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Abstract

Children and young people that need to be removed from their living environment should be preferably placed in a family care context, rather than in residential care homes. Given the scarcity of foster families in the child protection system, efforts to recruit new families may benefit from evidence about the representations, enablers, and barriers to become a foster family within community samples. The current qualitative study (N=716, 79% female, aged between 18 and 76 years old, Portugal) collected data from a set of free word association tasks and open questions about foster families. The results revealed mostly positive representations about foster families and their protective role for children in need (e.g., social appreciation of foster families), although some negative representations were also identified (e.g., ambivalence regarding the role of foster families). The main perceived drivers and enablers to become a foster family included the protective role of foster care (e.g., to promote child development), individual/family resources (e.g., economic resources), and other family factors (e.g., inability to have biological children). The main perceived barriers included the lack of individual and family resources (e.g., economic resources), individual and family constraints (e.g., emotional or health related factors), and constraints related with the foster care system (e.g., bureaucracy, difficulties regarding formal procedures). These findings provide inputs for further research on how to improve the recruitment and retention of new foster families.

Keywords: Child protection; foster families; foster care; recruitment

Introduction

The role of foster parents can be classified as challenging but also as being a valuable and fulfilling experience (Blackburn, 2016; Diogo & Branco, 2017, 2020). A lack of public knowledge about the foster care system and a lack of awareness about the role of foster parents are seen as persistent problems to recruit and retain new families (Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Goodman et al., 2016; Randle et al., 2012; Scott & Duncan, 2013; Sebba, 2012), even though some evidence exists about positive public opinions and support for foster families (Leber & LeCroy, 2012; Riggs & Due, 2018). In addition, foster families are subjected to high public and institutional scrutiny (Riggs et al., 2016), and there is evidence that professionals working in the system may have negative attitudes and representations about foster families (Riggs et al., 2009). It has been argued that reliable information about the foster care system (e.g., procedures, admission criteria, and the support provided to foster families) should be more visible to community samples (Contreras & Muñoz, 2016), which is ultimately expected to increase the likelihood that more people become foster families (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Randle et al., 2012; Sebba, 2012). As such, there is a need for expanding knowledge about public opinions, enablers, but also barriers for becoming a foster family, to be able to inform policies and practices of recruitment and selection of new families (Andersson, 2001; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2020; Rhodes et al., 2006; Sebba, 2012).

This is particularly true of the Portuguese context as there is a significant predominance of residential care to protect children that need to be removed from their living environment. In 2020, 6706 children and youth were placed in the out-of-home care system, but merely 3% (202) were in foster care (ISS, 2021). The criteria to apply to be a foster family in the Portuguese context are being 25+ years old, not being a

candidate for adoption, meeting physical, mental and safety requirements, not being inhibited from exercising parental responsibilities, not having any family relationship with the foster child (i.e., there is no formal kinship care in Portugal), and not being accused or convicted by judicial authorities for a crime against life, physical integrity and personal freedom or sexual self-determination (Decree-Law no. 139/2019). Between 2009 and 2019 the number of children placed in foster care decreased by 65% due to a lack of available foster families, but in 2020 there was a 6% increase in the number of children and youth placed in foster families (ISS, 2021). This change in the foster care system occurred due to important legislative changes and regulations (Law 139/2019), which included improved support to foster families (e.g., social and parental rights). In addition to improved legislation and institutional capacity, we argue that building a cumulative body of evidence on the views and perceptions about foster care with community samples may help inform strategies to improve the recruitment and selection processes of new foster families (i.e., possible prospective caregivers not yet involved with the system).

