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**To be or not to be a foster family: A mixed methods approach to promote awareness, willingness and intention to become a foster parent.**

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PhD in Psychology

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December, 2024





CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS  
E HUMANAS

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Department of Social and Organizational Psychology

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December, 2024



*To all children and young people who have the right to an alternative family,  
And to the families who choose to transform their lives.*



## Acknowledgements

As this academic cycle concludes, I wish to convey my sincere gratitude to the dedicated team that supervised this dissertation.

Professor Eunice, a source of professional inspiration. I am deeply appreciative of the rigor and expertise that characterize the supervision of this dissertation. In addition to the essential formal and scientific support, I particularly appreciated your unwavering presence and availability throughout the entire process.

I also wish to express my gratitude to Professor João Graça for your meticulous supervision and the significant contributions to this dissertation. The reflections you encouraged on new perspectives regarding the data were fundamental to enhancing the depth and quality of this work.

It was an honor and privilege to have the opportunity to receive your guidance and supervision. I extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Vânia S. Pinto for your collaboration in the qualitative study of this dissertation. Your insightful feedback, reading recommendations, availability, and encouraging remarks were of great importance.

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Joana Baptista, the reviewer for this PhD project, for your suggestions and interest in our work.

To my colleagues—Micaela Pinheiro, Emma Castro, and Inês Chim—thank you for making this journey a pleasure. I am proud of our team.

Micaela Pinheiro, PhD, colleague and friend, I am very grateful for your presence and support, and for all the moments we shared. You have made this journey easier, and without you, it would not have been the same.

To the members of the Community, Education, and Development (CED) research group for their willingness to provide constructive feedback and for offering the opportunity to engage with the inspiring projects they have developed and presented within the group.

To the foster families and professionals from the foster care system who contributed to the qualitative study. Their willingness to share experiences and insights provided invaluable contributions to the research, and I have great admiration for the work they perform.

I would also like to express my gratitude to all the community members who participated anonymously in the quantitative cross-sectional and experimental studies of this dissertation. The advancement of science relies significantly on your contribution.

I thank my Fiancé Frederico for everything. You are one of the great pillars of this journey. Your understanding in the most challenging moments, your constant support, and your unwavering confidence in my potential have been essential to this achievement.

To my parents, António and Estrela. These words are not sufficient to express my gratitude. This achievement is also the result of your love, sacrifice, and unconditional support. This is another dream we have achieved together.

To my long-time friend, Ana Teixeira, I thank you for your presence, your advice and your ability to listen and understand. You are the person who celebrates my achievements as if they were your own. May everyone have the opportunity to experience friendships like ours.



This work was supported by Portuguese national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I. P. [UI/BD/150992/2021]

<https://doi.org/10.54499/UI/BD/150992/2021>



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CIÊNCIA, TECNOLOGIA  
E ENSINO SUPERIOR



## **Resumo**

O acolhimento familiar é a medida preferencial para proteger crianças em necessidade de uma medida de colocação, contudo o reduzido número de famílias de acolhimento (FA) reforça a necessidade de desenvolver campanhas de recrutamento. Esta dissertação pretende fornecer evidências sobre os fatores associados a tornar-se FA e sobre as mensagens a desenvolver para aumentar a consciencialização, a vontade e intenção de acolher. Para tal, foram desenvolvidos três estudos com os seguintes objetivos específicos: (1) analisar as perspetivas das FA e profissionais sobre fatores associados à decisão de acolher e estratégias de comunicação e recrutamento (Estudo 1); (2) identificar fatores associados a tornar-se FA a partir de uma amostra da comunidade (Estudo 2); (3) desenhar e avaliar mensagens teoricamente informadas (Estudo 3). Os resultados sugerem que profissionais, famílias e pessoas na comunidade consideram que tornar-se FA decorre fundamentalmente de processos motivacionais reflexivos (e.g., centrados na criança) e da disponibilidade de recursos pessoais (i.e., autoeficácia, tempo disponível). Para as famílias e profissionais, fatores relacionados com a família, suporte social e recursos do sistema são fatores determinantes. Ter um plano de ação revelou-se particularmente significativo para os participantes na comunidade. No que diz respeito às mensagens desenvolvidas, a que abordou a superação da antecipação da separação com a criança acolhida foi considerada a mais envolvente e foi percebida como a mais eficaz. Em suma, os resultados destes três estudos fornecem uma compreensão teoricamente inovadora sobre tornar-se FA e podem informar campanhas de recrutamento.

*Palavras-chave: Acolhimento familiar; Famílias de acolhimento; Estratégias de recrutamento; Estratégias de comunicação; Razões para acolher; Consciencialização*

### **Categorias e códigos de classificação PsycINFO:**

2100 Psicologia Geral

2956 Educação e Cuidado Infantil

3000 Psicologia Social



## **Abstract**

Foster care is the preferred service for protecting children in need of placement; however, the reduced number of foster families (FF) highlights the need to develop recruitment campaigns. This dissertation aims to provide evidence of the factors associated with becoming a FF and how to use messages to increase awareness, willingness, and intention to foster. To this end, three studies were developed with the following specific objectives: (1) to analyze the perspectives of FF and professionals on factors associated with the decision to foster and recruitment strategies; (2) to identify factors associated with becoming a FF from a community sample, and (3) to design and evaluate theoretically informed messages. The results suggest that professionals, families, and people in the community consider that becoming a FF is fundamentally a result of reflective motivational processes (e.g., child-centered) and the availability of individual resources (i.e. self-efficacy, available time). For families and professionals, factors related to family, social support, and system resources are determining factors. Having an action plan was particularly significant for the community participants. Regarding the messages developed, the one that focused on overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child was found to be the most engaging and perceived as the most effective.

In summary, the results of these three studies provide a theoretically innovative understanding of becoming a FF and can inform recruitment campaigns.

*Keywords: Foster care; Foster families; Recruitment strategies, Communication strategies; Reasons for fostering; Awareness*

### **PsycINFO Classification Categories and Codes:**

2100 General Psychology

2956 Childrearing & Child Care

3000 Social Psychology



## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	vii
Resumo .....	xi
Abstract .....	xiii
General Introduction .....	19
<b>Chapter 1. Theoretical Background and Research Problems</b> .....	23
Broad-Scope Models of Attitudes and Behaviors .....	25
<b>Chapter 2. Why do People Become Foster Parents and How to Recruit New Families?</b>	
A Multi-informant Study .....	35
Abstract.....	35
Introduction .....	36
Broad-Scope Models of Attitudes and Behaviors: The COM-B System and the HAPA Model .....	38
The Current Study: Background, Aims, and Approach.....	39
Method .....	39
Participants .....	39
Instruments .....	40
Data Collection and Analytical Procedure .....	41
Results .....	43
Perceived Public Awareness about Foster Care.....	45
Factors Related to Becoming a Foster Family .....	45
Communication and Recruitment Strategies.....	48
Discussion .....	50
Public Awareness about Foster Care .....	50
Factors Related to Becoming a Foster Family .....	51
Communication and Recruitment Strategies.....	54
Limitations and Implications for Research and Practice.....	55
Conclusions .....	56
<b>Chapter 3. Theoretically Grounded Insights into Engagement With Foster Care Among Potential Carers</b> .....	59
Abstract.....	59
Introduction .....	60
Factors Related to the Decision to Become a Foster Family .....	60
Broad-Scope Models of Attitudes and Behaviors .....	62

The Current Study: Aim and Hypotheses.....	63
Method .....	64
Context .....	64
Participants .....	65
Instruments .....	66
Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis.....	70
Results .....	71
Correlations Between Sociodemographic, Foster Care System and Broad-Scope Model Variables and Awareness, Willingness, and Intention to Foster.....	71
Awareness, Willingness, and Intention to Become a Foster Family: Regression Analyses .....	71
Discussion .....	76
Implications for Research and Practice .....	78
<b>Chapter 4. Developing and Evaluating Theory-Based Messages to Promote Foster Care.....</b>	<b>81</b>
Abstract.....	81
Introduction .....	82
Message Development and Evaluation .....	82
The Current Study .....	84
Method .....	85
Message Development .....	85
Participants .....	89
Design, Procedure, and Measures .....	90
Data Analysis.....	93
Results .....	93
Message-Related Variables.....	93
Audience-Related Variables .....	94
Mediation Model .....	94
Discussion .....	95
<b>Chapter 5. General Discussion .....</b>	<b>99</b>
Implications for Practice, Policies and Research .....	103
References .....	109
Appendices .....	123



## **List of Tables**

Table 1. Overview of study variables in relation to the conceptual models.....	64
Table 2. Sample socio-demographic characteristics.....	66
Table 3. Multiple linear regressions for awareness about foster care.....	72
Table 4. Multiple linear regressions for willingness to become a foster family.....	74
Table 5. Multiple linear regressions for intention to become a foster family.....	75
Table 6. Theoretically informed foster care messages.....	87
Table 7. Sample socio-demographic characteristics.....	90
Table 8. Means (and standard deviations) of conditions on awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family.....	94

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1. Summary of theoretical background, research problems, studies, and aims.....	22
Figure 2. Thematic map of findings .....	44
Figure 3. Mediation model of transportation in the relationship between content messages and perceived effectiveness.....	95



## General Introduction

Foster care aims to provide an alternative temporary family context for children and young people who cannot remain with their biological families (Reimer, 2021). This form of care offers children the right to live in a family and is recognized as the preferred context for a child's harmonious and integral development (UNICEF, 2019).

Evidence on the potential positive impact of foster care on children's outcomes (e.g., Delgado et al., 2020; Delgado et al., 2019; Kothari et al., 2020; Llosada-Gistau et al., 2017) has supported a process of deinstitutionalization in child and youth welfare systems in European Union countries (Reimer, 2021). This process represents a transition from systems largely based on residential care to those that recognize foster care as the preferred form of care for children in the child protection system. In the last two decades, there has been a significant increase in foster care placements in several European countries (Negrão et al., 2022; Reimer, 2021). For example, foster care placements in Bulgaria increased 200% between 2007 and 2017. In Romania, around 29 000 children were in foster care in 2000 compared to fewer than 10 000 before 1994. In Serbia, the number of children in foster care rose to 5320 in 2018 compared to 1795 in 2009 (Reimer, 2021). Despite the de-institutionalization efforts undertaken by certain countries, it is evident that others, including Portugal, Albania, Armenia, Cyprus, and Greece, still have a high number of children in residential care (UNICEF, 2024). For instance, in Portugal, only approximately 4.3% of out-of-home children are placed in foster care (ISS, 2024a).

As such, there is a pressing need to recruit more foster families (Anjos et al., 2023; Davi et al., 2021; Magalhães et al., 2022; Sebba, 2012), to ensure the right to live in a family (3rd United Nations Sustainable Development Goal) to all children. To achieve this, it is important to identify barriers and enablers that influence behavioral involvement with foster care. Considering that behavior occurs through a dynamic process, characterized by distinct phases (HAPA model; Schwarzer, 2008), it is essential to understand what leads an individual to transition from a pre-intentional phase to the implementation of a behavior. In the context of foster care, this insight can be obtained by gathering inputs from individuals at different phases of involvement. This includes individuals who are already involved in foster care (i.e., foster families), as well as members of the wider community who are not yet involved. Also, staff working in the foster system should be heard. This understanding allows for the development of broad and integrated recruitment strategies. Specifically, strategies for recruiting new foster families may include communication (e.g., messages), as well as enablement (i.e., increasing

means and reducing barriers to increase capability or opportunity; Michie et al., 2011), education (e.g., increasing knowledge or understanding; Michie et al., 2011), or environmental restructuring (e.g., changing the physical or social context; Michie et al., 2011). Based on this rationale, this dissertation aims to provide new insights into the factors associated with becoming a foster family, and how to use messaging (i.e., communication strategies) to raise awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster parent. Accordingly, this dissertation is organized in six chapters (see Figure 1).

Specifically, Chapter I provides an overview of foster care in both international and Portuguese contexts. Additionally, it addresses the specificities of Portugal's foster care system, including its history, practices, and policies. Aligned with the need to provide theoretically grounded evidence on the intention to foster a child, Chapter I presents two broad scope models of attitudes and behaviors (i.e., COM-B system of behavior, Michie et al., 2011; HAPA model, Schwarzer, 2008). Extensive research on behavioral change suggests that the adoption of a deliberate, intentional target behavior can be seen as occurring in two phases (HAPA model; Schwarzer, 2008). An initial phase, where there is no intention to act but whose goal is the formation of an intention, and a volitional phase, which aims to implement the intention into a target behavior (Schwarzer, 2008). According to the HAPA model, each phase is influenced by certain factors that help the individual progress from the pre-intentional phase to the implementation of the target behavior. In the context of foster care, existing evidence on what leads individuals to become foster families essentially focuses on the perspective of potential foster families (i.e., those who have already participated in preparation for fostering training; Baum et al., 2001) and current or prospective foster families (e.g., Blackburn, 2016; MacGregor, 2006; De Mayer et al., 2014). Few exceptions include samples from broader and more diverse communities (e.g., Anjos et al., 2023; Davi et al., 2021). These models aim to broaden and provide conceptual meaning to the factors that may be associated with becoming a foster family. Thus, this chapter provides an overview of each model, including their implementation contexts and potential inputs to becoming a foster family. Furthermore, the development of recruitment efforts that focus on communication strategies should be guided by specific guidelines, such as steps to develop and evaluate messages (e.g., Lewis et al., 2016). However, to our knowledge, no study has applied this approach in the context of foster care. Additionally, the increase in the development of communication campaigns for new foster families has not been supported by studies evaluating their outcomes (Wilkinson & Wright, 2024). This research gap hinders the identification of areas for improvement and limits our understanding of the most effective communication and outreach strategies. To address these

research problems, this dissertation employed a mixed-methods approach, which included three studies: One qualitative and two quantitative (correlational and experimental) studies.

Chapter II presents a qualitative study (Study 1) aimed at analyzing the perspectives and meanings of foster families and professionals regarding the factors influencing the decision to become a foster family, through the lens of COM-B system and HAPA model. This study also sought to gather insights to guide strategy and content development for campaigns to promote foster care and recruit new foster families. Understanding the perspectives of people within the system is crucial as it helps gather information about the needs, challenges, and factors that support the decision to become a foster family. Additionally, including the perspectives of foster families and professionals enable us to get new insights into the effective communication and recruitment of new families. This study has the potential to broaden (and provide conceptual meaning to) the range of factors that may be associated with becoming a foster family.

To obtain the perspective of those who are not yet involved in the foster care system (community), a quantitative correlational study was conducted (Study 2). Chapter III presents this study, which aimed to map the factors associated with becoming a foster family with a community sample. Understanding the reasons that lead individuals from a wider community to consider becoming foster families is crucial for the development of effective communication and outreach strategies. Tailoring messages that align with the specific motivations of general audiences can enhance engagement among individuals who may not have previously contemplated fostering. To achieve this, the study explored the association between awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family and a variety of sociodemographic characteristics, variables related to the foster care system, and factors supported with broad-scope models of attitudes and behaviors (i.e., COM-B system, Michie et al., 2011; and HAPA model, Schwarzer, 2008).

Finally, informed by study one and two, the experimental quantitative study (Study 3) aimed to develop theory-based messages to promote engagement with foster care and evaluate these messages in terms of message-related (i.e., identification, transportation, emotional response, and perceived effectiveness; Krause & Rucker, 2020; Lewis et al., 2016; Liu & Yang, 2020) and audience-focused variables (i.e., awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family). This study is presented in Chapter IV, where the results of the evaluation of these messages are also described. Thus, this study informs communication and outreach strategies for recruiting new foster families. Chapter V provides a general discussion of the results of the three studies in light of the theoretical models and empirical evidence, presenting a set of implications for future research, foster care practices, and public policies.

**Figure 1.**

*Summary of theoretical background, research problems, studies, and aims*

Introduction		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Despite evidence of the potential positive impact of foster care on children's outcomes, certain countries, including Portugal, still have a high number of children in residential care (ISS, 2024a; UNICEF, 2024).</li> <li>To recruit more foster families, it is important to identify barriers and enablers that influence the involvement with foster care, in order to promote it.</li> <li>Considering that behavior occurs through a dynamic process, characterized by distinct phases (HAPA model; Schwarzer, 2008), it is essential to understand what leads an individual to transition from a pre-intentional phase to the implementation of a behavior.</li> </ul>		
Chapter I - Theoretical background and Research problems		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Despite the pressing need to increase the number of foster families, research on recruitment strategies is limited.</li> <li>To design potentially effective recruitment strategies, it is important to understand target behavior from a theoretical perspective.</li> <li>According to broad scope models, behavior is influenced by a range of factors across the individual, social, contextual, and environmental domains (Hagger et al., 2020; Michie et al., 2011; Schwarzer, 2008).</li> <li>However, studies on the factors associated with becoming a foster family have mainly focused on individual variables (e.g., Contreras &amp; Muñoz, 2016; Sebba, 2012). The role of contextual factors, such as social factors, in terms of opportunities (e.g., social support; Michie et al., 2011) and barriers (e.g., lack of services) have not been considered.</li> <li>Extensive research on behavioral change suggests that the adoption of a deliberate, intentional target behavior can be seen as occurring in two phases: Motivational (formation of an intention) and Volitional (implementation of an intention into an action).</li> <li>In the context of foster care, existing evidence on what leads individuals to become foster families essentially focuses on the perspective of potential foster families (individuals in an advanced phase of involvement with the foster care system).</li> <li>Consequently, there is a limited understanding of the barriers and enablers of early stage (probably pre-intentional) involvement with foster care.</li> </ul>		
Chapter II – Objective 1	Chapter III – Objective 2	Chapter IV – Objective 3
To analyze the perspectives and meanings of foster families and professionals regarding the factors influencing the decision to become a foster family; and to gather insights into communication strategies for message development in the field of foster care	To map the factors associated with becoming a foster family with a community sample	To develop and evaluate theoretically informed messages to promote awareness, willingness and intention to become a foster family
Study 1. Qualitative	Study 2. Correlational quantitative	Study 3. Experimental quantitative
Chapter V – General discussion		

## CHAPTER 1

### **Theoretical Background and Research Problems**

The number of children and young people in foster care varies significantly across countries worldwide, including Europe. In countries such as the USA and Australia, foster care is a centuries-old practice, and the majority of out-of-home children are integrated into foster families (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022; National Foster Parent Association, n.d.). Conversely, in countries such as Brazil, there are a small number of foster families (N=432; National Council of Justice, 2022). In the European context, there are more children in foster care than in residential care in countries such as Ireland and Sweden (91% and 74%, respectively; Eurochild & UNICEF, 2021). In contrast, Germany and the Netherlands have approximately equal numbers of children in both residential care and foster care (Eurochild & UNICEF, 2021). Meanwhile, Portugal and Greece have a higher proportion of children in residential care, with only 3% and 16% of children, respectively, being placed in foster care (Eurochild & UNICEF, 2021). The criteria for becoming a foster family also vary between European countries. For example, in Finland, a foster family can care for up to four children, including their biological children. In Croatia, fostering up to three children is permitted (Reimer, 2021). In Portugal, families can foster up two children, but there are exceptional cases in which more children can be fostered, such as when siblings or affectionate bonds justify this (ISS, 2024b). In contrast, countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, typically make decisions on a case-by-case basis (Reimer, 2021).

In addition, there is diversity in the types of foster care placements available. Not all European countries offer all types of foster care placements: a) kinship foster care, which involves placing a foster child with a relative or someone from their biological family's social network; b) traditional foster care, which involves placing a foster child with someone who has no family ties to the child; c) professional foster care, which involves placing a foster child with someone who has specific training or expertise (e.g., social work, psychology, and medicine); d) lastly, specialized foster care/treatment or therapeutic foster care refers to placing children with families who are trained in specific therapeutic methods and techniques. It targets children with serious internalizing and externalizing problems, and physical and mental disabilities (Reimer, 2021). In some countries, such as France, Germany, Croatia, and Italy, the foster care system includes both traditional and professional foster families. In the specific case of France, efforts have been made to professionalize the entire foster care system. However, countries such as Sweden and Portugal do not have professional foster families (Reimer, 2021).

In Portugal, foster care is defined as “the attribution of a child to a person or family, qualified for this purpose, to provide the child with integration into a stable family environment that guarantees adequate care for their needs and well-being, as well as the education and affection necessary for their integral development.” (Decree-Law no. 139/2019, 16 September). To be a foster family in Portugal, individuals must be aged 25 years or older and cannot simultaneously be candidates for adoption. Candidates must prove physical and mental health, have adequate housing with adequate hygiene and safety conditions, not be prevented from exercising parental responsibilities, and have no history of criminal activity (Decree-Law No. 139/2019, 16 September). In Portugal, foster families can only foster children and young people with whom they have no family ties.

Foster care has been a part of Portuguese society for approximately 40 years and has undergone numerous changes throughout history. The tradition of placing children in alternative families initially occurred spontaneously, driven by a sense of solidarity and mutual support (Delgado, 2010). This practice was also promoted by the initiative of state social action services or private social solidarity institutions (e.g., Casa Pia de Lisboa, Misericórdias). In 1979, the need to legally formalize this practice was recognized, where family began to be valued as the preferred life context for the child's development. Since its implementation, foster care has been characterized by its transitory and temporary nature (Decree-Law No. 288/79, 13 August). In 1999, a law for the protection of children and young people in danger was implemented, which included foster care as a protective measure (Delgado, 2010). This regime allowed family members of the foster child to be considered a foster family (Decree-Law No. 190/92, 3 September).

