Original Paper

Foster Parent Experiences of Pre-adoptive Placement Disruption: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

Adoption is the permanency plan for more than one-quarter of all children in the U.S. foster care system. In 2022, more than 108,800 children were living in out-of-home care and awaiting adoption. Pre-adoptive placement disruption is one reason children continue to wait. This interpretive phenomenological study explored the experiences of 11 foster parents in a Midwestern state who lived through a pre-adoptive placement disruption. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to identify pre-adoptive parents' motivations, expectations, realities, and the meanings they attributed to the disruption. Data reveal compound loss, lived vulnerability and ambivalence, and lasting consequences related to future foster and adoptive decision-making. Findings have implications for permanency practice and research.

Keywords: child welfare, adoption, pre-adoptive disruption, pre-adoptive foster parents, interpretive phenomenology

Introduction

Awaiting Adoption

Each year in the United States (U.S.), more than 200,000 children and youth enter the child welfare system for reasons of abuse and neglect. Roughly 200,000 children and youth exit the system annually by way of reunification or adoption and thousands of youth also age-out of the system without permanency. Permanency refers to a permanent, safe, family-like living situation that offers legal rights and the status of full family membership (Barth & Berry, 1987; Casey Family Foundation, 2005). Permanency is an overarching goal for each child who enters into foster care. Although reunification with the family of origin (often the birth family) is considered the most desirable permanency outcome (Barth & Berry, 1987), at times, reunification is not feasible, safe, or appropriate. In these cases, adoption becomes the preferred permanency outcome for children (Snowden, Leon, & Sieracki, 2008). Adoption provides children and youth in need of permanency with a "substitute family that society accepts" (Barth & Berry, 1987, p. 72).

Despite thousands of children and youth exiting the foster care system to permanency or aging-out annually, another group exists. At any given moment, thousands of children continue to await adoption while residing in out-of-home care (including family foster, kinship, and residential care). These children are referred to as *waiting children* (Annual Foster Care and Adoption Reporting System [AFCARS], 2012). Waiting children lack stability and permanency. While there is no federal definition for waiting children, the AFCARS—the national reporting system for case-level child welfare data—defines waiting children as young people in foster care who have a case plan of adoption and/or children whose parental rights have been terminated (the termination of parental rights [TPR] is complete). Youth whose parental rights have been terminated, who are over the age of 16, and who have a case plan of emancipation are not considered to be waiting children. A child is considered to be waiting if he or she meets the waiting criteria on the last day of the federal fiscal year (September 30th) (AFCARS, 2012). Waiting children are also referred to as *pre-adoptive children*, signifying their status as available for adoption, yet without permanency. The terms waiting children and pre-adoptive children are used interchangeably throughout this article. Youth who meet waiting child criteria are included when the terms are used.

Waiting children are cared for by both foster and pre-adoptive foster parents. Additionally, some pre-adoptive children reside in residential care facilities. Historically, foster parents have been under-valued and under-utilized as resources for permanency. Following the passage of federal laws prizing permanency, such as the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA), foster care and adoption practice shifted to recognize the importance of foster parent adoptions. Today, foster parents are acknowledged as a valuable source of adoptive families for children in foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2013). Foster parents are a critical link between waiting children and adoption. Pre-adoptive foster parents are those parents who foster a waiting child with an openness, willingness, or intention to adopt the child from foster care. In many cases, pre-adoptive foster parents have completed additional training to prepare them for adopting children from the foster care system.

Pre-adoptive children and pre-adoptive foster parents are rarely recognized as unique cohorts in child welfare legislation or literature. Pre-adoptive populations, however, have needs that differ from other children and foster parents who are not awaiting adoption. The practical and emotional experiences for a child or parent with an impending or prospective adoption are inherently different than those associated with a planned reunification or a completed adoption. Permanency limbo is a distinct experience for children and parents with a pre-adoptive status. Pre-adoptive children and pre-adoptive foster parents should be recognized as unique cohorts within child welfare. A need exists for research, policy, and practice to identify, distinguish, and address these unique cohorts and their experiences and respond accordingly. This study is an attempt to purposefully attend to pre-adoptive experiences.

Background

In 2022, there were nearly 370,000 children in foster care in the US and more than 108,000 were awaiting adoption (AFCARS, 2022). The average age of a waiting child was about seven and one-half years (7.6 years) (AFCARS, 2022). On average, a waiting child had been living in foster care for almost three years (34.9 months) of their young life (AFCARS, 2022). Adoption was the case plan for more than one-quarter of all children residing in out-of-home care (28%). However, only 5% of *all children* in foster care were identified as placed in pre-adoptive homes and only 13% of *all waiting children* were placed in pre-adoptive homes (AFCARS, 2022). This means that only a small percentage of children in need of adoption were identified to be residing with pre-adoptive foster parents. On average, the parental rights of waiting children had been terminated for more than one and one-half years (19.1 months) (AFCARS, 2022), rendering these children to languish in the foster care system without permanency for extended periods of time.

In 2022, approximately 19,000 youth left foster care without a permanent family (AFCARS, 2022). This figure does not include more than 22,000 additional youth who exited care via guardianship and more than 11,000 who exited while living with a relative (AFCARS, 2022). Children who age-out of foster care are more likely than other children to experience challenges with housing (including homelessness), education, employment, physical health, mental health, substance abuse, and criminal involvement (Schelbe, 2011). Achieving permanency offers children a stronger possibility of developing and maintaining life-long relationships with parents, siblings, and extended family members (Rosenthal, 1993). Stable, permanent relationships play a significant role in the development of a sense-of-self and achieving overall, long-term well-being (Freundlich, Avery, Munson, & Gerstenzang, 2006). A lack of permanency is associated with a milieu of negative, potentially life-long consequences in relational, social, emotional, and independent functioning. Without a permanent, stable home, the possibility of forming strong, meaningful, trusting relationships with other human beings, including caregivers, is compromised. Goldstein, Freud, and Solnit (1973) contend that children must have the opportunity to love and be loved and valued by at least one adult in order to develop self-esteem, self-value, and confidence in the possibility of future achievement. When these relationships do not exist, for reasons of impermanency and instability, the sense-of-self and ability to develop relationships with others may be compromised. Achieving permanency does not ameliorate the risk for future challenges or possible consequences associated with surviving abuse, neglect, and/or other traumas. However, the perils associated with drifting through care and possibly out of care are significant.

Foster Care Drift

A host of factors affect waiting children's journeys to permanency. One particular phenomenon, recognized to plague waiting children for decades, is referred to as *foster care drift* (Maas & Engler, 1959). Foster care drift defines the experiences of children and youth who drift from placement to placement within the child welfare system, without the promise of permanency. Disruptions result in placement changes for children and youth with permanency needs, compromise progress toward permanency, and significantly affect the lives of children, youth, and families. Children who experience more out of home placements experience longer waits to permanency (Avery, 2000; Cushing & Greenblatt, 2013; Rosenthal, 1993). Multiple types of disruption can contribute to a child's impermanency; child welfare practice and literature recognize several types of disruption. Varying types of disruption include placement disruption (the disruption of a foster care/out-of-home placement [Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain, & Whaley, 2001]), reunification disruption or re-entry (the disruption of a placement for a child/youth who has been reunified with his or her family of origin and re-entry back into out-of-home care [CWIG, 2017]), adoption disruption (the disruption of a placement before a finalized legal adoption [CWIG, 2012]), and adoption dissolution (the disruption of an adoptive placement after a finalized legal adoption [CWIG, 2012]).

