Foster children's views of family: A systematic review and qualitative synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research reveals that children with childhoods characterised by placement(s) in foster care have particularly complex and multi-dimensional understandings of family. Given the changing nature of family forms and meanings, and the increased emphasis on children's voices in decisions about their care and well-being, this review seeks to encapsulate how foster children and former foster children ("foster children") understand family.
Objective: The aim of this review is to comprehensively identify, synthesise, and analyse three decades of qualitative research on current and former foster children's understanding of family.
Method: A systematic review was conducted, using three databases related to social sciences, social work, and family studies to identify relevant qualitative studies in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Using the guidelines of PRISMA statement, 20 studies met the inclusion criteria. A thematic synthesis of the findings was carried out.
Results: Family was understood by foster and former foster children (1) as biological relatedness, (2) associated with positive emotions, (3) as *doing* family, and (4) as a choice, reflecting multiple ways of family belonging, in three contexts – kinship, non-kinship, and a combination of the two.
Discussion and conclusion: For most foster children (both former and current), biological bonds determine what constitutes family. Some emphasised acts of mutual love, care, support, as well as tolerance and communication as important in defining what constitutes family. Others, however, felt that family is an individual choice. Welfare regimes were highlighted as a possible factor in foster children's construction of family. We argue that foster children's meaning and understanding of family in relation to a particular welfare state or local context, would be a welcome addition.

1. Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), article 20 defines family as "the fundamental group of society and natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children" and declares that every child has the right to grow up in a supportive, caring family environment that promotes and develops his or her full potential (UNCRC, 1989). The UNCRC (1989) defines family as the ultimate source of provision and protection of children. Family has also been identified as a key context for the formation of children's sense of self, identity, and belonging in research (Giddens, 1991; Rabiau, 2019). Family is said to be the most enduring and salient social institution that provides a site of connection, interdependence, and context in which children experience their most intimate and significant relationships (McKie & Callen, 2012; Wyn, Lantz & Harris, 2012). Furthermore, family is the foundation of children's sociocultural and economic lives. According to Gubrium and Holstein (1990) and Carsten (2004), families are a fundamental reproduction of society in terms of their material, symbolic, and relational significance. Family and the familial environment are critical for children's development and well-being (Schoenmaker, Juffer, van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2014; Martin & Zulaika, 2016; Dinisman et al., 2017).

However, some children are unable to live with their biological family due to, amongst other things, inadequate parental care such as abuse or neglect, or the child's engagement in anti-social behaviour (Bruskas, 2008; Lindquist & Santavirta, 2014). The UNCRC recognises the child as a right-bearing individual of the state, and when the child's well-being is compromised by parents' inability or inadequacy to provide care, temporary separation from parents may be necessary (article 9). State Child Protection Services (CPS) are responsible for

safeguarding children's rights to protection and to ensure their overall well-being according to the UNCRC (1989). The UNCRC promotes participatory, child-centred collaborative approaches in social work practice (Alderson, 2000). Children's participation in CPS encompasses several dimensions: discursive (referring to children's participatory rights), bureaucratic (involving children just to be able to tick of a checklist), informative (providing children information about their case), investigative (talking to children about what is going on), and solution-based (finding a solution based on children's wishes) (Sørenssen, Abebe & Ursin, 2021).

Although we lack reliable data on children in foster care, it is estimated that at least 2.7 million children worldwide live in residential care (UNICEF, 2020). Foster care has become the first choice in most developed countries when out of home placement is required, favoured above residential and institutional arrangements (Fernandez & Barth, 2010; Leloux-Opmeer, Kuiper, Swaab & Scholte, 2016). The aim of foster care is to provide stable placements and to give children an opportunity to have a substitute family. However, research shows that placement disruption is a major problem in foster care in many western countries (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). While foster care is sometimes used to refer to a particular type of family-based placement setting - that is foster/non-kinship care versus kinship foster care, or treatment foster care (Berrick, Barth & Needell, 1994; Lee & Thompson, 2008) - for this literature review 'foster children'[1] refers to children (0–18 years of age) who were living or had lived in a kinship or non-kinship placement (Rock, Michelson, Thomson & Day, 2015) as a result of a decision made by the CPS.