Between the 1990s and the early 2000s, there was a significant increase in foster care placements, which was partly due to kinship care (Delgado, 2023). In 2004, 1326 (12.3%) children were in family care, and 16.8% (N=1802) were placed in kinship care, making a total of 29.1% of children in family care (Delgado, 2023). However, since 2008 (Decree-Law No. 11/2008, 17 January), one of the criteria for becoming a foster family is not having family ties with the child in need. Consequently, there was a significant decrease in foster care placements, going from 1829 children and young people in foster care in 2007 to 918 in 2008 (ISS, 2023).

In recent years, the state has demonstrated increased recognition and appreciation for the role of foster families through legislative changes. Specifically, in 2015, foster care was identified as the preferred type of out-of-home care for children up to 6 years of age (Decree-Law No. 142/2015, 8 September). Since 2019, the selection and training of new foster families has been carefully ensured, with quality monitoring provided by qualified entities. The



Portuguese State has appointed the Instituto da Segurança Social and Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa to manage foster care system, which includes supervising placements, developing awareness-raising campaigns and recruiting new families (Decree-Law No. 139/2019, 16 September). In addition, legislation has strengthened the rights of foster families, including provisions for tax deductions, employment benefits and financial support (Decree-Law no. 139/2019, 16 September). Thus, the legislative changes that have occurred since 2015 reflect a context that promotes the behavior of becoming a foster family, which has the potential to significantly impact the recruitment processes. In fact, there has been a growing trend towards foster care in Portugal. In 2020, there was a variation of six percent, in 2021 of eleven percent (ISS, 2022) and in 2023 of 26% (ISS, 2024a).

Regarding the sociodemographic profile of children and youth in foster care, in line with the most recent legislative guidelines (i.e., preference for children up to six years old), the most represented groups were 0-5 (41%), followed by 6-9 years old (13%), 15-17 (13%), 18-20 (12%) and 12-14 (11%). The data revealed that a quarter of children receive psychological and child psychiatric follow-up and/or medication (ISS, 2024a). Although foster care in Portugal is intended to be temporary, children tend to stay in foster care for a long time, on average four years (ISS, 2024a). In terms of case plans, 28% focused on reunification, 28% on preparation for independent living, and 24% on adoption (ISS, 2024a).

In sum, the current situation regarding foster care in Portugal does not align with international recommendations (UNICEF, 2019). Only 4.3% of children in the child protection system have the right to live in an alternative family context, while 5409 children and young people are in residential care (ISS, 2024a). Therefore, there is an urgent need to recruit foster families. Despite this pressing need to increase the number of foster families, research on recruitment strategies is limited. To design potentially effective recruitment strategies, it is important to understand target behavior from a theoretical perspective. Published studies have mainly focused on reflexive motivations (e.g., Sebba, 2012) and sociodemographic variables (e.g., Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Ciarrochi et al., 2012), overlooking insights from broad-scope models of attitudes and behaviors (e.g., COM-B system of behavior; The Health Action Process Approach – HAPA).

### **Broad-Scope Models of Attitudes and Behaviors**

The current literature on intention to foster is mostly atheoretical. This contradicts the theoretical assumptions emphasizing the importance of understanding behavior through theory (Michie et al., 2021; Hagger et al., 2020). Analyzing behavior from a theoretical perspective

provides important insights into the individual, social, contextual, and environmental factors that can either promote or hinder the adoption of a new behavior (Hagger et al., 2020). Therefore, various factors can influence human behavior and intended behavioral change (Michie et al., 2021). However, studies on the factors associated with becoming a foster family have mainly focused on sociodemographic variables (Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Ciarrochi et al., 2012) and reflective motivational variables (Sebba, 2012). Therefore, this dissertation intended to add new theory-driven insights into the field of foster care (HAPA model, Schwarzer, 2008; COM-B system of behavior, Michie et al., 2011) in order to analyze and broaden the factors potentially associated with becoming a foster family.

### ***The COM-B System of Behavior***

The COM-B system is a conceptual model recommended in the literature on behavioral change as an initial basis for predicting and understanding behaviors owing to its overarching structure (Hankonen & Hardeman, 2020). According to the COM-B system, behavior occurs as a result of the interaction between three components: Capability, Motivation, and Opportunity. Each component is subdivided into categories. Capability refers to an individual's physical (e.g., strength, endurance, coordination, mobility) and psychological (e.g., knowledge, memory, attention, decision processes, behavioral regulation) capabilities. The adoption of a certain behavior requires the necessary knowledge and skills (Michie et al., 2011). Motivation involves all mental processes that stimulate and regulate behavior, including deliberative processes (e.g., conscious beliefs, values, goals, analytical decision-making) and automatic processes (e.g., emotions, rewards, and incentives). Finally, Opportunity refers to all contextual factors, external to the individual, that enhance the target behavior. Opportunities can be from the physical context (e.g., housing, time, financial resources) and from the social context, where they are integrated with social influences (e.g., social pressure, norms, conformity, social comparison). According to the COM-B system, all three components—Capability, Motivation and Opportunity—contribute to changes in behavior and are affected by them, creating a dynamic behavioral process (Michie et al., 2011). Specifically, capability and opportunity are crucial for turning motivation into practice.

The COM-B system has been applied in studies with different objectives. Several studies have used the COM-B to identify the predictive role of its components (i.e., Motivation, Capability and Opportunity) in the target behavior (e.g., Bishop et al., 2024; Nabafu et al., 2023), whereas others have used the COM-B to explore or map barriers and enablers associated with the target behavior (e.g., Blebil et al., 2022; Fuster et al., 2023). In addition, multiple

interventions have been developed and assessed using a behavior change wheel (Michie et al., 2011), based on the COM-B system of behavior. Considering that the COM-B system and wheel were originally designed in the context of health interventions, many implementations have occurred in this context, such as the promotion of physical activity (Brannan et al., 2019), reduction of sedentary behavior (Morton et al., 2024), infectious disease control (Oliwa et al., 2020), chronic disease management (Wlash et al., 2018), promotion of health (Rohde et al., 2019), and plant-based diets (Rickerby & Green, 2024). In addition, the COM-B system has been applied to prevent or reduce risky behaviors, such as sexuality (Armayones Ruiz et al., 2023) and smoking prevention (Andersen et al., 2023).

Research suggests that different COM-B components seem to be associated with diverse target-behaviors, including both health-related (e.g., Howlett et al., 2019) and pro-social behaviors (e.g., Nabafu et al., 2023). Specifically, within the category of health behavior, such as physical activity, different COM-B components have distinct effects. For instance, capability (habits) and opportunity (social support) seem to be associated with physical activity in some studies (Willmott et al., 2021), but others revealed that reflective motivation (i.e., reflective processes to enact or maintain new physical activity patterns) and physical opportunities are particularly important to adults' physical activity (Spence et al., 2021). This variability may be due to factors such as the type or intensity of the activity, context (e.g., during a pandemic; Spence et al., 2021), and characteristics of the target population (children, Bishop et al., 2024; young adults, Willmott et al., 2021; or adults, Howlett et al., 2019).

Furthermore, recently there is an effort to adapt the COM-B system to different social contexts aiming to promote social justice, for instance, to increase the participation of people with disabilities in employment (Nagtegaal et al., 2023) or civic engagement in public policies (Nabafu et al., 2023). Specifically, in terms of engagement in policymaking through a digital platform (Nabafu et al., 2023), physical opportunity (ICT infrastructure) was found to be the most important predictor. Furthermore, this study found that capability partially mediates the relationship between opportunity and engagement (target behavior), and fully mediates the relationship between motivation and engagement. These results call for further clarifications on the role of the different components from the COM-B model in pro-social behaviors.

Studies that use the COM-B system to explore or map barriers and enablers of behaviors have contributed to a structured understanding of factors that need to be promoted and obstacles to be overcome. For instance, a study focusing on healthy food choices in restaurants (Fuster et al., 2023) identified barriers and enablers in all the components of the COM-B system. However, most reported barriers focus on physical (e.g., offering a variety of healthy and

attractive options) and social opportunity (i.e., family members and close people tending to request healthy options); therefore, this seems to be the most urgent component to be addressed in this context. In turn, a study focusing on the implementation of weight management services in Malaysia (Blebil et al., 2022) found that barriers and enablers essentially focused on the psychological capability component (i.e., education and awareness). These results reveal that identifying and mapping barriers and enablers is crucial to inform the design of targeted and potentially more effective interventions to promote or inhibit desired behaviors.

Despite the relevance of contextual variables in the adoption of a new intended behavior (Michie et al., 2011), the analysis of involvement with foster care has focused mainly on individual variables. Most studies explore the role of reflexive motivations (e.g., reasons for fostering; Gouveia et al., 2021; Sebba, 2012) and sociodemographic variables (e.g., gender, age; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Ciarrochi et al., 2012). Consequently, the role of contextual factors, such as social factors, in terms of opportunities (e.g., social support; Michie et al., 2011) and obstacles (e.g., lack of services) have not been considered.

Therefore, this dissertation aims to apply the COM-B system of behavior (Michie et al., 2011) to explore and identify barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family in terms of Capability, Opportunity and Motivation. This approach, which has already been implemented in social contexts (e.g., justice and social participation; Nabafu et al., 2023; Nagtegaal et al., 2023), aims to provide an understanding of which factors (individual and contextual) need to be addressed to increase the likelihood of becoming a foster family. Moreover, considering that certain factors are particularly relevant during the initial phases of the behavioral change, while others become more significant as individuals progress to more advanced phases, it is valuable to consider the behavior of becoming a foster family also including the HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2016).

### ***The HAPA Model***

HAPA is a theoretical framework used to understand and explain how people adopt, maintain, or modify their behavior (Schwarzer, 2016). It suggests that understanding behavior should consider factors beyond motivation and include those responsible for implementing intentions, which are crucial for behavioral change (Schwarzer, 2008). As not all intentions lead to behavior (intention-behavior gap), the HAPA as a comprehensive self-regulation model proposes that behavior adoption and maintenance involve two distinct phases: motivational and volitional (Schwarzer, 2016). Therefore, the HAPA model can be seen as complementing the COM-B system by including similar constructs and operating as a stage model. Compared to

other models, like the Theory of Planned Behavior used by Raudkivi (2020) in the context of foster care, the HAPA model includes motivational components and has the advantage of incorporating a volitional phase as well. Therefore, it allows for a more comprehensive and integrated analysis of the range of factors that may be linked with becoming a foster family.

According to HAPA model, changing a behavior must be preceded by the formation of an intention. This process occurs in the motivational phase, during which the individual develops the motivation to act, despite not yet acting (Schwarzer, 2016). Several factors influence the formation of an intention according to the HAPA model, namely, action self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and risk perception. Action self-efficacy (also called pre-action self-efficacy or task self-efficacy) is a positive belief in the ability to adopt a target behavior. Individuals with high levels of action self-efficacy tend to envision success and are more likely to initiate the target behavior. However, individuals with low confidence in their abilities often anticipate failure (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020) and exhibit a propensity to discontinue their efforts prematurely (Schwarzer, 2014). Outcome expectancies are beliefs about the potential consequences, both positive and negative, of adopting a behavior. These predictions about how actions lead to certain outcomes are typical features of rational decision making. If outcome expectancies are positive, the benefits outweigh the negative consequences (e.g., if I exercise, I can improve my physical and mental health) (Schwarzer, 2016). In turn, negative outcome expectancies can decrease intention to act. Risk perception comprises two aspects: the perceived severity of a situation and the individual's vulnerability to this situation. Perceived severity refers to the amount of harm that can occur and the perceived vulnerability to the subjective probability of the individual being affected by this situation (Schwarzer, 2016).

In the HAPA model, intention plays a crucial role between the motivational and volitional phases (Schwarzer, 2016). In the volitional phase, the individual aims to execute the desired behavior by converting the intention into an effective action. This phase involves the implementation and maintenance of a given behavior. Given that the conversion of an intention into a behavior can be affected by several obstacles (e.g., conflicting habits; Schwarzer, 2016), the HAPA model includes mediating factors such as action planning and coping planning (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). These two proximal determinants of behavior help individuals transform their intentions into the desired behavior (Schwarzer, 2016). Action planning is understood as the development of detailed plans about when, where, and how the behavior will be executed. This planning is considered a facilitating strategy because it guides behavior (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). In turn, coping planning involves anticipating potential barriers and defining alternative strategies to overcome them (Schwarzer, 2008). Both planning

strategies occur before the behavior is executed (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). In the HAPA model, coping planning has a compensatory function: if the initial plan is not feasible, coping plans provide alternative actions (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020).

Although self-efficacy is crucial in all phases of behavioral change, the HAPA model differentiates various types of self-efficacy based on the specific circumstances in which the individual finds themselves. Thus, while action self-efficacy is important for the formation of an intention (motivational phase), coping self-efficacy and recovery self-efficacy are relevant for the initiation and maintenance of behavior (volitional phase). Coping self-efficacy is understood as an optimistic belief in one's ability to deal with barriers that may arise. Specifically, coping self-efficacy helps an individual persist in the desired change despite difficulties. In turn, recovery self-efficacy refers to confidence in resuming behavior after a setback. This type of self-efficacy promotes setbacks after failure. Individuals with high self-efficacy tend to attribute failures to external causes, establish strategies to minimize harm, and regain confidence in their abilities. Those with low self-efficacy tend to attribute failure to internal and stable causes (Schwarzer, 2008).

Since initiated behavior must be maintained, the HAPA model also includes a self-regulatory strategy in the volitional phase, known as action control (Schwarzer, 2016; Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). Action control is a strategy that occurs during or after the implementation of a behavior and involves continuous monitoring and evaluation. This strategy aims to ensure that the behavior is executed in accordance with standard behavior and includes three components: Self-monitoring, awareness of standards, and self-regulatory effort (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). For example, self-monitoring refers to observing and recording when, where, and for how long an individual is executing a behavior. Awareness of standards refers to an individual's familiarity with defined goals, guidelines, or behavioral programs. Finally, self-regulatory effort refers to conscious effort to ensure that the plan and goals are met. Thus, the volitional phase can be divided into planning, initiation of behavior, and maintenance and monitoring of relapses (Schwarzer, 2016).

The HAPA model, also developed originally in the health field, has been widely applied to understand and promote various health behaviors. These include promoting physical activity (Mirzaeimoghadam et al., 2023), disease prevention (Keller et al., 2024), chronic disease management and prevention (D'Addario et al., 2020), sports health (Jespersen et al., 2024; McKay et al., 2016), and nutritional education (Razzazi et al., 2024). Similar to the COM-B system, the HAPA model has also been applied to risky behaviors, excessive Internet use (Tang et al., 2021), rehabilitation and treatment of addictions (Meng et al., 2024), prevention of risky

behaviors, and traffic safety (Gebbers et al., 2017). Efforts have also been made to use the HAPA model to promote prosocial behaviors, such as blood donation (Thijssen et al., 2022).

Interventions based on the HAPA model support the assumption that behavioral changes progress through distinct phases. These interventions have been shown to be effective in forming intentions and helping individuals move from the motivational phase to the implementation phase (e.g., Joveini et al., 2019; Fattahi Ardakani et al., 2024). For instance, an intervention focused on smoking cessation (Joveini et al., 2019) found a significant increase in the intention to quit smoking, as well as a higher number of individuals who quit smoking in the experimental group. In this intervention, there was a significant increase in the constructs of the motivational phase (i.e., risk perception, outcome expectancy, and action self-efficacy) and volitional phase (i.e., action planning, coping planning, and coping self-efficacy) in the experimental group. Similar results were found in a health education intervention that focused on developing communication skills among nurses (Fattahi Ardakani et al., 2024). In this study, nurses in the experimental group showed higher levels of communication skills than those in the control group did.

Research has shown that different factors exert distinct influences at various phases of behavioral change. Specifically, action self-efficacy and risk perception seem particularly relevant to intention (Meng et al., 2024). Conversely, in the process of behavior adoption, both self-efficacy and planning seems to become especially critical. For instance, there is evidence that self-efficacy and planning are associated with physical activity post-cancer (Sequeira et al., 2023) and adherence to physical distancing measures (Beeckman et al., 2020; self-efficacy, action planning, and coping planning). Moreover, for behavior maintenance, variables such as maintenance self-efficacy, action planning and coping planning seem relevant (Meng et al., 2024). These findings are consistent with the motivational and volitional phases of the HAPA model and underscore the important role of different self-efficacy constructs in behavioral change (Zhang et al., 2019). Still following the specific effect of the phase, Schüz and colleagues (2007), in a volitional intervention focused on action control, revealed that only participants in the volitional phase benefited from the intervention. This empirical evidence reinforces the importance of developing tailored and targeted interventions for individuals in different phases of the process of behavioral change.

In fact, research indicates that when individuals intend to adopt new behaviors, developing a detailed plan (action planning) and anticipating potential barriers while defining strategies to overcome them (coping planning) significantly enhances the likelihood of translating that intention into action (e.g., Johnson et al., 2019; Meng et al., 2024; Moghaddam et al., 2023).

This has been observed in diverse contexts, such as promoting physical exercise in individuals with substance use disorders (Meng et al., 2024), minimizing the provision of unhealthy foods to young children (Johnson et al., 2019), and advancing disease prevention and health promotion. Specifically, this includes good hand hygiene (Keller et al., 2024) and oral health practices (regular visits to the dentist and oral self-examination behaviors; Moghaddam et al., 2023). Despite the role of planning in adopting a new, intended behavior, evidence suggests that intention and maintenance self-efficacy better explain behavior than planning (Zhang et al., 2019).

Finally, certain constructs of the HAPA model predict certain target behaviors but not others. For example, risk perception is significantly associated with the development of communication skills in nurses (Fattahi Ardakani et al., 2024) and the intention to reduce unhealthy food provision to children (Johnson et al., 2019). However, there was no association between risk perception and intention to practice good hand hygiene (Keller et al., 2024). Despite this evidence, Zhang et al. (2019) suggest that risk perception has a small effect on health intentions and behaviors. The same is true, for example, for the construct of outcome expectancies. On the one hand, outcome expectancies are significant predictors of blood donation (Thijssen et al., 2022) and intention not to drink and drive (Gebbers et al., 2017). In contrast, no significant associations were found between outcome expectancies and intention to practice physical exercise in individuals with substance use disorders (Meng et al., 2024). These results highlight the specific nature of each behavior and the importance of an in-depth theoretical understanding of its drivers in producing effective behavioral changes.

Considering the established evidence that a new intended behavior occurs in phases influenced by specific factors (e.g., Meng et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2019), it may be valuable to analyze involvement with foster care through this lens. This approach enables the identification of motivational factors, such as positive beliefs about one's capability to perform the role, in forming the intention to become a foster family. Additionally, it allows the identification of the role of volitional factors, such as having a detailed plan, in converting the intention into behavior of becoming a foster family. This insight is crucial to understand the dynamic nature of involvement with foster care.

In sum, the COM-B system of behavior (Michie et al., 2011) and the HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008) have the potential to offer valuable theoretical insights into the factors associated with becoming a foster family. The COM-B system can provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors associated with becoming a foster family by focusing on capability, opportunity, and motivation. The HAPA model allows for an analysis of the dynamic and



developmental aspects of foster care involvement, particularly in terms of motivational and volitional factors. This has the potential to inform the development of targeted and tailored strategies for recruiting new foster families, which is particularly important in the Portuguese context, where a small percentage of children are in foster care (ISS, 2024a).



## CHAPTER 2

# **Why do People Become Foster Parents and How to Recruit New Families? A Multi-informant Study<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The shortage of foster families in child protection systems worldwide is a critical issue that requires a deeper understanding of culturally situated approaches to recruit new families. This study aimed to explore public awareness of foster care, provide an integrated view of barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family, and generate insights to guide strategy and content development for campaigns to promote foster care and recruit new foster families. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with 29 participants (14 foster parents, 15 professionals; Portugal) and subjected to a thematic analysis. The results suggested there was limited public knowledge about foster care. Becoming a foster parent was linked both with reflective motivational processes (e.g., child-centered motivations) and the availability of multidimensional resources (e.g., social support), but multi-level constraints were identified as barriers to becoming a foster parent (e.g., worries related to the foster child). Integrated outreach strategies (e.g., combining tailored and mass media approaches) with a range of communication channels and vehicles may raise awareness and enable the recruitment of more foster families. Participants indicated that message content should involve system-related information and evidence about the positive impact of fostering, among other aspects. Overall, this study provides insight into recruitment and outreach strategies to increase the pool of prospective foster families.

*Keywords: Foster care; Foster families; Reasons for fostering; Awareness; Recruitment strategies; Communication strategies*

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<sup>1</sup> The study presented in this chapter has been submitted for publication to the *Children and Youth Services Review*.

## **Introduction**

Removing a child from their birth family should only be done as a last resort (Barth & Lloyd, 2010). Child separation from their birth family may involve a traumatic experience that evokes feelings of loss and grief (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010), which might be worsened by placement instability (Unrau et al., 2008). Children and young people placed in alternative care, such as foster care, are more likely to experience mental health disorders (e.g., Engler et al., 2022; Oswald et al., 2010), low education attainments (e.g., Geiger & Beltran, 2017; Harris et al., 2009) and developmental delays due to previous risk, adversity, or maltreatment (Oswald et al., 2010). In cases where child removal is needed to protect the child, foster care is the preferable alternative care to residential care, given placement in foster care may improve the quality of their attachment with significant people (secure attachment) (West et al., 2020; Smyke et al., 2010) and promote more adaptive functioning (e.g., academic performance, happiness, behavior outcomes; Fernandez, 2008). In fact, some studies have suggested that children in foster care may show higher levels of subjective well-being than children in residential care and similar levels to children and young people in the general population (e.g., Delgado et al., 2019, Delgado et al., 2020; Llosada-Gistau et al., 2017).

