del Valle, 2016](#); [Magalhães et al., 2022](#)) but the demands of existing parental responsibilities may negatively affect the decision to become a foster parent ([Randle et al., 2014](#)). While most research in the field has been conducted with purposive or convenience samples, this study relies on a representative sample, which may help clarify previous mixed findings and strengthens the external validity of our results.

In short, the present study aimed to screen and examine the profile(s) of adults who are more likely to become foster parents. To achieve this, we have proposed to identify these profiles based on awareness (i.e. knowing about the foster care system), consideration (i.e. willingness to become a foster parent), and intention to become a foster parent (i.e. commitment to becoming a foster parent).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This study was conducted with a demographically representative sample of the Portuguese population (gender, age, and geographical location), which was targeted by a market research company. The inclusion criteria were: 1) participants should be at least 25 years old (considering that in Portugal, only individuals aged 25 years or older are eligible to foster); 2) understand Portuguese; and 3) not be foster families. Participants were informed about the study objectives and conditions, and then they provided their informed consent. Data were collected between November 2023 and January 2024, using primarily an online approach (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing - CAWI). However, a smaller sample was collected via telephone using the CATI system (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) to ensure a sufficient representation of the 65+ age group. The CAWI approach collected data from 947 participants (87.5 %), and the CATI system (via telephone) collected data from 135 participants (12.5 %). Quality criteria were considered when collecting data. In the online phase, all surveys completed in <7 min and 7 s were considered *speeders* ($n = 140$, 6 %).

This value corresponds to 40 % of the median obtained for 50 % of the study sample. In both phases, all surveys with a standard deviation equal to 0, in at least one of the blocks of questions were considered *straightliners* (CAWI: $n = 89$, 3.8 %, CATI: $n = 23$, 5.3 %; Total: $n = 112$, 4.1 %). In the present study, we adopted the 40 % of the median completion time as the threshold for identifying speeders as it strikes a balance between the need to detect low-effort responses without overestimating their prevalence. As shown by Greszki et al. (2014), the proportion of identified speeders varies considerably depending on the criterion used: more lenient cutoffs, such as 30 %, tend to inflate the number of flagged cases and may capture false positives, while stricter thresholds, like 50 %, risk overlooking genuine cases of speeding. By selecting the 40 % threshold, we followed a middle ground that has been shown to effectively identify a meaningful subset of low-quality responses, while minimizing both false positives and false negatives.

2.2. Measures

The selection of variables was based on conceptual alignment with the COM-B model and existing empirical evidence from research on fostering and related caregiving domains. Capability was operationalized through parental self-efficacy, personality traits, and mental and physical health, all of which influence the ability to perform caregiving roles (Pinto, 2022; Pinto & Luke, 2022). Opportunity was assessed through perceived social support and family functioning, capturing the social and relational contexts that may enable or constrain fostering (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Goodman et al., 2017; Metcalfe & Sanders, 2012). Motivation was measured with established reasons for fostering (child centered, family-related, self-oriented) drawn from previous studies in the field (Magalhães et al., 2022). Awareness, willingness and intention to foster were treated as proximal indicators of behavioral readiness and used to classify respondents into latent profiles of openness to fostering, with the other COM-B variables entered as predictors of profile membership. Table 1 provides an overview of the variables and their alignment with the COM-B domains. Descriptions of these measures are provided below.

2.2.1. Capability variables

2.2.1.1. Parenting self-efficacy. The Me as a Parent scale - Short Form (MaaPs-SF) (Matthews et al., 2022) is a 4-item scale derived from the 16-item Me as a Parent scale (MaaPs) (Hamilton et al., 2015), which assesses parents' perceptions of their competence and efficacy about parenting. The MaaPs-SF comprises three self-efficacy items (e.g., "I know I am doing a good job as a parent") and one self-management item ("I can stay focused on the things I need to do as a parent even when I've had an upsetting experience"). For the present study, the items were translated into Portuguese, adapted to the foster care context of parenting (e.g., I know I can do a good job as a foster parent) and similarity with the original items was ensured through back-translation into English. The answer format for all items consisted of a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measure had excellent internal consistency with the current sample ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Table 1
Variables, dimensions and instruments for each COM-B Domain.