Enablers to becoming a foster family

Research suggests that foster families identify multiple reasons for fostering (Randle et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2006). These reasons can be centered on the foster child, on the foster family/self, or oriented towards the community (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2020; Migliorini et al., 2018; Rodger et al., 2006; Sebba, 2012; Tyebjee, 2003). On one hand, the reasons centered on the foster child are focused on their needs and are guided by altruistic values (e.g., a desire to protect and help a child; a desire to provide care and development opportunities) (Buehler et al., 2003; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2017, 2020; Rodger et al.,

2006; Sebba, 2012). On the other hand, self-oriented reasons are focused on the foster family needs and interests (e.g., to have more money, to fill the empty nest or to deal with not having biological children) (Andersson, 2001; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Migliorini et al., 2018; Randle et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2006; Rodger et al., 2006; Sebba, 2012; Tyebjee, 2003). Lastly, community-oriented reasons refer mostly to positive representations of foster care as meeting a larger societal need (e.g., the desire to do something for the community) (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Rhodes et al., 2006; Sebba, 2012; Tyebjee, 2003).

Motivations to foster can be intrinsic – i.e., arising from within the individual, including values, standards, and personality traits - or extrinsic – i.e., arising from anticipated rewards and from fulfilling others' expectations (Rodger et al., 2006). Research shows that child related reasons (e.g., to positively impact a child's life) seem to be reported more often than extrinsic or family-oriented motivations (e.g., wanting to increase family income) (Diogo & Branco, 2020; Rodger et al., 2006). Some studies suggest that intrinsic, child-centered and self-centered reasons are associated with positive foster experiences and a higher likelihood of families' retention (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Rodger et al., 2006). However, other findings show that self-oriented reasons may be related with less positive experiences and disruptions of foster care experience, for instance, when foster parents are more focused on their needs than on the child in care (Rhodes et al., 2006). Moreover, reasons such as the desire to have a companionship or to be loved by a child also seem to result in less positive experiences of fostering and greater rate of placement disruptions (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Rhodes et al., 2006).

Finally, the "Resource Theory" (Cox et al., 2003; Migliorini et al., 2018), where a resource is defined as "anything that one family member can offer to another to help

meet personal needs or achieve goals" (Hesse-Biber & Williamson, 1984, p. 262) is useful to understand why people become a foster parent. As such, the more resources a person has, the greater the likelihood of offering them to others (Cox et al., 2003; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Migliorini et al., 2018). According to this theory, families with more resources (e.g., higher education, income, greater time availability, parental experience or social support) are more likely to become foster families (Cox et al., 2003; De Maeyer et al., 2014).

Barriers to becoming a foster family

To fully understand the factors that contribute to people becoming foster families, it is also important to consider the barriers that prevent them to be foster parents. The most prominent barrier is the lack of knowledge about foster care (Goodman et al., 2016; Sebba, 2012; Randle et al., 2012). A significant proportion of people are not familiarized with the concept of foster care and do not have knowledge regarding the requirements and procedures to be a foster family (Cosano, 2004; Scott & Duncan, 2013). On the one hand, limited access to information related with foster care is described in the literature (Cosano, 2004; Goodman et al., 2016; Jiménez, 2003; Randle et al., 2012). On the other hand, there is also evidence that the available information is not always the most suitable, leading to negative perceptions and misunderstandings about foster care (Diogo & Branco, 2017; Sebba, 2012).

Other common barriers to becoming a foster family can be related with the applicants, the child and their birth family, or the foster process itself. Known barriers related with the applicants include a lack of resources (i.e., financial, available time, housing conditions; coparenting or social support) and a lack of readiness to play this parental role which involves greater commitment (Blackburn, 2016; Cosano, 2004;

Goodman et al., 2016; Randle et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2001; Scott & Duncan, 2013). Also, some concerns are recognized as barriers, namely, the fear of not being able to effectively play the parenting role, fear of false accusations associated with fostering (e.g., becoming a foster family in order to obtain financial support), fear of false accusations of maltreatment (Minty & Bray, 2001; Plumridge & Sebba, 2016; Riggs et al., 2009), and fear of the negative impact of this experience on the foster family functioning, for instance, the impact of the foster child on their own children (Blythe et al., 2012; Buehler et al., 2003; Goodman et al., 2016; Randle et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2001; Scott & Duncan, 2013). Lastly, professional difficulties (e.g., job instability and overloaded schedules) have also been identified as preventing people to become a foster family (Blythe et al., 2012; Randle et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2001).