However, the number of children in care is much higher than the number of available foster families in several countries (e.g., Estonia, see Raudkivi, 2020; Portugal, see ISS, 2023; Greece, see UNICEF, 2022). Thus, one of the main challenges to increase the number of foster families is to identify barriers and enablers to fostering children and to develop tailored and potentially effective recruitment messages and strategies. In fact, developing communication and recruitment campaigns that generate awareness about foster care and help increase the number of prospective foster families has been identified in research over the past decade as a relevant area of intervention (Berrick et al., 2011; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Magalhães et al., 2022). Previous work has identified a range of possible communication channels and vehicles to promote foster care, such as newspapers, television, radio, cinema, advertisements on public transport and outdoors, and information pamphlets (e.g., López et al., 2010). Online platforms in general and social media in particular have also gained increased importance in communication campaigns, due to the relatively low cost to implement and facility to access and promote interaction between members of the audience (Chiang et al., 2019; López et al., 2010). Promoting interpersonal contact (e.g., word-of-mouth) has also been referred to as a key strategy, as it allows direct contact with those who perform this role, first-hand access to information that is perceived as more authentic, and the possibility of asking questions on the spot (Canali et al., 2016; Cox et al., 2003; López et al., 2010; Sebba, 2012). Despite these broad

inputs to promote foster care and increase the number of prospective foster families, there is very limited evidence to guide actual strategies and content development for communication campaigns on this topic. The current study aims to address this knowledge gap.

Moreover, research that examines the self-reported reasons for becoming a foster family may yield outcomes that are useful to improve recruitment strategies (e.g., Magalhães et al., 2022), as it allows to develop and messages and campaigns that target outcome-relevant beliefs or motivations (e.g., Lewis et al., 2016). Several studies have shown that altruistic and child-centered reasons are the most reported reasons for becoming a foster family (Canali et al., 2016; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Gouveia et al., 2021; López & Del Valle, 2016; Rodger et al., 2006; Sebba, 2012). These reasons include protecting the child from further harm (e.g., Sebba, 2012) and providing care and affection to a child (e.g., De Maeyer, et al., 2014). Other reasons have also been identified, such as societal-oriented motivations (e.g., desire to do something for the community/society; De Maeyer, et al., 2014), family-centered motivations (e.g., new experience and family enrichment; Migliorini et al., 2018) and self-centered motivations (e.g., having previous cared for children and wanting children at home; De Maeyer et al., 2014).

Apart from these reflective motivations (e.g., reasons for fostering; Sebba, 2012), research in the field has also focused on sociodemographic variables (e.g., gender, age, income; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Ciarrochi et al., 2012). These reasons for fostering have been explained in the literature according to the Theory of Resources (Cox et al., 2003), which argues that the more resources a person has, the greater the probability of sharing with others (e.g., high income; De Maeyer et al., 2014). These approaches are meaningful and relevant per se, but do not account for other potentially relevant variables that are seen as critical across different topics and domains, as suggested by broad-scope models within social and behavioral sciences. Broad-scope models of behavior propose that intention and behavior are influenced not only by individual factors (e.g., motivation, capability; Mayne, 2016; Michie et al., 2011) but also by social factors, namely in terms of opportunities (e.g., social support; Michie et al., 2011) and constraints that may emerge from the context. Here, we draw on insights from two broad-scope models developed in the field of psychology (HAPA model, Schwarzer, 2008; COM-B system of behavior, Michie et al., 2011) to explore and extend the range of factors that may be linked with becoming a foster family.

## **Broad-Scope Models of Attitudes and Behaviors: The COM-B System and the HAPA Model**

The COM-B system proposes that behavior occurs through the interaction of variables across three components: capability, opportunity, and motivation (Michie et al., 2011). Capability involves both the physical and psychological capacity to adopt a certain behavior, which requires skills and knowledge (e.g., comprehension, reasoning). Opportunity refers to all external factors, such as physical (e.g., home conditions) and/or social (e.g., social pressure, norms) factors, that make the behavior possible. Lastly, motivation includes reflective (i.e., conscious beliefs, values, goals, plans) and automatic (e.g., desires, emotional responses, habits, impulses) psychological processes that energize the behavior. This model proposes that variables across the three components are linked with each other and necessary to enable a given target behavior (Michie et al., 2011; West et al., 2020), such as becoming a foster family. However, specific variables within each component (i.e., capability, opportunity, motivation) are contingent on the target outcome, as well as the target group or population.

Although we refer to the COM-B system for its high heuristic value, there are also conceptually flexible models within social and behavioral sciences that have addressed the “intention-behavior gap” more specifically, given that people do not always necessarily act according to their intentions (e.g., Fishbein et al., 2003; Sniehotta et al., 2005). This suggests that intention needs to be complemented with other more proximal factors, which help to translate the intention into a given action. A model that explicitly addresses these factors is the HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008), which distinguishes between (a) pre-intention motivational processes that lead to a behavioral intention and (b) post-intention volitional processes that lead to actual behavior. Variables seen as relevant for the pre-intention motivational processes are risk perception (i.e., perceived severity of a specific condition and personal vulnerability), outcome expectations (i.e., perception of potential consequences of a behavior), and task self-efficacy, also referred as action self-efficacy or pre-action self-efficacy (i.e., optimistic belief, at this phase individuals anticipate success). Variables seen as relevant for the post-intention volitional processes include action planning (i.e., individual's plan for performing a target behavior, specifying when, where, and how they will do it), coping planning (i.e., anticipate challenging situations and make plans to deal with them), and coping self-efficacy, also referred as maintenance self-efficacy (i.e., optimistic belief about the capacities to deal with potential barriers), among others (see Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). Here, we explore the utility of these broad-scope models in identifying factors related to becoming a foster family. Specifically, we propose to use these models to observe the perspectives of foster families and professionals on

variables that are considered relevant to becoming a foster family and to generate insights for designing outreach strategies and campaigns.

### **The Current Study: Background, Aims, and Approach**

The body of evidence on the factors related to becoming a foster family is still mostly atheoretical, which limits an integrated and comprehensive understanding of the variables involved in this process. In addition, there is limited evidence to guide efforts to recruit new foster families, despite the urgent need to increase the pool of promising and prospective foster parents (Reimer, 2021). To address these limitations, the current study aimed to 1) explore factors linked with public awareness about foster care; 2) provide a more integrated view of barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family; and 3) generate insights to guide strategy and content development for culturally situated campaigns to promote foster care and recruit foster families. To deliver and strengthen this contribution, we relied on inputs from two broad-scope models of behavior (COM-B system, Michie et al., 2011; HAPA model, Schwarzer, 2008) to generate an interview script, which was used in semi-structured interviews to collect data both with foster families and professionals working in the field. We conducted this study in the Portuguese context, where foster care continues to have a reduced expression (about 3.6% of children in care are in foster care; ISS, 2023), which perpetuates a culture of institutionalization. Since 2020 there has been an increase in placements in foster care, with an increase of 6% in 2020 and 11% in 2021. However, as in many other countries (e.g., Estonia, see Raudkivi, 2020; Greece, see UNICEF, 2022) more systematic and consistent dissemination efforts are needed in Portugal to recruit and select new foster families (Delgado, 2010; Delgado et al., 2015; Delgado et al., 2018). In Portugal, the criteria for being a foster family include being aged 25 or more, not being a candidate for adoption, having physical and mental health conditions, physical and safety conditions, not having criminal problems, not being inhibited from parental responsibilities, and not having any kinship relationship with the foster child (In Portugal, only non-kinship foster families exist) (Decree-Law no. 139/2019).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study included 29 participants, 14 foster parents and 15 professionals (including three directors) working in the Portuguese foster care system. Almost all foster parents were female (97%), most were married (79%), and their age ranged between 35 to 56 years ( $M = 44.21$ ,  $SD = 5.55$ ). Regarding their education, 43% had completed high school, 36% had completed a

bachelor's degree, and 21% had completed a master's degree. Most foster parents had two biological and/or adopted children (54%). Moreover, the majority of foster parents belonged to households consisting of a twosome, own child(ren), and a child in care (79%). From the remaining 21%, 14% were single-parent families with children and 7% were single-parent families without children. Half of the foster parents reported previous knowledge and/or contact with the child protection system before becoming foster parents, though the majority were fostering for the first time (71%). Length of time fostering varied between one month and 32 months, with an average of 12.79 months. Regarding the children in care, 14% were less than one year of age, 43% were between one and six years and 43% were more than six years old. Most children in care were male (71%) and did not have previous placements (57%), although a high percentage had experienced one previous placement (36%) and 7% had two or more previous placements.

The age of professionals who participated in this study was between 28 and 63 years ( $M = 45$ ,  $SD = 7.83$ ), most were female (87%), married (53%), 40% single and 7% were in a common-law marriage. Regarding their education, 67% had completed a bachelor's degree and 33% had completed a master's, mainly in the field of Psychology (60%), followed by Social Work (27%) and Social Education (13%). Three of the interviewees were directors. An average of 17 years of experience in the child protection system ( $SD = 5.88$ ) and six years in the foster care system ( $SD = 4.53$ ) were reported.

## **Instruments**

### ***Sociodemographic Questionnaires***

Two sociodemographic questionnaires were developed, one version for foster families and the other for professionals. The version for foster families measured individual (i.e., gender, age, marital status), academic and professional (i.e., educational qualifications and profession) characteristics of participants and their families (e.g., to have children and their ages). In addition, the questionnaire measured information regarding their role as foster families, such as previous contact with the child protection system, number of children fostered, length of past placements, and length of current placement. Finally, information was collected regarding the individual characteristics and previous placements of the children foster families were fostering at the time of the interview (i.e., age, gender).

The version for professionals measured individual (i.e., gender, age, marital status), academic, and professional (i.e., course, profession) characteristics and assessed information



associated with professional practice in the child protection system (i.e., time of experience in the child protection system and in foster care).

### ***Semi-structured Interviews***

The interview guide was developed around three main sets of questions to address the three contributions of this study. The first set was focused on participants' general knowledge and awareness about foster care (i.e., "How did you hear or become familiar with foster care?").

The second set of questions focused on barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family and was grounded on the theoretical frameworks that guided this study. Specifically, based on the COM-B System of Behavior, this set focused on capability (e.g., "What skills do you think you had that supported your decision to become a foster family?"), motivation (e.g., "What led you to become a foster family?"), and opportunity (e.g., "In this process of becoming a foster family, how would you describe the role of people in your social network, such as family and friends?"; "In addition to your social context that includes family and friends, how did the foster care system itself contribute to your intention to become a foster family?"). It also included questions aligned with the HAPA model, namely coping planning (e.g., "What kind of concerns, challenges or difficulties did you experience when you were thinking about becoming a foster family? How did you handle/overcome those challenges?"), outcome expectancies (e.g., "What expectations did you have, at the time, regarding your role as a foster family?"), and action planning (e.g., "Once you decided to become a foster family, how did the decision materialize? What did you do?").

The last set of questions focused on recruitment strategies (e.g., "How do you think more foster families could be recruited?", "Imagine that you have a decision-making role in the system with a view to better attracting and recruiting families, what would you do?") to generate insights to guide strategy and content development for campaigns to promote foster care and recruit foster families in the Portuguese context. The first version of the interview script was created by the first author and discussed with the other team members, who provided feedback to improve language, clarity, and theoretical alignment.

### **Data Collection and Analytical Procedure**

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon (Ref. 92/2021). Most of foster families in Portugal are in three geographical areas: Lisbon, Porto, and Madeira Island. In order to include families and professionals working in the foster care system from these three areas, the individual interviews were carried out via Zoom, and

conducted in Portuguese. As such, first, we requested collaboration from entities working in the context of foster care in the districts of Porto, Lisbon, and the Autonomous Region of Madeira and informed them about this study. After this first contact, two directors of the entities requested a meeting via ZOOM to clarify the objectives of the present study, the number of participants required, as well as the procedures adopted to collect data and the conditions for participation. Then, each entity contacted foster families and professionals to inform them about the present study and requested authorization to share their email addresses and/or telephone contacts with the research team. We then contacted each of the participants directly via email and telephone so the interviews could be scheduled. Prior to the beginning of the interviews, the participants were provided with an informed consent document through ZOOM screen sharing. The informed consent presented the study's aim, the voluntary, anonymous, and confidential nature of participation, as well as the right to refuse and cease at any time. In addition, information regarding personal data protection was provided and the contact details of the research team were made available for later contact (questions, clarifications), as well as the contact of the Data Protection Officer of ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon. Consent was audio recorded and the data (i.e., audio files) were stored in a SharePoint with access restricted to the research team. Audio files were destroyed after transcription. The interviews ranged in length from 33 to 90 minutes, with an average length of 60 minutes.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data were analyzed using the NVivo software version 1.6.1. The sociodemographic data were analyzed using IBM ® SPSS ® Statistics v29. We performed a thematic analysis through the identification and analysis of patterns (themes) in the data with a mixed (i.e., top-down and bottom-up) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We relied on the structure of the interview script to create the first, overarching layer of meaning and organization of our results (i.e., top-down), but created and interpreted the themes based on semantic criteria (i.e., bottom-up). We followed the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), namely: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) production of initial codes; (3) theme exploration – classification of different codes into potential themes; (4) review of themes – to ensure the adequacy between the thematic map and the dataset; and (5) definition and naming of themes. Trustworthiness was ensured by a systematic scrutiny of the data analysis process through the discussion of the coding process among the researchers, and by providing illustrative examples of participants' verbalizations. Furthermore, a second coder analyzed 30% of the data as per our thematic map and we computed a Cohen's Kappa coefficient to assess the reliability of the analysis. This yielded a Kappa=.865 (strong agreement; McHugh, 2012) in the data collected with the foster parents, a Kappa=.869 (strong agreement) in the data

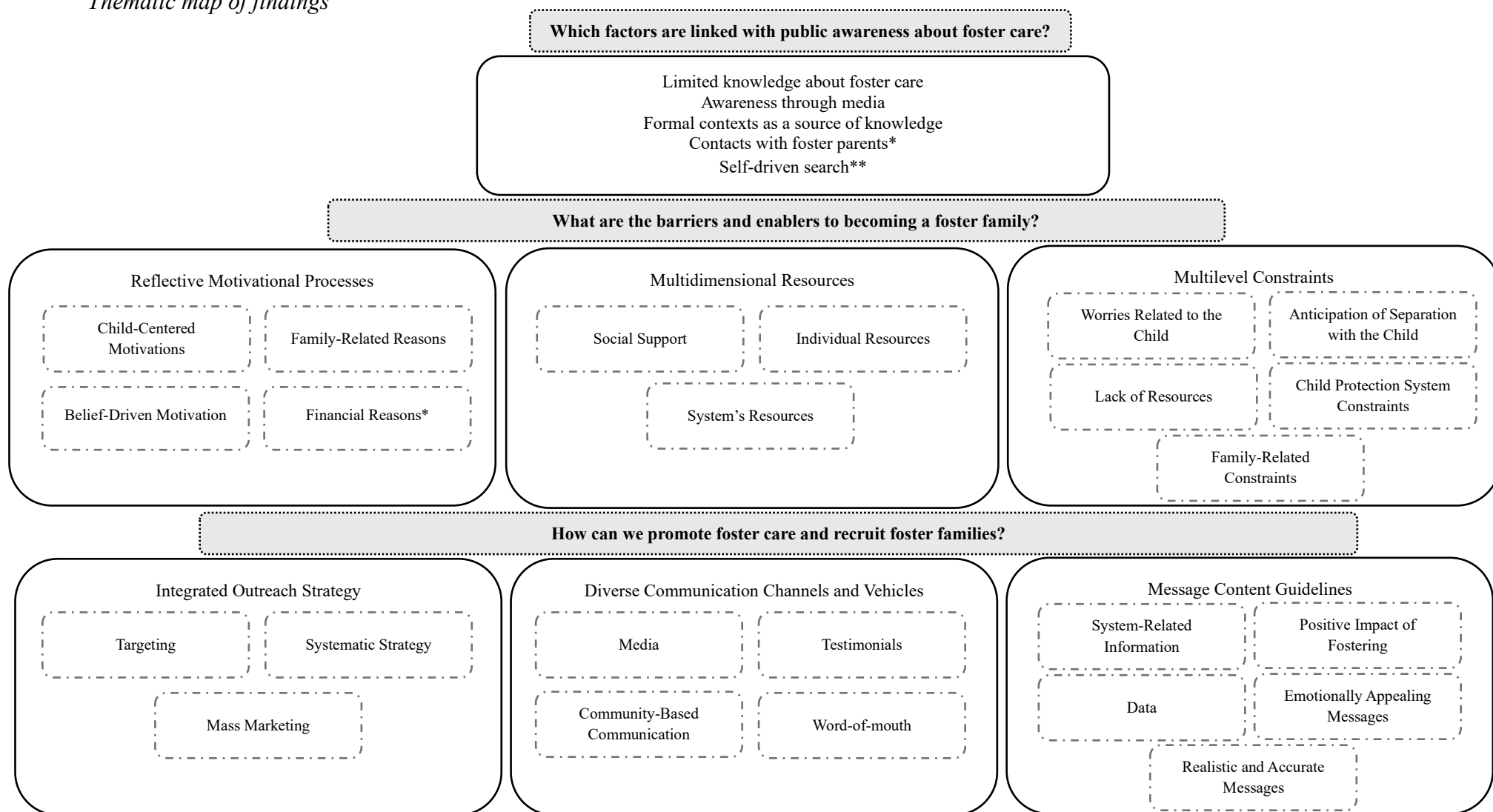
collected with the professionals, and a Kappa=.867 (strong agreement) referring to the total data (foster parents and professionals).

### **Results**

The analysis of the results was structured according to the main objectives of the present study: 1) explore factors linked with public awareness about foster care; 2) provide a more integrated view of barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family; and 3) generate insights to guide strategy and content development for campaigns to promote foster care and recruit foster families (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Thematic map of findings*



*Note. Themes and sub-themes identified only by professionals are marked with an asterisk and by foster parents with two asterisks.*

## Perceived Public Awareness About Foster Care

We identified three common themes among professionals and foster parents about how they perceived public awareness about foster care (i.e., *Limited knowledge about foster care*, *Awareness through media*, and *Formal contexts as a source of knowledge*). In addition, among professionals, we identified the theme *Contacts with foster parents*, and among foster parents the theme *Self-driven search*. Foster parents and professionals perceived a *Limited knowledge about foster care*, both from the community and other professionals (e.g., “The professionals from different areas that intervene with these children, whether in terms of education, (...) health and others, also demonstrate a huge lack of knowledge.”; Professional; Female, 63 years old).

Participants recognized *Awareness through media* via previous recruitment campaigns of foster care organizations in Portugal, and through films that portray this reality (e.g., “I heard about it through advertising, on Expresso, it said (...) “LX fostering. Why not fostering a child?”. It was the first step, this ad”; Foster parent; Female, 50 years old).

In addition, participants identified *Formal contexts as a source of knowledge*, which means that public knowledge about foster care yielded from social interactions in different formal contexts (such as schools, church, or the child protection system) (e.g., “There are people (...) who are kindergarten teachers, for example, and who here have some contact with this aspect of promotion and protection in the professional field”; Professional; Female, 43 years old).

Professionals also acknowledged that foster care awareness came from *Contacts with foster parents*, which means that foster families are important sources in the spread of knowledge (e.g., “The experience of other families, word of mouth (...). We ended up having some applications that came as a result of this knowledge and the experiences of other people who were also positive.”; Professional; Male, 41 years old). On the other hand, foster parents mentioned *Self-driven search* as a source of knowledge about foster care, in cases where they had the initiative to carry out the research on fostering, without having received any prior information on this subject (e.g., “I had already researched about it, the only thing I could find was *Mundos de Vida*, up there in the North [Porto], and as soon as I saw the advertisement [in Lisbon] I immediately grabbed this opportunity because there was nothing here [in Lisbon].”; Foster parent; Female, 45 years old).

## Factors Related to Becoming a Foster Family

For both professionals and foster parents, three main themes were found regarding the factors that may influence people to become a foster family: *Reflective motivational processes* (i.e., conscious beliefs, values and goals that seem to energize and direct the behavior of becoming

a foster family included four sub-themes: Child-centered motivations, Family-related reasons, Belief-driven motivation and Financial reasons), *Multidimensional resources* (i.e., enablers of the behavior to become a foster family, included three sub-themes: Social support, Individual resources, and System's resources) and *Multilevel constraints* (i.e., barriers that inhibit the behavior of becoming a foster family, including five sub-themes: Worries related to the child in foster care, Anticipation of separation with the child, Lack of resources, Child protection system constraints, and Family-related constraints).

Participants identified several reflective motivational processes that mobilized the behavior of becoming a foster family, through four sub-themes, namely Child-centered motivations, the desire to care for a child preventing their placement in residential care (e.g., “It goes through this need to help, to prevent the child from going to an institution, to want to somehow provide a family; Professional; Female, 42 years old), Family-related reasons, for example, the need to fill the “empty nest” and wanting family-like company (e.g., “As my children are already grown up, sometimes, I feel alone (...). I think it was because, [I wanted] more company.”; Foster parent; Female, 42 years old) and Belief-driven motivation, as social responsibility and/or religious beliefs (e.g., “Changing the world of one person at a time. In the next generation, for my daughter and all her friends it will be natural to foster a child.”; Foster parent; Female, 44 years old). Professionals also mentioned that prospective foster families were not driven by *Financial reasons* for becoming a foster family (e.g., “I had some fear that there were more motivations associated with the (...) [financial reason], but they do not arise.”; Professional; Female, 45 years old).

These motivations seem to lead people to become foster families; however, they emerged possibly being influenced by a set of resources. The theme *Multidimensional Resources* involves three sub-themes, namely social, individual, and system's resources. Foster parents and professionals identified Social Support as a critical resource, which means that they perceived formal support (e.g., availability and follow-up by the professional team, as well as the provision of training and adequate preparation for the role) and informal support (i.e., family, friends, neighbors) as an important factor influencing the decision of becoming a foster family (e.g., “My family is always present, they always said: We will always be here when you need us.”; Foster parent; Female, 56 years old).