The lack of consistent terminology to describe certain types of disruption in the literature has made studying disruption challenging. The term adoption disruption has historically been used to describe both disruptions prior to a finalized adoption as well as after a finalized adoption. For the purposes of this article, pre-adoptive placement disruption is used to describe the placement disruptions of pre-adoptive children, prior to a finalized legal adoption.

Literature Review

The placement disruptions of waiting children are rarely recognized as unique experiences in child welfare literature or federal child welfare data collection or documentation. Existing foster care placement disruption and adoption disruption research likely capture some pre-adoptive disruptions; however, delineations between disruption types are not always clearly established. Additionally, because of differential definitions, adoption disruption research at times includes disruptions that are actually adoption dissolutions. Nevertheless, existing adoption disruption literature is closest to the study of pre-adoptive disruptions.

Much of the existing adoption disruption literature regarding children and families in the United States is dated (Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Cushing & Greenblatt, 2013; Smith, 2003; Smith, Howard, Garnier, & Ryan, 2006; Vandivere et al., 2009). Contemporary researchers note that the majority of adoption disruption research was conducted in the 1980's and 1990's with small samples and many of these early studies did not always define adoption disruption in the same way that modern researchers do (disruption prior to legal adoption finalization). The literature suggests periods of time when the number of adoption disruptions in the US increased. Adoption disruptions increased as the number of pre-adoptive children with special needs grew in the 1970's (Rosenthal, 1993; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Schmidt, Rosenthal, & Bombeck, 1988) as well as following the permanency planning reforms of the 1980's (Barth & Barry, 1987). Therefore, it is understandable why much of the existing adoption disruption literature comes out of the 1980's and 1990's. While these studies are no doubt important to the body of existing knowledge, it is possible if not likely, that social, environmental, political, and cultural shifts have altered the context of adoption disruption over the past several decades.

The lack of contemporary adoption disruption research in the U.S. is concerning for multiple reasons. First, the experiences and events associated with the unique cohorts of pre-adoptive populations are underrepresented in modern child welfare literature. Also, the number and proportion of waiting children has increased since the passage of the 1997 ASFA (Smith, 2003). Even decades later, outcomes and consequences of ASFA and other legislation relevant to permanency are largely unknown due to a lack of modern investigation. Following years of declining foster care numbers, the number of children in out-of-home care has been steadily growing since 2012. Not surprisingly, the number of waiting children has also grown.

Although much existing U.S. adoption disruption literature is dated, a 2019 special issue of Research on

Social Work Practice (Volume 29, Issue 2) dedicates time and space to exploring research that has accumulated in recent years. In this special issue, scholars identify many of the same terminological and methodological challenges identified in past research as well as many of the same types of child, family, and system/service characteristics associated with adoption disruption (Palacios, Rolock, Selwyn, & Barbosa-Ducharne, 2019). Although this special issue undoubtedly adds to the knowledge base of adoption and disruption-related research, U.S.-specific research attending to disrupted placements prior to a final legalized adoption remains limited. Basic research and applied implications related to adoption disruption remain (Palacios et al., 2019).

Foster care placement disruption research has identified several potential casual factors; however, far less is known about potential antecedents of adoption disruption. Existing adoption disruption studies have primarily explored risk factors including child factors (Barth, Berry, Yoshikami, Goodfield, & Caron, 1988; Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Rosenthal, 1993; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Smith & Howard, 1991; Smith et al., 2006), family factors (Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Rosenthal, 1993; Rosenthal, Schmidt, & Conner, 1988; Smith & Howard, 1991; Schmidt et al., 1988; Smith et al., 2006), and system/service factors (Carnochan, Moore, & Austin, 2013; Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Smith et al., 2006).

A range of child, family, and system/service-related factors are also associated with adoption delay or disruption (Carnochan et al., 2013). A summary of existing disruption literature reveals that children who have experienced sexual abuse, demonstrate sexually acting-out and aggressive behaviors, older children, and children who have special needs are at greater risk than their peers without these characteristics to experience adoption disruption. Pre-adoptive foster homes, placements that include other children, and relative-care placements appear to be protective factors against adoption disruption. Additionally, more positive foster parents' perceptions of their competency, commitment, and attachment and positive family functioning and integration appear to buffer against adoption disruption. Finally, system and service provision factors including formal support and increased years of worker experience appear to be protective factors against adoption disruption while negative attitudes regarding the adoptability of some waiting children, a greater number of agencies involved in the case, and child welfare worker turnover may work against timely adoption from foster care. While these findings provide a base of risk and protective factors associated with disruption, further research that purposefully attends to the experience of pre-adoptive populations is necessary. Additionally, pre-adoptive/adoption disruption research would benefit from identifying and using a singular, agreed-upon definition of the phenomenon associated with a disrupted placement prior to a finalized adoption. Variations in terminology disserve the efforts of those interested in investigating and improving experiences, policies, and practices related to pre-adoptive and other types of placement disruption (Coakley & Berrick, 2008).

Study Rationale

This study seeks to make meaningful contributions to adoption-related research by purposefully attending to the phenomenon of pre-adoptive placement disruption. This study gives voice to pre-adoptive foster parents in hopes of recognizing their experiences, needs, and strengths. The overarching purpose of this study, and future studies related to this one, is to improve the system of adoptions from foster care—securing safe, permanent, family placements for more children and youth who await adoption.

Methodology and Methods

The overarching mission of the child welfare system is to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. Pre-adoptive foster parents and adoptive foster parents are a critical resource for carrying out the mission of child welfare—with specific regard to achieving and maintaining permanency on behalf of waiting children. Parents' perspectives and experiences must be acknowledged in an effort to learn more about the needs of pre-adoptive children and families. Pre-adoptive parents are a bridge connecting waiting children and the system designed to meet their permanency needs. Pre-adoptive foster parents are the selected sample for this study about pre-adoptive placement disruption. Nevertheless, value in the perspectives and experiences of other stakeholders associated with this phenomenon—especially those of children and youth as well as providers and

professionals—is acknowledged.

The research question for this study is: *What is the experience of pre-adoptive placement disruption for pre-adoptive foster parents?* This research question is devoted to understanding the contextual elements of the phenomenon - pre-adoptive placement disruption. Answers to this question may bring us closer to an understanding of pre-adoptive placement disruption and how the processes and outcomes of the experience are constructed and lived, in hopes of improving adoption from foster care practices.

The majority of existing placement disruption research, regardless of disruption type, is rooted in the post-positivist paradigm, using quantitative methods of inquiry. Pragmatism is also present; many researchers have used readily accessible datasets or populations—at times resulting in small, geographically-limited, and population-restricted studies. Qualitative methods are limited in placement disruption research. Researchers have identified risk and protective factors and child, family, and system/service characteristics in order to predict the likelihood of disruption, presumably in an effort to control the event from occurring. However, some of these factors and characteristics, especially those associated with demographics, cannot be controlled for in real life. It is difficult to reduce the phenomenon of pre-adoptive placement disruption to a list of variables. Multiple truths and realities exist within the experience of disruption and the only way to get closer to those truths is to explore the experiences of those who have lived them.