Regarding known barriers related with the foster children, these include a lack of knowledge about their history and development, concerns about behavioral difficulties, the fear of rejection (by the child), as well as difficulties related with the subsequent separation and loss of contact with the child (Blackburn, 2016; Buehler et al., 2003; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Goodman et al., 2016; Randle et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2001). Concerning the known barriers associated with the birth family, these include difficulties in the relationship with relatives of the child, namely, when it comes to managing their contacts with the child (Buehler et al., 2003; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Rhodes et al., 2001). Lastly, the known barriers related with the foster care process include the bureaucracy and procedures related with foster care system; lack of follow-up and support from foster care agencies; lack of trust in the foster care system, and lack of autonomy to make decisions regarding the child (Blackburn, 2016; Blythe et al., 2012; Buehler et al., 2003; Randle et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2001).

Research context, problems and aims

More foster families are needed to account for the number of children and young people in need (Ciarrochi et al., 2012; Diogo & Branco, 2020). However, there is limited evidence on public perceptions about foster families and the reasons for becoming a foster family, as most studies on this topic have been conducted with samples of foster families who already in the system (e.g., Blackburn, 2016; Diogo & Branco, 2017), instead of community samples. This is a limitation because a broader perspective about why and when adults from community samples may become foster families is needed, as they are prospective targets for strategies aiming to increase knowledge, awareness, and willingness to become a foster family. Moreover, recruiting prospective foster families is a global challenge that may nevertheless require situated approaches, which calls for a vibrant field of research that incorporates inputs from studies conducted in diverse cultural contexts. This is necessary to corroborate themes and findings that are recurrent across settings, but also to identify needs and nuances that are applicable to specific contexts. For example, specific features of the Portuguese foster care system might exacerbate some of the barriers previously identified in other contexts, given the non-existence of kinship families and the fact that families cannot register as candidates for adoption and as foster families at the same time.

Against this backdrop, the current study aims to explore representations, enablers, and barriers to becoming a foster family with a community sample of adults in Portugal. Building a cumulative body of evidence on the views and perceptions about foster care with community samples from diverse contexts may help inform strategies to improve the recruitment and retention processes of foster families (Andersson, 2001; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2017; 2020; Rhodes et al., 2006; Sebba, 2012),

hence addressing a global need that is expected to require tailored, context-focused outreach efforts to foster children across settings.

Method

Participants

A sample of 716 participants from Portugal aged between 18 and 76 years ($M = 32.15$, $SD = 12.44$) participated in this study. Most of them were female (78.6%), and had no children (66.3%), 67.3% were single, 23% married, 9.4% divorced, and 0.3% widowed. Regarding the academic qualifications, 50.3% completed an undergraduate degree, 18.6% completed a master's degree, while 25.6% completed high school. Most of these participants (67.7%) had no previous contact with child protection system (e.g., for instance, to know a child or a family in the child protection system). Of the remaining participants who reported to have had previous contact with child protection system (32.3%): 11.3% knew someone who had had a child protection process; 10.8% knew people who had been in residential care; 5.4% had had contact with the child protection system due to academic and/or professional reasons; 5.4% knew people who were foster families; 3.4% had had a child protection process; and, finally, 0.3% of the participants had been in residential care and the same percentage had lived with a foster family.

Instruments

Sociodemographic Questionnaire

A sociodemographic questionnaire measured a set of individual (e.g., gender, age, marital status) and academic (e.g., last completed academic degree) characteristics of the participants. This also included a question about previous contact with the child

protection system ('yes' or 'no'). If participants answered yes, they have indicated what contact they had.

Free word association task and open questions

Participants' opinions about foster families, as well as their perceived enablers and barriers to become a foster family were assessed through a free word association task (i.e., "Foster families make me think, feel or imagine..."), which typically yields short and descriptively rich responses, and two open questions (i.e., "Please, indicate the main reasons or events that can/could lead you to become a foster family"; "Please, indicate the main reasons or events that can/could prevent you from becoming a foster family"). Participants were asked to identify a maximum of five ideas, words, or expressions for each question.

