

FOSTER CARE FOR ROMA CHILDREN FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF FOSTER CARE PROVIDERS

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Abstract

This study aims to find the motivation factors among non-Roma foster parents for the foster caring of a Roma child. Roma children are more challenging to place in substitute family care, and the Roma minority is associated with the most prejudices and stereotypes. We used in-depth, biographical interviews with five foster families to collect data, and thematic analysis to process them. The results showed the causes of motivation and positive and negative internal and external intervening influences. Categories of motivational factors included: doing the right thing (the harder-to-place child gets a home), financial reward, and the dream of a (big) family. The financial reward was considered only as a secondary motive (extra income), and several communication partners were negative about it. The dream of a family was related more to children and a woman's inability to have children. The negative external intervening variable appeared as the broadest category, namely prejudices from the extended environment and, in some cases, from one's own family. The internal negative factor was the fear of children running away from their biological families. On the contrary, religious faith and family support were active factors.

Keywords: *Foster care; Roma children; Substitute family care; The Roma minority*

INTRODUCTION

Foster care is a much discussed topic in the Czech Republic, not only from the point of view of the benefits system for foster care providers but also in relation to selecting suitable candidates. Roma children are challenging to place in foster families, although many are available for substitute family care or foster care. One of the reasons for this (and according to several studies the main one) is discrimination. Several public opinion studies have shown that the Roma ethnic group is ranked in the worst position (cf. Institute of Sociology Czech Academy of Sciences, 2019). Regarding the Roma ethnicity and

foster care, foster care can be provided by a close relative, often grandparents or siblings. However, in political discourse, this type of foster care is discussed from the point of view of the possible abuse of benefits intended for foster care providers. For this reason, these benefits for relative foster care were reduced on 1 January 2022. In the Czech Republic, almost no studies focus on non-Roma foster families caring for Roma children. Therefore, this article aims to find the motivation factors for the foster caring of Roma children.

Theory

In the Czech Republic, foster care is the second most common substitute for fam-

ily care (Zezulová, 2012). Foster care in the Czech Republic is regulated primarily by Act No. 89/2012, Coll., Civil Code and Act No. 359/1999 Coll., on children's social and legal protection. The foster parent is obliged to take care of children with a parent's rights and obligations. However, the child's legal representatives are his/her biological parents if they have not been completely deprived of their rights and responsibilities or these have not been limited (Trnková, 2018). Since 2022, foster care has been divided into two types, i.e., mediated and non-mediated foster care. The foster parents receive foster care benefits. In 2021, according to the annual report on the performance of children's social and legal protection for 2021, there were 11,796 substitute parents and 12,351 children in foster care (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2021).

There is no official statistical data on the ethnicity of children in foster care in 2021. However, in 2020, 12,094 children registered in substitute family care (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2020). The research results of Barvíková and Paloncyová (2022) show that 40% of the registered children were Roma (based on qualified estimates by regional and municipal authorities). This research showed that, from the workers' point of view, the primary reason for the long mediating process of alternative family care for Roma children is the lack of Roma applicants. Many applicants fear adverse reactions from the child's biological family, cultural differences, or the child not being accepted by the foster parents' close neighbourhood, or extended family. Weinerová (2014) states concerns about educational problems, especially during puberty.

Factors in deciding to take a Roma child into foster care can also be attitude towards the child's origin, or a strong motivation and determination to help an unwanted child (Vančáková, 2011a). According to Weinerová (2014), another factor is the desire to prove to their neighbouring environment that despite stereotypes, prejudices and widespread discrimination, the host family can raise a good person. When accepting a child with a different cultural identity, non-Roma foster parents may have different attitudes towards the child being Roma. Vančáková (2011a) distinguished six such attitudes:

1) *Denial* – the parents do not talk about the origin with the child or their neighbouring en-

vironment. In some cases, they lie about the origin (higher pigmentation) because the foster parents want to ensure a better chance for the child to join society.

2) *Cutting off* – the foster parents try to cut off the child from being Roma, biological parents, and other members of the Roma community.

3) *Belittling* – the foster parents do not discuss the child's origin because it is a delicate issue.

4) *Overestimation* – the foster parents exaggerate when pointing out the child's origin/ethnicity.

5) *Replacement* – the foster parents try to replace the Roma origin with something similar, especially in terms of appearance, e.g., Italian, Indian, etc.