Participants also highlighted the importance of having Individual Resources. Having caregiving skills (e.g., the ability to give affection, care, and satisfy the needs of children) and social skills (e.g., emotional regulation) that facilitate the role of foster family, as well as self-efficacy beliefs, seem to have weight in the decision to become a foster parent. Moreover,

additional individual resources such as having a household dynamic aligned with the requirements to care for a child in foster care (i.e., dynamics that already include children), time and housing conditions proved to be important aspects in the behavior of becoming a foster family (e.g., “Resources that are often addressed are: okay, I have a house that has space.”; Professional; Female, 63 years old).

Alongside social support and individual resources, the System's resources were identified as a relevant factor, namely the positive perception of the foster care system, in terms of competence, credibility and rigor, as well as the legal rights of foster families, such as the right to leave work due to an illness event or emergency related to the child in care (e.g., “We knew [wife and husband] that we could take a few days off from work, this is also important, because when a child arrives, he needs some time.”; Foster parent; Female, 48 years old).

Participants revealed *Multilevel Constraints* regarding becoming a foster family. Within this theme, five sub-themes were found. Experiencing Worries related to the child in foster care (including the child's birth family) (e.g., “I was concerned about how they [birth family] would react to us [foster family], to what extent they would think we were interfering in their lives and to what extent they thought we were responsible for that.”; Foster parent; Female, 56 years old) and the Anticipation of separation with the child (e.g., fear of the foster family connecting with the child and when the bond becomes established, suffering with the separation) were emphasized by both professionals and foster parents as the most salient barriers (e.g., “[Potential foster families] talk a lot about the end of fostering as an obstacle. How will I cope when the child has to leave? I think this is one of the impediments, cutting off contact with the child, the loss, the suffering inherent in the loss; Professional; Female, 45 years old).

Participants also recognized personal barriers such as Lack of resources (including the lack of availability and material resources) (e.g., “Not having the conditions to ensure essential goods or at the same level as their children. When families foster or intend to foster, they intend to offer the child the same [conditions they give to] their children. Be it school attendance, extracurricular activities, etc.”; Professional; Female, 46 years old). On the other hand, they identified Child protection system constraints, namely the unpredictable duration of the placement, the fact that the law does not provide for a period in which the foster family remains at home during the child's integration period. The perception of constraints associated with both the application process and training and assessment, and even the lack of response from the system, seems to inhibit people from becoming foster families (e.g., “At the bureaucratic level there are no justified absences for medical follow-up (...), and even more (...), in the initial phase, they [potential foster families] would need to be at home to be able to take care of the

child [and the system doesn't contemplate that] and this issue sometimes prevents some families from applying"; Professional; Female, 46 years old).

Finally, participants also highlighted Family-related constraints, which involve concerns expressed by the foster parents' extended family regarding the impact of fostering (e.g., potential negative impact of fostering a child on the foster families functioning) (e.g., "They [extended family] at the beginning (...) said "(...) think about it, it is possible that the child will have significant traumas. What if a child comes with health problems? You will become attached to the child and then when he/she leaves you will suffer horrors. Think about it."; Foster parent; Female, 48 years old).

### **Communication and Recruitment Strategies**

Three themes were found regarding the communication and recruitment strategies needed to promote foster care in the Portuguese context. Participants provided several inputs for an *Integrated outreach strategy* (i.e., outreach strategies that reach both a specific target audience, a broader audience, and continuous exposure to the message). They also identified *Diverse communication channels and vehicles* (i.e., delivery of the message through channels such as the media, testimonials, disseminating information in public places and in a face-to-face format, and through word-of-mouth). In addition they provided input about *Message content guidelines* to consider when developing messages to recruit more foster families (i.e., guidelines for the type of information the message should contain, namely system-related information, information regarding the positive impact of fostering, information about current data, the emotional appeals and realistic and accurate messages).

Regarding the first theme, *Integrated outreach strategy*, both professionals and foster parents considered that outreach strategies should target specific audiences to deliver the message more effectively (i.e., Targeting). Participants reflected on potential target audiences for delivering messages, for example, children, families with children, or families that may already be more willing to foster ("An important way of working on this subject is also in fiction, for example, directed at children, (...) for children to get used to this reality. (...) I see children as being useful from the point of view of children normalizing this reality among themselves (...). All realities that are closer are easier to accept, easier to understand."; Professional; Female, 45 years old). Moreover, participants also suggested that to make foster care more visible the outreach would include a Systematic strategy, which means that initiatives should be delivered strategically and continuously over time (e.g., "Campaigns are very targeted at certain times of the year, probably because [professionals] have studied [about this],



but they should not stop insisting during the rest of the year”; Foster parent; Female, 47 years old).

In addition to the importance of systematic and targeted approaches to recruit foster families, participants also mentioned Mass marketing with broad and generic audiences to raise general awareness about foster care (e.g., “[Developing] a campaign that [is] strong. When there are big campaigns, all the media are showing that. All people in one way or another will hear about it. If they don’t hear about it, they’ll talk about it. So, I think that [could be] a way to be able to spread more information.”; Foster parent; Female, 37 years old).

Professionals and foster parents also reflected on how these messages could be delivered to potential foster families (i.e., second theme, *Diverse communication channels and vehicles*), suggesting the use of Media, namely traditional media such as television, radio, newspaper, billboards and outdoor advertising, or social media such as Instagram or Facebook (e.g., “Digital influencers, (...) people who have children (...), have thousands of followers and have the ability to spread the word message in a different way.”; Foster parent; Female, 44 years old). The use of Testimonials, from foster families, children in care, and professionals in the area (e.g., “I think it works a lot to know other cases [of] existing foster families. [Sharing] how it worked, managing expectations, so that people can also identify, [and realize] that in fact it is a perfectly normal family, that has children, that works and that manages, that’s it, for people to feel identified.” Foster parent; Female, 44 years old), and Community-based communication involving the dissemination of tailored information in local public places and in a face-to-face format (e.g., “In addition to these national campaigns, I think it is important to develop campaigns at a more local level, places in the community where families are, [in] schools, [for example].”; Professional; Female, 52 years old).

Participants also highlighted the importance of Word-of-mouth to enable recruitment efforts (e.g., “Each one of us who works in foster care [system] and who comes into contact with these foster families has a duty, in their network of professional and social relationships, to say “this works”. I think that makes people stop and think and some even apply. They begin to know better what it is.” Professional; Female, 51 years old).

Finally, regarding *Message content guidelines*, third and final theme, participants found that the delivered messages should include System-related information, namely information regarding how to become a foster family and the rights of foster families (e.g., “[the message must] state that the law has been changed and that many of the things that harmed foster families and their children have been changed to the benefit of foster families themselves. [It] draws attention.”; Foster parent; Female, 46 years old) and provide information regarding the Positive

impact of fostering, namely on child development and well-being (e.g., “Realizing the impact of residential care on a child and realizing that foster care has a more positive impact, I think that also leads people to make this decision. (...) That would also be important [disclose].”; Professional; Female, 41 years old).

In addition to system-related information and positive impact of fostering, participants suggested to link testimonials with information about current Data to highlight the scale of the problem and the fact that many children in residential care need a foster family (e.g., “[How] Portugal is different from other countries. In other countries foster care prevails and children in residential care are the exception and not the rule. [It's important] to compare in terms of numbers with the reality in Portugal.”; Professional; Female, 43 years old) and to use Emotionally appealing messages, that is, to include content that appeals to people's emotions such as empathy (e.g., “Asking a child “what is your wish?” because I know that many would say “I want to have a family”. A person who hears this, I think gets goosebumps.”; Foster parent; Female, 37 years old).

Finally, participants considered important to develop messages with realistic information, contemplating both the positive and the challenging aspects of foster care, as well as the provision of clear and accurate information about foster care – Realistic and accurate messages (e.g., “I think it was important to disclose (...) real experiences, not [only] experiences where everything went well. Experiences in which the difficulties, the good things, and the balance of this are discussed.”; Professional; Female, 40 years old).

## **Discussion**

One critical challenge to improve the protection of children who are in alternative care is to learn how to increase the number of foster families, and how to recruit the most qualified and skilled foster families (Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Sebba, 2012). To recruit more foster families, relevant barriers, and enablers to fostering children need to be comprehensively identified. Thus, this study aimed to: 1) explore factors linked with public awareness about foster care; 2) provide a more integrated view of barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family; and 3) generate insights to guide strategy and content development for campaigns to promote foster care and recruit foster families. Figure 2 provides an overview of our aims and findings.

### **Public Awareness about Foster Care**

Our participants reported that both the community and professionals in the child protection system in Portugal had limited knowledge about foster care. Even considering that this was a

qualitative study and that variability might emerge across the country, the lack of knowledge is critical when thinking about recruiting new families, given that familiarity is an essential condition for awareness about foster care and, consequently, for the decision to foster (Blackburn, 2016; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2017, 2020; Gouveia et al., 2021; Marcenko et al., 2009; Rochat et al., 2016; Sebba, 2012). This is aligned with the assumption in the COM-B system that more deliberate behavioral outcomes require a sufficient degree of knowledge and awareness to be enabled (Michie et al., 2011). Lack of knowledge about how the foster care system works (e.g., procedures and requirements) can lead to uncertainty and a lower intention or motivation to become a foster family.

### **Factors Related to Becoming a Foster Family**

Participants identified several reasons for being or becoming a foster family, namely child-centered motivations, family-related reasons, and belief-driven motivation. Viewed in light of the COM-B system (Michie et al., 2011), these factors can be framed as reflective processes (i.e., conscious beliefs, values, goals) under the Motivation domain. Wanting to help a child and enabling their integration into a family supports the child's right to grow up in a family (Magalhães et al., 2022). This is the main purpose of foster care, therefore, it is not surprising that having these values and goals was well aligned with the motivation to becoming a foster family. Participants also mentioned family-centered reasons by perceiving benefits of being foster parent for themselves and their family members (e.g., need to fill the “empty nest”). However, according to the literature, child-centered reasons may be associated with a greater likelihood of foster parent retention (Rodger et al., 2006), while self-centered motivations may lead to fewer and shorter placements (Rhodes et al., 2006). Of note, financial considerations did not appear in our interviews as a motivation variable to becoming a foster families, which is in line with previous research (e.g., Baer & Diehl, 2019; Leber & Lecroy, 2012). Baer and Diehl (2019) highlighted that financial compensation might facilitate and help foster children in need, but foster parents did not explicitly identify financial incentives as the main driver of fostering.

In our study, reflective motivational processes such as child-centered motivations and family-related reasons were identified as enablers to becoming a foster family, but these motivations were combined with a set of resources. Participants recognized formal social support (i.e., availability and follow-up by the professional team), as well as the provision of training and preparation (considered adequate) and informal support (i.e., family, friends, neighbors) as important resources in their decision to become foster families. Specifically,

according to our participants, the perception that families would receive social support allowed the families to make this decision and mitigated fears they had before the initial enquiry. In fact, past research in the field of foster care has identified social support as a protective factor, given that a positive perception of social support is associated with greater perceived capability in managing the challenges that emerge from foster care (e.g., children's behavior) and, in turn, a greater intention to become a foster family (Ciarrochi et al., 2012; Piel et al., 2017; Raudkivi, 2020). This suggests that a positive and supportive environment strengthens social opportunity to becoming a foster family, as viewed with the lens of the COM-B system (Michie et al., 2011). It also seems to strengthen the parents' perceived self-efficacy to deal with the anticipated challenges, in line with the HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008). This social support, whether formal or informal, should make foster parents feel more confident in performing this role and mitigate doubts and barriers they had regarding foster care.

In addition to the perception that social support promoted self-efficacy, participants demonstrated that they had optimistic beliefs regarding their ability to be a foster family (perceived self-efficacy, HAPA model; Schwarzer, 2008). High perceived self-efficacy is linked with the likelihood of engaging in a new behavior (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). Along with self-efficacy beliefs, participants acknowledged having caregiving skills and social skills, which in their view facilitated the behavior of becoming a foster family. These are skills considered important for the foster parent role, considering that this role requires, in addition to parental skills, social skills that allow foster parents to support the child's relationship with their birth family, but also with the care system teamwork (Berrick & Skivenes, 2012; Van Holen et al., 2019). This is also consistent with the COM-B system, namely in terms of the Capability domain, which requires the individual to have the knowledge and necessary skills to engage in the new behavior (Michie et al., 2011; West & Michie, 2020).

Additional individual resources such as having a favorable household dynamic seemed to be a relevant requirement to care for a child in foster care, therefore time and housing conditions were also seen as important to becoming a foster family. This is consistent with input from the COM-B system that a lack of material opportunities and resources (i.e., lack of opportunity) compromises the desired behavioral outcomes (Michie et al., 2011). It is also consistent with input from the HAPA model, which suggests that if families do not have access to these resources, they may feel unable to engage in the behavior as this limits their self-efficacy (Schwarzer, 2008; Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020).

System resources were also identified as a relevant factor, in addition to social support and individual resources. Participants recognized recent changes in Portuguese legislation (e.g.,

legal rights for foster families; ISS, 2021) as an important development for becoming a foster parent. Viewing these findings in the light of the COM-B system (Michie et al., 2011), these resources can be framed at the level of social and physical (i.e., material) opportunities, to the extent that the political system values foster care and empowers foster families. This finding highlights the impact of public policies and legislative support actions on the recruitment of potential foster families (Leber & LeCroy, 2012; Michie et al., 2011), as new opportunities can also increase motivation (Mayne, 2016). Moreover, in light of the HAPA model, this context might also strengthen perceived self-efficacy, insofar as the recognition of a social and legal context that promotes foster care can contribute to greater optimism in performing the role of foster parent.

Another important system resource reported by our participants was the positive perception about the foster care system. Previous studies have shown that when people trust the government, they are also more likely to engage in prosocial, cooperative, and altruistic behaviors (Han et al., 2023; Hetherington, 1998; Rubin et al., 2009). Here, believing in the competence of the child protection system seemed to be linked with a greater confidence in its functioning and, consequently, a greater willingness to foster. The opposite appeared to be a barrier, that is, child protection system constraints were identified as compromising the likelihood of becoming a foster family.

In this study, foster parents also expressed concerns regarding foster care, such as worries related to the child in foster care, their birth family, and family related constraints. Foster parents were concerned about putting their family's safety at risk and, in turn, participants had the perception that members of the extended family of foster parents were concerned that becoming a foster family might compromise foster parents' health and well-being. These worries were possibly associated with negative social representations about children in alternative care and their birth families (e.g., negative child behavior; Raudkivi, 2020). Potential foster families and their extended family may in some cases perceive foster care as a threat to their safety and emotional stability, which in turn is identified as a barrier in decision-making (Bertalanffy, 1969). This may be seen as a negative outcome expectation in light of the HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008), and a motivational barrier in light of the COM-B system (Michie et al., 2011).

Finally, the anticipation of separation with the child, identified as a constraint in this study, is in line with previous findings that demonstrated that foster families experience significant suffering in moments of transition, this being one of the factors that affect the recruitment of new foster families and the respective maintenance of existing foster families (Hebert et al.,

2013). Likewise, it might be seen as a relevant motivational barrier (COM-B system; Michie et al., 2011) and a challenge that might require the anticipation of strategies to mitigate this barrier (coping planning, coping self-efficacy, HAPA model; Schwarzer, 2008).

### **Communication and Recruitment Strategies**

Regarding our third aim, participants suggested that campaigns should be sustained and continuous. There is evidence that a greater frequency of exposure to a campaign can lead to favorable outcomes (Snyder, 2007), but this needs to be balanced against risks of overexposure and message fatigue, which may lead to reactance and inattention to the message and thus lower effectiveness (e.g., Kim & So, 2018). Participants also reflected on potential target audiences for message delivery, which is aligned with social marketing principles in terms of audience analysis and segmentation (Bates, 2010). Past research shows that it is important for implementers to identify and describe their target audience(s) and tailor specific messages to different segments (e.g., Bates, 2010; Brennan et al., 2020). In addition to recommending tailored outreach strategies, participants also mentioned the importance of broader campaigns to raise public awareness about foster care among the general population (Wakefield et al., 2010). Considering the current lack of knowledge and public awareness, these strategies might be particularly useful to provide meaningful knowledge when developing recruitment campaigns.

In addition to these outreach strategies, participants reflected on how messages could be delivered to potential foster families, suggested using communication channels that have been used in the context of foster care, namely mass media (e.g., Delfabbro et al., 2008; López et al., 2010), but also other potentially effective channels such as word-of-mouth and community-based communication (Cox et al., 2003; Rodger et al., 2006). Investing in these channels might yield advantages by allowing interpersonal contact and the opportunity to share questions and doubts between the community and foster families (Cox et al., 2003). Testimonials were emphasized by participants as a potentially effective approach, by giving voice to those who go through the experience, which can increase perceived credibility. Credibility is linked with message effectiveness (Martín-Santana et al., 2018) and narratives can be seen by the audience as more personal, realistic, credible, and memorable (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007).

Finally, participants gave inputs about content guidelines, which are critical to developing communication products and campaigns (Zhao, 2020). Participants argued that the messages should convey realistic information (i.e., contemplating both the positive and challenging aspects of foster care, as well as clear and accurate information about foster care). In fact, the

literature suggests that the message is perceived as more realistic and authentic when it includes also obstacles and not merely positive aspects (Boeijinga et al., 2017). Participants also considered that the messages should also provide system-related information, namely information regarding how to become a foster family and the rights of foster families. Also, information about current data on foster care, highlighting that many children are placed in residential care but need a foster family, and providing information regarding the positive impact of fostering, namely on child development and well-being, were highlighted in the current study. In addition to these content guidelines, participants mentioned the importance of including emotionally appealing messages, which is consistent with evidence that strong emotional responses to a message can impact attitudes and behavioral outcomes (Green & Clark, 2013).

In sum, professionals and foster parents revealed more similarities than differences regarding the factors related to becoming a foster family as well as the implications for campaigns. Nevertheless, some specific contributions were found. Specifically, regarding the awareness of foster care the professionals highlighted that the contacts with other foster families might be important, and the foster parents mentioned that the knowledge also derived from their initiative to learn more about fostering (i.e., self-driven search). Finally, only the professionals suggested that foster families are not driven by financial reasons to become a foster family.

### **Limitations and Implications for Research and Practice**

Despite the contributions of this present study, it is important to note some limitations that should be addressed in future studies. Our sample size was appropriate to generate insight about the issues approached here, but additional input from more representative and diverse samples is needed, including care experienced children and young people and participants from other contexts to account for cultural variability in public awareness about foster care, barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family, and inputs for outreach campaigns. Despite these limitations, the current findings provide tentative implications to advance the field and to inform outreach strategies. Considering that limited knowledge and awareness are linked with a lower likelihood of becoming a foster family (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Randle et al., 2012; Sebba, 2012), it may be worthy to consider approaches that target broad audiences to raise general awareness about foster care. In addition, following our participants' suggestions as well as principles of social marketing, it may be relevant to complement these generic approaches with more strategic, tailored efforts (Bates, 2010; Brennan et al., 2020) that target families with children or families that may already be more willing to foster.

Regarding the content of the outreach messages and campaigns, given the input from our participants and the evidence that most foster families are mobilized by child-centered motivations (Canali et al., 2016; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2017; López & Del Valle, 2016; Rodger et al., 2006; Sebba, 2012), it may be relevant to highlight the role of foster families in the development and well-being of children and young people. Our participants also suggested illustrating the scale of this social need, as there is a lack of foster families in the system and ensuring that the messages elicit an emotional response. This is consistent with the notion that emotional appeals may activate emotional responses and mobilize action through affective processes (Akbari, 2015; Leonidou & Leonidou, 2009).

The discussion about social and system resources also provided input on additional content to consider in the outreach messages. It may be relevant to show that the child protection system provides formal social support before and during foster care (e.g., follow-up by a professional team, as well as the provision of training and preparation). It may also be relevant to address some of the challenges and concerns identified by participants, such as the anticipation of separation with the child (e.g., by showing that the child's departure is contemplated in the training and that professionals provide support on this matter). Regarding the system's resources, since positive perceptions of the system were seen as an enabler to becoming a foster family, outreach efforts could for example include testimonials to highlight accomplishments of the foster care system despite the challenges it faces and demonstrate the commitment of the professionals who work in the system. Participants also suggested that providing practical information on how to become a foster family could help increase capability and motivation to become a foster parent. Similarly, they considered it important to provide accurate and realistic information about the topic. Providing information about foster care can help address negative social representations of children in alternative care and their birth families (e.g., negative child behavior; Raudkivi, 2020).

## **Conclusions**

This study contributed to broadening and providing conceptual meaning to the range of factors that may be associated with becoming a foster family. Drawing on insights from broad social-psychological models of behavior that are established in behavior change research and using interview data from families and professionals in the foster care system, we identified several potentially relevant variables in one's motivation, opportunity, and capability (i.e., COM-B system; Michie et al., 2011) to become a foster carer. To provide an integrative overview, in terms of motivation, relevant enablers included child-centered motivations and family-related



reasons, while worries about the child and anticipation of separation from the child were seen as possible barriers. In terms of social and physical or material opportunity, relevant potential enablers included the presence of social support and access to resources such as a supportive household and legal rights for foster families, but there were also possible barriers at the same level, such as lack of time or lack of appropriate conditions in the household. In terms of capability, factors such as having appropriate social and caregiver skills, as well as a certain level of awareness and sufficient knowledge of the foster care system, were seen as prerequisites for becoming a foster family. Overall, these findings provide a basis for future studies to map barriers and enablers in the capability (e.g., skills, knowledge, traits), opportunity (e.g., support structures, resources, and family and community involvement), and motivation (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, emotions) to become a foster parent.