Data collection and analysis

This study was part of a larger research project titled "Family foster care: from motivations to the intention of being a foster family" approved by the Ethics Committee of ISCTE in 2019 (Reference number 92/2019). The study focused on qualitative data gathered on a survey that included additional measures pertaining to foster care (i.e., reasons for fostering, knowledge and opinions about the foster system). To prevent any risks of bias from exposure to the closed questions, the qualitative data were collected first in the survey before the other measures were presented. The data were collected online (January 2020) through *Qualtrics.com* using a convenience sample. The link for the survey was distributed on social media through Facebook profiles targeting adults who met the inclusion criteria: a) being an adult (age equal or older 18 years), b) understanding the Portuguese language and c) not being a foster family at the time of completion of the survey. After being informed about the research objectives and

conditions to participate, namely the voluntary nature of the participation, the right to interrupt at any time, and the data confidentiality and anonymity, the participants gave their informed consent.

Data analysis was conducted through IBM ® SPSS ® Statistics v27 to describe the participants' socio-demographic characteristics. The content analysis was conducted with MAXQDA v10 by the first author using a bottom-up approach (i.e., categories and subcategories were identified using semantic criteria). More specifically, the corpus was segmented into units of analysis based on semantic criteria which included words, concepts and phrases used by the participants. All categories and subcategories were mutually exclusive, i.e., each unit of analysis was included in only one category/subcategory. To strengthen the reliability of the analysis, the first author held regular meetings with the research team to discuss the codification process. Afterwards, the reliability of the coding process was assessed through the co-coding of 30% of the material by an independent researcher who had access to the dictionary of categories and subcategories. The inter-coding agreement was calculated using the Cohen Kappa coefficient and a substantial agreement (Kappa=0.739) was observed. To provide a clearer description of results, the categories are presented here in the main document, and the subcategories are presented in supplementary material.

Results

Public Opinions About Foster Families

Regarding the participants' opinions about foster families, 1045 units of analysis were coded into seven categories (Table 1) and 47 subcategories (Table S1). The *Caring role of foster families* was the most coded category and involved the participants' perceptions of foster families as a context that protects children and young people

through their skills and capabilities and has a positive impact on their lives, providing them care, affection, support, inclusion, stability, and security (e.g., “[*foster families*] *act to support, go along, fight for the well-being and for the future of those [children who are under their care]*”, Female, 45y). *Social appreciation* referred to the participants’ recognition that foster families are brave and denote altruism, courage, sensitivity, benevolence, or compassion, which led to expressions gratitude, esteem, and respect for foster parents (e.g., “[*they are*] *altruistic and want to make a difference*”, Female, 21y). Furthermore, the participants also recognized that foster families faced *Challenges and vulnerabilities*, which were mostly related with the unprotection and vulnerability of foster children, temporary placement, adverse experiences or changes, and adaptation (e.g., “*Child maltreatment*”, Female, 21y).

Finally, the four categories that were less frequently identified in this study were *Negative representations*, which included ambivalent and biased perceptions of foster families or the foster care system (e.g., “*Thinking of good and bad things at the same time, because of the stories that we hear.*”, Female, 24y), namely representations about the separation after fostering or the possibility of adoption (i.e., the respondents think about foster families to pursue adoption). Participants also recognized that *Foster families are needed* suggesting that they are important to society and should be supported (e.g., “*It is something very needed in the society*”, Male, 23y), as well as that resources are important to be a foster family - *Resources for foster families* - namely stability or financial resources (e.g., “*Economic power*”, Female, 20y). Lastly, participants perceived foster families as an opportunity to have new experiences, involving *Openness to diverse experiences* (e.g., “*It would be very interesting to know different cultures, habits*”, Female, 24y).

Enablers to Becoming a Foster Family

As for the enablers to become a foster family, 845 units of analysis were coded and sorted into eight categories (Table 2) and 21 subcategories (Table S2).

The category with the highest number of units of analysis was the *Child-centered approach*, where participants considered that they would become a foster family to provide care, love, and affection to children/young people, preventing their placement in residential care, contributing to their development, which means being motivated to support children and young people (e.g., “*Being able to help someone in need*”, Male, 20y).