COM-B domains	Variables	Dimensions	Instruments	Conceptual rationale
Capability	Parental Self-efficacy	Single dimension	MaaPs-SF (Matthews et al., 2022), adapted to foster care	Reflects perceived caregiving competence and maps onto psychological capability.
	Personality traits	Conscientiousness Agreeableness Openness Extroversion Neuroticism	NEO-FFI 20 (Bertoquini & Pais-Ribeiro, 2006)	Psychological traits linked with conscientiousness and emotional stability that may affect self-regulatory capacity and readiness for caregiving.
	Mental Health	Emotional Well-being Social Well-being Psychological Well-being	MHC-SF (Keyes et al., 2008, Portuguese version by Fonte et al., 2019)	Reflects psychological well-being and functional capacity to undertake caregiving.
Opportunity	Physical Health	Single dimension	Physical Health Item (Cullati et al., 2020)	
	Social Support	Single dimension	Three items taken from the Portuguese version of the MSPSS (Carvalho et al., 2011)	Captures perceived availability of general social support from family, friends and significant others.
Motivation	Family Functioning	Family Communication Family Strengths	SCORE-15 (Stratton et al., 2010, Portuguese version by Vilaça et al., 2014)	Reflects family relational dynamics that may facilitate fostering.
	Reasons for fostering	Family-related Reasons Self-oriented Reasons Child-centered Reasons	Reasons for Fostering Inventory (Orme et al., 2006, Portuguese version by Magalhães et al., 2022)	Reflects internal drivers and personal meanings associated with fostering.

2.2.1.2. Personality traits. The Neo-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI 20) (Bertoquini & Pais-Ribeiro, 2006) is a short version instrument that enables the assessment of the Big Five: Extroversion (e.g., “I often feel as if I’m bursting with energy.”), Openness to Experience (e.g., “Poetry has little or no effect on me.”), Agreeableness (e.g., “Some people think of me as cold and calculating.”), Conscientiousness (e.g., “I strive for excellence in everything I do.”) and Neuroticism (e.g., “I often feel helpless and want someone else to solve my problems.”). The answer format consisted of a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Acceptable reliability values were found for all dimensions of the NEO-FFI 20 (>0.60) - Extroversion ($\alpha = 0.68$), Openness to Experience ($\alpha = 0.71$), Conscientiousness ($\alpha = 0.74$), Neuroticism ($\alpha = 0.67$) and Agreeableness ($\alpha = 0.62$). However, item 14, which significantly lowered the internal consistency of the dimension Agreeableness, was removed to improve the reliability value of this dimension (α without item 14 = 0.69).

2.2.1.3. Mental health. The Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF) (Keyes et al., 2008, Portuguese version by Fonte et al., 2019) is a self-report questionnaire that measures the three dimensions of positive mental health, namely, emotional well-being (3 items, e.g., “During the past month, how often did you feel satisfied with life?”), social well-being (5 items, e.g., “During the past month, how often did you feel that our society is becoming a better place for all people?”) and psychological well-being (6 items, e.g., “During the past month, how often did you feel that you had experiences that challenged you to grow and become a better person?”). It includes 14 items answered on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (every day). In the current sample, good reliability values were found for all the subscales: emotional well-being ($\alpha = 0.86$), social well-being ($\alpha = 0.78$), and psychological well-being ($\alpha = 0.82$).

2.2.1.4. Physical health. This variable was evaluated with one item (“How is your health status in general?”) on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (bad) to 5 (excellent) (Cullati et al., 2020).

2.2.2. Opportunity variables

2.2.2.1. Social support. Participants' social support was evaluated using three items taken from the Portuguese version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Carvalho et al., 2011). MSPSS evaluates the adequacy of perceived social support from family, friends, and significant others. Each of the selected items is representative of one of three sources of support - family (“I can talk about my problems with my family”), friends (“I can count on my friends when things go wrong.”) and significant others (“There is a special person around when I am in need”), with a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). Acceptable internal consistency was found for these three items ($\alpha = 0.74$).