Recent research suggests that children with childhoods characterised by placement(s) in foster care often have complex and multi-dimensional understandings perceptions of family (Parker & Mayock, 2019). The fluid nature of family has been central to sociological analysis and emphasis has been placed on the "doing" of family things rather than "being" a family (Finch, 2007; Morgan 2011). Central to contemporary theorising of family is the study of "family practices" (Morgan 1996, 2011), with family viewed as a socially defined concept constituted by numerous qualities, activities and everyday actions. In sociology, family is seen not only as a biological or legal connection but also as a social construction made possible through interactions and daily relational processes (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990).

In diverse socio-geographical contexts, empirical studies show that the nuclear model of family prevails among social workers, in legislation and in family policies (Morris, 2012; Ursin, Oltedal & Muñoz, 2017). In the United Kingdom, social workers are shown to have "limited engagement with family as an active, dynamic entity" (Morris, White, Doherty & Warwick, 2017, p.14). A quantitative study in Israel showed that social worker's conceptualisations of family are often traditional, predominantly among those who have limited exposure to (for example) foster families (Gavriel-Fried, Shilo & Cohen, 2014). In Greece, social work students use traditional views to describe family issues and family roles (Dedotsi & Paraskevopoulou-Kollia, 2015). A recent study conducted in Norway, Chile, and Mexico showed that social workers are moving away from an emphasis on biological ties towards a focus on social networks (Studsrød, Ellingsen, Guzmán & Espinoza, 2018).

A view of children as social agents, in which children's perspectives are embraced in research, has permeated the field of social work and social policy (Holland & Crowley, 2013). Children's views, often having different conceptualisations of the world than adults do, can assist in knowledge development and contribute to comprehending their life (Corsaro, 2017; Johnson & West, 2018). Once placed into foster care, children appraise and reappraise their concept of family (Mitchell,

2016), and for us to understand their views we must explore their subjective meanings. Listening to foster children is an important step to improve our knowledge of the nature of foster care and how family-based service programs can better serve children (Whiting & Lee III, 2003). While there is an increased focus in research on foster children's conceptualisations of family, thus far there has been no literature review of children's generic views of family within the foster care system.

The purpose of this article is to conduct a systematic review where we summarise, synthesise, and analyse qualitative studies with children who are or have been in foster care – with a focus on their understanding of family. The research question is: *What is 'family' from the perspective of children in foster care*? A literature review to synthesise current evidence of children's understanding of family has the potential to reveal the meaning they attach to family, even explore what constitutes family for these children in the hope of informing future practices, research, and policies related to foster care intervention.

2. Methods

Qualitative research allows for the development of a rich comprehension of social phenomena by exploring in depth meanings given to those phenomena by participants (Tong, Morton, Howard & Craig, 2009), and which cannot be amenable to counting or measuring (O'Day & Killeen, 2002). The combination of findings from different qualitative studies can offer an overview of a range of experiences and perspectives in different time periods, locations, and contexts (Tong et al., 2009). Procedures used in this systematic review were followed, as outlined by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Liberati et al., 2009). For a better understanding of the selection process, see Fig. 1. Additionally, the qualitative meta-synthesis approach was adopted to integrate and improve our understanding of existing information (Sandelowski, Barroso & Voils, 2007). A review protocol was developed and registered on the 28th of March 2021 in the Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO): CRD42021231681.

2.1. Search strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted using three databases relevant to social work, sociology, and family studies: Web of Science, Scopus, and ProQuest. The search strategy included a screening reference list of included papers, and by conducting a "cited by" search on Google Scholar (as this type of search has been found to increase retrieval of articles (Fegran et al., 2014).

The acronym PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) developed for quantitative review questions was modified to Population, Context, Outcome (PCO) to suit our qualitative methodology (Stern, Jordan & McArthur, 2014). PCO was used to identify key words for the database search. These key words were first developed in English by the first author and included widely used international terms for 'foster care settings', 'children', 'young people', and 'perspectives'. These were then revised by the other two team members. Subsequently, the key words were translated into Spanish and Portuguese. Search terms relating to 'children', 'young people', 'foster care', 'views', and 'meanings' were combined with the term 'family'. An overview of these terms and their combinations is provided in Table 1.

To keep the search volume manageable the function 'NOT' was used for terms such as: 'mental health', 'health', 'education'*, and 'sexual health'. These terms were selected after running the first search on the databases and going through half of the retrieved studies' titles and abstracts. These terms are explored in foster care research, but they do not fit the inclusion criteria (see below). A comprehensive search was conducted between November 2020 and December 2020.