Our findings also point to the importance of self-efficacy in the process of translating interest in becoming a foster parent into the steps necessary to materialize interest into action. We suggest that efforts to recruit new families could target the variables and domains identified here to support both the formation of intention to foster and the translation of intention into action, as highlighted in stage models of behavior change (e.g., HAPA, Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). This may require consistent, sustained efforts to deliver differentiated but integrated approaches that combine tailored and mass media outreach, targeting relevant (capability, opportunity, and motivation) variables according to several content guidelines. According to our participants, these guidelines include providing accurate and realistic information about both the foster care system and the impact of foster care, and ensuring that messages are emotionally appealing and based on data.



## CHAPTER 3

# **Theoretically Grounded Insights into Engagement with Foster Care Among Potential Carers<sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The shortage of foster families is a global social challenge. To increase the pool of available foster families, it is important to understand what leads people to foster. However, theory-driven models have been overlooked in the literature exploring the decision to become a foster carer. The present study aimed to provide new, theoretically grounded insights regarding awareness, willingness, and intention to foster children in need. A community sample of 462 Portuguese adults (aged 25-70, Mage = 39.6, SD = 10.9; 73% women) participated in this study. Variables such as having contact with the child protection system and higher parental competences were positively associated with awareness about foster care. Child-centered reasons, self-efficacy, and action planning showed the strongest associations with willingness and intention to foster, whereas individuals' perceptions of having time available showed unique associations with willingness to foster. This study identified relevant factors that may be targeted in outreach and recruitment efforts to promote awareness, willingness, and intentions to become a foster family.

*Keywords: Foster care; Foster families; Awareness; Willingness; Intention*

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<sup>2</sup> The study presented in this chapter has been submitted for publication to the *Child and Family Social Work*.

## **Introduction**

Children in foster care are vulnerable to developmental issues, including attachment disorders, mental health difficulties, and inadequate social skills, due to risk factors such as adversity or maltreatment (Harden, 2004; Oswald et al., 2010). Furthermore, placement in foster care can also entail risk factors for the child (Bertão et al., 2015; Harden, 2004), such as the impact of the child's separation from their birth family (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010) and sometimes multiple changes in the out-of-home care system (Unrau et al., 2008). However, providing a stable alternative family care can positively impact their development and recovery (Harden, 2004; Smyke et al., 2010). Foster care might provide a quality relationship between the foster family and the fostered child (Kothari et al., 2020; Smyke et al., 2010; West et al., 2020), therefore positively impacting child well-being and mental health (Delgado et al., 2019, 2020; Kothari et al., 2020; Llosada-Gistau et al., 2017) and their adaptive functioning (e.g., academic success, positive behavioral outcomes; Fernandez, 2008).

Despite evidence supporting the benefits of foster care, residential care prevails in many countries (e.g., Greece, see Eurochild & UNICEF, 2021; Portugal, see ISS, 2023). Hence, increasing the number of foster families is critical worldwide (Raudkivi, 2020; Sebba, 2012), including through tailored and effective communication and recruitment campaigns (Diogo & Branco 2017; Magalhães et al. 2022). To develop tailored and targeted recruitment efforts, it is important to have a comprehensive and theoretically grounded understanding of the factors that may be linked to the likelihood of becoming a foster family.

### **Factors Related to the Decision to Become a Foster Family**

The decision to become a foster family can be influenced by multiple factors (Anjos et al., 2023; Gouveia et al., 2021), and most studies focus on motivational issues (e.g., Diogo & Branco, 2017; Migliorini et al., 2018; Rodger et al., 2006). These motivations are mostly child-centered (e.g., providing a good home for a child; López & Del Valle, 2016), but they can be also family-centred (e.g., knowing a foster child or a foster child's family and wanting to help; Magalhães et al., 2022), or society-oriented (e.g., wanting to contribute to the community or society; De Maeyer et al., 2014). Child-centered motivations are identified by foster families as the most important reasons for fostering (Delgado, 2023; De Mayer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Gouveia et al., 2021; López & Del Valle, 2016), which are also associated with positive fostering experiences and greater retention of foster families (Rodger et al., 2006).

Furthermore, previous studies have found that some sociodemographic characteristics may be associated with the decision to become a foster family. For example, being younger

(Ciarrochi et al., 2012; Magalhães et al., 2022), female (Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Magalhães et al., 2022), and having higher salaries (Magalhães et al., 2022) have been associated with greater willingness or intention to foster. Identifying these individual characteristics associated with becoming a foster family can inform recruitment campaigns by enabling the design and implementation of tailored and targeted efforts, as suggested by the literature focused on outreach and communication strategies (Bates, 2010; Hall & Johnson-Turbes, 2015; Lewis et al., 2016; Zhao, 2020).

In addition to these individual and motivational variables, variables related to the child protection system, such as contact with foster families or with fostered children, have also been reported in the past (e.g., Baum et al., 2001; Davi et al., 2021; De Maeyer et al., 2014). Moreover, working in a context with direct contact with the system, namely in out-of-home care (Diogo & Branco, 2017) or even in contexts with indirect contact (e.g., schools and police; Baum et al., 2001) increases awareness about foster care. This is critical given that positive attitudes towards the foster families are described also as positively impacting the decision to become a foster family (Blackburn, 2016; Ribeiro et al., 2023). Specifically, having greater knowledge about the foster care system, including its challenges (e.g., need to recruit more families; Baum et al., 2001; Blackburn, 2016; Davi et al., 2021), is associated with greater interest to become a foster family. In turn, having a lack of knowledge (Contreras & Munoz, 2016; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Goodman et al., 2017; Randle et al., 2012; Sebba, 2012) as well as negative conceptions and myths about foster care may prevent people from fostering children (Raudkivi, 2020; Sebba, 2012), which makes it difficult recruit new families (Leber & LeCroy, 2012).

Although the current evidence provides an overall consistent overview of the reasons for fostering a child in need, these studies are mainly focused on motivations and sociodemographic factors. Theory-driven models have been overlooked in the literature exploring the decision to become a foster carer. According to broad-scope theoretical models within the field of social and behavior sciences (e.g., COM-B system of behavior, Michie et al., 2011; HAPA model, Schwarzer, 2008), behavior is explained by factors at the individual level (e.g., motivation, capability, self-efficacy, outcome expectations) but also by variables of the social context, including physical and social opportunities and situational barriers. Furthermore, most studies have been developed mainly with samples of current, former foster parents or prospective parents (e.g., Baum et al., 2001; Blackburn, 2016; MacGregor et al., 2006), which provides a limited understanding of the factors that lead people who are not yet involved in foster care to become foster families. Thus, in this study, we intend to add new theory-driven insights into the

field of foster care by providing evidence on correlates of awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family, based on inputs from broad-scope models of behavior, in this case, the HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008) and the COM-B system of behavior (Michie et al., 2011), and using a community sample.

### **Broad-Scope Models of Attitudes and Behaviors**

Broad-scope theoretical models within social and behavioral sciences (e.g., COM-B system of behavior, Michie et al., 2011; HAPA model, Schwarzer, 2008) provide conceptual frameworks for understanding the factors that impact the acceptance and sustainability of a given behavior. For example, the COM-B system proposes that behavior results from the interaction of three components: Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation to perform the behavior (Michie et al., 2011). Capability refers to physical (e.g., physical dexterity, strength or skills) and psychological (e.g., psychological and information processing skills, such as attention, memory, and comprehension) variables needed to perform a behavior. Opportunity refers to external conditions that enhance individual behaviors, including physical (i.e., arising from an individual's physical context, such as housing conditions) or social (e.g., social influences such as social pressure, norms, social comparison, conformity) strengths. Lastly, Motivation concerns all mental processes that energize and direct behavior, including reflective processes (e.g., conscious beliefs, values, goals, and plans) and automatic processes (e.g., emotions and impulses) (Michie et al., 2011).

While the COM-B system offers valuable insights into why and how people engage in certain behaviors, other broad-scope models within social and behavioral sciences (e.g., HAPA; Schwarzer, 2008) focus more specifically on the gap that often exists between intention and action. Since a given intention does not always translate into behavior (Fishbein et al., 2003), the HAPA model considers post-intentional processes, distinguishing between the motivational phase and the volitional phase (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020; Sniehotta et al., 2005). The motivational phase is characterized by a deliberative mindset in establishing objectives and goals (intention). Several factors play a role in being (or becoming) motivated to adopt a given behavior, such as risk perception (i.e., perceived severity of a condition and personal vulnerability to this condition), outcome expectations (i.e., perception of potential consequences of a behavior), and action self-efficacy (i.e., positive belief about the individual's ability to engage in the target behavior). The volitional phase involves an action-oriented mindset and includes two main components for turning intentions into actions: self-efficacy and planning (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). The HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008) identifies

different forms of self-efficacy for different phases of the model. Action self-efficacy is crucial for forming an intention (motivational phase) and coping self-efficacy and recovery self-efficacy are important for initiating and sustaining a behavior. Specifically, coping self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to overcome obstacles while implementing a new behavior, while recovery self-efficacy concerns an individual's confidence in regaining control in the face of a failure. In addition to self-efficacy, volitional phase planning plays a crucial role as it allows defining preparatory strategies to implement intentions. Specifically, the HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008) identifies two forms of planning: action and coping planning. Action planning consists of developing a detailed plan for performing a target behavior, specifying when, where, and how they will do it. Coping planning refers to the development of plans that anticipate challenging situations (Schwarzer, 2008; Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). Similar to the COM-B system of behavior, the HAPA model suggests that situational opportunities and barriers are important aspects to consider when adopting and maintaining behavior (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020).

### **The Current Study: Aim and Hypotheses**

The present study aims to provide new theoretically grounded insights regarding awareness, willingness, and intention to foster children in need and has two specific objectives. To achieve this aim, the study examines whether and how a set of sociodemographic characteristics, variables related to the foster care system, and variables aligned with broad-scope models of behavior (i.e., COM-B system, Michie et al., 2011; and HAPA model, Schwarzer, 2008) are associated with awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family (Table 1). We hypothesize that contact with the child protection system is associated with awareness about foster care. Furthermore, in line with previous research, we anticipate that being female, younger and with lower education is positively associated with the willingness and intention to foster (Ciarrochi et al., 2012; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Magalhães et al., 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2023). We also anticipate that variables aligned with the COM-B system (i.e., reasons for fostering; parental competences, time, resources, and social support) and the HAPA model (i.e., action self-efficacy, outcome expectations, action planning, and coping planning) will show positive associations with willingness and intention to become a foster family.

**Table 1***Overview of study variables in relation to the conceptual models*

Variables	Domain/phase	Conceptual models	Instruments
Sociodemographic variables			
Perceptions of the foster care system			The items were taken from Leber and LeCroy (2012)
Reasons for fostering	Motivation	COM-B system of behavior (Michie et al., 2011)	Portuguese version of the Reasons for Fostering Inventory (Magalhães et al., 2022)
Parental competences	Capability		Items taken from the Parental Capacity Assessment Tool (Melo & Alarcão, 2015) and adapted to the current study
Time	Opportunity		The items were adapted from the Available Time Scale - ATS (Orme et al., 2006)
Resources			The items were developed from resource theory (Cox et al., 2003), as well as the Family Resource Scale - FRS, the Casey Home Assessment Protocol - CHAP (Orme et al., 2006)
Social support			The items were taken from the Portuguese version of The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support – MSPSS (Carvalho et al., 2011)
Action self-efficacy	Motivational phase	HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008)	The items were taken from Renner and Schwarzer (2005) and adapted to foster care context
Outcome expectations			
Action planning	Volitional phase		
Coping planning			

## Method

### Context

This study was developed in the Portuguese context, where only adults who are 25 years old or over can be a foster family. Kinship care is not a type of foster family in Portugal, and candidates for fostering cannot be simultaneously candidates for adoption. Due to legislative changes that restricted foster care to people with no family ties to the child, the number of children and young people in foster care dropped from 1829 in 2007 to 918 in 2008 (ISS, 2023). Moreover, the lack of foster families in Portugal might be associated with the long-term placements (the average length is approximately 5.7 years; ISS, 2023), which causes serious problems, as it overloads existing families, undermining the rights of other children in need to grow up in a family. Currently, only 3.6% of out-of-home children are placed in foster care, aged between 0 and 21 years or more (30% aged between 0 and 5 years, 18% between 6 and 11 years old and 52% over



11 years), with males representing 59%. Some of these children show special mental and physical needs (14 % have mental disabilities, 11% have behavioral problems and 7% have physical disabilities), 26% have regular psychological intervention and 13% have psychiatric care (ISS, 2023). Recent legislative changes have strengthened the rights of foster families (i.e., tax deductions, employment, and financial benefits; Decree-Law no. 139/2019), which has created a window of opportunity in Portugal to foster evidence-based recruitment and selection processes of new families.

### **Participants**

A sample of 462 Portuguese adults, aged 25 years and over ( $M_{age} = 39.6$ ,  $SD = 10.9$ , aged 25-70) participated in this study. Most participants were female (73%), 47% were married, 42% were single, 11% were divorced, and 0.4% were widowed. Eighty-six percent were employed, 5% were unemployed, 3% were employed/student, 3% were retired, and 2% were students. Regarding academic qualifications, 64% had higher education (33% undergraduate, 28% master degree, 3% doctoral degree), 27% had secondary education, 10% had primary school education, and 4% fit into other categories (e.g., professional qualifications - vocational training courses). Most participants had children (60%) and had no contact with the child protection system (69%) (Table 2).

**Table 2***Sample socio-demographic characteristics*

Variables	<i>f</i>	%
Marital status		
Single	193	42
Married	217	47
Divorced	50	11
Widowed	2	0.4
Completed education		
Higher Education	282	61
Undergraduate	145	33
Master's degree	123	28
Doctoral degree	14	3
Secondary Education	118	26
Primary Education	44	9
Other categories (e.g., professional qualifications)	18	4
Household monthly income (€)		
≤ 1000	107	23
1001–1500	124	27
1501–2500	147	32
> 2500	84	18
Employment status		
Employed	399	86
Employed/student	15	3
Unemployed	25	5
Retired	14	3
Student	9	2
Parental experience		
Had children	277	60
Had no children	185	40
Contact with the Child Protection System		
No contact	319	69
I had a Child Protection Case	5	1
I know people who had and/or whose children had a Child Protection Case	30	7
I know foster families	25	5
I lived in a residential care home	0	0
I know people who lived in a residential care home	21	5
Professional/volunteering contact with the Child Protection System	62	13

**Instruments***Sociodemographic Questionnaire*

The questionnaire included questions about demographic variables including gender, age, nationality, marital status, education, income, employment status, profession, and parental experience (i.e., having children).

### ***Awareness***

Awareness was measured using a single item taken from Rienks and Oliva (2013) and adapted to the foster care context (i.e., "Have you heard about foster care?). Participants responded to this item using a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often).

### ***Willingness***

Willingness to foster was measured using a single item ("I would like to become a foster family") taken from Magalhães et al. (2022). This item was answered using 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree).

### ***Intention***

Intention to foster was measured using three items (e.g., "I am willing to be a foster family shortly") taken from Magalhães et al. (2022). These items were answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). In the current study, the internal consistency was excellent ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

### ***Social Support***

Social support was assessed using three items (i.e., "There is a special person who is around when I am in need") taken from the Portuguese version of The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support – MSPSS (Carvalho et al., 2011). These items were answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). In the current study, the internal consistency was good ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

### ***Perceptions of the Foster Care System***

Perceptions about the foster care system were assessed using three items (e.g., "Most foster parents are competent at foster parenting") taken from Leber and LeCroy (2012). Responses were given on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). In the current study, the internal consistency was moderate ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

### ***Time***

We adapted four items from the Available Time Scale – ATS, included in the Casey Home Assessment Protocol - CHAP (Orme et al., 2006), originally consisting of 20 items. This scale is intended to measure the time a person anticipates that they will need to complete tasks that represent the responsibilities of foster families (i.e., Addressing health issues; Collaboration

with technical team; Spending time in direct interaction with the child (e.g., playing, helping with homework); and Taking the child to visit/contact the biological family). Responses were given on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often). In the current study, internal consistency was excellent ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### ***Resources***

We used five items based on the resource theory (Cox et al., 2003) and the Family Resource Scale - FRS, Casey Home Assessment Protocol - CHAP (Orme et al., 2006). These items (Access to food; Housing; Access to services [e.g., health, education]; Time availability; Financial resources) were answered using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Not at all adequate) to 5 (Almost always adequate). In the current study, internal consistency was excellent ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### ***Parental Competences***

Parental competence was assessed using six items (i.e., “Ability to provide food suited to the child’s nutritional needs, both in quantity and quality”; “Ability to provide regular baths and careful hygiene in all areas of the body”; “Ability to ensure adequate treatment of clothing and provide the child with appropriate clothing, suitable for the climate, in good condition”; “Ability to be attentive, alert and sensitive, to perceive and appropriately interpret the child's behavior, emotional states and needs”; “Ability to be responsive to the child's behavior and emotional disturbance; provide comfort, warmth, and care in response to the child in a predictable and consistent way;” “The ability to unconditionally accept and appreciate the child, to provide positive attention, praise, and positive reinforcement”) taken and adapted to foster care context from the Parental Capacity Assessment Tool (Melo & Alarcão, 2015). Responses were given on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). In the current study, the internal consistency was excellent ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

### ***Reasons for Fostering***

The reasons for fostering were measured through the Portuguese version of the Reasons for Fostering Inventory (Magalhães et al., 2022) composed by 22 items which allow the assessment of the following dimensions: Self-oriented reasons (10 items; e.g., “I cannot have any, or any more, children of my own”), child-centered reasons (6 items; e.g., “I want to provide a child with love”) and family-related reasons (6 items; e.g., “I know a foster child or a foster child’s family and want to help”). Responses were given on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1

(not at all true for me) to 5 (very true for me). In the current study, internal consistency for Self-oriented reasons were very good ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and excellent for Family-related and Child-centered reasons ( $\alpha = .90$ ;  $\alpha = .91$ ).

### ***Self-efficacy***

To assess self-efficacy, two items taken from Renner and Schwarzer (2005) were adapted to the foster care context (“I believe/feel that I am capable of being a foster family” and “I believe I am capable of dealing with the adversities inherent in foster care.”). These items were answered using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). In the current study, internal consistency was excellent ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### ***Action Planning***

To assess action planning, three items taken from Renner and Schwarzer (2005) were adapted to the foster care context (e.g., “I already planned... When will I become a foster family; How I can become a foster family; and where to go to become a foster family”). These items were answered using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). In the current study, internal consistency was excellent ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

### ***Coping Planning***

Coping planning was measured by adapting two items from Renner and Schwarzer (2005) (“I’ve already thought concretely about how to deal with... Difficult situations that may occur during placement of the child; and Fears I have regarding foster care”). These items were answered using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). In the current study, the internal consistency was excellent ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

### ***Outcome Expectations***

To assess outcome expectations, three items taken from Renner and Schwarzer (2005) were adapted to the foster care context (“I have the expectation that... To foster will have a positive impact on a child's life; Fostering a child will provide me with benefits (e.g., satisfying personal ambitions and goals); and Fostering a child will benefit my family (e.g., it will bring meaningful relationships to my children or partner”). Responses were given on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). In the current study, the internal consistency was good ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

## **Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon (Ref. 46/2023). Data were collected through Qualtrics.com and disseminated on social media, such as LinkedIn and paid advertisements on Facebook and Instagram, as well as by sending the link by email to social and community organizations (e.g., schools, IAC – Instituto de Apoio à Criança, Firefighters associations) targeting individuals aged 25 or more, and who were not foster families. Participants provided their informed consent before proceeding to the online survey. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that the study included financial compensation (at the end of the study, two vouchers worth €100 were raffled). At the end of the questionnaire, a debriefing was provided with the contact details of the research team for further questions or clarifications.

Data analyses were performed using IBM SPSS® for Windows (Version 29.0) for descriptive statistics, and correlational and hierarchical linear regressions. The following nominal variables were transformed into dummy variables: Gender: 0 –Female, 1 – Male; Marital status: 0 – Not married (i.e., single, divorced, or widowed); 1- Married; Parental experience: 0 – Without children, 1 – With children; Contact with child protection system: 0 - No contact, 1: With contact. We conducted correlational analyses followed by hierarchical linear regressions to identify unique associations between the theoretical grounded variables and awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family. We tested separate models for awareness (Table 3), willingness (Table 4), and intention to become a foster family (Table 5). For each regression, we inserted three blocks: Block 1 referred to sociodemographic factors and the foster care system; Block 2 referred to variables aligned with the COM-B system; and Block 3 referred to variables aligned with the HAPA model.

## **Results**

### **Correlations Between Sociodemographic, Foster Care System and Broad-Scope Model Variables and Awareness, Willingness, and Intention to Foster**

Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are presented in appendices section (Appendix A). No significant associations were found between gender, willingness, and the intention to become a foster family. Age and education were statistically correlated only with willingness to become a foster family, but not with intention. Specifically, age showed a significant negative correlation, whereas education showed a significant positive correlation. Furthermore, all variables aligned with the COM-B system (i.e., child-centered reasons, parental competence, time, resources, and social support) and the HAPA model (i.e., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, action planning, and coping planning) showed statistically significant and positive correlations with willingness and intention to become a foster family. Finally, there was a significant positive correlation between contact with the child protection system and the awareness about foster care.