Several participants considered that having *Individual resources* also acted as an enabler, suggesting that psychological, economic, and personal resources and skills can contribute to the decision of becoming a foster family (e.g., “*Financial and emotional stability*”, Female, 23y). Participants also considered *Family factors* as facilitating their intention to foster, including previous parenting experience and family agreement, the inability to have their own children (e.g., “*Infertility*”, Female, 40y), or family expansion desires, including adoption. Having a *Close relationship with foster children* was another enabler mentioned by the participants (e.g., “*Knowing that someone close to me might need one [foster family]*”, Female, 53y).

Finally, the four categories that were less frequently identified in this study were *Self-centered motivation* which includes the sense of gratification derived from the experience (e.g., “*The fact that perceiving it as a rewarding act and a possibly very enriching experience*”, Female, 21y), but also as a way of dealing with loneliness or the opportunity to have a new experience. *Being familiar with the foster care system* includes previous contact with the system and the recognition of positive experiences (e.g., “*Knowing someone who has been in a foster family that helped him/her*”, Female,

20y). Furthermore, other two enablers were the perception that being a foster family is a matter of *Social responsibility* (e.g., “*Contributing to a better society*”, Female, 34), as well as the recognition of *Need for foster families* given the low number of foster families available to care for children (e.g., “*Being aware of the need for foster families in Portugal*”, Female, 19y).

Barriers to Becoming a Foster Family

Participants also mentioned barriers to become a foster family, in total 886 units of analysis were coded, which were organized into five categories (Table 3) and 25 subcategories (Table S3). *Lack of individual and family resources* was the most frequent identified barrier by the participants to become a foster family, this included unfavorable financial situation, lack of time, lack of adequate living conditions to foster children/young people, and also lack of skills and readiness (e.g., “*Not having enough conditions to foster a child or youngster in need*”, Male, 25y).

Participants also focused on *Individual constraints*, which involved professional, emotional or health related factors that prevented them from becoming a foster family (e.g., “*Personal and professional condition*”, Female, 28y). *Foster care system constraints* were also recognized as barriers, which are related with perceived difficulties with procedures within the foster care system, namely system failures or the anticipation of difficulties related with further separation (e.g., “*Bureaucracy and the complex system*”, Female, 21y), as well as with the problematic behaviors of fostered children themselves. Participants also mentioned *Family constraints*, namely, perceived threat to their family functioning of fostering a child, tensions between partners/family members that threat the family functioning (e.g., “*Disagreement in the household*”, Female, 23y). Lastly, the least stated category was the *Lack of awareness and*

325 *motivation to foster*, in which participants mentioned that they had never considered this
326 possibility, were not motivated, or did not want to have children (e.g., “*Lack of thought*
327 *on the subject*”, Female, 22y).

328 **Discussion**

329 Foster care is an alternative care service for children and young people that need
330 to be removed from their living environment, and in most circumstances is considered
331 preferable than group residential care (Contreras & Muñoz, 2016). However, across the
332 globe, many children and young people are still being placed in residential care due to a
333 shortage of available foster families (Ciarrochi et al., 2012; Diogo & Branco, 2017).
334 Exploring public perceptions about foster families as well as perceived enablers and
335 barriers to become a foster family may inform public policies and practices for
336 recruiting and selecting new families (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2020;
337 Randle et al., 2012; Sebba, 2012).

338 Our findings suggest that foster families were perceived positively by most
339 participants, which is consistent with previous evidence on public opinions about foster
340 families (e.g., Leber & LeCroy, 2012). Most participants described foster families as a
341 source of affection, love, and support for children, but some challenges and
342 vulnerabilities (e.g., temporary placement, adverse experiences) and more ambivalent
343 aspects were also identified (e.g., negative perceptions about the foster care system such
344 as the limited investment in foster family’s selection criteria) – which is also consistent
345 with some evidence on negative perceptions about the foster care system (e.g., lack of
346 adequate training and education provided by the foster agencies to those who decide to
347 become foster families) (Andersson, 2001; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Leber & LeCroy,
348 2012; Sebba, 2012).