In an effort to address methodological gaps in disruption research and attend to multiple truths associated with living through a pre-adoptive placement disruption, this qualitative study used phenomenology (the study of experience) and hermeneutics (the study of interpretation) to answer the primary research question. Together, hermeneutics and phenomenology inform a specific type of phenomenological analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This type of inquiry permits the researcher to explore and interpret data related to *what it is like* to experience a pre-adoptive placement disruption and *the possible understandings that can be derived* by purposefully attending to the phenomenon with those who experienced it. Although phenomenological methodology is not typically revered as action-oriented research, this author contends that phenomenological research can give voice to participants who can inform the understandings of researchers and practitioners, which can lead to action.

Phenomenology and Theory

Phenomenological philosophy acknowledges theory in a unique way. According to Husserl, theory is not used as an explanatory tool; theory is present, but it is not the lens through which phenomenological scientists use to describe the world (Husserl & Welton, 1998). Husserl notes that when attending to things and objects in the natural attitude, theory is not used to validate things or objects; description of the things must come before theory. Van Manen (1990) notes that "In our efforts to make sense of our lived experiences with theories and hypothesizing frameworks we are forgetting that it is living human beings who bring schemata and frameworks into being and not the reverse" (p. 45). Being tied to a particular theoretical framework for carrying out a phenomenological study is problematic. Placing theory before the research may compromise the possibility of the research actually clarifying theory.

Rather than explicating a particular, presupposed theoretical framework, phenomenology was used as a guiding and founding philosophy as well as a methodology and a research approach for this study. Theory cannot and should not be ignored, however, as theory does indeed exist in the natural world. Existing literature should be used to frame what makes the phenomenon under study important—to help the researcher answer the question, "what is this thing?" The author used existing literature and theoretical considerations regarding general systems theory and crisis theory to provide context for the idea of disruption and personal construct theory and ambivalence theory to develop interview questions for this study. Acknowledging theory in this way helped to frame and illuminate the phenomenon while still allowing the meaning of the experience to emerge organically from the data.

Bias, Positionality, and Quality Criteria

Using criteria of rigor inherent to quantitative research is not appropriate for evaluating the quality of qualitative research (Emden & Sandelowski, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011; Yardley, 2000). However, there is also no final or single answer about what

constitutes good qualitative research; a plethora of practices and perspectives exist (Emden & Sandelowski, 1998). McConnell-Henry et al. (2011) contend that interpretive researchers benefit from establishing their own foundations for rigor versus being pressured into using positivist criteria or positivist language to describe evaluation criteria in interpretive work. Yardley's (2000) four broad principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research, sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance, were used as quality criteria for this study (see Yardley [2000] for a detailed explanation of these criteria). To address biases, as well as the likely consequences of positionality, the researcher routinely reflected upon personal and professional values and experiences through journaling and with other scholars. These measures served as foundations for rigor in this study.

Study Components

Participants in IPA are selected because they can provide access to the phenomenon under study; IPA participants represent a perspective versus a population (Smith et al., 2009). The sample for this study included eleven pre-adoptive foster parents who experienced a pre-adoptive placement disruption. Inclusion criteria for this study included being a current or former licensed foster parent who fostered a pre-adoptive child with an openness, willingness, or intention to adopt the child; however, the placement disrupted prior to a finalized adoption and the child moved to an alternative placement. Participants meeting these criteria had the capacity provide a particular perspective on the pre-adoptive placement disruption phenomenon.

Nine interviews were completed with a total of 11 participants. The sample was both purposive and convenient. Three child welfare agencies assisted with recruitment efforts—one public agency and two private agencies that contracted with the public agency. To protect the identities of families/clients, agencies reviewed inclusion criteria, shared the number of families who met the criteria with the author, and the author provided recruitment letters in pre-stamped envelopes to agencies who addressed and mailed the letters. Letter recipients interested in the study and/or in participating were encouraged to reach out to the author directly to protect confidentiality. There was no external incentive for participation. Participants hailed from a variety of locales (rural, urban, and suburban) in one Midwestern state. Additional sample information is presented in the study findings. This study was approved by a University Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the state where the research was conducted.

Data Gathering

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The author developed a semi-structured interview guide based upon existing knowledge of child welfare and permanency practice, a pilot study, existing literature, and in consultation with other scholars. The interview guide consisted of 15 primary questions and was complemented with probes. Interview questions were designed to investigate and contextualize experiences before, during, and after the pre-adoptive placement disruption and explore what it was like for the participants to live through the phenomenon. The author also gathered demographic and background information related to the participants' age and race, length of time as a foster parent, child's age and race, length of the pre-adoptive placement, licensing agency, pre-adoptive training, current fostering status, and if the participant(s) had adopted from the foster care system. Participants selected interview settings; six interviews were completed in participants' homes, one in the participants' business, and two in a public library.

Interviews were recorded, with participants' permission, using a digital recorder. The author took notes on a paper copy of the interview guide. Interviews ranged in length from 23 minutes to one hour and 50 minutes. The average interview lasted approximately 48 minutes. Two interviews were with married couples. Two of the seven single-person interviews were completed with individuals who were married to one another but elected to complete separate interviews. Data were transcribed verbatim and identifying names and details were replaced with pseudonyms. Data were gathered over a period of four months. In addition to the recorded interviews, handwritten interview notes, memos, and journal entries were completed throughout the study and were used as data in the analysis.

Data Analysis

Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA framework was used to analyze the data gathered for this study. Table 1 outlines the Smith et al. framework used for data analysis. Components of Vagle's (2014) post-intentional methodology and philosophy and Van Manen's (1990) six themes for a pedagogical approach to phenomenological research also informed data analysis. See Vagle (2014) and VanManen (1990) for details regarding these approaches. These three approaches to analyzing phenomenological data are similar and complementary. Data analysis was approached from a whole-part-whole orientation, which is advocated by many prominent phenomenologists, especially those concerned with hermeneutics. The whole-part-whole orientation to analysis is concerned with the dynamic relationship between the part (i.e., one quotation within an entire transcript or one transcript within the entire set of transcripts) and the whole (i.e., the collective transcripts) on a variety of levels.

Table 1. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin Framework for IPA Data Analysis

Step	Description	Activities
1: Reading & Re-reading	Becoming immersed in the data	Reading & re-reading the transcript; listening to & re-listening to the recording; imagining the interview taking place; noting striking observations
2: Initial Noting	Identifying remarkable aspects of the data	Correcting transcription errors; noting descriptive, conceptual and reflective, & linguistic comments
3. Developing Emergent Themes	Creating thematic memos, based upon initial noting	Breaking the data into smaller, re-organized sections; identify themes growing out of the transcript & author's notes
4. Searching for connections among emergent themes	Non-prescriptive efforts for identifying connections across the emergent themes	Re-reading the transcript; drawing on initial notes & emergent themes; compiling list of new & revised emergent themes; combining themes through abstraction; renaming themes to better reflect theme clusters; organizing theme evidence for each theme
5. Moving to the next case	Move to the next transcript	Repeat steps 1-4 for each transcript
6. Looking for patterns across cases	Creative, non-prescriptive efforts for identifying connections among emergent themes across all transcripts	Answering the questions: What connections are there across cases? How does a theme in one case help illuminate a different case? Which themes are the most potent?; compiling, re-organizing, re-labeling themes; Producing an interpretive description of the phenomenon

Results

Findings for this study begin with a brief introduction to participant characteristics. Next, essential elements of the disruption experience are presented, using participants' quotes, to evidence the findings. For participants in this study, the essential elements of pre-adoptive placement disruption include significant loss, highly emotional responses to the child's pre-adoptive placement and disruption, betrayal and blame, and ultimately, a repurposing of their challenges.