### **Awareness, Willingness, and Intention to Become a Foster Family: Regression Analyses**

The non-multicollinearity assumption was confirmed in all models (i.e., awareness, willingness, and intention), with variance inflation factors (VIF) <3.0 for all predictors. Furthermore, the independence of residuals was tested and confirmed through the Durbin-Watson test in all models, with values between 1.5 and 2.5. The normality of the standardized residuals of the models was examined using skewness and kurtosis analyses, with values within the intervals between -2 and 2 and -7 and 7, respectively (Byrne, 2010).

The regression focusing on awareness identified gender, contact with the child protection system, perceptions of the foster care system, and parental competences as significantly related to awareness about foster care. However, perceptions of the foster care system were no longer significant when the second block was inserted. Being female, having contact with the child protection system, and scoring higher on parental competences were positively associated with awareness about foster care (see Table 3).

**Table 3***Multiple linear regressions for awareness about foster care*

Block 1	$\beta$	t	p-value	Tolerance	VIF
<i>Sociodemographic factors and the foster care system</i>					
R <sup>2</sup> =.260; F=38.409 [4, 438], p<.001					
Gender	-.147	-3.511	<.001	.963	1.038
Education	.053	1.258	.209	.966	1.035
Contact with child protection system	.428	9.990	<.001	.921	1.086
Perceptions of the foster care system	.095	2.297	.022	.987	1.013
Block 2					
<i>Variables from the COM-B System</i>					
R <sup>2</sup> = .281; $\Delta$ R <sup>2</sup> = .022; F= 2.629 [9, 433], p<.001					
Gender	-.137	-3.253	.001	.937	1.067
Education	.044	.994	.321	.863	1.159
Contact with child protection system	.415	9.657	<.001	.896	1.116
Perceptions of the foster care system	.075	1.754	.080	.919	1.088
Child-centered reasons	-.020	-.421	.674	.748	1.338
Parental competences	.166	3.310	.001	.661	1.512
Time	.045	.791	.429	.523	1.913
Resources	-.083	-1.478	.140	.532	1.879
Social support	-.011	-.238	.812	.727	1.375
Block 3					
<i>Variables from the HAPA model</i>					
R <sup>2</sup> = .288; $\Delta$ R <sup>2</sup> = .006; F= 1.960 [11, 431], p<.001					
Gender	-.142	-3.374	<.001	.934	1.071
Education	.056	1.275	.203	.843	1.187
Contact with child protection system	.398	9.068	<.001	.857	1.167
Perceptions of the foster care system	.060	1.384	.167	.876	1.141
Child-centered reasons	-.039	-.806	.421	.710	1.409
Parental competences	.151	2.959	.003	.633	1.580
Time	.015	.260	.795	.485	2.062
Resources	-.079	-1.417	.157	.528	1.893
Social support	-.002	-.043	.966	.719	1.391
Self-efficacy	.048	.905	.366	.584	1.713
Coping planning	.068	1.467	.143	.773	1.293

Note: Gender: 0 – Female, 1 – Male; Contact with child protection system: 0 - No contact, 1 - With contact.



The regression focusing on willingness identified that age, income, contact with the child protection system, perceptions of the foster care system, child-centered reasons, family related reasons, time, self-efficacy, and action planning were significantly related to willingness to foster. However, age, contact with the child protection system and perceptions of the foster care system were no longer significant when the second block was entered, and income and family related reasons were no longer significant when the third block was entered. Greater scores on child-centered reasons, time, self-efficacy, and action planning were positively associated with willingness to foster (see Table 4).

**Table 4***Multiple linear regressions for willingness to become a foster family*

Block 1	$\beta$	t	p-value	Tolerance	VIF
<i>Sociodemographic factors and the foster care system</i>					
	R <sup>2</sup> =.089; F=7.113 [6, 437], p<.001				
Age	-.119	-2.342	<b>.020</b>	.814	1.229
Marital status	-.011	-.214	.831	.751	1.331
Education	.092	1.784	.075	.780	1.282
Income	-.114	-2.117	<b>.035</b>	.720	1.388
Contact with child protection system	.098	2.088	<b>.037</b>	.948	1.055
Perceptions of the foster care system	.166	3.613	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.982	1.019
Block 2					
<i>Variables from the COM-B System</i>					
	R <sup>2</sup> = .385; $\Delta$ R <sup>2</sup> = .296; F= 29.638 [13, 430], p<.001				
Age	-.052	-1.211	.227	.764	1.309
Marital status	-.017	-.377	.706	.747	1.339
Education	-.006	-.125	.900	.703	1.423
Income	-.108	-2.326	<b>.020</b>	.667	1.500
Contact with child protection system	.009	.227	.821	.878	1.139
Perceptions of the foster care system	.066	1.660	.098	.901	1.110
Child centered reasons	.341	6.862	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.579	1.728
Family-related reasons	-.146	-2.868	<b>.004</b>	.549	1.821
Self-centered reasons	.053	.990	.323	.504	1.984
Parental competences	.023	.478	.633	.640	1.563
Time	.353	6.708	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.517	1.935
Resources	-.016	-.302	.763	.502	1.991
Social support	.010	.215	.830	.709	1.410
Block 3					
<i>Variables from the HAPA model</i>					
	R <sup>2</sup> = .531; $\Delta$ R <sup>2</sup> = .145; F= 32.941 [17, 426], p<.001				
Age	-.045	-1.163	.246	.734	1.362
Marital status	-.042	-1.079	.281	.736	1.358
Education	.035	.885	.376	.688	1.454
Income	-.052	-1.264	.207	.648	1.543
Contact with child protection system	-.040	-1.095	.274	.835	1.198
Perceptions of the foster care system	-.014	-.404	.686	.861	1.162
Child centered reasons	.257	5.745	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.550	1.819
Family-related reasons	-.079	-1.754	.080	.537	1.864
Self-centered reasons	.000	-.008	.993	.494	2.023
Parental competences	-.058	-1.348	.178	.600	1.667
Time	.204	4.254	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.477	2.095
Resources	-.044	-.941	.347	.495	2.021
Social support	.036	.898	.370	.704	1.421
Self-efficacy	.319	6.671	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.483	2.070
Outcome expectations	.041	.981	.327	.636	1.572
Action planning	.179	3.937	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.534	1.874
Coping planning	.044	1.043	.298	.607	1.646

Note: Marital status: 0 – Not married (i.e., single, divorced, or widowed); 1- Married; Contact with child protection system: 0 - No contact, 1: With contact.

The regression focusing on intention to foster identified perceptions of the foster care system, child-centered reasons, self-centered reasons, time, self-efficacy, and action planning as significantly related to intention to foster. However, perceptions of the foster care system, self-centered reasons and time were no longer significant when the third block was entered.

Thus, scoring greater on child-centered reasons, self-efficacy, and action planning was positively associated with the intention to foster (see Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Multiple linear regressions for intention to become a foster family*

Block 1	$\beta$	t	p-value	Tolerance	VIF
<i>Sociodemographic factors and the foster care system</i>					
	$R^2=.037$ ; $F= 8.933$ [2, 459], $p<.001$				
Contact with child protection system	.075	1.624	.105	.989	1.011
Perceptions of the foster care system	.171	3.711	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.989	1.011
Block 2					
<i>Variables from the COM-B System</i>					
	$R^2= .157$ ; $\Delta R^2= .120$ ; $F= 10.736$ [8, 453], $p<.001$				
Contact with child protection system	.020	.446	.656	.914	1.094
Perceptions of the foster care system	.118	2.619	.009	.922	1.084
Child centered reasons	.142	2.565	<b>.011</b>	.610	1.641
Self-centered reasons	.104	2.103	<b>.036</b>	.761	1.314
Parental competences	.023	.430	.668	.651	1.537
Time	.187	3.120	<b>.002</b>	.517	1.933
Resources	.046	.794	.428	.544	1.839
Social support	-.027	-.535	.593	.740	1.351
Block 3					
<i>Variables from the HAPA model</i>					
	$R^2= .380$ ; $\Delta R^2= .223$ ; $F= 40.370$ [12, 449], $p<.001$				
Contact with child protection system	-.018	-.443	.658	.875	1.143
Perceptions of the foster care system	.035	.874	.382	.879	1.137
Child centered reasons	.100	2.041	<b>.042</b>	.578	1.729
Self-centered reasons	.047	1.096	.274	.744	1.344
Parental competences	-.030	-.624	.533	.611	1.636
Time	.030	.551	.582	.479	2.089
Resources	.059	1.153	.249	.535	1.868
Social support	.022	.500	.618	.730	1.370
Outcome expectations	.020	.448	.654	.665	1.504
Self-efficacy	.130	2.451	<b>.015</b>	.489	2.046
Action planning	.410	8.294	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.564	1.774
Coping planning	.057	1.196	.232	.618	1.617

Note: Contact with child protection system: 0 - No contact, 1: With contact.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to provide new theoretically grounded insights into awareness, willingness, and intention to foster children in need. The study examined the correlations and unique associations between sociodemographic characteristics, variables related to the foster care system, variables aligned with broad-scope models of behavior (i.e., COM-B system and HAPA model), and awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family. To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies using broad scope theoretical models of behavior to understand what leads people to become foster families (Raudkivi, 2020).

Contact with the child protection system was positively correlated with awareness about foster care, as expected. Previous studies have revealed that familiarity with the system means greater knowledge about the foster care system and children in care, which might be viewed as a necessary condition to be aware of foster care as a protective family context for children in need (e.g., Baum et al., 2001; Davi et al., 2021; De Maeyer et al., 2014). Moreover, based on previous studies (Ciarrochi et al., 2012; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Magalhães et al., 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2023), we expected that being female, younger, and less educated would be positively correlated with willingness and intention to foster. However, our findings suggested that younger individuals and those who had higher education levels showed a greater willingness (but not intention) to foster. Younger participants might be more willing to become foster families due to their developmental phase, in which parenting can be seen as an important task (McGoldrick & Carter, 2003). Also, greater education may be associated with greater access to stable income and resources that might positively impact the willingness of highly educated participants (OECD, 2023; Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). The results also revealed that all variables derived from the COM-B system (i.e., child-centered reasons, parental competences, time, resources, and social support; Michie et al., 2011) and the HAPA model (i.e., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, action planning, and coping planning; Schwarzer, 2008) were positively correlated with willingness and intention to become a foster family.

As for the unique associations tested via hierarchical regression models, the results revealed that awareness about foster care was predicted by gender, contact with the child protection system, and parental competence. Female participants revealed greater awareness than males. Although traditional gender expectations are changing in many countries, there are still significant inequalities in terms of family responsibilities, with women spending more time on household chores (Amâncio & Santos, 2021; Cerrato & Cifre, 2018) and caregiving activities (Pocock et al., 2010). These family responsibilities can lead to greater familiarity with childcare and greater awareness of children's needs including those in need of foster care. Familiarity

with foster care might be gained with closer contact with the system (e.g., Blackburn, 2016; Davi et al., 2021), which allows people to know that there is an alternative family care context for children who are temporarily removed from their biological families. Having direct experience with the child protection system can provide a better understanding of features of foster care, the support provided by the system (e.g., rights of foster families, social support from professionals), and the responsibilities that come with being a foster family. Finally, participants who perceived themselves as more competent in terms of parenting skills also showed greater awareness about foster care. This finding might suggest that those who feel confident about their parenting capability, including perceiving and appropriately interpreting children's behavior, emotional states, and needs (Melo & Alarcão, 2015), might be more aware of the children's needs, particularly those who are vulnerable and need an alternative responsive care context.

In turn, our findings revealed that child-centered reasons, self-efficacy, and action planning showed the strongest associations with willingness and intention to become a foster family. Child-centered reasons can be understood as reflective motivational processes (COM-B system, Michie et al., 2011). These reflective motivations tend to involve conscious and deliberate processing of personal beliefs, values, and goals (Michie et al., 2011). Wanting to help a child (child-centered reasons) aligns with the purpose of foster care (i.e., providing the child with the opportunity to grow up in a family environment; López & Del Valle, 2006; Magalhães et al., 2022; Pinto & Luke, 2022), which appears to uphold participants' willingness and intention to become a foster family.

Moreover, being a foster carer entails several responsibilities, such as dedicating time to the child (López & Del Valle, 2006), collaborating with professionals (Berrick & Skivenes, 2012; Van Holen et al., 2019), and organizing visits or ensuring the child's contact with the biological family. As such, positive self-efficacy beliefs, which refer to an individual's belief in their ability to perform a particular behavior (Schwarzer, 2008), might be particularly important for driving individuals toward foster care. Individuals with high self-efficacy tend to anticipate success and are more likely to invest effort in a specific task (Luszczynska & Schwarzer, 2020; Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). Furthermore, action planning, as a task-facilitation strategy that directs how a desired behavior can be performed (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020), can increase individuals' willingness and intention to become a foster family by providing them clarity and predictability regarding what needs to be done.

The current findings also suggest that individuals' perception of having time available showed unique associations with willingness (but not intention) to become a foster family.

Having the perception of time available to play the responsibilities of foster families (e.g., spending time in direct interaction with the child, taking the child to visit/contact the biological family; Orme et al., 2006) seems to encourage people to consider foster care, especially because the context is favorable to this decision ("opportunity" dimension, COM-B system; Michie et al., 2011). However, for the formation of an intention, which implies greater commitment to a determined action and conscious effort to act, other aspects seem to be more relevant.

Although this study helps advance toward a more integrated and theoretically grounded understanding of awareness, willingness, and intention to foster, it also has limitations that should be addressed in future research. This study is cross-sectional and includes a convenience sample with limited diversity in terms of gender, academic qualifications, and age. Future studies should include representative samples that would enable the identification of potential foster carers profiles, and that might inform the development of tailored and targeted messages steering these profiles (e.g., Bates, 2010; Brennan et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2016). Tailored messages for people at different stages of the process of becoming a family have the potential to encourage those interested in developing an intention, as well as help those in this last stage to take the actual step to apply.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

Despite the limitations, this study provides a set of implications for practice and particularly to the development of outreach campaigns, including tailored recruitment strategies. Contact with the child protection system showed a positive and significant association with awareness about foster care. As such, sharing real testimonies from foster families, children who are in foster care, or even from those who have been in foster care previously (i.e., foster care alumni) might be a useful and effective way to raise awareness. Moreover, given the positive and significant association found between child-centered reasons (e.g., desire to want to help a child) and willingness and intention to foster, it may be relevant to address the needs of children in alternative care in future campaigns, highlighting that foster care placement may have positive impacts for children in need (e.g., development of secure attachment; Kothari et al., 2020; Smyke et al., 2010; West et al., 2020). It may also be beneficial to emphasize the purpose of foster care (i.e., to provide a family environment for the child to grow up) so that people who have values and goals congruent with this purpose can critically reflect on this alternative care for children who cannot remain with their families.

Furthermore, since self-efficacy was positively associated with willingness and intention to become a foster family, it may be relevant to include information regarding the support provided

by the foster care system and its professionals in campaigns as an attempt to strengthen positive beliefs about the ability to perform the foster carer role, responsibilities, and duties. Finally, considering the critical role of action planning on willingness and intention to foster, it may be relevant to disseminate clear information about the process of becoming a foster family, including legal requirements, assessments, and training.





## CHAPTER 4

# Developing and Evaluating Theory-Based Messages to Promote Foster Care<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Foster care is the preferred out-of-home placement for children at risk. However, the number of children in child protection systems exceeds the number of available foster families, highlighting the need for recruitment campaigns. Although there has been a growth in the development of such campaigns, their results have not been evaluated. This study aims to create and experimentally evaluate messages to increase awareness, willingness, and intention to foster. Data were collected from 405 adults aged 25 years or older ( $M_{age} = 40.4$ ,  $SD = 10.5$ , range 25-72; 67% women; Portugal). The results showed no differences in awareness, willingness, and intention between messages. However, the message that focused on dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child generated higher levels of transportation and perceived effectiveness than a baseline message. The results also showed that transportation mediated the differences in perceived effectiveness between messages. These findings call for more research on narrative-based approaches to promote foster care.

*Keywords: Foster care; Foster families; Narrative communication; Transportation*

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<sup>3</sup> The study presented in this chapter has been submitted for publication to the *Spanish Journal of Psychology*

## **Introduction**

Foster care stands out as the preferred out-of-home placement for children and young people at risk who were removed from their families as it provides a stable alternative family context (Font & Gershoff, 2020; Saarnik, 2021). Children in foster care may face challenges such as separation from their biological family, which can be traumatic (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010), placement instability (Unrau et al., 2008), and previous experiences of abuse, neglect, and maltreatment (Jiménez-Morago et al., 2015; Oswald et al., 2010). However, research has shown that foster care placements can also have a protective effect. Specifically, benefits have been reported in terms of the quality of attachment with significant others (e.g., Kothari et al., 2020; West et al., 2020; Smyke et al., 2010) and the adaptive functioning of children and young people in terms of academic performance, happiness, and behavioral results (Fernandez, 2008).

Despite these benefits of foster care, recruiting new foster families is a global challenge (Anjos et al., 2023; Davi et al., 2021), as there are more children in need than families available to foster them (Davi et al., 2021). Developing and evaluating communication and recruitment campaigns to recruit foster families has therefore been identified as a need to improve the care system (Berrick et al., 2011; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Magalhães et al., 2022).

## **Message Development and Evaluation**

Previous work has identified a variety of communication channels and vehicles to promote foster care. Preferred channels and vehicles include newspapers, radio, cinema, television, advertisements on public transport and public roads, and informative pamphlets (López et al., 2010). Given the increasing significance of social media as a marketing and communication platform (Chiang et al., 2019), it has also been suggested that these platforms could be used to promote foster care (e.g., with testimonials from foster families) (López et al., 2010). Interpersonal communication (e.g., word-of-mouth) has also been identified as an important strategy (López et al., 2010), providing an opportunity to establish direct contact with foster families, clarify doubts, and access information that is perceived as authentic (Canali et al., 2016; Cox et al., 2003; López et al., 2010; Sebba, 2012). Despite this evidence, no study has yet been guided by an explicit approach to the development and evaluation of messages promoting foster care.

Developing and evaluating messages and campaigns requires identifying factors that are associated with target behavior (Lewis et al., 2016; Zhao, 2020), so that these factors can be reflected in message content. According to broad scope models of attitudes and behaviors (e.g., HAPA model; Schwarzer, 2008) the adoption of a new behavior is influenced by motivational

and volitional factors, which are important for forming and implementing intentions, respectively (Schwarzer, 2008). The decision to become a foster family derives from a set of motivational variables (Diogo & Branco, 2017; Migliorini et al., 2018; Rodger et al., 2006). The motivations considered most important for fostering are child-centered (the desire to help a child; Delgado, 2023; De Mayer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Gouveia et al., 2021; López & Del Valle, 2016), but family centered motivations have also been reported (e.g., knowing a foster child or a foster child's family and wanting to help; Magalhães et al., 2022) as well as society-oriented motivations, including the desire to contribute to society (De Maeyer et al., 2014).

Two key factors in the motivational phase of behavioral change are outcome expectancies and action self-efficacy. It is important for individuals to consider the pros and cons of the new behavior (i.e., outcome expectancies, such as expecting positive development outcomes for fostered children) but also to feel confident in their ability to perform the behavior (i.e., action self-efficacy). This may be especially important for behaviors with multiple responsibilities, such as becoming a foster family (e.g., spending time with the child, collaborating with professionals, organizing visits, ensuring the child's contact with the biological family; Berrick & Skivenes, 2012; López & Del Valle, 2016; Van Holen et al., 2019). Moving from the motivational phase to the volitional phase, where intentions are put into action, usually requires developing an action plan. Action planning involves identifying the necessary steps and resources to turn intentions into behavior (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). It is considered a task-facilitation strategy, as it helps guide behavioral performance (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). Along with factors that influence intention formation and implementation, the adoption and maintenance of a behavior can also be negatively affected by contextual constraints (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020).

Obstacles to becoming a foster family might include the anticipation of separation from the foster child (e.g., Anjos et al., 2023; Buehler et al., 2003; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016) and the foster family's concerns about the birth family of the fostered child (e.g., Contreras & Muñoz, 2016). The anticipation of the separation process can bring about fears related to losing contact with the foster child (Anjos et al., 2023), and there may be concerns about the emotional impact of this separation on the foster family and/or foster child (Ferreira et al., 2024). In turn, fear of contact with birth families may include concerns related to the privacy and security of foster families. Additionally, difficulties in the relationship with the birth family can be a source of fear (Contreras & Muñoz, 2016), which is a critical barrier to being a foster carer. The use of coping narratives and narrative resilience could reduce the influence of these barriers, as such

narratives not only acknowledge barriers but also provide suggestions for overcoming them (Gesser-Edelsburg, 2021; Horstman et al., 2023). However, to understand whether the messages are capable of producing the results expected, namely, overcoming barriers and producing the intend behavioral change, it is necessary to evaluate their results (Lewis et al., 2016; Yzer et al., 2015).

Although there is a growing effort to develop messages and recruitment campaigns for new foster families, there are no published studies that evaluate the results of these campaigns (Wilkinson & Wright, 2024). This makes it impossible to identify areas for improvement and to determine the most effective strategies for recruiting new foster families. Thus, to evaluate the results of a campaign, it is necessary to test its perceived effectiveness (i.e., how the public perceives the quality and persuasiveness of the messages; Yzer et al., 2015), the emotional responses elicited by the messages (Krause & Rucker, 2020; Lewis et al., 2016), and, for testimonials and narrative communication, the extent to which the audiences identify with the characters and are transported into the story (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010).

### **The Current Study**

Given the global need to recruit foster families (Berrick et al., 2011; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Magalhães et al., 2022) and the lack of studies on the development and evaluation of messages in the context of foster care, this study aimed to develop and evaluate theoretically informed messages to increase awareness, willingness, and intention to foster.