The findings about perceived enablers to become a foster family emphasized a *child-centered approach*, which focused on the protective role for the development of children and young people in care, by providing these children and young people with a caring and safe environment and preventing their placement in residential care. This suggests that participants were aware that foster care is considered the most favorable alternative care for children and young people's development, compared to residential care, as foster care provides their integration in a family environment which can usually address their needs more effectively (Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Diogo & Branco, 2020). Thus, the motivation to support children and young people refers mostly to the willingness to help someone in need and is guided by altruistic values. Previous research in the field has also identified factors focused on the foster child as the main enablers to become a foster family (Buehler et al., 2003; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Leber & LeCroy, 2012; Rodger et al., 2006).

In addition to these reasons, one of the most prevalent perceived enablers was having adequate *individual resources* to foster children/young people, such as available time, space, parental experience, social support, and financial resources. This result is consistent with the resource theory, which suggests that the more resources a person has (i.e., something that one person can offer to another to help them to satisfy needs or achieve goals), the more they are willing and able to provide for others (Cox et al., 2003; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Migliorini et al., 2018). Participants also pointed out enablers related with the *foster family*, namely, not having biological children (e.g., due to fertility problems), as well as the desire for family expansion, namely the possibility of adoption, which is consistent with previous research (Andersson, 2001; Migliorini et al., 2018; Rhodes et al., 2006). Thus, participants identified the opportunity of adoption as an enabler for becoming a foster family, which suggests that some misunderstandings

about foster family system and adoption might subsist (Diogo & Branco, 2017; Sebba, 2012).

Having a *close relationship with the fostered child* was also perceived as an important enabler to become a foster family. Specifically, participants mentioned that if they could foster a child they knew (e.g., relatives), they would be more likely to become a foster family. This finding suggests that people perceived fostering as a less threatening role if they were to foster a child with whom they already had a close relationship; hence, a process with fewer uncertainties. In fact, previous familiarity with fostering or with a foster child seems to be associated with willingness to foster (Maeyer et al., 2014; Rhodes et al., 2006; Wilson et al., 2007). Nonetheless, in Portugal, kinship care is not recognized as a type of foster care (contrary to other countries such as Australia, Italy, Romania, and Sweden; Del Valle & Bravo, 2013), but instead is classified as support within the child's life context (Law 147/99). Therefore, family members who decide to take care of their relatives do not go through the same selection and training processes of foster carers, do not receive the same level of support, and are not formally qualified to foster other children. This could be a missed opportunity for the Portuguese foster care system as well as other systems with similar characteristics.

Previous research has referred to extrinsic economic motivations (i.e., financial compensation) as enablers to fostering (Diogo & Branco, 2017; Leber & LeCroy, 2012; Rodger et al., 2006; Sebba, 2012). However, this was not the case in the current study since no economical motivations were identified. One straightforward interpretation for this finding is that financial incentives were less salient or had negligible importance to our participants. However, this contrasts with the importance placed by participants on having financial resources as perceived enabler to foster a child. Hence, an alternative but plausible interpretation could also be that they were unaware that foster families can

399 receive financial support. A third, related explanation for this finding is that we used
400 open questions and a free word association task to gather participant-generated data,
401 whereas previous studies asked directly whether economic reasons were important to
402 become a foster family (e.g., Diogo & Branco, 2017; Leber & LeCroy, 2012).
403 Therefore, it is possible that our participants were both unaware of financial
404 compensations for fostering children, and that financial incentives were less salient as
405 perceived enablers in an audience with limited knowledge of the child protection
406 system, when compared to other drivers such as protecting and promoting child
407 development.