2.1.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria
Studies included in the review had to meet the following criteria: (1)

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[1] For this article, the term 'foster children' will be used to refer to children currently living within foster care as well as former foster care children - those who once lived in foster care but no longer do, irrespective of what the reason(s) might be.
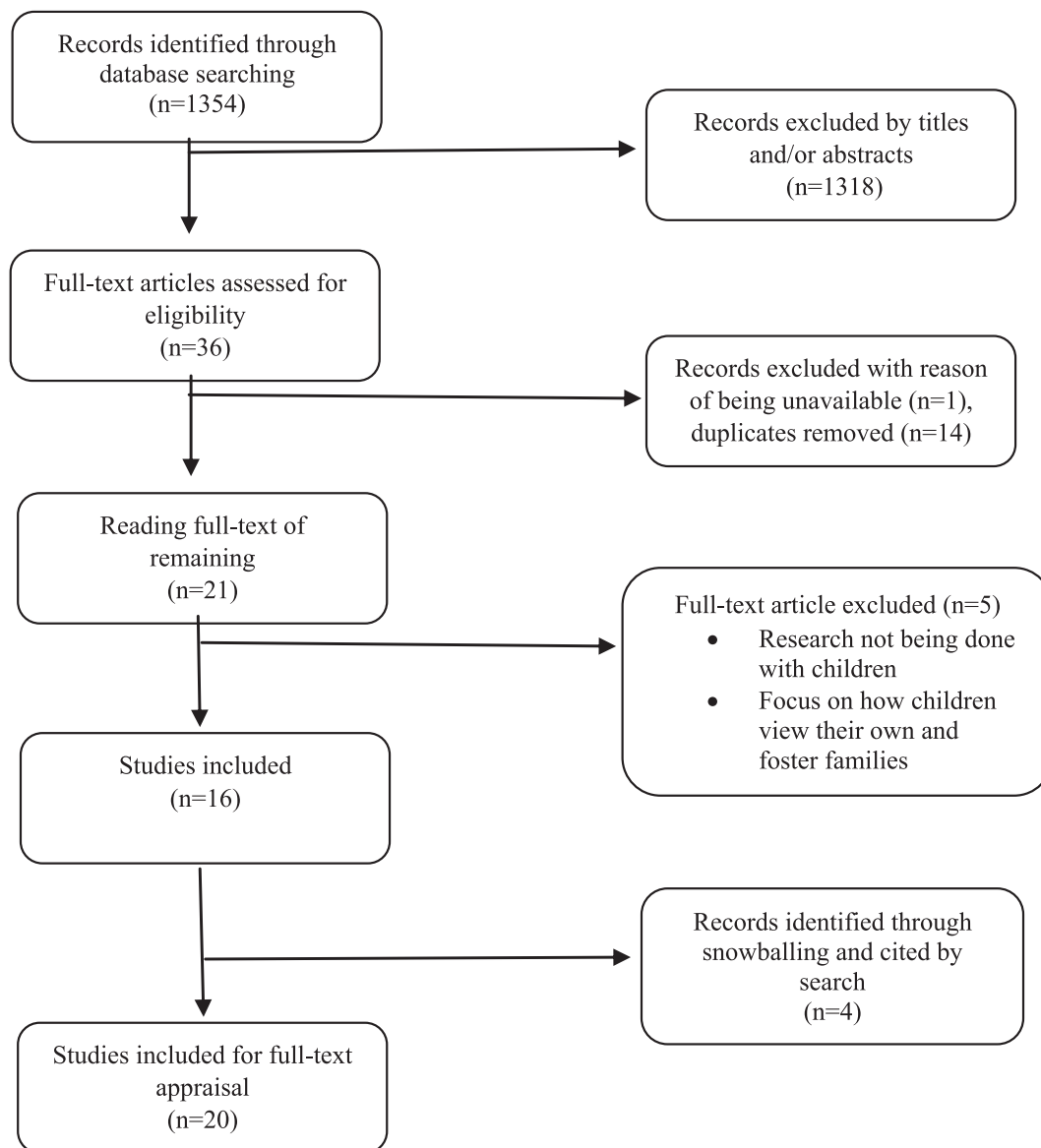
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│ Studies included for full-text│
│        appraisal           │
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Fig. 1. PRISMA flow chart systematic review process.