Our first objective was to develop theory-based messages to promote engagement with foster care and evaluate these messages in terms of message-related (i.e., identification, transportation, emotional response, and perceived effectiveness; Krause & Rucker, 2020; Lewis et al., 2016; Liu & Yang, 2020) and audience-focused variables (i.e., awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family). Perceived effectiveness is often considered a proxy for the expected impact of a campaign and is associated with changes in the attitudes, intentions, and behaviors targeted by the message or campaign (e.g., Davis et al., 2013; Yzer et al., 2015). Additionally, creating awareness about foster care and increasing willingness and intentions are also important prerequisites for recruiting new foster families (Magalhães et al., 2022; Sebba, 2012).

Our secondary objective is to examine the mediating role of the message-related features identification, transportation, and emotional response on the potential differences between messages in terms of perceived effectiveness, awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family. Past research suggests that these variables can enhance the impact of messages

and campaigns (Dunlop et al., 2008; Hamby & Jones, 2022; Krakow et al., 2018; Krause & Rucker, 2020; Liu & Yang, 2020). Therefore, analyzing how these characteristics mediate observed differences between messages can shed light into the mechanisms through which these messages can encourage people to consider becoming foster families.

## **Method**

### **Message Development**

We developed the messages for this study based on relevant research on foster care (e.g., Anjos et al., 2023; Baer et al., 2019; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Magalhães et al., 2022), social marketing (e.g., Van den Putte & Dhondt, 2005; Zhao, 2020) (see Table 6), as well as operational frameworks for designing and testing messages (e.g., SatMDT, Lewis et al. 2016; PHM framework, Hall & Johnson-Turbes, 2015), in four steps.

#### ***First Step: Target Audience***

The first step consisted of defining the target audience: adults from the general population (i.e., who did not have direct and close contact with the foster care system) and who are eligible to be a foster family (i.e.,  $\geq 25$  years).

#### ***Second Step: Content Development and Execution Strategy***

We developed content for the messages based on previous research on motivations for fostering and broad scope models of attitudes and behaviors. Regarding the execution strategies, we used a narrative approach through a testimonial format (e.g., Gesser-Edelsburg, 2021) in the first-person plural (Green & Fitzgerald, 2017; Kim & Lim, 2022) and elements to enhance identification and transportation in the target audience. To enhance identification, the messages emphasized perceived similarity with the foster family by sharing attributes (e.g., “We are a family like any other with qualities and difficulties”) and objectives (e.g., “[A family that] tries to do the best it can help others”) (Cohen, 2001). Vivid descriptions and emotional content were included to enhance transportation (e.g., “This gave us the confidence to [...]"). We also aimed to convey realism through the plausibility of the characters, responses from the foster family to relevant and accurate events, and the use of realistic scenarios (Cho et al., 2014; Green & Fitzgerald, 2017; Green & Brock, 2000; Isberner et al., 2019). We developed four messages, each with a consistent word count ranging between 115 and 121 words and the same structure: an introductory paragraph, a development paragraph, and a concluding paragraph. The introductory and concluding paragraphs were identical in all messages and included in an

additional message with only the introductory and concluding paragraph (message five, See table 6), which was used as a baseline message to improve the internal validity of the study. This allows us to disentangle potential effects of the content presented in the development paragraphs vis-à-vis the content in the introductory and concluding paragraphs, which was held constant across messages. Table 6 provides an overview of all five messages tested in the study.

**Table 6***Theoretically informed foster care messages.*

Message 1	<p>We are a family like any other, with strengths and difficulties, who make mistakes and learn and try to do our best to help others, including the children we foster.</p> <p>We know that every child has the right to grow up in a family where they feel loved, safe, and confident. We had been thinking about helping a child for a while, and this was the way we found. It is incredible to see how small things, new routines, and experiences can improve these children's lives.</p> <p>Fostering a child brings challenges that lead us to question our abilities. But knowing that we have initial and ongoing training, financial support, and professional support helps us to do our job better.</p>
Message 2	<p>We are a family like any other, with strengths and difficulties, who make mistakes and learn and try to do our best to help others, including the children we foster.</p> <p>We heard about foster families and thought that we could also foster children. We learned more about how people become foster families and what kind of entities are responsible for that. We discussed an action plan for our family, our rights and responsibilities, and the next steps. This gave us the confidence to go ahead with this decision.</p> <p>Fostering a child brings challenges that lead us to question our abilities. But knowing that we have initial and ongoing training, financial support, and professional support helps us to do our job better.</p>
Message 3	<p>We are a family like any other, with strengths and difficulties, who make mistakes and learn and try to do our best to help others, including the children we foster.</p> <p>One of our greatest concerns was that the child had to leave. This idea caused us enormous anguish. Thinking about how we can connect with a child, and then they have to leave. Over time, we realized that the end of fostering didn't mean a breaking point, that we could still be present, just in a different way.</p> <p>Fostering a child brings challenges that lead us to question our abilities. But knowing that we have initial and ongoing training, financial support, and professional support helps us to do our job better.</p>
Message 4	<p>We are a family like any other, with strengths and difficulties, who make mistakes and learn and try to do our best to help others, including the children we foster.</p> <p>One of the biggest concerns was the child's birth family. We were afraid of jeopardizing our family's safety because we did not know anything about the birth family. However, the experience and support we received helped us to see the child's family in a different way, which made us feel more secure.</p> <p>Fostering a child brings challenges that lead us to question our abilities. But knowing that we have initial and ongoing training, financial support, and professional support helps us to do our job better.</p>
Message 5	<p>We are a family like any other, with strengths and difficulties, who make mistakes and learn and try to do our best to help others, including the children we foster.</p> <p>Fostering a child brings challenges that lead us to question our abilities. But knowing that we have initial and ongoing training, financial support, and professional support helps us to do our job better.</p>

*Message 1.* Child-centered motivations have been identified in previous research as a facilitator for becoming a foster family (e.g., Anjos et al., 2023; Baer et al., 2019; Gouveia et al., 2021; Magalhães et al., 2022). This motivation includes, for instance, the desire to make a difference

in a child's life and wanting to provide a family context to avoid placement in residential care (see Table 6).

*Message 2.* Action planning is proposed in several attitudes and behavioral change models (e.g., HAPA model; Schwarzer, 2008) as a key component to adopt a new behavior. It consists of formulating detailed plans on when, where, and how to implement a behavior.

*Message 3.* The anticipation of separation from the foster child have been identified in previous studies as a barrier for becoming a foster family (e.g., Anjos et al., 2023; Buehler et al., 2003; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016). This barrier involves fears related to losing contact with the foster child and concerns about the emotional impact of this separation on the foster family and/or foster children. Highlight that relationships can continue in different ways is suggested as a strategy to address this barrier.

*Message 4.* Foster families' concerns about the foster child's birth family have been reported as a barrier to the decision to become a foster family (e.g., Contreras & Muñoz, 2016). This barrier may include concerns related to the privacy and security of foster families as well as fears related to difficulties in the relationship with the birth family. Gaining experience, receiving support, and changing perspective are suggested as strategies for dealing with these concerns.

*Message 5.* This message served as control or baseline message. Previous work has indicated that incorporating realistic elements that focus on both positive and challenging aspects into messages can increase perceived authenticity (Boeijinga et al., 2017). This message includes elements present in all messages (i.e., content present in the introduction and final paragraph), namely, positive, and challenging aspects of foster care, as well as information about the support provided by the foster care system.

### ***Third Step: Pilot Test***

The third step consisted of a pilot test to evaluate responses to the messages (Lewis et al., 2016). The test involved a group discussion with eight individuals aged 25 years or over (four females and four males) who had no contact with the foster care system. They were asked to complete the questionnaire developed within the scope of this study (used later in data collection) and share their feedback in terms of identification, transportation, emotions elicited, and perceived effectiveness of the message they read. Participants also provided feedback on the clarity and intelligibility of the messages. Overall, individuals found the messages concise, straightforward, and easy to comprehend. They emphasized the importance of adding emotional elements for reader involvement and confirmed the importance of presenting coping strategies in messages that address obstacles to produce the intended persuasive impact. Following the



discussion, the research team implemented minor adjustments based on the feedback from participants.

#### ***Fourth Step: Evaluation***

The fourth and final step consisted of evaluating the effect of the messages (Lewis et al., 2016) on a set of message-related (i.e., identification, transportation, emotional response, perceived effectiveness) and audience-focused variables (i.e., awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family). The methods and results are presented in the current and following sections of this study.

#### **Participants**

A total of 405 Portuguese adults aged 25 years or older ( $M_{\text{age}} = 40.4$ ,  $SD = 10.5$ , range 25-72), participated in this study. Most of the participants were female (67.3%), 46.7% were married, 40.7% were single, 11.6% were divorced, and 1% were widowed. Regarding education, 42.2% had a higher education (23.7% undergraduate, 16.8% master's degree, and 1.7% doctoral degree), 38.5% had secondary education, and 17.8% had primary school education. Most participants were employed (86.7%) and had children (65.6%) (Table 7). All participants had to meet the following eligibility criteria: being aged 25 or over (as being 25 or over is a criterion for being a foster family in Portugal) and not having close contact with the foster care system. Given the aims of the study, people who were or had been foster families in the past, reported knowing foster families, had previous contact with the foster care system, and/or were professionals in the child protection system were not eligible to participate.

**Table 7***Sample socio-demographic characteristics.*

Variables	<i>f</i>	%
Marital status		
Single	165	41
Married	189	47
Divorced	47	11
Widowed	4	1
Completed education		
Higher Education		
Undergraduate	96	24
Master's degree	68	17
Doctoral degree	7	2
Secondary Education	156	38
Primary Education	72	18
Other categories (e.g., professional qualifications)	6	1
Household monthly income (€)		
≤ 1000	122	31
1001–1500	110	28
1501–2500	105	26
> 2500	62	15
Employment status		
Employed	351	87
Employed/student	9	2
Unemployed	29	7
Retired	10	2
Student	6	2
Parental experience		
Had children	265	66
Had no children	139	34

### **Design, Procedure, and Measures**

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon (Ref. 129/2023). This study used a between-group experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions. Four of these conditions targeted two enablers and two barriers (and their coping strategies). The other two conditions were used as control. Specifically, a message with the same introductory and concluding paragraph content as the other messages was developed to serve as baseline message. The other control condition, which served as the second control group, exposed participants to no information (i.e., no messages). The data were collected through Qualtrics.com and disseminated via paid advertisements on Instagram and Facebook, asking participants to share the study with their contact list (snowball strategy), as well as through requests for participation and dissemination with various entities such as schools, parents' associations, and governmental organizations.

Participants were provided with information about the study and were asked to give their informed consent before completing the questionnaire. Participants who were under the age of 25 (i.e., formal requirement to be a foster family is to be 25 years or older), reported having been a foster family in the past, reported knowing foster families, or were professionals working in the child protection system were not eligible to participate and therefore forwarded to a debriefing. In turn, participants who met the eligibility criteria answered a set of other sociodemographic questions, including gender, marital status, nationality, education, employment status, profession, monthly income, and parental experience (i.e., having children). Participants were then assigned to one of the six conditions. Participants assigned to reading one of the messages were asked to carefully read a testimonial from a foster family (see Table 7), which presented either facilitators for becoming a foster family, namely “Child-centered motivation” (message 1) and “Action plan” (message 2), or coping strategies for dealing with obstacles to becoming a foster family, namely “Dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child” (message 3), “Dealing with and overcoming fears associated with the child in care (including their biological family)” (message 4) or a factor that was constant in all messages – “Positive and challenging aspects of foster care and self-efficacy” (message 5). After participants read the message, we asked them to complete a set of questions regarding identification, transportation, emotional response, and perceived effectiveness (see description of the measures below), followed by questions on willingness, intention, and awareness about foster care. Participants in the “no message” control condition only responded to the questions on willingness, intention, and awareness about foster care (i.e., they were not asked questions about the messages). At the end of the questionnaire, a debriefing was provided including the contact details of the research team for questions or clarifications.

### ***Identification***

Identification was assessed using three items taken and adapted from Tal-Or and Cohen (2010) (“As I read, I felt what this foster family felt”, “I think I understand this foster family well”, and “I tend to understand why this foster family did what they did.”) and answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

### ***Transportation***

Transportation was assessed with three items taken and adapted from Tal-Or and Cohen (2010) (“I could imagine myself in the scenario described”, “I felt mentally involved in the testimony”,

and “The testimony impacted me emotionally.”) and answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

### ***Emotional Response***

Participants’ emotional response was assessed using the short version of the Portuguese Positive and Negative Affect Scale - PANAS-VRP (Galinha et al., 2014), with the instruction “Please, indicate to what extent you felt each of these emotions after reading the testimony of a foster family” followed by 10 items (e.g., Interested, Nervous, Enthusiastic, Scared, Inspired). These items were answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = Not at all or very slightly to 7 = Extremely;  $\alpha = .89$ ).

### ***Perceived Effectiveness***

Participants also answered questions related to the perceived effectiveness of the testimony using the perceived effectiveness scale (Davis et al., 2017), which consists of 6 items (i.e., “This testimonial: 1) was worth remembering; 2) grabbed my attention; 3) was powerful; 4) was informative; 5) was meaningful; 6) was convincing”). These items were answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### ***Awareness***

An item was developed based on Dyehouse et al. (2008) to assess awareness, i.e., “Please read the following statement and indicate your level of agreement: “How familiar are you with foster care? Specifically, I know the foster care system”. The item was answered using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

### ***Willingness***

A single item was used to measure willingness to become a foster family (“I would like to become a foster family”). The item was taken from Magalhães et al. (2022) and was answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree.

### ***Intention***

Intention to foster was measured using three items (e.g., “I am willing to be a foster family shortly”) taken from Magalhães et al. (2022). The items were answered on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS® for Windows (Version 29.0) for descriptive statistics, variance, and mediation analyzes using regression models. One-way ANCOVAs were conducted to determine statistically significant differences between conditions in terms of identification, transportation, and perceived effectiveness, controlling for gender and age, and the same was performed to identify differences between messages in awareness, willingness, and intention. When significant differences between conditions were detected, multiple comparison tests (Bonferroni) were used to identify and qualify these differences. Since the emotional response variable consisted of two dimensions (i.e., positive and negative affect), we performed a MANCOVA instead of two ANCOVAs (but still including gender and age as covariates). Gender was measured including five options (1 - Female, 2 - Male, 3 - Non-binary, 4 – Other, and 5 - Prefer not to answer), but given the low prevalence of other genders in the sample ( $N=2$ ), we created a dummy variable (0 – Female, 1 – Male).

To test identification, transportation, and emotional response as mediators to explain differences between messages in our main outcome variables (perceived effectiveness, awareness, willingness or intention), our approach was to use Process macro v4.2 (model 4, univariate mediation model) whenever those differences were significant in the pairwise comparisons (using each pair of conditions as dummy variables).

## **Results**

### **Message-Related Variables**

An ANCOVA revealed no significant differences between the messages in terms of identification ( $F(4, 292) = 1.414, p = .229$ ). Similarly, a MANCOVA showed that there were no significant differences between the messages and emotional response ( $F(8, 582) = 1.405, p = .191$ , Wilks'  $\Lambda = .952$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .019$ ). However, there were significant differences in transportation ( $F(4, 292) = 3.940, p = .004$ ). Pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni correction showed that participants exposed to message 3 – Dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child ( $M = 5.32, SD = .152$ ) scored significantly higher than participants exposed to the baseline message ( $M = 4.68, SD = .146$ ) (C.I. 95% [-1.238, -.045];  $p = .026$ ). There were also significant differences between the messages in perceived effectiveness ( $F(4, 292) = 4.051, p = .003$ ). Pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni correction revealed that participants exposed to message 3 - Dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child ( $M = 3.95, SD = .084$ ) scored significantly higher than

participants exposed to the baseline message ( $M = 3.589$ ,  $SD = .081$ ) (C.I. 95% [-.694, -.032];  $p = .021$ ).

### Audience-Related Variables

The ANCOVA revealed significant effects of our manipulation on awareness about foster care ( $F(5, 395) = 2.547$ ,  $p = .028$ ), but the paired comparisons using Bonferroni correction revealed no significant differences between messages in awareness ( $p = .062$ ), pointing to a lack of robustness of this effect. Furthermore, there were no significant differences in willingness ( $F(5, 395) = .622$ ,  $p = .63$ ) or intention to become a foster family ( $F(5, 395) = .412$ ,  $p = .840$ ), see Table 8.

**Table 8**

*Means (and standard deviations) of conditions on awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family.*

	Awareness	Willingness	Intention
Condition 1	4.31 (.224)	3.89 (.216)	3.40 (.194)
Condition 2	3.37 (.235)	3.77 (.226)	3.04 (.202)
Condition 3	3.39 (.241)	3.91 (.232)	3.16 (.208)
Condition 4	3.89 (.259)	3.73 (.250)	3.09 (.224)
Condition 5	3.44 (.231)	3.53 (.223)	3.12 (.200)
Condition 6	3.71 (.180)	3.54 (.174)	3.15 (.155)

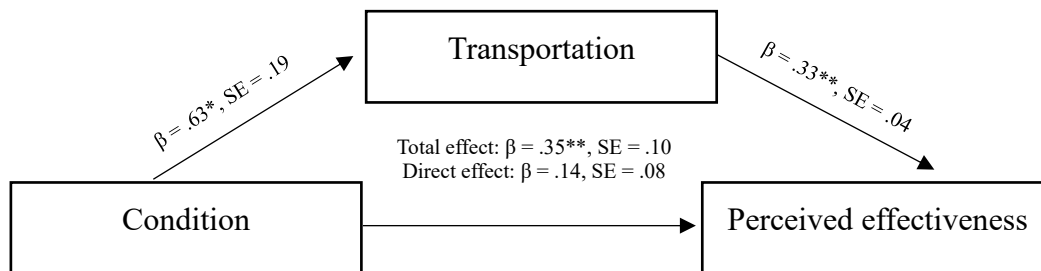
### Mediation Model

As previously reported, no significant effects were found between messages and identification, as well as between messages and emotional responses. Thus, identification and emotional responses were not included in the mediation model as mediators. A mediation model (PROCESS, model 4) was used to evaluate whether the differences between message 3 - Dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child and baseline message were explained by the level of transportation (Figure 3). The results revealed that exposure to message 3 - Dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child, compared to baseline message, increased transportation levels ( $\beta = .63$ , 95% CI [.25, 1.01],  $t = 3.31$ ,  $p = .0012$ ;  $R^2 = .16$ ). Transportation had a statistically significant effect on perceived effectiveness ( $\beta = .33$ , 95% CI [.25, .41],  $t = 8.225$ ,  $p = .0000$ ;  $R^2 = .43$ ). Both the total effect ( $\beta = .35$ , 95% CI [.14, .56]) and the indirect effect via transportation were significant ( $\beta = .34$ , 95% CI [.15, .54]). The direct effect of the condition on perceived effectiveness was not

significant ( $p = .100$ ), suggesting that transportation fully mediated the causal link between condition and perceived effectiveness.

**Figure 3**

*Mediation model of transportation in the relationship between content messages and perceived effectiveness*



Note.  $*p < .05$ ,  $**p < .001$ . Condition = Dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child vs. Baseline message.

## Discussion

This study aimed to develop and evaluate theoretically informed messages to increase behavioral related outcomes associated with fostering children in need. We developed and tested a total of five messages – i.e., two narratives involving foster care enablers (i.e., child-centered motivation or action planning), two coping narratives (i.e., dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child or other fears associated with the child in care), and a message with constant information present in all messages (which served as baseline or control). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to experimentally test messages about foster care with the potential to inform recruitment strategies for new foster families.

The results indicated that the message focused on dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child generated higher levels of transportation and perceived effectiveness than the baseline message. The message focused on dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child was designed using elements that have the potential to enhance transportation, such as vivid descriptions and emotional content, along with the responses of the foster family to the situation portrayed (Cho et al., 2014; Green & Fitzgerald, 2017; Green & Brock, 2000; Isberner et al., 2019). In contrast, the baseline message did not include elements to enhance transportation, as it aimed to control the potential effects of the content in the introductory and concluding paragraphs of all messages.

Although all the messages were developed including transportation elements, the results were only significant for the message that focused on dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child, which might suggest that this content (i.e., anticipating the child separation) might enhance (more than the other conditions) the participants' cognitive, attentional and emotional processes. Dealing with relational losses or separations can be perceived by participants as particularly familiar and impactful, given that everyone throughout their life can experience situations of separation or losses. In fact, studies indicate that the more familiar the audience is with the material presented (Bae et al., 2014; Green & Fitzgerald, 2017), or when they can relate the details of the story to their own memories or experiences, the more likely they are to be transported (Escalas, 2007). The results from the mediation model supported this interpretation, as the differences in perceived effectiveness between the two messages were fully explained (i.e., mediated) by differences in transportation.

Several factors can contribute to increasing audience transportation, which should be considered when designing these types of messages. For written narratives or testimonials, it is important to ensure that they are easy to understand, read, and imagine (Green & Fitzgerald, 2017). Perceiving that the message reports a story or an event that is plausible, genuine, and realistic (i.e., plausibility and verisimilitude) can also increase transportation (Cho et al. 2014; Green & Fitzgerald 2017). Therefore, it may be important to express realism through the plausibility of the characters or exemplars, present their responses to relevant and accurate events, and to use realistic settings. The realism referred to here pertains not necessarily to the resemblance that messages have to the real world, but to their psychological credibility. This implies that characters or exemplars should act like real individuals, even within a fictional context (Green & Fitzgerald 2017). Furthermore, when developing messages, it may be equally important to consider incorporating vivid descriptions and developing emotionally moving narratives (Ching et al., 2013; Cho et al., 2014; Green & Fitzgerald, 2017). This may involve highlighting the emotional aspects of various actions, events, or decisions (Green & Fitzgerald, 2017). Finally, structuring a narrative in chronological order and creating suspense by providing general information that alludes to a future event can also enhance a message's ability to generate transportation (Green & Fitzgerald, 2017).