2.2.2.2. Family functioning. To measure family functioning, we used two dimensions of the Systemic Clinical Outcome and Routine Evaluation-15 (SCORE-15) (Stratton et al., 2010, Portuguese version by Vilaça et al., 2014): family strengths (5 items, e.g., “We trust each other”) and family communication (5 items; e.g., “People often don't tell each other the truth in my family”), with a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (describes us - very well) to 5 (describes us - not at all). In the current study, higher scores indicated greater family strength and communication. In the current sample, both dimensions yielded good reliability values – family strengths ($\alpha = 0.85$) and family communication ($\alpha = 0.81$).

2.2.3. Motivation variables

2.2.3.1. Reasons for fostering. The Reasons for Fostering Inventory (Orme et al., 2006) includes 32 items assessing the different reasons and motivations for becoming a foster parent. It was included in the Casey Home Assessment Protocol and was translated and adapted to the Portuguese context by Magalhães et al. (2022). Their study found a 22-item structure composed of three factors: family-related reasons (six items), which includes motivations related to the individual's own family relationships (e.g., “My spouse wants to be a foster parent, so I agreed.”), as well as the perceived intimacy with the potential foster child (e.g., “I know a foster child or a foster child's family and want to help.”), self-oriented reasons (10 items), which refers to motives oriented toward oneself and fulfilling one's desires and needs (e.g., “I want to have company for myself.”); and child-centered reasons (6 items), meaning motivations centered on taking care of the foster child, and addressing the child's needs and welfare (e.g., “I want to provide a child with love.”). Participants answered using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all true for me) to 5 (very true for me). Internal consistency values found in the present study were good for the self-oriented reasons ($\alpha = 0.79$) and family-related reasons ($\alpha = 0.88$) dimensions and excellent for the child-centered reasons ($\alpha = 0.91$).

2.2.4. Behavioral readiness indicators

2.2.4.1. Awareness. Awareness of the foster care system was evaluated with one item taken from Rienks and Oliva (2013) and adapted in the present study to the foster care context (“Have you heard about foster care?”). The item was answered using a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often).

2.2.4.2. Willingness. Willingness to become a foster family was evaluated with one item (“I would like to become a foster family”) answered through a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) (Magalhães et al., 2022).

2.2.4.3. Intention. Three items, previously adapted to the Portuguese context (e.g., “I will make an effort to become a foster family shortly”) (Magalhães et al., 2022), were used in this study to measure behavioral intention. Participants answered on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Excellent internal consistency was observed in this study ($\alpha = 0.93$).

2.2.5. Sociodemographic variables

Participants filled out a questionnaire to capture their sociodemographic characteristics, such as age, gender, education, employment, marital status, parental experience (i.e., having children), household income, or contact with the child protection system.

2.3. Procedures

This study is part of a larger project designed to identify the profiles of Portuguese families most likely to become foster families, with the ultimate aim of informing tailored and targeted recruitment campaigns to guarantee every child's right to a family. This project was approved by the Ethics Committee of Iscte (Reference number 117/2023). Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0 and within the R open-source statistical programming environment (<http://www.r-project.org>) with the R-package “mclust” (Scrucca et al., 2023) to perform the Latent Profile Analysis (LPA). LPA was used to identify distinct clusters or latent profiles among Portuguese adults using their levels of awareness, willingness, and intention to foster as indicators. This method assumes that hidden profiles influence the potential of adults to become foster families. Before the analysis, z-scores were calculated for each indicator given their different scoring ranges. Four latent profile solutions were tested, starting with two profiles and reaching five profiles (η^2 was 0.41, 0.59, 0.64, and 0.66, respectively). To determine the optimal number of profiles and select the most suitable model, we used the *elbow-plot* based on each profile's total explained variance; one-way ANOVAs were performed on each profile solution, with the indicators as dependent variables and profile membership as the independent variable. General η^2 effect size was calculated by dividing the sum of all between-groups sum of squares by the total sum of squares for the three indicators. Additionally, descriptive statistics were used to assess the sociodemographic composition of the total sample and each profile. Finally, four multinomial logistic regression models were developed to explore differences across the identified profiles, first entering only sociodemographic variables and then step-by-step the variables from each domain of the COM-B model.