Table 1
Key search terms (with * truncation notation).

Population	Context	Outcome
child* OR adolescent* OR youth OR teen* OR "young people" OR "child* in care" OR "look-after child*" OR "looked-after child*" OR "formerly in care" OR "aging out of care"	"foster care" OR "out-of-home care" OR "kin*care" OR "non-kin* care" OR "alternative care" OR "substitute care"	view* OR perspective* OR perception* OR viewpoint* OR understanding* OR conception* OR interpretation* Or construction* OR meaning* AND family

be original qualitative or mixed method primary research published in peer-reviewed journals; (2) focus on former and current foster children's perspectives and meaning of family; and (3) be published between 1990 and 2020 in English, Spanish, or Portuguese.

The first and the second author's native language is Portuguese and Spanish, (respectively) and the third author is proficient in Portuguese. The time limit between 1990 and 2020 allows us to capture research done with children after the ratification and adoption of UNCRC in state policies as well as the increased emphasis on children's views in research and policymaking in the past three decades. There were no geographical limitations to the studies.

Studies were excluded if they had: (1) a focus on parents or social workers' views on foster children's perspectives and meaning of family, (2) a focus on children in group homes, or residential or institutional care, or (3) a lack of focus on foster children's perspectives and meanings of family, as was the case in the study of Rigg and Pryor (2007).

2.2. Search outcome

The initial search yielded 1354 articles. After screening titles and abstracts, 1318 articles were excluded by the first author due to irrelevance based on the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The remaining 36 articles were shortlisted for full-text reading. Articles were imported into Mendeley Reference Manager (2020) for further screening. The next step was to delete duplicates and locate full texts for the remaining articles. Although we tried several times, we could not find one article, published in South Korea. After careful examination of the 21 remaining full-texts, five articles were excluded. The first two authors applied an inter rater check on 22% of the retrieved articles, and

the third author was consulted when there was a lack of consensus. Although we tried to only include views of children in foster care it was not always clear what type of settings the child(ren) lived in such as the study of Welch (2018). However, as the study included children's views of family, it was agreed by the research team to include it.

The reference list of the 16 included studies was reviewed, and forward citation tracking conducted. Four more studies were included through this process. Thus, a total of 20 articles were identified as relevant to the research question and these formed the final sample for further analysis (see Fig. 1).

2.3. Quality appraisal

Included articles were assessed for their quality using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool, commonly used to appraise studies in qualitative synthesis (CASP, 2018). No articles were excluded due to a lack of methodological rigour, as recommended by Sandelowski and colleagues (2007). The criteria used to determine study quality was as follows: (O meaning 'No quality', 1 meaning 'Can't tell and 2 meaning' 'Yes, there is quality'). The first and second author scored the studies independently before discussing and reaching consensus. Each study was awarded a potential score between the maximum of 19 and the minimum of 12. Studies scoring 8 – 11 were defined as medium quality, and studies scoring 12 or higher were classified as being of good quality (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008). Overall, the quality of the studies was good. The shortcomings detected were related to the relationship between the researcher and participants as well as ethical considerations. Fourteen studies did not adequately consider the relationship between the researcher and participants; five studies had not taken ethical issues into consideration, and seven studies did not clearly address the type of analysis that was used. Table 2 provides a summary of the main characteristics of the reviewed studies.

2.4. Data extraction and analysis

Once screening was complete and the final number of included studies was determined, a process of extracting the data from eligible studies was required. The first author used a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to tabulate the extracted data. The documented information consisted Table 2 of bibliographical details, country of research, research purpose, research design, data collection and analytical method, and population sample (see Table 2).

For the purpose of synthesis, foster children's perspectives from each article were extracted. Targeted findings included direct quotations of the participants in the article and the researcher(s)'s interpretation of participant's understanding of family. These two data sources were imported into qualitative data analysis software. ATLAS.ti was selected for the coding process because of its ability to incorporate visual and written data (Vicente-Mariño, 2009). While software packages are clearly both useful and beneficial, "the qualitative analyst nevertheless needs a strong reserve of insight and reflection to tease important patterns out of a body of observations" (Babbie, 2009, p.51).