Participant Profiles

The 11 foster parents who shared their experiences of pre-adoptive placement disruption are diverse

and their disruptions occurred under varied circumstances. Participants came from a variety of professional and personal backgrounds and cared for children with different histories and presenting needs. Their experiences are unique, yet, each participant experienced significant and meaningful loss that was transformational in some way. Table 2 and Table 3 provide participants' demographic and background characteristics.

Table 2. Participant Characteristics I

Participant	Age	Race	Marital Status	Agency Type	Locale	Biological Children	Ever Adopted
Tracy	47	African American	Single	Private	Suburban	Yes	Yes
Eric	52	Caucasian	Married	Private	Rural	No	Yes
Nancy	38	Caucasian	Married	Public	Small town	Yes	Yes
Kyle	39	Caucasian	Married	Public	Small town	Yes	Yes
Chad	37	Caucasian	Married	Private	Suburban	No	No
Lisa	36	Caucasian	Married	Private	Suburban	No	No
Debra	52	Caucasian	Widowed	Private	Suburban	Yes	Yes
Leanne	28	Caucasian	Married	Private	Suburban	No	No
Luke	29	Caucasian	Married	Private	Suburban	No	No
Marcy	58	Caucasian	Widowed	Private	Small town	No	Yes
Tina	45	Caucasian	Married	Private	Rural	Yes	Yes

Table 3. Participant Characteristics II

Participant	Year Licensed	Pre-adoptive Training	Placement Year	Disruption Year	Placement Length
Tracy	1998	Yes	2009	2009	8 months
Eric	2004	Yes	2007	2008	6 months
Nancy	2005	Yes	2010	2010	< 1 month
Kyle	2005	Yes	2010	2010	< 1 month
Chad	2013	Yes	2013	2013	10 months
Lisa	2013	Yes	2013	2013	10 months
Debra	2004	Yes	2008	2008	9 months
Leanne	2013	No	2013	2013	6 months
Luke	2013	No	2013	2013	6 months
Marcy	2002	Yes	2008	2013	5 years
Tina	2003	Yes	2003	2006	3 years

Table 4. Child and Disruption Characteristics

Participant	Child Characteristics & Names	Key Factor(s) in Disruption	Subsequent Placement	Adopted at Time of Interview
Tracy	3 African American, female siblings ages 4, 5, & 7 *Lindsey, Lydia, and Layla*	Agency Decision; Policy-related	Different pre-adoptive home	No
Eric	Caucasian female age 10 *Tiffany*	Behavior Challenges; Increased Level of Need	Psychiatric Hospital	No
Nancy Kyle	Bi-racial male age 18 months *Darian*	Agency Decision; Timing-related	Different pre-adoptive home	Yes
Chad Lisa	Caucasian siblings, 1 boy age 5, one girl age 4 *Blake and Carly*	Behavior Challenges; Agency Decision	Different pre-adoptive home	Unknown
Debra	2 Caucasian female siblings, ages 8 & 9 *Bethany and Melissa*	Behavior challenges; Agency Decision	Different pre-adoptive home	1 sibling Yes 1 sibling No
Leanne Luke	Caucasian female age seven *Felicity*	Behavior Challenges; Agency Decision	Different pre-adoptive home	No
Marcy	Caucasian female age 10 *Courtney*	Behavior Challenges; Increased Level of Need	Residential Treatment	No
Tina	Caucasian male age 3 *Bryce*	Behavior Challenges; Multiple Reunification/Kinship Care Attempts	Biological Mother	No, residing with biological family

Findings and Evidence

Compound Loss

Data reveal that the experience of pre-adoptive placement disruption for foster parents is characterized by compound loss. Compound loss can be thought of as experiencing multiple losses and the consequences that accompany those multiple losses (Grief Link Forum, 2014). In this study, the experience of compound loss has two essential parts, the loss of the child and the loss of purpose. The first loss is the loss of the child—the child is no longer physically present in the parents' lives.

Marcy shared the pain associated with her loss – like losing a child, a lasting pain:

> *It hurts. I mean, it hurts when you know you can't do anything. It's almost like losing one of your own children, it really is, and that's just want it felt like – just what I felt like – it was so hard and it was hard for me to pack up her things, it was hard for me to pack up her room up. Because I knew, this time it was final…I didn't want it to happen and it just hurt like that, like they were gone and it was like a piece of you is gone. A piece of you is gone.*

Chad described the family's efforts to deal with their loss after the children moved to a new home:

> *Yeah, we cleansed the house. We took everything off the walls, we took all the pictures and boxed*

them up. We took all books, anything – you name it – if it was child-like, it was put up away, out of sight, out of mind so that we could begin the healing process. I don't know if that's the best way to do it, but it's the way we did it. And we told them, we did a two-hour window – I think it took us 90 minutes and the second we were done, mom and sis left, and we got the hell outta this house.

The second loss is the loss of purpose, a goal-oriented purpose that pushes foster parents toward achieving positive outcomes on behalf of children and families. This purpose motivates foster parents to seek and carryout the placement of children in need. Foster parents are motivated to provide foster care and adopt from the foster care system based upon a personal mission of sorts. For couples in this study, at least one parent embodied this purpose. One consequence of the loss of purpose is the loss of desired outcomes—something the parents had imagined for themselves, their families, or the pre-adoptive children. Participants shared about this sense of purpose by describing some of their motivations and expectations for providing pre-adoptive foster care.

Lisa described it as a "calling":

Well, my boss is a nun and we were talking about this, maybe my third day at work, and I was telling her about it and she just looked at me and said, "It's your calling, it's that simple, it's your calling," and I thought, 'Wow, she just summed it up!' There's a lot of backstory there that we could go through, but she's right and as I've gotten older and I've worked with kids in [a] youth opportunity center, in housing projects, I know some of those terrible situations that are out there and I was just called to it, that's the only way to talk about it, I think. It's just one of those things you know you should do. Period.

Kyle described knowing from a young age that he would adopt children:

From the time I was little I always knew that there was – we were going to have some biological children, not many, and then have other children who either came into the home and went somewhere else or came into the home and stayed. That's kind-of how I was raised, so that's always been my path, I've never questioned it. There are different ways I tell different people, depending on whom I'm talking to, but that's the real core of it.

Disruption compromises the pre-adoptive foster parents' ability to enact their purpose and achieve desired outcomes. The parents' purpose, their mission, their desired outcomes go unrealized. The loss of purpose resulted in feelings of guilt, regret, failure, and anger.

The Through-ness

The data reveal certain elements of "through-ness" as foster parents work toward their purpose, during the placement, before the disruption. Vagle (2014) describes the "through-ness" of an experience as the elements of movement and the meanings people attribute to their experiences. The disruption is more fluid than a point-in-time experience. The elements of "through-ness" shared by participants help to contextualize how participants *lived* the experience before, during, and after the physical move of the child to an alternative placement. Findings suggest through-ness experiences such as vulnerability, isolation, and ambivalence.