3. Results

3.1. Participants' characteristics

A total of 1082 adults participated in the study, ranging in age from 25 to 94 years ($M = 52.73$; $SD = 14.95$). The majority were female (53.4 %), married, or lived in a civil partnership (63.5 %), and had children (72 %). Regarding their level of education, most

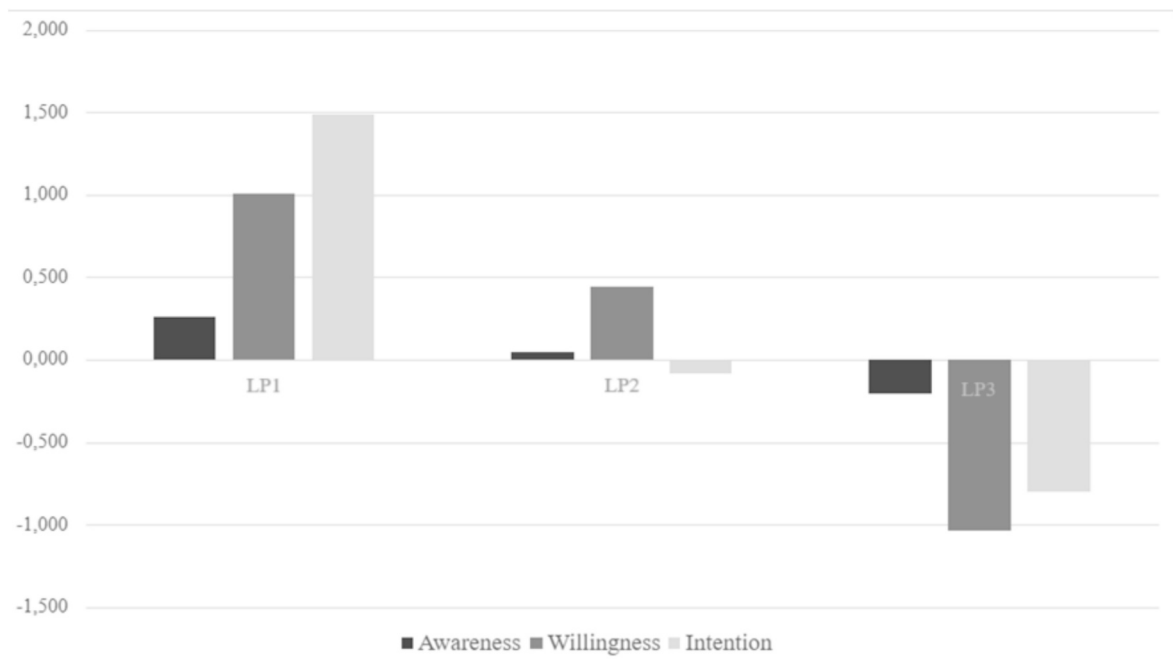


Fig. 1. Latent profile analysis: mean z-scores by profiles in the awareness, willingness, and intention indicators.

participants had completed secondary education (36.2 %). Concerning monthly household incomes, most earned between 1501 and 2500€ (32.6 %). Lastly, many participants had never had any contact with CPS (76.2 %) (Table S1).

3.2. Identifying profiles

Using the elbow method, the percentage of variance explained was analyzed for different numbers of clusters (k). The most substantial improvement was observed between $k = 2$ (41 %) and $k = 3$ (59 %). After this point, the additional gains diminished: $k = 4$ (64 %) and $k = 5$ (66 %). Based on the inflexion point in the curve, the optimal number of clusters was identified as $k = 3$, representing the best balance between model simplicity and explanatory power (Fig. S1). As expected, the η^2 values consistently increased as the number of profiles increased. However, the largest increase was between the two-profile and three-profile solutions, with values plateauing beyond the three profiles, signifying that the three-profile solution was the superior fitting model. To enable the interpretation of the profiles, we referred to the z-scores of the indicators (see Fig. 1). The participants in profile 1 ($n = 248$; 22.9 %) had the highest scores for all indicators. We labelled this profile *Ready Responders*. In the second profile ($n = 417$; 38.5 %), participants scored high on willingness and moderate on awareness and intention. Thus, we labelled this profile *Willing Waverers*. Finally, in the third profile ($n = 417$; 38.5 %), participants scored the lowest on all the indicators. We labelled this profile *Reluctant Bystanders*.