The findings were read several times in order to grasp their meanings as a whole (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Direct quotations and the interpretations were taken as the unit of thematic analysis. The material was then analysed in three stages (according to the model proposed by Thomas and Harden (2008): (1) code the findings of primary studies, (2) organise codes into descriptive themes, and (3) generate analytical themes. Themes and subthemes were discussed within the research team to explore the confirmability of the analysis and achieve critical interpretation of diverse understandings of 'family'.

This review yielded 20 articles in English, 12 of which were qualitative and eight were mixed-method (see Table 2). The studies were conducted in Sweden (n = 5), Norway (n = 4), UK (n = 3), Australia (n = 2), USA (n = 2), Israel (n = 1), Denmark (n = 1), Belgium (n = 1), and Scotland (n = 1). Eight studies were with former foster children, and 11

studies with children in foster care. Four studies were of children living in both kinship and non-kinship foster care, two studies were of children in non-kinship foster care, one study was done with children in kinship care, while the rest did not prove a clear context. Some of the included studies report on the same sample, such as Andersson (1999b, 2005, 2009).

3. Results

In this meta-synthesis exploring (former) foster children's understanding of family in the 20 selected articles, four themes emerged: (1) *Family as biological relatedness;* (2) *Family as associated with positive emotions;* (3) *Family as doing;* and (4) *Family as a choice.* Each theme is considered in turn in the following sections.

3.1. Family as biological relatedness

The studies reported that most foster children's feelings of family referred entirely to their biological family (Holtan, 2008; Samuels, 2009; Ellingsen et al., 2011, 2012; Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018 Thomas et al., 2017; Welch, 2018). They spoke of biological and genetical ties as the foundation of the factual family, and categorically perceived biological parents, siblings, and relatives as family (Gardner, 1998; Andersson, 1999b; Holtan, 2008; Ellingsen et al., 2011; 2012; Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2017; Wissö et al., 2019; Van Holen et al., 2020). The understanding of biological affiliation as family was independent of co-residence and endured throughout the separation of family members whether for an extended period of time with minimal contact or no contact (Welch, 2018). For example, one child explained: "I don't live with my family…But I love my parents dearly, they are my parents!" (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018, p.10).

Some children who were raised in kinship care felt no difference between their birth family and their foster family, and perceived both families as one at both a practical and perceptual level: "They [foster parents] are my family… They're part of my family…We have the same last name; we [foster siblings] have the same grandmother…It's clear we are together" (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018, p.10). Some in non-kinship care also talked of family with the traditional view and pondered the degree and meaning of their relationship with their foster family. To substantiate, one child reflected: "Sometimes I say to myself: she [foster mother] is not your mother, she's not really your mother, you have to remember that… Keep in mind that I have a mother" (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018, p.10). When defining family, the significance of blood ties is evident among foster children, whether raised and cared for by a kinship or non-kinship foster family (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018). According to Holtan (2008), the understanding of biological parents as family is often intuitive among foster children.

Furthermore, some former foster children perceived family to be people who are biologically related (Samuels, 2009; Thomas et al., 2017). For many former foster children, shared genes mean enduring relationships. When asked what family is, a former foster child (now an adult) explained: "I'll describe it like my mom's my mom, I'm not gonna have another biological mom so she's family regardless, you know…" (Thomas et al., 2017, p.7). A few former foster children spoke with great appreciation of their biological parents and wanted to re-connect with them, even build a sense of family after leaving foster care. Unfortunately, it did not always play out as they had imagined because every so often birth parents were physically absent (Samuels, 2009). Other former foster children also spoke about this sense of love towards their biological parents having developed in their adult life (Gardner, 1998).

A number of foster children felt that biological family must be honoured, even when there is disappointment and abuse. A child who was abused by the biological father explained: "Yet he is my dad, so I'm taking care of him and I come to visit. It's like that with family, that's what you do with family…you can't choose your family" (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018, p.11). Some foster children reported having fond memories

Table 2
Studies included in the analysis.