Nancy experienced vulnerability in her role:

…the hand of judgment is strong in [the state child welfare department] - so I began to think about the scrutiny which I was under as a foster parent as well and I began to think that little things, which are completely normal, I would be scared, 'Oh, what if they saw this?' or 'What if they saw that?' but it wasn't anything that was big, it was like if I accidently let my kid go out to play at the wrong time. So, I began to question a lot of parenting decisions, where before, I would have been affirmative. And I think it was just –it made me question whether or not I could this again because I was worried about the kids already in the home, was worried – I just became worried about everything…

Eric expressed how meeting Tiffany's needs created an awkward awareness when around extended family. These types of experiences led Eric and other participants to feel alone:

Well, we try not to give up on any kid. As hard as it sounds, and we've even had our family saying,

"You guys are crazy," because they were aware of things that were going on, because having her in our home did affect how we were around other people – especially family members – because of her past sexual abuse. You know, if we went to where there were younger kids, we never had an incident of her acting out sexually with other kids, but as a precautionary, 'okay, where is she at? Where are the smaller kids at?' just to make sure… for her safety or other kids' safety because of her past. It kinda made things a little awkward when you would go around family members because of "where are your kids? Where is our kid at?"

The experience of ambivalence—feeling mixed or contradictory emotions or being pulled in multiple directions—transcended participants' experiences and presented as central to the "through-ness" of pre-adoptive placement disruption.

Lisa spoke of the exhaustion of ambivalence; she wanted to move forward with adoption, but her husband did not:

I think part of it was I was just so worn out, I was so tired of the fight and I wanted Carly so badly and I knew my husband wasn't happy and it was like, what am I supposed to do? Sacrifice my marriage and keep two of them just so I can have Carly? Or do I let Carly go so I can maintain my marriage? ...It was complete loss anyway you looked at it.

The Broken Social Contract

Another key finding of this study related to the break in a perceived social contract. A foster parent's purpose, and the goals attached to that purpose, are anchored in treating children well and acting in the best interest of children. Participants believed treating children well and acting in their best interest was a shared social enterprise – one of reciprocity and support. Participants perceived that when perpetrating parents or the child welfare system acted in ways contrary to treating children well or in their best interest, these parties violated the social contract and this was a deeply disturbing element of their disruption experiences.

Luke expressed the disappointment he felt when he and **Leanne** did not receive the support he believed they needed (and she deserved) to successfully adopt Felicity:

It was hard because I knew Laura really wanted to do this and at the time, in the beginning, I did, too, I loved Felicity – my whole family did, she was a great little girl for the most part. But, once we didn't get the help [that we needed] and [the agency] kept saying [this is] the best therapist we have [for Felicity] ...nothing was happening, and to me, we can't – it sounds horrible – but we can't sign away the rest of our lives without the help that little girl needs. We couldn't do her any good at that point. I actually approached Laura with that – we wanted to adopt her to change her life and how would we change her life without the help?

Chad discussed how being the best advocate he could be resulted in the parents getting "burned" and resulted in a lack of trust toward the system:

I'm going to second guess myself and whether or not I should share something with [the state child welfare department] because I'm going to be worried about how they might interpret that because this last experience to me has told me that you only get one chance and if you instill any doubt within your case worker, it's over. If they start to doubt you, you're done. And I have enough confidence in my own background and in my wife's background that I feel confident in making that decision [to share] and the sad part is, I shouldn't have to make that decision. I should feel comfortable with sharing one hundred percent of everything and not worry about the interpretation because you want to be the best advocate you can be and you should be able to share everything, but the experience tells you that if you do, there's a good chance that you could get burned.

Attribution

When the disruption occurred, foster parents sought attribution for the disruption and their losses. Some participants attributed the disruption to the perpetrators who abused and neglected the child. Perpetrator attribution was connected to a strong sense of empathy for the child. Other participants attributed the

disruption and loss to the child welfare system, which was accompanied by a sense of betrayal and broken promises.

Marcy embodied empathy for the child, which was common among those who ultimately attributed the disruption to the perpetrator(s):

No, just these kids are not to blame! They are a victim of their environment, they are helpless and people ruin their lives and they think, well going to therapy and stuff will cure them, straighten them up, and it's not! It helps them survive and most of them are survivors! They've been through everything in the world and they're gonna make it! Maybe not in a normal way, but they will make it and Courtney will, too, she's a fighter and she will be back.

Debra attributed her disruption experience and the consequences for the children to the child welfare system. She felt more information and/or greater transparency was necessary:

And I wasn't told beforehand that that was what the oldest girl would do – was disrupt placement when she knew it was getting close to adoption and so therefore, we weren't warned about it. If we had, we could have been more prepared and then when they decided, no, they didn't want to separate them, they moved them onto another pre-adoptive home to where the girl did the same thing – disrupted the placement and then they decided to separate them and the other little girl got adopted.

Lasting Effects & Resolve

Foster parents' losses, the disruption, and the broken social contract have lasting effects. Some participants altered the profile of pre-adoptive children they are willing to foster or adopt in the future. Others decided not to pursue adoption as an outcome again. Some parents became stronger advocates. Still others experienced the disruption as a motivating factor for pursuing adoption on behalf of other children.

Chad and Lisa shared some of the consequences of their pre-adoptive placement disruption experience:

Chad: *We decided that we needed to take a break and that we would maintain our license. At first, we weren't sure what we were going to do. We worked some of that out in therapy.*

Lisa: *Yeah.*

Chad: *She wasn't quite sure – Lisa wasn't quite sure whether or not I would wanna go down that road again and we, of course, originally had said anywhere from two years old to probably six years old, a sibling group preferably a boy and a girl or two girls because Lisa really wants a girl and I'm like, 'eh, whatever!' I'm happy with whatever – I don't care, boy, girl, whatever. Now that I've had the experience, I think I'd much rather have a girl.*

Lisa: *It's hard.*

Chad*: And that's changed now. It's now a single child only.*

Marcy's disruption experience resulted in her changing her status as a pre-adoptive foster parent. She continues to foster, but she will not adopt from foster care after her Courtney's disruption:

I won't adopt anymore… I think my future holds fostering and like I said, maybe guardianship for Courtney or something, but as far as adopting – no… I feel like I let Courtney down, but in my heart, I know I didn't – I did everything that I could, but I will always be here for her. She will always be part of our family, she will always be a part of our life and, but it also means that I realize I can't adopt another child. I can't talk to another child about adoption because I'm afraid the same thing would happen that happened to Courtney and I just feel like I could not do that to another child.

Each of these types of lasting effects supports the necessary resolve that brings the foster parents back to their purpose—to achieve desired outcomes on behalf of children, outcomes that are anchored in treating children well and acting in the best interest of children.