Despite the differences observed in terms of transportation and perceived effectiveness between the message that focused on dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child and the baseline message, the messages we tested did not have an impact on awareness, willingness and intention to become a foster family. This study was conducted in Portugal, where there is limited community knowledge about foster care (Negrao



et al., 2019). This limited knowledge means that the community is not well informed about this care alternative and its importance as an option for children and young people who are in out-of-home care. Given this, it might be beneficial to consider increasing the frequency of message exposure in the community, as studies have shown a positive link between increased exposure and favorable results (e.g., Snyder, 2007). Thus, it would be relevant to develop longitudinal studies that evaluate the effects of repeated exposure to messages to a given target audience to inform more effective and sustainable communication strategies. Studies in this context could provide important insights into how the frequency of exposure affects attention, the target audience's response to messages, which in turn might foster awareness, willingness, and intention to become a foster family.

In this study, the messages were targeted at adults from the general population (i.e., who did not have direct and close contact with the foster care system) and who were eligible to be a foster family (i.e.,  $\geq 25$  years). In future studies, it could be relevant to deliver messages to people at different stages of the process of becoming a foster family (i.e., people without any knowledge about foster care, people who express willingness but not an intention to become foster families, and people who demonstrate their intention and are willing to move forward with the decision). As such, future studies should identify different profiles of potential foster families to inform future targeted and tailored recruitment processes.

To conclude, despite its limitations, the results from this study inform the development of future research on how to develop and evaluate messages and campaigns to recruit new foster families. The findings point to the significance of using narrative communication approaches, highlighting the importance of transportation and its impact on how effective the messages are perceived by the target audience.



## CHAPTER 5

### **General Discussion**

The lack of foster families available for children in out-of-home care is an international challenge (Blackburn, 2016; Sebba, 2012), including in countries where foster care is the primary form of out-of-home placement (e.g., United States; Davi et al., 2021). In Portugal, the majority of children in out-of-home care (96%) are placed in residential care, with only 4.3% being placed in foster families (ISS, 2024a). This disparity highlights the urgent need to identify comprehensive strategies to develop and evaluate recruitment efforts aimed at increasing the number of available foster families (Magalhães et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Wright, 2024).

Identifying barriers and enablers of a target behavior is essential to guide efforts to promote or inhibit that behavior (Michie et al., 2011; Schwarzer, 2008). Given that behavioral change occurs through phases (HAPA model; Schwarzer, 2008), understanding what leads an individual to move from a pre-intentional phase to the implementation of the behavior is crucial in developing tailored recruitment strategies. In the context of foster care, this requires input from individuals at different phases of involvement with foster care. However, prior research tends to focus on current foster families or individuals already involved in the process (e.g., those who have taken part in preparation for foster training; Baum et al., 2001; Blackburn, 2016; Engelhardt & Royse, 2023) and lacks a solid theoretical basis. Consequently, the effectiveness of strategies for recruiting new foster families may be undermined by failure to address the specific barriers and enablers of each phase of involvement.

Although efforts have been made in recent years to recruit foster families, the results of these initiatives remain unknown (Wilkinson & Wright, 2024). It is important to systematically develop and experimentally test messages to recruit new foster families in outreach campaigns. This allows for the analysis and identification of the most effective content and execution strategies (e.g., message design, modality, and types of appeal; Zhao, 2020) to raise awareness about foster care and encourage people to consider becoming a foster family.

To address these challenges, this dissertation aimed to provide new insights into the factors associated with becoming a foster family, and how to use messaging (communication strategy) to raise awareness, willingness, and intention to foster. To achieve this aim, a mixed-methods approach was employed, which included three studies: Study one (qualitative), study two (quantitative correlational), and study three (quantitative experimental). The first study aimed to explore the perspectives and meanings of foster families and professionals regarding the factors influencing the decision to become a foster family. This study also aimed to gather

insights into the outreach and execution strategies for message development in foster care. The second study sought to map the factors associated with becoming a foster family, involving a community sample. Finally, the experimental study, informed by the first two studies, aimed to design and experimentally test messages to increase awareness, willingness, and intention to foster among community individuals with no prior contact with the child protection system.

Overall, our findings suggest that both foster families and professionals emphasize a limited knowledge about foster care within the community and among other professionals. This finding suggests the need for broader recruitment campaigns along with educational strategies aimed at improving knowledge and understanding of foster care, in line with the behavior change wheel (Michie et al., 2011). Previous studies in Portugal (Negrão et al., 2019) have also documented this limited knowledge, which can act as a barrier to becoming a foster family. Having the necessary knowledge is a crucial factor for adopting new practices or behaviors, as highlighted in comprehensive models of attitudes and behaviors (e.g., COM-B system; Michie et al., 2011). Moreover, the current dissertation reveals that specific factors might be relevant across all phases of involvement with foster care. Families, professionals, and community members all agreed that becoming foster families relies on child-centered motivations, having personal resources such as time, and a belief in one's ability to fulfil the role of a foster family (action self-efficacy; HAPA model, Schwarzer, 2008). Developing broader approaches can attract not only those who already have some contact with the system but also individuals who would not have otherwise considered fostering a child.

This evidence that there are factors that appear relevant across all phases of involvement (i.e., child-centered motivations, available time, and action self-efficacy) has the potential to inform communication strategies (Michie et al., 2011), especially regarding the content of more general messages. Specifically, child-centered motivations have been recognized as one of the most important motivations to become a foster family in previous studies (Canali et al., 2016; Delgado, 2023; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Gouveia et al., 2021; López & Del Valle, 2016). Messages involving child-centered motivations can attract individuals interested in contributing to the child's well-being, which is the purpose of foster care. This may be particularly important, given that these motivations have been associated with positive foster care experiences (Rodger et al., 2006). Furthermore, messages and recruitment campaigns involving this content can eventually contribute to a high-quality fostering process, as child-centered motivations are also associated with greater retention of foster families in the system (Rodger et al., 2006).

Messages that address time availability may also have the potential to attract new foster families. When individuals feel and recognize that they have the time and resources to get

involved in foster care, they may be more prone to become a foster parent ("opportunity" dimension of the COM-B system; Michie et al., 2011). In general, broad scope models of attitudes and behaviors (i.e., Michie et al., 2011; Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020) suggest that favorable circumstances and resources can positively impact the acquisition and maintenance of a particular behavior. Having more time available may increase an individual's belief in their ability to act (known as action self-efficacy). For instance, when individuals have the time to fulfil various responsibilities, such as being a foster family, they may feel more confident in their ability to handle this role. Indeed, action self-efficacy was one of the factors reported by all informants as important in becoming a foster family. This suggests that regardless of involvement with foster care (i.e., being part of the system or not), believing in the ability to become a foster family seems to be an essential condition for considering this action. This result aligns with the assumptions that self-efficacy plays a significant role in the entire process of behavior change, particularly as a crucial factor in motivating individuals to engage in a specific behavior (Schwarzer, 2008; Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). Individuals reporting high self-efficacy are more likely to start the desired behavior and envision success (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020).

Although all informants of the first two studies recognized the importance of action self-efficacy, for those already part of the system (i.e., foster families and professionals), other factors arose, such as social support and system resources. This result may be linked to the distinct phases of involvement in foster care within each sample. In the first study, foster families and professionals discussed the factors that influenced the decision to become foster families, which represents a transition from intention to action. Additionally, when reflecting on past experiences (i.e., barriers and enablers), it is possible that foster families and professionals highlight social support and system resources, as these factors can enhance coping self-efficacy (i.e., optimistic belief in the individual's ability to deal with barriers that may arise in the adoption and maintenance of new behavior; Schwarzer, 2008). In the second study, the broader community may or may not be in the process of forming a willingness or intention to become a foster family. Being more involved with the foster care system implies a deeper understanding of the challenges associated with fostering a child and the responsibilities of the role of a foster family. In contrast, community participants may not have this specific knowledge, which may explain why they did not consider these factors (i.e., social support and system resources) important to becoming a foster family.

In turn, action planning (i.e., a detailed plan on how to perform a target behavior, which specifies when, where, and how the individual will do it; Schwarzer, 2008) was identified only

by the community sample. The lack of experience and, probably, the reduced awareness of the procedures and challenges of foster care may lead individuals in the community to feel the need to develop an action plan that provides them with detailed guidance on the necessary steps. Action planning is seen as a task-facilitation strategy that guides the implementation of a certain behavior (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). In turn, foster families may consider that they already have necessary knowledge to move forward with the decision, probably obtained through their sources (as reported in study one). In addition to targeted communication approaches, the results suggest that enablement strategies should be developed for individuals at more advanced phases of involvement with foster care. These strategies are designed to enhance means or reduce barriers, thereby improving individuals' capabilities or opportunities (Michie et al., 2011). This can be particularly important because both opportunity and capability are key factors in adopting a new intended practice or behavior (Mayne, 2016; Michie et al., 2011). Therefore, in the context of foster care, strengthening social support and system resources may be relevant.

Based on all these findings from the first two studies, we developed a set of messages in the third study. Five narrative messages were developed, two on fostering enablers (i.e., child-centered motivation or action planning), two on obstacles and their respective coping strategies (i.e., dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child or other fears associated with the child in care), and the remaining message served as a control or baseline message (with the same introductory and concluding paragraph content as the other messages). Moreover, considering the feedback from the participants in study one, these narratives were developed to be emotionally engaging. To achieve this, we included elements in the message design to enhance the persuasive mechanism of transportation, which involves emotional, cognitive, and attentional processes (Green & Brock, 2000; Schmidt et al., 2023).

Among all the messages developed, the one that focused on dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child was perceived as the most effective due to transportation. Although there were no significant results in terms of awareness, willingness, and intention, the message focused on dealing with and overcoming the anticipation of separation from the foster child impacted perceived effectiveness through transportation. Using a narrative that addresses the obstacle of anticipating separation and their respective coping strategies appears to significantly influence the cognitive, attentional, and emotional processes of participants. This finding is relevant and should be the focus of future research for two reasons. First, transportation is identified as a mechanism responsible for the persuasive impact of narrative messages, capable of affecting substantial changes in audience attitudes and

intentions (e.g., Liu & Yang, 2020; Ma, 2020; Oh et al., 2020). Second, perceived effectiveness is often used as a proxy for the actual impact of a campaign as its effectiveness typically results in outcomes that align with campaign goals (Davis et al., 2013; Ye et al., 2021; Yzer et al., 2015). Developing messages that immerse the audience in stories about foster care (i.e., transportation) can potentially enhance the effectiveness of communication recruitment campaigns. Through a focus on transportation and heightened perceived effectiveness, these campaigns may yield better outcomes in terms of increasing individuals' willingness and intention to become a foster family.

### **Implications for Practice, Policies and Research**

The results of this dissertation establish a groundwork for informed practice in foster care and public policies. Given the limited understanding of foster care, recruitment efforts that concentrate on educational strategies (Michie et al., 2011) can enhance the knowledge of the role that foster care plays within the child protection system. Additionally, these efforts can address the eligibility criteria for becoming a foster family, and the rights and responsibilities of foster families.

Specifically, foster families and professionals highlighted the significance of formal and informal social support in the decision to become foster families. Despite the acknowledgement of formal social support provided by the foster care system, it seems important to enhance these resources (Enablement; Michie et al., 2011). To address this, it may be beneficial to establish local support groups of foster care agencies, taking inspiration from initiatives in certain countries (e.g., USA; Clarvida, 2024). These groups would facilitate interconnections between foster families through meetings, workshops, and social events. In addition, online communities and forums can be developed to offer a virtual space to foster families to share instrumental support (e.g., sharing material resources; availability to care for another family's child at a time of need) and emotional support (e.g., having a space to share experiences where they feel heard and understood). This is particularly relevant, as the findings of this dissertation reveal that foster families perceive the lack of material resources (i.e., not being able to provide essential goods to children compared to their own) as a significant barrier to becoming a foster family. Nevertheless, it is important to empower services to ensure adequate professional supervision (Service provision; Michie et al., 2011).

Complementing education and enablement strategies, this dissertation provides relevant insights into recruitment and awareness campaigns through communication (Michie et al., 2011). It suggests the importance of an integrated outreach strategy that includes broad

approaches (e.g., mass marketing) to raise general awareness about foster care as well as more targeted approaches. The findings reveal that certain factors are relevant across various phases of involvement with foster care, whereas others are specific to each phase. Action planning seems relevant for those in the early phases, and social support and system resources for those in a more advanced stage. Based on these results, it is suggested that more general messages be developed with content focused on child-centered motivations, self-efficacy, and individual resources. To develop messages focused on child-centered motivations, it may be relevant to address the desire of families to make a difference in a child's life and the positive impact of foster care placement (e.g., Kothari et al., 2020; West et al., 2020). In messages that address self-efficacy, it is suggested that content aims to promote the individual capabilities of the audience. Promoting efficacy through social support and system resources may not be the most appropriate approach, since these factors were identified only by those who were in a more advanced phase of involvement. Therefore, to promote optimistic beliefs about the role of foster families, it may be relevant to provide examples of success without previous experience in the area or specific professional training.

Messages targeted at initial-stage individuals with content focused on action planning may include information about the main steps of becoming a foster family. It could be important to inform the audience that the process involves assessments, training, and opportunities to connect with foster families. Furthermore, it could be relevant to provide websites and identify entities responsible for foster care where individuals can find additional information and address questions or concerns. For individuals in more advanced phases, messages addressing social support may provide information about formal support, particularly in terms of availability and follow-up by the professional team as well as the provision of training and adequate preparation for the role. In turn, messages addressing the system's resources should convey a positive perception of the system, highlighting its competence, credibility, and rigor. Targeting messages to individuals at different phases of involvement in foster care may increase the effectiveness of the recruitment processes for new foster families. Specifically, with targeted approaches, it is possible to promote factors that are important at various phases of foster care involvement, which can help individuals form an intention (when they have none) and progress from an intention to a possible application (target behavior).

In addition to the content of messages and potential targets, the findings of this dissertation suggest relevant execution strategies: Testimonials, messages that elicit transportation, and coping narratives. The testimonials, which aim to give a voice to those going through the experience (e.g., foster families, professionals working in the foster care system, and foster



children and young people), can increase the perceived credibility of the narratives. It is worth noting that perceived credibility is associated with the effectiveness of a message (Martín-Santana et al., 2018), and narratives can be perceived as more personal, realistic, credible, and memorable (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). Transportation is another factor associated with the perceived effectiveness of messages. In study three (quantitative experimental), transportation fully mediated the relationship between the message that focused on coping strategies to deal with anticipation of separation from foster child and perceived effectiveness. This finding highlights the potential relevance of designing narratives to promote transportation and to address barriers to becoming a foster family and ways to overcome them. This is particularly relevant, considering that in the qualitative study (study one), foster families and professionals identified several obstacles that inhibit people from becoming foster families (e.g., anticipation of separation from the foster child, lack of material resources, unpredictable duration of placement; perception of restrictions associated with the application, training, and assessment process; lack of response from the foster care system).

The effectiveness of recruitment strategies that raise awareness and engagement with foster care through communication (Michie et al., 2011) can be strengthened and supported through policies at the service provision level (Michie et al., 2011). To develop potentially effective recruitment strategies, it may be important to establish partnerships between the entities responsible for recruiting new families and scientific researchers, marketing professionals, journalists, web designers, or social media experts.

The identification of constraints associated with the child protection system, both from professionals and families (e.g., unpredictable duration of placement; perception of restrictions associated with the application, training, and assessment process; lack of response from the foster care system) may require improvements in the implementation and decision-making processes. The unpredictability of placement duration, combined with long-term placement (the average length is approximately four years in Portugal; ISS, 2024a), underscores the need to expedite the decision-making process. To this end, it could be relevant to develop a remote access system with relevant information for each case, accessible at any time to authorized parties involved in each individual case of children in need of care and protection (Ghosh, 2024; UNICEF, 2020). Owing to the highly confidential nature of the data, this system must ensure confidentiality and protection of the information of all individuals involved in each case. Additionally, public policies aimed at service provision (Michie et al., 2011) may also be relevant, namely increasing the number of professionals in foster care as well as the establishment of new entities that work with foster care in regions of the country that do not

offer this service. This could decrease the caseload for each professional, leading to more efficient management and the timely sharing of information. Finally, reducing the bureaucracy of the application, training, and assessment process for becoming a foster family can improve accessibility to the system.

Moreover, beyond these implications for practice and policies, this dissertation is one of the first efforts to understand becoming a foster family from a theoretical perspective, employing two comprehensive models of attitudes and behaviors (i.e., COM-B System; Michie et al, 2011; HAPA model; Schwarzer, 2008). The findings provide valuable insights into the factors that potentially influence the diverse phases of foster care involvement. However, it is important for future research to evaluate the applicability of COM-B and HAPA models or other frameworks (e.g., Transtheoretical Model of Change; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997), in understanding the process of becoming a foster family through longitudinal study designs. This allows the identification of predictors of willingness, intention, and behavior as well as the understanding of the factors that drive transitions between different phases (i.e., formation of willingness, progression from willingness to intention, and conversion of intention to action). Additionally, beyond testing predictors of intention as we run in this dissertation, it is relevant to identify the profiles of potential foster families in each phase of involvement. This profile analysis will allow for the development of specific recruitment strategies for different groups, which is in line with the principle of audience segmentation in social marketing (e.g., Bates, 2010). Audience segmentation is a key strategy for the development of effective campaigns (e.g., Bates, 2010).

The third study (experimental quantitative) identified a complete mediation of transportation in the relationship between the message that addresses strategies for dealing with anticipation with the foster child and perceived effectiveness. Given the potentially relevant role of transportation in the context of foster care, it may be relevant to replicate this study using a diverse and representative sample. In this study, the messages were presented to participants in a written testimony format, narrated by a foster family. It may be relevant to explore whether the length of the narratives (e.g., short, medium, and long), different formats (e.g., video, audio) and channels (e.g., television, radio) impact the level of identification and transportation. In fact, research suggests that a longer exposure to a character may be associated with greater identification (Cohen, 2001). In addition, it may be relevant to test other sources in the narratives, such as testimonies from foster families, children, and young people in foster care, and professionals in child protection system.

In sum, this dissertation provides a theoretically grounded perspective on the factors that may potentially encourage people to become foster families, including the representations and meanings of those already in the system (foster families and professionals), as well as the broader community. It was found that there are factors that may be transversal to all phases of involvement with foster care, and others that may be specific to each phase. This knowledge has the potential to inform diverse recruitment strategies for new foster families. To date, no previous study has focused on the development and evaluation of strategies for recruiting new foster families.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Correlations between study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
1.Awareness																						
2.Willingness	.192**																					
3.Intention	.076	.649**																				
4.Gender	-.229**	-.067	.046																			
5.Age	.073	-.172**	-.090	.040																		
6.Education	.136**	.101*	-.033	-.025	-.174**																	
7.Income	.017	-.121**	-.071	.111*	.255**	.290**																
8.Children	.009	-.085	-.067	-.047	.517**	-.278**	.202**															
9.Marital status	-.020	-.111*	-.022	.009	.366**	-.148**	.378**	.504**														
10.Contact CPS	.478**	.126**	.093*	-.190**	.020	.183**	.034	.012	.017													
11.Perceptions FCS	.137**	.176**	.179**	-.030	-.074	.012	-.034	-.043	-.007	.105*												
12.Self-centered	-.057	.148**	.182**	.088	-.081	-.183**	-.135**	-.063	-.041	-.112*	.067											
13.Child-centered	.116*	.505**	.310**	-.167**	-.152**	.146**	-.071	.005	-.058	.148**	.124**	.388**										
14.Family-related	.031	.116*	.088	-.016	-.165**	.039	-.137**	-.097*	-.092*	.073	.002	.610**	.406**									
15.Time	.185**	.513**	.320**	-.136**	-.150**	.249**	.062	-.064	-.063	.229**	.165**	.085	.490**	.184**								
16.Resources	.106*	.298**	.224**	-.061	-.200**	.305**	.201**	-.084	-.065	.167**	.123**	-.009	.339**	.124**	.601**							
17.Social support	.124**	.182**	.100*	-.066	-.185**	.256**	.077	-.160**	-.067	.129**	.226**	-.131**	.171**	.025	.311**	.418**						
18.Parental competences	.223**	.284**	.181**	-.096*	-.065	.193**	.113*	.008	-.001	.162**	.167**	-.082	.315**	-.020	.462**	.498**	.395**					

19.Self-efficacy	.211**	.616**	.451**	-.069	-.117*	.095*	-.029	.001	-.020	.203**	.276**	.101*	.415**	.080	.500**	.363**	.219**	.429**			
20.Action planning	.077	.474**	.561**	-.031	.009	-.150**	-.149**	.032	.039	.100*	.172**	.171**	.210**	.037	.289**	.147**	.019	.139**	.506**		
21.Coping planning	.194**	.368**	.378**	-.028	.061	-.067	-.064	-.001	.000	.235**	.135**	.065	.234**	.008	.272**	.085	-.007	.154**	.391**	.557**	
22.Outcome expectations	.091	.434**	.315**	-.042	-.235**	.101*	-.068	-.059	-.079	.092*	.204**	.137**	.369**	.153**	.401**	.315**	.177**	.349**	.508**	.336**	.319**

*Note: \*p<.05. \*\* p < .01. Gender: 0 – Female, 1 – Male; Marital status: 0 – Not married, 1 - Married (The “No not married” category includes those who are single, divorced, or widowed); Parental experience: 0 – Without children, 1 – With children; Contact with child protection system: 0 - No contact, 1 - With contact.*