Author(s) & country	Year	Purpose	Study design	Methods	Analysis	Sample	CASP
Mahat-Shamir, Davidson, Shilo, Adler & Leichtentritt (Israel)	2018	Explore the views of adolescents about family system	Constructivist-narrative study	In-depth semi-structured interviews	Holistic-content and content categorical narrative analysis	13 adolescents (aged 18 years) in foster family for at least 3 years. 8 in kinship, and 5 in non-kinship foster family	17
Ellingsen, Shemmings & Størksen (Norway)	2011	Explore adolescents views and meaning of family	Q-methodology study	In-depth interviews	Principal component analysis with varimax rotation	22 adolescents (aged 13–18 years) in foster care 3 years or more. 10 boys and 12 girls. 21 white Norwegian	19
Thomas, Jackl & Crowley (USA)	2017	Explore how former foster children make meaning of family	Relational Dialects Theory method	Narrative interviews	Contrapuntal analysis & thematic analysis	24 participants (aged 18–30 years). 18 girls and 6 boys. Mean length in foster care is 6.8 years	16
Wissö, Johansson & Höjer (Sweden)	2019	Explore how family and parenting is constructed by foster parents and children with experience of custody transfer	Qualitative multi-informant study	Interviews, and drawing	Thematic analysis	11 young people in non-kinship foster care (aged 14–19 years). 6 girls and 5 boys. All children had contact with birth and extended nuclear family during their placement in foster care. 12 foster carers	16
Bengtsson & Luckow (Denmark)	2020	Explore how children create sense of belonging in their everyday life across multiple family settings	Participatory design approach	Video diaries, and semi-structured interviews		2 girls aged 12 and 15 years from a sample of 11 children. Participants had regular contact with members of family of origin	17
Andersson (Sweden)	1999a	Explore children relationships to their birth and foster family and their sense of family belonging		Interviews (on 3 occasions)		11 children in non-kinship foster care (aged 10–11 years), and their foster parents. 6 boys and 5 girls. Placed in foster care between the age of 1 and 5	12
Samuels (USA)	2009	Explore the meaning of family and permanence from the perspective of young adults with foster care background	Exploratory study	In-depth interviews	Constant comparison analysis	29 formerly foster youth (aged 17–26 years). 20 girls and 9 boys. 15 African American, 10 white, 3 Mexican American, and 1 multi-ethnic	16
Holtan (Norway)	2008	Address the variation and complexity of relationships with extended family to analyse the meaning of family	Mixed-method multi-informant study	Qualitative methods: interviews	Grounded theory combined with abductive strategies	17 children in kinship foster care (aged 9–12 years). 9 girls and 8 boys. 47 foster parents and 14 biological parents. Most of children moved to into foster care while still young	14
Ellingsen, Stephens & Størksen (Norway)	2012	Explore the perception of family among foster parents, birth parents and their adolescent foster children	Q methodology study	In-depth interviews	By-person factor analysis & correlation analysis	22 adolescents (aged 13–18 years). 10 boys and 12 girls. 21 white Norwegian	18
Andersson (Sweden)	2005	Explored the effects of early attachment on later well-being and parental relationships, and perceptions of family	Mixed-method longitudinal research	Qualitative methods: drawings, and interviews		20 young adults who were placed in foster care (aged 20–25 years). 10 were boys and 10 girls	12
Van Holen, Clé, West, Gypen & Vanderfaeillie (Belgium)	2020	Examine the experiences of foster children regarding the concept of family	Qualitative research	Interviews and network diagram	Thematic analysis	27 children (aged 12–18 years). 13 in kinship care, and 14 in non-kinship care. 14 girls and 13 boys. Living in foster care for at least 6 months	16
Welch (Scotland)	2018	Explore how young people, birth mothers and kinship carers understand concepts of family, family troubles and looked-after child	Mixed-method multi-informant research	Qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews	Secondary analysis	8 looked-after children (aged 14–18 years) at home, 4 birth mothers, and 5 kinship carers	18
Boddy (UK)	2019	Explore young care leavers experience with family	Cross-country approach & mixed-method longitudinal research	Qualitative methods: interviews (on 3 occasions), life chart completion, photos, and music	Thematic analysis	3 males and 3 females (aged 16–32 years) from a sample of 21 young adults	14
Gardner (Australia)	1996	Explore the perceptions of families held by children held by children in foster care	Explorative & mixed-method multi-informant study	Qualitative methods: interviews, and drawing		43 children (aged 8–15 years). 22 boys and 21 girls. 40 in kinship foster care, and 3 in non-kinship foster care. They have been in foster care for more than 1 year. 42 non-foster children	17
Gardner (Australia)	1998	Explore the perception of family held by adults after	Mixed-method study	Qualitative methods: interviews		39 participants (aged 19–65 years) with foster care background. 28 women, and 11	14