Nancy shared how a new approach to working with the system allowed her to continue to pursue her purpose:

> *And so, I guess it was just – and I think I'm stubborn. I was like 'this is a really screwed up system and I'm going to try to fight it from the inside,' and I was like, 'I can sit and badmouth it from the outside all I want and it does nothing and it's not helping anybody. If I get inside, maybe I can influence a few new case workers and get to know some of the people higher up in the system and start to talk about change.' So I could either fight it from the outside or fight it from the inside…*

Eric and **Debra** shared how, despite the disruption being difficult, they were pushing on with their purpose. **Eric** noted:

> *…just because of a disruption with [Tiffany] doesn't mean that we're not [continuing] to do foster care.*

And **Debra** expressed:

> *[The disruption] really hasn't [changed my status as a pre-adoptive parent] because there's so many children out there that need to be placed and I'm in the process of adopting another little girl.*

In conclusion, for participants in this study, pre-adoptive placement disruption was experienced as loss that involves both the physical loss of the child and the child's future as well as the parent's purpose to achieve positive outcomes on behalf of children and families. The pre-adoptive placement disruption meant that a social contract, which is based upon treating children well, acting in their best interest, and supporting the parents who care for them, had been broken. The broken social contract negatively affected foster parents' ability to achieve the goals and outcomes they set out to achieve. Disruption was ultimately attributed to an "other"—someone or something outside of the foster parents. Disruption experiences were attributed to the child welfare system and the professionals who make up the system as well as the perpetrators who caused children's overwhelming trauma. The disruption experience has long-term effects for the participants. These effects include changes to the profiles of children parents are willing to foster or adopt in the future, changes to parents' status as pre-adoptive, or changes in empowerment and advocacy. Although the disruption experiences were difficult and painful, in some ways, the lasting effects of disruption permitted participants to re-solve the disruption issue and find new solutions for enacting their purpose. While participants found new ways to move forward toward desired outcomes, some negative consequences for children, families, and agencies are noted. Discussion and implications of these findings are discussed next. Figure 1 demonstrates the overview of the pre-adoptive placement disruption experience for foster parents as revealed by this study.
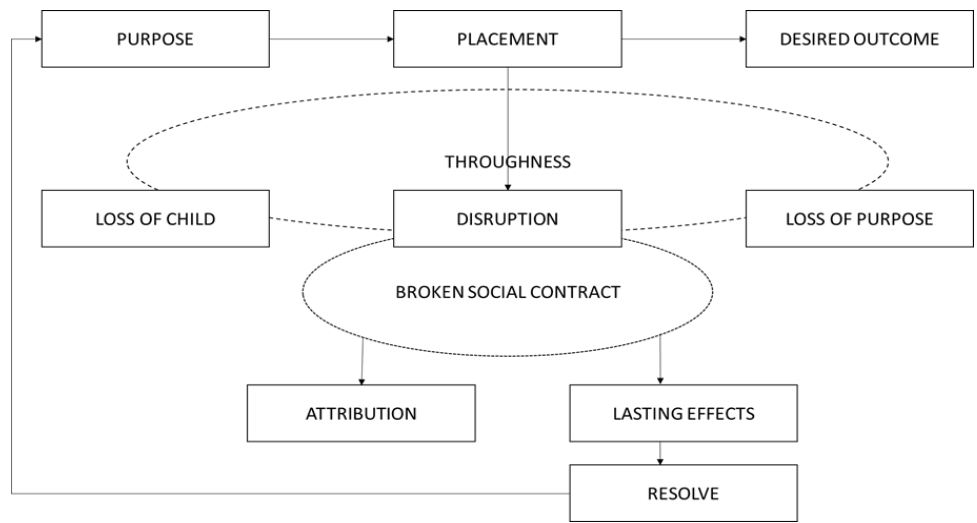

Figure 1. The Experience of Pre-Adoptive Placement Disruption Lived by Foster Parents

Discussion

Compound Loss

Despite evidence of considerable loss, professional literature and practice have devoted limited attention to interventions and supports to assist foster family members with the losses they encounter. Common grief and loss experiences for foster parents include the grief of the family of origin, grief associated with the child's abuse, neglect, and placement in foster care, the foster parent's own grief associated with a child's placement change, and the grief experienced by other foster family members when a child leaves the home (Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2001). In their study of foster care placement disruption, Taylor and McQuillan (2014) also found that disruption resulted in experiences of loss, bereavement, and emotional upset. Foster parent grief can have lasting negative effects if not resolved. Unresolved grief was not specifically explored or found to be essential to the experience of pre-adoptive placement disruption in this study. However, existing literature and findings from the data warrant further exploration of unresolved grief and loss in disruption experiences.

Multiple participants in this study likened the loss of the child to an alternative placement to that of the death of a child. Schmidt et al. (1988) also discovered that foster parents who lived through a pre-adoptive placement disruption experienced grief and loss and at times likened the experience to the death of a child. Participants who did not make this specific death comparison still often spoke of the grief they experienced and, in some cases, still experience as a result of the child no longer being in their home or their life.

Existing literature suggests that adoptive parents often cite intrinsic motivations, such as altruism (Leathers Falconnier, & Spielfogel, 2010; Malm & Weli, 2010), exposure to adoption (by family or being adopted themselves), infertility, and adopting a known child (Malm & Welti, 2010). Motivations in the literature are consistent with many of the histories shared by participants in this study. Not achieving positive or intended outcomes, outcomes that are associated with motivations to adopt, resulted in loss. Even in situations when parents request a child's removal grief can be intense because the parents grieve the loss of the child and also the loss of the sense of being a competent caregiver in their own eyes as well as in the opinion of others (Edelstein et al., 2001). Foster parents can feel angry or hurt that they were unable or not approved to adopt the child themselves when a disruption occurs (Edelstein et al, 2001). These noted losses connect with the finding of the parent's loss of purpose—parents grieve the loss of the intended, desired, or expected outcome. The stronger the motivations and hopes are for achieving permanency with the child, the more severe the parent's grief reaction is likely to be (Edelstein et al, 2001).

The Social Contract

Rubin (2012) notes that a social contract can be thought of as a conceptual vehicle that links the individuals and their constructs to the larger social structure in which the individual is situated and/or acts. Social contracts connect individuals to public issues and the micro to the macro (Rubin, 2012). Implicit social contracts provide a foundation for most social relationships, they are developed through active participation in collective life, and they contribute to rational, stable social processes that are part of social structures and organizations (Moghaddam, 2008; Rubin, 2012). The current study demonstrates that social contracts exist in the realm of child welfare. Rubin posits that social contracts are essentially the glue that holds societies together. Therefore, a break in the social contract would likely result in the social structure falling apart or *disrupting*. Participants in this study experienced pre-adoptive placement disruption as a break in the social contract—based upon their constructs or schemas. Participants believed they were actors in a social contract in which treating children well, acting in children's best interest, and supporting parents who care for children were *shared* social schema. The actions and decisions by other social actors, including child welfare professionals and perpetrating parents, worked in contrast to the participants' schemas regarding the welfare and well-being of children in need of permanency. The broken social contract finding is novel, in part due to a lack of investigation. Nevertheless, it has emerged as core to the experience of participants in this study and the finding warrants further, purposeful examination. What types of social contracts exist in child welfare? How are they experienced by professionals? What are the additional effects of broken social contracts? In experiences of successful outcomes, is the social contract reinforced?

Disruption Attribution

In each of the nine interviews for this study, participants revealed attribution for the disruption. Attribution research is the science of understanding how people interpret events or other people's motives and how people choose a cause of an outcome for blame or praise (Brooks, & Clarke, 2011; McLeod, 2012; O'Connor, Kotze, & Wright, 2011). When faced with particularly stressful events, people tend to seek causal explanations for how and why things happened (O'Connor et al., 2011). Attributing culpability to an "other" can provide people with a cathartic focus for anger, it can help to preserve one's own sense of justification or assist in avoiding responsibility (O'Connor et al., 2011).

Participants who attributed the disruption experience to the system did so clearly and in a straight forward manner. Findings from this study regarding system-related failures are consistent with other studies related to disruption (Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Osborne & Alfano, 2011; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Schmidt et al., 1988; Smith et al., 2006). Participants who attributed the disruption to the perpetrators who caused significant and insurmountable trauma did so in a less direct way, but their interpretations revealed that the transgressions of the children's perpetrators ultimately compromised the children's pre-adoptive placements and opportunities for permanency. While children are not to blame, because trauma can result in symptomology associated with externalized behaviors, this finding connects to previous research about child-related factors of disruption (Avery, 2000; Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Cushing & Greenblatt, 2013; Leathers, Spielfogel, Gleeson, & Rolock, 2012; Smith et al., 2006).