3.3. Socio-demographic differences across profiles

The sociodemographic characteristics of each profile are shown in Table 2. Statistically significant differences were found across profiles with respect to age; post hoc comparisons using Tukey's test showed that participants in the *Reluctant Bystanders* profile were significantly older than those in the *Ready Responders* ($p < .001$) and *Willing Waverers* ($p < .001$) profiles. Significant differences were also found concerning gender and children, with the *Willing Waverers* profile having a much higher percentage of women and a much lower percentage of participants with children than the *Ready Responders* and *Reluctant Bystanders* profiles did. Profiles showed differences regarding education status, as in the *Willing Waverers* profile there was a higher percentage of participants who completed a bachelor's degree and a lower percentage of participants who completed the 9th grade than in the *Ready Responders* and *Reluctant Bystanders* profiles, while the *Ready Responders* profile had a higher percentage of participants who completed a master's degree than the *Willing Waverers* and *Reluctant Bystanders* profiles. Finally, contact with CPS also varied across profiles as in the *Ready Responders* profile there was a much higher percentage of participants who had had contact with CPS than in the *Willing Waverers* and *Reluctant Bystanders* profiles, while the *Willing Waverers* profile had a higher percentage than the *Reluctant Bystanders* profile.

The results of the four multinomial logistic regressions are detailed in the Supplementary Materials (Tables S2 and S3), with the *Ready Responders* profile as the reference group. For parsimony reasons, we focus on the last model, which includes all predictor

Table 2
Socio-demographic characteristics of each profile.

Variables	<i>Ready Responders</i>	<i>Willing Waverers</i>	<i>Reluctant Bystanders</i>	Profiles' differences
Total	22.9 % (248)	38.5 % (417)	38.5 % (417)	
Age ^a	50.02 (13.20)	50.65 (15.35)	56.41 (14.79)	$F(2,1079) = 21.56, p < .001$
Gender				$\chi^2(2) = 6.82, p = .033$
Female	48.8 % (121)	58.3 % (243)	51.3 % (214)	
Male	51.2 % (127)	41.7 % (174)	48.7 % (203)	
Children				$\chi^2(2) = 13.54, p = .001$
Yes	77 % (191)	65.7 % (274)	75.3 % (314)	
No	23 % (57)	34.3 % (143)	24.7 % (103)	
Marital Status				$\chi^2(6) = 2.72, p = .842$
Single	16.9 % (42)	20.1 % (84)	18.2 % (76)	
Married/Civil Partnership	64.9 % (161)	62.8 % (262)	63.3 % (264)	
Divorced	14.1 % (35)	11.5 % (48)	12.9 % (54)	
Widowed	4 % (10)	5.5 % (23)	5.5 % (23)	
Completed Education				$\chi^2(12) = 34.84, p < .001$
Elementary School (1st–4th)	2.4 % (6)	5 % (21)	4.3 % (18)	
Elementary School (5th–6th)	.8 % (2)	2.6 % (11)	1.2 % (5)	
Middle School (7th–9th)	8.5 % (21)	2.9 % (12)	10.3 % (43)	
Secondary School (10th–12th)	35.9 % (89)	34.5 % (144)	38.1 % (159)	
Bachelor	28.6 % (71)	34.8 % (145)	28.8 % (120)	
Master	17.3 % (43)	11.3 % (47)	10.6 % (44)	
PhD	6.5 % (16)	7.9 % (33)	6.7 % (28)	
Household Monthly Income				$\chi^2(6) = 5.34, p = .500$
≤1000	16.1 % (40)	21.1 % (88)	21.8 % (91)	
1001–1500	27.4 % (68)	23.5 % (98)	25.4 % (106)	
1501–2500	32.3 % (80)	34.5 % (144)	30.9 % (129)	
>2500	24.2 % (60)	20.9 % (87)	21.8 % (91)	
Contact with the CPS				$\chi^2(2) = 48.97, p < .001$
Yes	37.1 % (92)	26.1 % (109)	13.7 % (57)	
No	62.9 % (156)	73.9 % (308)	86.3 % (360)	