Table 2 (*continued*)

Author(s) & country	Year	Purpose	Study design	Methods	Analysis	Sample	CASP
		having spent time in foster care as children				men. Majority of participants were white and Christian. Few from minority background. Mean length in foster care was 11.8 years	
Biehal (UK)	2014	Explore children perception of family and belonging in foster placements	Mixed-Method research	Qualitative methods: semin-structured interviews, drawings, and relational mapping exercise	Narrative analysis & cross-sectional thematic analysis	13 children (aged 9–17 years) in foster care for 3 years or more. 3 in kinship, and 10 in non-kinship foster family. 8 white boys and 5 girls	13
Andersson (Sweden)	1999a	Explore children relationships to their birth and foster family and their sense of family belonging		Interviews (on 3 occasions)		11 children in non-kinship foster care (aged 10–11 years), and their foster parents. 6 boys and 5 girls. Placed in foster care between the age of 1 and 5	12
Andersson (Sweden)	1999b	Explore children's experiences of stability in living conditions, their family relations, and their well-being	Mixed-method longitudinal research	Qualitative methods: drawings, and interviews		20 children who were placed in foster care (aged 15–20 years). 11 boys and 9 girls	14
Andersson (Sweden)	2009	Explore young adults family relationships childrens birth and foster family relationships	Mixed-method longitudinal research	Qualitative methods: drawings, and interviews		20 young adults who were placed in foster care as children (aged 25–30 years). 11 males and 9 females	14
Schofield (UK)	2002	Explore family membership throughout foster life	Psychosocial model of long-term foster care	Qualitative interviews		40 adults (aged 18–30 years) who grew up in foster families (at least 3 years). 30 females, and 10 males. 32 white British, and 8 minority ethnic/cultural origin	12
Christiansen, Havnen, Havik &Anderssen (Norway)	2013	Explore the relationships between young people and their foster families	Mixed-method multi-informant longitudinal research	Qualitative methods: interviews	Explorative analysis	43 children (aged 13–20 years). 31 girls and 12 boys. 36 Norwegian origin, 2 ethnic minorities, and 5 mixed ethnicities. In foster care for a minimum of 4 years. 40 foster carers, 22 birth parents, 42 social workers	17

of their biological family and many spoke with great loyalty and eagerness to forgive, even when contact with them remains problematic (Ellingsen et al., 2011, 2012; Biehal, 2014; Van Holen et al., 2020). One child reported: "My mom…I love her no matter what…Because I know, it wasn't nice what she did to me, but she it's still my mum and I really love her" (Van Holen et al., 2020, p. 5). Numerous foster children were also concerned about their birth parents (Ellingsen et al., 2011; Biehal, 2014; Van Holen et al., 2020). One child admitted: "I'm often worried about my mom and dad. Yes, sometimes I am. I generally don't show it to anyone here, but deep down it's there, that feeling of: 'How are they doing at the moment?'" (Van Holen et al., 2020, p.5). Another child reported: "I would like to live with my mother, just so that's said. But I'm really better off here" (Christiansen et al., 2013, p.730). According to Mahat-Shamir et al. (2018), for most foster children, their commitment to the biological family is not based on the nature of the relationship but to biological ties.

However, a few foster children negated biology and genetics as the primary criteria when defining family. For example, one adult stated:

"I think… blood only goes so deep I guess. Um, like just because like my mom, like, gave birth to me like I share like her genes I, I would never consider her family again, um, so I think, anyone that is like in your strong support system would be like family" (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 11).

In the same vein, some foster children believe "nothing but family name connects them to their biological family" (Ellingsen et al., 2011, p. 312). While some foster children spoke about feeling hurt, unloved, and angry towards their birth parents and hence did not include them in their representation of family (Gardner, 1998; Biehal, 2014; Van Holen

et al., 2020), others expressed great ambivalence: "My real mom means a lot to me. She brought me into this world. In any way, mother comes first. But…I never really had that strong bond with her" (Van Holen et al., 2020, p. 5).