Despite ultimately attributing the disruption to someone or something other than themselves, multiple participants expressed feelings of guilt, self-blame, and regret. Self-blame and regret are noted as components of loss-related guilt and are the most frequently identified forms of guilt in the bereavement literature (Stroebe et al., 2014). Exploring foster parent guilt as a component or consequence of disruption may be a worthwhile endeavor for future research; findings from this line of inquiry have the potential to better support the pre-adoptive parents of waiting children.

Lasting Effects of Disruption

Participants described their responses to the disruption in terms of the disruption's lasting effects. Effects included changes to the profile of children parents are willing to foster or adopt, pre-adoptive or license status, and advocacy efforts. Lasting effects of disruption have implications for the agencies, families, and for waiting children. The lack of investigation into pre-adoptive placement disruption renders it difficult to compare the lasting effects that participants reported in this study to existing literature.

In cases in which participants changed the profile of the child they were willing to foster or adopt, changes typically disadvantaged children with characteristics of those who wait longer and experience more disruption. Characteristics identified by participants in this study as undesirable for future placements included being male, having a history of sexual abuse, exhibiting emotional and behavioral challenges, and being older. Existing literature demonstrates that older age, being male, presence of behavioral challenges (especially aggression and sexually acting-out behaviors), and a history of sexual abuse are associated with higher rates of adoption disruption (Rosenthal et al., 1988; Smith et al., 1991) as well as a greater likelihood of continuing to await adoption when compared to peers without these characteristics (Cushing & Greenblatt, 2013). Findings do not suggest that children with these characteristics are not adoptable or will always disrupt in pre-adoptive placements. Instead, systems and players are not adequately assessing and/or meeting the needs of pre-adoptive children with these characteristics nor the parents who provide their pre-adoptive care. Wind, Brooks, and Barth (2005) note adoption preparation has received less attention than recruitment and post-adoption services and advocate that comprehensive, diversity-competent adoptive family preparation is necessary to support positive outcomes. Far more investigation is necessary to identify the best ways to meet the needs of children with compound risk factors for pre-adoptive disruption and delayed permanency.

Schmidt et al. (1988) found that, following a pre-adoptive placement disruption, some parents relinquished their roles as a foster parent. Although participants in this study did not report relinquishing their role as foster parents, three couples described taking a break after their disruption experience and one participant changed her status from pre-adoptive to foster care only. One couple decided to transfer

their license to an alternative agency, in hopes of being better supported in their efforts there. Unresolved issues related to pre-adoptive placement disruption have the potential to compromise the pool of available and willing pre-adoptive parents—which has direct, negative implications for waiting children.

Living Through Disruption

Essential elements of living through pre-adoptive placement disruption emerged as a result of directing purposeful attention to the phenomenon itself. In this study, experiences of vulnerability, isolation, and ambivalence were generative experiences that were essential to the participants "becoming" pre-adoptive foster parents who lived through a pre-adoptive placement disruption. Experiences of perceived scrutiny by the state agency's "strong hand of judgement," difficulty explaining what it is like "unless you do it," being viewed as "crazy" by extended family members and friends, and living through a "wrestling match" between one's heart and one's head made it possible to have both a literal and figurative dialogue with the phenomenon (Vagel, 2014) of pre-adoptive placement disruption. These "through-ness" experiences were taxing for participants.

Participants revealed feelings of judgement, inferiority, and fear with regard to their relationship with the state child welfare agency and child welfare professionals. Participants described vulnerability. Participants appeared to observe a hierarchy that positioned foster parents as less powerful or even powerless in a variety of situations. Parent voices seemed to go unheard or under-acknowledged in issues that mattered most to them—the safety of the child, the well-being of other family members, the child's future. In some cases, early in the child's placement, the experience of vulnerability was motivating—pushing participants to put their best foot forward and demonstrate competence. However, when the vulnerability grew to be an issue of power, participants experienced it as defeating and destructive to their efforts to achieve positive outcomes. Follan and McNamara (2013) found that experiences of fighting for recognition and being labeled a failure by professionals added to experiences of insecurity in adoptive parenting.

At times, participants expressed feelings of isolation. The experience of isolation made it difficult for participants to relate to others or feel as if others understood their lives or experiences. Participants described how they felt different from other parents, how they felt alone in their frustration and anxiety about the child's needs when professionals minimized or ignored their concerns, and how they felt rejected by those who did not understand their lives. Participants in this study did not acknowledge support from other foster or pre-adoptive parents nor did they identify a connection to groups or therapeutic outlets with parents who live/have lived through similar experiences. Investigation of formal and informal supports was not a primary focus of this study, however, a connection to others who could empathize in relatable ways with the participants seemed to be lacking from participants' disruption experiences. Exploring solidarity as a means for supporting pre-adoptive parents appears to be a valuable task for foster care adoption research and practice.

Ambivalence emerged as an essential element of the 'lived-through" experience of pre-adoptive placement disruption. Participants described experiencing conflicting emotions, fluctuation, and uncertainty in their roles, feelings, and decision-making. Schofield, Beek, Ward, and Biggart (2013) note that, while work and family are usually two different realms for most people, for foster parents, "in many significant ways, their family is their work and their work is their family—so roles are not so clearly separated and boundaries are not so clearly defined" (p.46). Considering the balance pre-adoptive parents are asked to strike when carrying out responsibilities for a variety of roles (parent, partner, child welfare system actor, advocate, etc.) across many different systems, it is no surprise that ambivalence emerged as essential to the pre-adoptive disruption experience. Effective permanency planning requires an understanding of the interaction of personal and social forces that contribute to and reinforce parental ambivalence (Hess & Folaron, 1991). In a study that explored adoptive parents' experiences, reciprocal communication and the ability to exchange perspectives and empathize with feelings and positions of others in the family were reported as valuable to enhanced family functioning (Zosky, Howard, Smith, Howard, & Shelvin, 2005). Findings from the current study coupled with existing literature (Coakley & Berrick, 2013) merit further investigation into the relevance of ambivalence theory in child welfare practice and scholarship and the role ambivalence plays in matters of placement and permanency.

Resolve and Resilience

Edelstein et al. (2001) note that, although disruption may be a deeply emotional time for foster parents, it may also present an opportunity for growth and change. In the current study, resolve permitted participants to make changes and repurpose their efforts in ways that continued to benefit children and families. Foster parents may emerge from loss with a renewed energy for providing care by reframing their role (Edelstein et al., 2001). Resolve is an essential element of pre-adoptive placement disruption in this study and it shares some constructs with resilience. Begun (1993) defines resilience as "an ability to cope with adversity, stress and deprivation" and notes that resilience is shaped by both intrinsic factors (what individuals bring to a situation, including past experience and learning) and extrinsic factors (including environmental risk and protective factors) (pp. 28-29). Taylor and McQuillan (2014) acknowledge increasing attention to the resilience of human service professionals; they advocate that similar attention be paid to foster parents and members of their families. Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Piel (2016) have completed valuable work in this area – corroborating existing research that suggests foster family resilience is process vs. product-oriented and is enhanced by family strengths such as connectedness and social support, to respond to adversity. Although resolve was interpreted to be an essential element of pre-adoptive disruption in this study, the scope of the study (including the interview questions) limit the discussion of this finding. Further research is needed to explore resolve and resilience in pre-adoptive families, which may support pre-adoptive recruitment and retention and permanency practice.