6) *Respect for the child's roots* (Vančáková, 2011b). This is the last and most suitable attitude from a psychological point of view. At the same time, accepting a child of a different ethnicity can cause long-term stress and dissatisfaction for some foster families (Winnette, 2014).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research used a qualitative research strategy, specifically the interview method and in-depth, biographical interviews. We collected the data in the South Bohemian Region. The research group included non-Roma foster parents living in South Bohemia who had fostered at least one Roma child. We conducted five interviews with foster parents aged 43–66 who fostered 2–4 Roma children. The biographical interview questions focused on the initial motivation for fostering a Roma child, the attitudes and actions of those around them regarding this decision and what other decision-making factors played a significant role.

The interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and subsequently transcribed into written form. Data analysis was carried out using open coding and thematic analysis.

RESULTS

The following results contain individual motivators and positive and negative intervening internal and external influences.

Communication partners reported that their decision-making to apply for foster care lasted several days to weeks; they often sought the advice and opinions of their loved ones. We focused only on the period before a child was fostered and finished with the child's arrival at their new home.

Motivation to accept a Roma child into foster care

Each communication partner had a different motivation, reflecting life experiences and the current situation. However, we have identified three categories: doing the right thing, financial reward, and the dream of a (big) family. We describe them in more detail and supplement them with statements from communication partners.

Doing the right thing

For our communication partners, doing the right thing was an internal drive that came from giving a home to a child who was difficult to place: *"Our children will remember someone who gave them a home, dressed them, gave them lunch and dinner. We felt that they felt at home with us, and we knew we had done the right thing"* (CP3). This motive was also supported in the case of CP2 by the statement of a social worker, who confirmed that there was less interest in Roma children in foster care: *"The social worker told us that everyone needed to be placed, including the Roma!"* In the case of CP1, the motive to do good was based on religion: *"We are doing good, we knew it was the right move. We don't want to sound like fanatics, but we believed that by doing this, we were allowing our children to live a full life that most would likely never know."*

Financial reward

In the case of the "financial reward" category, there were two opposing answers. While some of the communication partners stated that it was a secondary motive (a form of extra income), other communication partners were against financial reasons, as shown by the following statements:

"Unfortunately, when I started fostering, I was fresh out of school, had a husband, no children, and suffered from a chronic illness. At that time, foster care was an option for me to have children and be at home with them, but also a form of extra income" (CP1).

"A child for money? Seriously? We didn't want to make money off them or bribe them; we wanted to give them a home" (CP2).

A dream of a (big) family

The concept of a family also differed significantly among individual communication partners. CP3 said the reason for (any) foster care was that the woman could not have her own children: *"... The desire for a family is a natural part of a woman's life. I decided to start a family differently."* CP4 compensated for their dysfunctional family and negative experiences from their childhood and previous life. They wanted to compensate the children for what they had not experienced themselves – a safe, stable, and functioning environment. CP1 stated that they lived in a harmonious family environment but wished for a bigger family. After his wife's health problems, they took eight more children into foster care – in addition to their own two children: *"We have ten children; we always wanted a big family. Although we know the differences between our two and eight fostered children, we have never considered them. They are our children, and that is why we try to give them the love they deserve."*

Intervening variables

Negative external intervening variable – prejudices of the environment

Prejudices played a dual role in the case of communication partners. On the one hand, there were concerns about the impact on the foster family and, on the other hand, the fear of the Roma child being bullied.

In general, the most extensive category that all communication partners mentioned were prejudices and stereotypes from the wider environment. On the one hand, family and friends: *"My mother said that we were crazy, and we didn't know how much we would suffer because that child would never be a good person"* (CP4). On the other hand, office workers, including social workers, tried to invalidate the decision to take Roma children into foster care. Support from social workers is integral to the foster care application process. Such support should be automatic, honest, and always at a professional level. While CP4 preferred a Roma child from the beginning, the other families discussed it with so-

cial workers. In two cases, the experience was negative due to prejudice: *“She was terrible, she forced me to foster a child that she liked. A typical blond boy with blue eyes. She kept saying that the first child should take after the parents”* (CP3).

The social worker prepared CP5 for the fact that these children often have intellectual problems and are educated outside mainstream education: *“What the worker was hammering into our heads was not motivating all. She straight up said that the child would be stupid”* (CP5).

Finally, it was also about the wider community, neighbours, and municipality residents: *“The rumours and reactions also reached us, but only when we took another Roma. People in the neighbourhood knew us and noticed us even more”* (CP5).

Prejudices from the neighbourhood influenced the decision-making to foster a Roma child. The communication partners had to consider the future above all. This manifested the fear of integrating a Roma child into the group of peers: *“I kept thinking – what if they bully him? This scared me the most, and I was afraid that I would be worthless as his future parent”* (CP3).