^a $M(SD)$.

variables (i.e. socio-demographic variables and variables related to capability, opportunity and the motivation domains of the COM-B framework). The results revealed that when comparing the *Willing Waverers* profile with the *Ready Responders* profile, Having (or not) Children, Conscientiousness, Social Well-being, Parental Self-efficacy, Family Communication, Self-oriented Reasons, and Child-centered Reasons were significant predictors of profile membership. Specifically, not having children increased the odds of belonging to the *Willing Waverers* profile by 77 % (OR = 1.77, $p = .015$) and for each unit increase in Conscientiousness, the odds of belonging to the *Willing Waverers* profile increased by 54 % (OR = 1.54, $p = .037$) and Family Communication by 43 % (OR = 1.43, $p = .009$). In contrast, for each unit increase in Social Well-being, the odds of belonging to the *Willing Waverers* profile decreased by 22 % (OR = 0.78, $p = .044$), Parental Self-efficacy by 41 % (OR = 0.59, $p < .001$), Self-oriented Reasons by 27 % (OR = 0.73, $p = .037$), and Child-centered Reasons by 42 % (OR = 0.58, $p < .001$).

When comparing the *Reluctant Bystanders* profile with the *Ready Responders* profile, Contact with CPS, Conscientiousness, Social Well-being, Parental Self-efficacy, Family-related Reasons, and Child-centered Reasons proved to be significant predictors of profile membership. Specifically, not having had contact with CPS increased the odds of belonging to the *Reluctant Bystanders* profile by 82 % (OR = 1.82, $p = .019$). For each unit increase in Conscientiousness, the odds of belonging to the *Reluctant Bystanders* profile were 2.16 times higher (OR = 2.16, $p = .002$). By contrast, for each unit increase in Social Well-being, the odds of belonging to the *Reluctant Bystanders* profile decreased by 51 % (OR = 0.49, $p < .001$), Parental Self-efficacy by 75 % (OR = 0.25, $p < .001$), Family-related Reasons by 40 % (OR = 0.60, $p = .002$) and Child-centered Reasons by 74 % (OR = 0.26, $p < .001$).

4. Discussion

Foster care may provide an alternative family environment that is suitable for a child's development and where children are most likely to reach their full potential (Li et al., 2019; Quick, 2024; United Nations, 1989). The shortage of foster families requires urgent and effective solutions guided by evidence-based theoretical frameworks. This study used the COM-B model as a theoretical framework to identify profiles of potential foster carers, assessing relevant variables across capability, opportunity, and motivation domains. Limited research on reasons for fostering has been informed by a theoretical framework, and studies have largely focused on foster family samples (Geiger et al., 2013; Keys et al., 2017). Thus, this study aimed a) to identify the profile(s) of adults most likely to become a foster family through LPA, using awareness, willingness, and intention to foster as indicators, and b) to explore various socio-demographic variables and multiple factors related to the COM-B model as predictors of profile membership.

Through the LPA, we identified three profiles. The *Ready Responders* profile was the smallest, accounting for 22.9 % of the sample. This profile was characterized by the highest scores on all three indicators - awareness, willingness, and intention - and thus represents the profile of adults most likely to become a foster family. The *Willing Waverers* and *Reluctant Bystanders* profiles were both composed of 38.5 % of our sample. The *Willing Waverers* profile was characterized by high scores for willingness and moderate scores for awareness and intention. Participants in this profile showed a willingness to become a foster parent but reported relatively limited knowledge about the foster care system and moderate intention to become a foster parent. The *Reluctant Bystanders* profile was characterized by the lowest scores on all indicators. Participants belonging to this profile showed very little awareness about the foster care system and very little willingness or commitment to becoming a foster parent.