Implications for Practice

The grief and loss that pre-adoptive foster parents experience as a result of pre-adoptive placement disruption needs to be shared with a professional who can listen and validate their experiences and provide assurance that vulnerability, pain, confusion, etc. are normal (Edelstein et al., 2001). Pre-adoptive parent grief may be categorized as disenfranchised grief, because the weight of the parent/child relationship and the loss are unrecognized and/or minimized. Zoll (2018) notes that recognizing and validating loss is essential to the healing process. Anderson (2010) advocates that when people experience grief and loss, they need to be heard and have their stories validated; an empathetic response and the experience of mutuality can help to change grief into hope. Child welfare practice would benefit from purposefully acknowledging foster parent loss and working to address it mutually. Adding or highlighting grief and loss content to licensure, continuing education, and pre- and post-adoption preparation for foster/adoptive parents is recommended. Recognizing loss and responding in empathetic ways may support positive changes in the ways that pre-adoptive foster parents repurpose their efforts.

Exploring and addressing ambivalence is necessary in permanency practice. According to Hess and Folaron (1991), helping parents explore ambivalent feelings requires knowledge about the forces at work in **ambivalence**, effective assessment skills, relationship building skills, patience, and self-awareness. The personal biases and values of professionals can influence responses to parental ambivalence. Child welfare professionals should be equipped with knowledge and training regarding the dynamics of ambivalence. Clarifying personal values, effective supervision, and team decision-making are advocated interventions for professionals engaged in permanency practice (Hess and Folaron, 1991).

Gaps in the child's history is noted as a challenge in permanency literature (Coakley & Berrick, 2007; Palacios et al., 2019; Rosenthal 1993; Schmidt et al, 1988). A comprehensive child history could benefit prospective adoptive families, equipping parents with knowledge and empowering parents to make informed decisions on behalf of the child and the pre-adoptive family. Schmidt et al. (1988) agree, noting that professionals who are aware of the significance of a child's past should develop a complete a history, to the extent possible, for the child and their subsequent caregivers. Brodzinsky and Livingston Smith (2019) note that it is "unrealistic to expect parents to manage challenges they face without full transparency regarding the child's history" (p. 191). Diligence in discovering and accurately reporting a child's history has the potential to support the child, the parents, and the providers working with the pre-adoptive family.

Some participants in this study reported feeling rushed or pressured to make an adoption decision based

upon agency timelines. In particular, parents expressed feeling pressure to make a decision around the sixth month mark of the child's placement. The ASFA established guidelines for permanency-related decision-making and the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) monitor states' compliance with timely adoptions. Permanency-related timeframes were established to expedite permanency and prevent children from languishing in out-of-home care. However, without the appropriate care and concern for the sheer magnitude of an adoption decision, ASFA and CFSR timeframes and decision deadlines may work against waiting children. Further investigation into policies associated with timeframes and deadlines is necessary to ensure rationales are communicated and enacted accurately and with purpose. It would be a true disservice if imposed deadlines were meeting the needs of workers or agencies instead of the children they were designed to protect.

Participants in this and related studies (Osborne & Alfano, 2011; Schmidt et al., 1988) have expressed a perceived lack of formal support in conjunction with their disruption experiences. Houston and Kramer (2008) found that families were more likely to maintain a pre-adoptive child in their home and finalize an adoption when parents reported higher levels of contact with formal agency supports. Child welfare professionals should be clear about their roles and the roles of pre-adoptive foster parents, the boundaries of those roles, and the services and supports that are available to pre-adoptive parents. According to Brodzinsky and Livingston Smith (2019), early identification of child and family needs and provision of support for the entire family is necessary for healthy adjustment and placement stability. Both professionals and pre-adoptive parents should be transparent with regard to expectations for support. Communication between professionals and parents is critical and should be attended to with the utmost care. Professionals and parents should strive to work collaboratively on behalf of successful permanency outcomes. The therapeutic relationship itself, between the permanency professional and the parent(s), especially a genuine ability to listen and empathize, has proven to be key in successful adoption services experiences (Zosky et al., 2005). In general, child welfare practice will benefit from listening to and acting upon the voices of pre-adoptive parents and children. The people who experience placements, disruptions, and permanency must be called upon to share their experiences in an effort to support and strengthen practice on behalf of those who need effective practice the most.

Limitations

The exploratory nature and small sample of this study render it problematic to generalize the findings beyond the sample. However, generalizable findings are a not a goal of qualitative work. Nevertheless, findings from this study (i.e., grief and loss, ambivalence, attribution, etc.) do resonate with existing permanency literature, thus, there is evidence to suggest the findings could be applicable or transferable in other contexts. With regard to the sample, recruitment may be noted as a challenge in this study. Recruitment efforts over the course of four months yielded nine interviews. Pre-adoptive placement disruption is a sensitive topic for many parents to discuss. Stigma may have played a role in prospective interviewees not participating in the study. Changes to recruitment efforts for future studies may be necessary to better support the target population. The focus of this study is limited to the particular experience of pre-adoptive placement disruption; however, the social challenge of awaiting adoption is broad and nuanced. There are multiple additional factors to consider and explore when attempting to understand barriers to permanency and address permanency practice on behalf of children and families. Additionally, the sample is limited in terms of what it can reveal about pre-adoptive placement disruption, in part because only the experiences of foster parents were explored. Although foster parents have tremendous insight to offer, the voices and perspectives of other players, such as professionals and children and youth who have also lived through the experience, are necessary to develop a more complete understanding of pre-adoptive placement disruption. The perspectives of biological family parents may also be helpful. In future iterations of this study, questions to gauge participants' motivations to become pre-adoptive foster parents as well as questions to gauge participants' motivations to participate in the study may be valuable. This study represents an effort to investigate a barrier to permanency by way of adoption from the foster care system. The findings are rich, add to the knowledge base, and reveal many aspects of foster and pre-adoptive care in need of further exploration.

Conclusion

This study reveals important findings regarding an under-studied phenomenon that affects the permanency of waiting children—pre-adoptive placement disruption. The phenomenon was explored by giving voice to pre-adoptive parents who care for children in foster care in need of adoption. A review of the literature yielded limited findings of the disrupted placements of pre-adoptive children and foster parents. Existing adoption disruption literature, overwhelmingly quantitative in nature, identifies various child, family, and system factors associated with the likelihood of disruption. Existing studies largely answered questions related to the "who" and "what" of disruption, but failed to acknowledge the "how" and "why." The perspectives and experiences of those who actually lived through disruption are largely absent from existing literature. An interpretive phenomenological investigation resulted in greater understanding of how pre-adoptive placement disruption is experienced by foster parents. In the true spirit of phenomenological investigation, study findings are at best partial and incomplete; yet, they are meaningful and represent the truths of the participants who lived the experience.

Researchers must continue to question and investigate issues of permanency, collaborate with key stakeholders, and disseminate meaningful findings on behalf of children and families with permanency needs. In addition to investigating issues of disruption and risk, placement stability protective factors must be explored. Pre-adoptive children and parents are worthy of directed attention and deliberate research and practice efforts.

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