Positive intervening variables – family and faith support

Communication partners 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 agree that the main protective factor that influenced their decision were their parents. *“Mum was excited, she gave me so much energy, and it was what I needed”* (CP2). CP1 added that their motivation was greatly influenced by faith in God. *“We are all religious, and the parents knew God was with us, as they were [the parents].”*

Negative internal intervening variable – fear of the child “running away” to their biological family

The biggest fear of the communication partners was that the child, aware of his/her different ethnic origin, would search for his/her biological family and run to them: *“... what if he doesn’t mind and tries to get closer to his people?”* (CP3), or vice versa – that the biological family would require contact with their child: *“We imagined a situation where they called us and wanted to see him, would we allow it?”* (CP5). These concerns were like

reflecting on a potential situation and searching for solutions to previously unexperienced situations. The communication partners also stated that similar concerns went away over time during contact with the child, or by deciding they would leave all decisions to the child. *“We said to ourselves, if he grows up and understands what’s going on, then let him make his own decisions. We will definitely not force him into something he does not want”* (CP5).

DISCUSSION

The research focused on a specific group of foster parents, specifically non-Roma foster parents with a child of Roma ethnicity in foster care. The study aimed to find the motivation factors of non-Roma foster parents to care for a Roma child. Data analysis showed the following main motivation factors – *“doing the right thing”* (this factor is characterised by inner conviction), *“financial reward”* (the financial reward is an inherent part of foster care – expenses for maintenance, additional income, etc.), and *“dream of a (big) family”* (foster care could fulfil ideals and ideas about care and family). Identified intervening variables also interfered with motivation. We divided them into negative (prejudices, stereotypes, fears) and positive (family, faith support).

Bubleová et al. (2014) point out that the reasons applicants accept a child in any substitute family care must be based on personal motivation and inner conviction. The communication partners stated that the motivation influenced the entire process of mediating foster care. Vágnerová (2012) says that motivation is no less necessary when foster parents already have a child at home. The communication partners stated that their neighbouring environment supported their motivation, whether this be families, friends, or social workers.

Ptáček et al. (2011) deal with a stable family background that should be provided to a child in foster care, which our communication partners consider to be one of the main motivating factors for fostering a child. Other reasons are individual, such as religious belief (cf. Howell-Moroney, 2014) or financial motivation.

The communication partners said they strived for a safe relationship between themselves and the children, although they knew that they were not their birth parents. They try to show this effort daily by caring, providing for the needs of the children, offering love, a sense of security and through many other ways. Cairns (2013) calls this the safe bond between surrogate parents and the child.

To improve their relationship, foster parents maintain contact with other foster families with Roma children. They exchange experiences, give each other advice, spend free time together, or participate in joint training. The Moravian-Silesian Region (2014) also points to this way of gaining experience.

According to Winnette (2014) and Weinerová (2014), the motivation of foster parents to accept an ethnically different child is most threatened by prejudice from the environment. The main threat to our communication partners was the fear of prejudice, gossip, and criticism. On the contrary, Weinerová's theory (2014) did not agree with the communication partners' response to the fear of educational problems during puberty. The communication partners did not mention this fear and, when asked, confirmed that they did not have it. However, there was a fear that the child might "run away" to their biological family.

The Association of Social Service Providers (2018) states that the motivation for fostering a child can be linked to concerns and fear from parents. This also appeared among our communication partners. In our case, the fears were reinforced by discrimination against children based on their different ethnicity, and the fear that their neighbouring environment would not understand the decision.

The research results represent a probe into the issue and should be further expanded to include other caregivers of non-Roma children. This would help to confirm the trends regarding prejudices and stereotypes. This fact is a significant limitation of this research. In our opinion, a very interesting point of view

would be a situation where the caregiver is a member of the Roma ethnic group, and the child is a majority member. However, due to the nature of foster care, this group will be tiny in number and difficult to access from a research point of view. The strength of this research is its uniqueness, because it focuses on a specific group of caregivers.

CONCLUSIONS

Between applying and receiving a child, applicants for foster care have to undergo training, psychological tests, and make a personal decision as to whether they are willing to take in a child of a different ethnicity. According to the communication partners, their reasons to foster a child should be supported mainly by family and friends, but this did not happen in all cases. Prejudices towards the Roma minority that appear in society influenced future foster care providers in the form of fears, both from their closest and more distant neighbouring environment.

The research results showed that for each communication partner and their motivation, it was important to have a functioning family that would give the fostered children a sense of security and a way of life that they would most likely not have in a children's home or in a dysfunctional family. All the communication partners stated that their main goal was to raise children so they would have a chance to secure a good future life. From a practical point of view, we recommend working with prejudices and stereotypes – not only in the case of those interested in foster care for a Roma child – but also to extend this possibility to the area of their extended family and close social environment, especially in the form of education.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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