Second, we aimed to identify predictors of group membership. When considering the last model that included all predictor variables (i.e., socio-demographic variables and variables related to the COM-B framework), our findings revealed that Having (or not) Children and Contact with CPS were the only socio-demographic variables that significantly predicted profile membership. Participants with no children were significantly more likely to be in the *Willing Waverers* profile, whereas participants with children were significantly more likely to be in the *Ready Responders* profile. Some studies have suggested that the demands of existing parental responsibilities or a larger number of children in a household may negatively affect the decision to become a foster family (Goodman et al., 2017; Randle et al., 2014). However, the current findings seem to be more aligned with research suggesting that having children is associated with greater intention to foster (Magalhães et al., 2022). As such, parents might be more prone to becoming foster families as they might feel more confident with this role (Leahy-Warren & McCarthy, 2011) or may be more thoughtful about the developmental needs of children, particularly those who are particularly vulnerable. Considering that parental self-efficacy also predicted profile membership in the present study, participants with children may have had higher levels of parental self-efficacy and felt more able or encouraged to become foster parents. Furthermore, participants who had contact with CPS were significantly more likely to belong to the *Ready Responders* profile than in the other two profiles. Contact with CPS may promote familiarity with and knowledge of the foster care system, which is aligned with research showing that foster parents often begin to foster due to prior familiarity with a foster child or family (Anjos et al., 2023; Diogo & Branco, 2019; Rodger et al., 2006). Increased knowledge about the emotional, psychological, and social needs of these children can increase their desire to help and support them and to make a difference in their lives. Also, such knowledge may increase the perceived self-confidence of these adults to become foster parents (Lotty et al., 2020).

Regarding the variables aligned with the COM-B model, our findings indicated that people with high levels of Parental Self-efficacy, Social Well-being, Child-centered, Family-related and Self-oriented Reasons and low levels of Conscientiousness and Family communication were more likely to belong to the *Ready Responders* profile, and thus more predisposed to foster. However, the factors that showed the strongest effects were Parental Self-efficacy and Child-centered Reasons, followed by Social Well-being and Conscientiousness. Specifically, people with high levels of conscientiousness tend to be orderly, self-disciplined, and deliberate (Diener & Lucas, 2019), meaning that they are less careless and impulsive and prefer to plan before they act, which means they might be more reluctant to take on the significant responsibility involved in fostering a child. In addition, these people might feel more comfortable in organized and predictable settings (Wilmot & Ones, 2019), which might discourage them from becoming foster parents because this role involves high unpredictability and further stressors. In contrast, high social well-being involves feeling socially integrated and

having a greater interest in contributing to society (Keyes et al., 2008), which means that it might raise individuals' disposal to become a foster parent as a way of social commitment (e.g. López & del Valle, 2016). Moreover, the intention to engage in a behavior is greater if a person perceives themselves as capable of performing that behavior (West & Michie, 2020). Therefore, participants with greater parental self-efficacy may be more prone to becoming foster parents because they have a greater belief in their capability to be successful foster parents and accept this additional responsibility. Also, these participants are more resourceful and able to solve problems related to parenting (Hamilton et al., 2015), and therefore, they may perceive themselves as more equipped to face the challenges of fostering children in need. Greater parental self-efficacy is associated with a more positive and rewarding parenting experience (Yang et al., 2020), which may increase the desire to care for children in need.

While both Family-related and Self-oriented Reasons were associated with belonging to the *Ready Responders* profile, Child-centered Reasons was by far the strongest predictor. These results are consistent with studies that have revealed that motivations to foster are predominantly altruistic and focus on the positive impact of fostered children, with children's well-being being the foremost incentive (Anjos et al., 2023; Diogo & Branco, 2020; Magalhães et al., 2022; Rhodes et al., 2006). Finally, higher levels of Family Communication were associated with a greater likelihood of being in the *Willing Waverers* profile than in the *Ready Responders* profile, which is inconsistent with previous evidence suggesting that family functioning may raise people's disposition for fostering (Goodman et al., 2017). One possible interpretation is that families with higher quality communication may perceive becoming a foster family as a threat to their family well-functioning. For instance, problems in the relationship between fostered children and foster family elements (e.g. birth children) can be associated with foster families' dropout or disruptions (Rhodes et al., 2001).