408 As for the barriers to become a foster family, the most common barrier
409 mentioned by the participants referred to the *lack of individual and family resources*,
410 including lack of financial capacity, lack of time, space, and adequate housing
411 conditions. Therefore, these barriers referred mostly to a lack of skills, readiness, and
412 resources required for the role (i.e., considering the high level of responsibility and
413 commitment). These barriers were consistent with previous research (Blackburn, 2016;
414 Cosano, 2004; Goodman et al., 2016; Randle et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2001; Scott &
415 Duncan, 2013), suggesting the need to provide support, resources, and knowledge about
416 how to deal with them. Participants also mentioned *individual constraints*, namely
417 emotional and/or professional instability, and *family constraints*, including the
418 disapproval from the partner or extended family to the fostering experience and the
419 perceived threat to their family functioning. In line with previous findings in the field
420 (Blythe et al., 2012; Buehler et al., 2003; Goodman et al., 2016; Randle et al., 2012;
421 Rhodes et al., 2001; Scott & Duncan, 2013), these findings highlighted that becoming a
422 foster family requires the involvement of all family members and highly committed
423 partners.

Previous findings suggest that the most common barriers related with the foster care system include a lack of knowledge (on behalf of prospective families), a lack of clear/adequate information about the system, slow and very bureaucratic procedures, the lack of adequate support to foster families, and the lack of trust in the child protection system as a whole (e.g., Blackburn, 2016; Blythe et al., 2012; Buehler et al., 2003; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Goodman et al., 2016; Randle et al., 2012; Sebba, 2012). In our study, there were also some references to *foster care system constraints* as deterrents to becoming a foster family. These constraints included the perceived complexity of the foster care system, the anticipation of further separation (i.e., loss of contact with the child after foster care placement), and concern related with children's behavioral problems (Blackburn, 2016; Buehler et al., 2003; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Goodman et al., 2016; Randle et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2001). Lastly, although the literature in the field stresses that the relationship with children's birth families is commonly perceived as a barrier (Blackburn, 2016; Blythe et al., 2012; Buehler et al., 2003; Randle et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2001), this factor was not mentioned by the participants in the present study. This result can be interpreted as a lack of knowledge about foster care within our community sample, as foster children should maintain regular and consistent contacts with their birth families - whenever this is in the best interest of the children and young people in care.

In sum, enablers to become a foster family among a community sample were mostly focused on individual and family resources and motivations to be protective and supportive of children. The most important barriers seemed to be related with the lack of individual and family resources and constraints, but also to foster care system constraints. Overall, the findings from this study are aligned with and provide support to findings from previous studies on this topic, as discussed here. Nonetheless, two other

relevant elements to fostering - i.e., extrinsic economic motivations as enablers to fostering, and relationship with children's birth families as barriers to fostering - were not mentioned by our participants. These are elements that are present in the fostering practice in Portugal (Diogo & Branco, 2017), showing that the participants of this study were either unaware of these issues or chose to highlight other enablers and barriers instead. Lastly, despite their level of knowledge about the fostering practice in Portugal, several participants highlighted the close relationship with the foster children as an important enabler. This finding reinforces that kinship care should be considered again as a type of foster care in Portugal, similarly to other countries (Del Valle & Bravo, 2013), and to the Portuguese context before 2008 when a new Decree-Law removed kinship care as a type of foster care. Also, our findings on participants' misconceptions about adoption and foster care placements point toward the need to discuss and address this issue in the Portuguese system (i.e., the impossibility of being both a candidate for adoption and a foster family in Portugal).

Limitations and implications

Despite the contributions of the current study, some limitations should be noted and addressed in future research. The current data was collected with a convenience sample, composed mostly by single, female participants, which limited the external validity of the findings. Moreover, our sample presents a higher educational level than the Portuguese population (i.e., Higher education in our sample represents 68% and in the Portuguese population merely 19.8%; INE, PORDATA). Given our focus on identifying possible barriers and enablers using a qualitative, bottom-up approach with a community sample (i.e., people not engaged with the child protection system), the relatively large sample ensured that some of the smaller proportions of participants