4.1. Limitations, implications for research and practice

In sum, the findings from this study suggest that capability and motivational factors have a greater influence on openness to becoming a foster family than opportunity-related factors or sociodemographic characteristics. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the cross-sectional design of the present study. As such, longitudinal studies testing the predictors of higher (or lower) involvement in the foster care system are needed. Future research should examine the stability of these profiles over time and investigate whether individuals initially classified as *Ready Responders*, *Willing Waverers*, or *Reluctant Bystanders* maintain their openness to fostering or transition between profiles. Longitudinal studies tracking changes in willingness and intention, as well as the impact of life events or policy changes, would provide valuable insights. Furthermore, it would be useful to consider additional variables related to the COM-B model, particularly within the Opportunity domain (for example, other external resources that may be important in the decision-making process). Additionally, as this was a first attempt to explore these profiles, the current findings could be further explored using qualitative approaches to better understand the results and refine strategies to improve recruitment. Although the sample in this study was representative of the Portuguese population, the results may not be directly applicable to other countries with different child welfare systems. As such, future research should replicate this study in other countries to examine whether these profiles hold across different socio-political contexts. This would help assess the generalizability of these profiles and provide insights into how recruitment strategies can be adapted to local cultural and structural differences. Also, our sample was demographically representative of the adult population, and we therefore did not exclude participants based on age, as long as they met the recruitment criteria. However, further consideration may be needed to understand fostering-related decision making and implementation processes among potential carers at diverse life stages.

While our study identifies *Ready Responders*, it is important to recognize that intention does not always translate into action. Existing literature highlights several characteristics of actual foster carers that may influence this transition. For instance, Pixley's (2023) umbrella review identified sixteen caregiver-related factors associated with placement stability and permanency, including social-emotional competencies such as emotional regulation and interpersonal skills, which are crucial for managing the challenges of fostering. Similarly, Vanderwill et al. (2020) found that engagement in pre-service and in-service training, and peer support from experienced foster parents, contribute to caregiver retention. These findings suggest that while *Ready Responders* may have the desire to foster, the development of specific skills and support systems may be necessary to transform their willingness into actual commitment. Future research should identify potential barriers and enablers that shape the likelihood that *Ready Responders* take concrete steps toward fostering, as well as the types of training and support systems that can effectively facilitate this transition.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this is the first study to apply the COM-B model to the foster care context using a representative sample. The COM-B model proved to be a useful framework for identifying variables related to openness to foster and for mapping associations between these variables and the three profiles of prospective foster families identified here. This is also the first study to use LPA to identify profiles of prospective foster families and explore differences across these profiles. The sociodemographic characteristics and COM-B-related variables associated with the *Ready Responders* profile provide important clues for future practice in recruiting foster families. In addition to having the highest scores on willingness and intention, the *Ready Responders* profile also had the highest levels of awareness. Outreach campaigns focused on generating awareness and providing accurate information about foster care may be important for attracting new foster carers. Contact with CPS was an important factor in motivating people to become foster parents, and using current foster parents as ambassadors for foster care and including them in recruitment campaigns and information sessions may be invaluable in recruitment efforts (Thomson et al., 2016). Additionally, campaigns should emphasize child-centered reasons to motivate prospective foster parents. Highlighting altruistic motivational factors (e.g., providing love to a child), as well as the protective role of foster care and the benefits it brings to children may be particularly effective. Furthermore, given the differences between profiles, targeted campaigns for individuals with the characteristics discussed above could lead to more effective recruitment efforts. Future studies should investigate how different recruitment messages influence prospective foster families, considering the distinct profiles identified in this study. Experimental research could assess the effectiveness of campaigns emphasizing

different motivational factors, such as child-centered reasons, and examine how these strategies influence *Ready Responders*, *Willing Waverers*, and *Reluctant Bystanders* differently. Understanding which approaches are most persuasive for each profile could lead to more tailored and effective recruitment efforts.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Eunice Magalhães: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Patrício Costa:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Leonor d'Eça:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Formal analysis. **Mariana Matoso:** Writing – original draft. **Vânia S. Pinto:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Sofia Ferreira:** Writing – original draft, Methodology. **Joana Baptista:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **João Graça:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used Chat GPT4 to rearrange sentences or perform English language editing and improvement. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Funding

This research received funding from “la Caixa” Foundation Social Observatory, granted under the competitive Call for Research projects on Childhood and Vulnerability in Portugal (Project code: FP23-1B023).

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2025.107486>.

Data availability

The data used in this study is restricted and not publicly available.

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