(e.g., lower levels of education) were nevertheless represented by non-negligible absolute numbers and could generate qualitative inputs that were included in the results. Nevertheless, future studies would benefit from collecting data on this topic with representative samples, especially to identify diverse profiles (i.e., distinct patterns of barriers and enablers) of prospective foster carers. The current study also included young adults (i.e., aged <25 years) who were formally non-eligible in Portugal to become a foster family at the time of data collection. On the one hand, this enables comparison with findings from other cultural contexts that may have different age requirements for fostering and ensures representation of audiences that might be willing or potentially available to foster in the future. On the other hand, it is also plausible that younger participants are less familiar with the foster care system or less committed to fostering a child. Nevertheless, the pattern of results observed in the current study was consistent when we compared the responses of “younger” and “older” participants (see Supplementary Material). Future research exploring age or generation effects on representations about foster care, enablers, and barriers is warranted to inform foster care recruitment and retention strategies. Future research would also benefit from multi-site and multi-method approaches to allow for a deeper understanding of enablers and barriers to become a foster family in diverse cultural contexts.

Notwithstanding the above limitations and directions for future research, the current study also provided a set of tentative implications for practice. Firstly, as inputs on how to optimize the recruitment of foster families, we found that factors centered on children in care were mostly reported in this study as enablers. This is a promising finding as these reasons are associated with positive and successful foster experiences and greater retention of foster families (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Rodger et al., 2006). For that reason, the recruitment of new families may be focused on individuals’

potential protective role of children. Secondly, and consistent with previous evidence (Blackburn, 2016; Blythe et al., 2012; Buehler et al., 2003; Cosano, 2004; Goodman et al., 2016; Randle et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2001; Scott & Duncan, 2013), one of the main barriers to become a foster family found in this study was the lack of individual or family resources (e.g., financial). As such, it is important to provide accurate information about the availability of formal support to prospective foster parents, not only financial but also other resources (e.g., support from staff, training). This is expected to increase clarity and awareness about the different types of support and assistance that are available for foster parents.

Conclusion

To conclude, the current qualitative study collected data from a relatively large community sample identified overall positive perceptions about foster families, but also some negative and ambiguous perceptions. The findings reinforce the importance of disseminating clear information about the criteria and procedures to become a foster family, but also information about what the role entails. This may increase knowledge and awareness about foster care among general or specific target audiences and help increase the pool of prospective candidates to become foster families (Randle et al., 2012; Scott & Duncan, 2013; Sebba, 2012). Implementing informed and family-centered strategies aimed at providing foster carers with adequate assistance before and during child placement should also be seen as a priority. This could improve the recruitment and retention of families and support stable placements.

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661 **Table 1**

662 *Opinions about foster families: categories, participants, and units of analysis*

Category	Participants	Units of analysis	
	<i>n</i>	<i>f</i>	%
Caring role of foster families	327	477	45.6
Social appreciation	336	410	39.2
Challenges and vulnerabilities	75	84	8.0
Negative representations	21	22	2.1
Foster families are needed	21	21	2.0
Resources of foster families	16	16	1.5
Openness to diverse experiences	14	15	1.4
Total		1045	100

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664 **Note.** n= number of participants; f= frequency of units of analysis; %= percentage of units

665 of analysis

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Table 2

Enablers to become foster family: categories, participants, and units of analysis

Category	Participants	Units of analysis	
	<i>n</i>	<i>f</i>	%
Child-centered approach	357	448	53
Individual resources	134	174	20.6
Family factors	90	93	11.0
Close relationship with foster children	62	62	7.3
Self-centered motivations	25	28	3.3
Being familiar with the foster care system	17	17	2.0
Social responsibility	12	12	1.4
Need for foster families	11	11	1.3
Total		845	100

Note. n= number of participants; f= frequency of units of analysis; %= percentage of units of analysis

Table 3

Barriers to become foster family: categories, participants, and units of analysis

Category	Participants	Units of analysis	
	<i>n</i>	<i>f</i>	%
Lack of individual and family resources	418	504	56.9
Individual constraints	137	146	16.5
Foster care system constraints	110	118	13.3
Family constraints	97	100	11.3
Lack of awareness and motivation	17	18	2.0
Total		886	100

Note. n= number of participants; f= frequency of units of analysis; %= percentage of units of analysis