3.2. Family as associated with positive emotions

Many foster children emphasised positive emotional characteristics as denoting family. Some spoke of family as being a support system made up of individuals who are in a close relationship, grounded in mutual care and support (Gardner, 1996; Samuels, 2009; Thomas et al., 2017; Van Holen et al., 2020). They spoke about feeling confident that their foster parents will be there for help and support (Gardner, 1998; Ellingsen et al., 2011). In addition, some former foster children spoke of family as a place where they are welcome and unconditionally accepted (Samuels, 2009; Thomas et al., 2017). For example, one adult explained: "A family member is somebody you can just feel real comfortable with and welcome, anywhere you go, no matter how you act, no matter what you do, they know you" (Samuels, 2009, p. 1233). In this kind of family understanding, "family has no boundaries to its love and care", family members talk things out, they listen to one another, tolerate differences and seek to bring out the best in one another (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 9). Families will be there, providing love and understanding one another, regardless of whether a right or wrong choice was made (Thomas et al., 2017). When asked how they know someone is not family, one replied: "Cuz they want nothing to do with you, or, like… they're not someone you can identify being close to" (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 9).

Some foster children yearned for their birth family and expressed feeling loved and confident that their birth mother loved them even

though she is unable to care for them (Ellingsen et al., 2011; Christiansen et al., 2013; Wissö et al., 2019). These family relationships were characterised by feelings of warmth, intimacy, affection, and love (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018). Yet, most foster children who emphasised emotional dimensions when defining their family, perceived their foster family as their 'real' family (Andersson, 1999b; Ellingsen et al., 2011; Schofield, 2002; Van Holen et al., 2020). They believed the foster family to be 'a family for life' (Andersson, 2005; Biehal, 2014) They include parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and nieces in their representation of family (Gardner, 1996, 1998; Andersson, 2009; Thomas et al., 2017; Wissö et al., 2019; Van Holen et al., 2020). They even and addressed their foster parents as 'Mum' or 'Dad' (Gardner, 1996; Andersson, 1999a; Schofield, 2002; Christiansen et al., 2013; Biehal, 2014; Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018; Van Holen et al., 2020). For example, one child related: "Ever since I moved I call her mum. I don't know why but I suppose that's the way she made me feel" (Schofield, 2002, p. 268).

Foster children (both former and current) reported that this feeling of connectedness with the foster family is because of the nurturing, warm, and supportive environment the foster family provided. They felt appreciated and valued (Gardner, 1998; Biehal, 2014; Van Holen et al., 2020; Bengtsson & Luckow, 2020). While some appreciated the supportive and accepting environment within their foster family, others mentioned not feeling emotionally close towards them (Christiansen et al., 2013; Bengtsson & Luckow, 2020). However, there were Some former foster children, who spoke of a secure, warm, and lasting relationship with their former foster family. The continuity in their relationships was grounded in the feeling of reciprocal love, as one stated: "My family, that's of course my foster family, they have been there all the time, also when I returned home in between … and they are grandma and grandpa for my boy" (Andersson, 2009, p.21).

Some foster children who spoke of foster parents as their real parents explained that the open and honest communication shared between them is what makes this true (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018). The ability to argue, disagree, talk about sensitive topics, address conflicts, and fight were considered essential aspects of open communication. For example, a child shared: "My (foster) mother, she worries too much and sometimes it leads to us fighting. Nothing too dramatic, just normal fights … It's a good sign that we feel okay fighting with each other'' (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018, p. 14). The experience of being treated the same as their foster parents' biological children was crucial for the foster children's sense of belonging and family (Gardner, 1998; Christiansen et al., 2013; Biehal, 2014). Equal treatment, to be accepted by the foster parents' extended family, to be able to fight with foster siblings as normal siblings do, or to stay overnight with their foster parents' biological adult children are all essential in order to feel included (Biehal, 2014). Foster children also stated that being allowed to have friends over (Gardner, 1998; Andersson, 1999a) was important in regarding the foster family as a real family.

Finally, former foster children who experienced the symbolic or actual loss of parents perceived professionals (such as social workers and teachers) as parental figures (Samuels, 2009). However, the emotional attachment was often not reciprocated, as the adults often were constrained by their professional statuses, and thus ended up having time-limited roles in their lives.

3.3. Family as doing family

The review revealed that for some foster children, participation in certain events turned people into family. They spoke about spending time together, having fun (Samuels, 2009; Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018; Van Holen et al., 2020) and participating in family meals (Schofield, 2002; Samuels, 2009; Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2017; Van Holen et al., 2020). Eating together was particularly significant in establishing a sense of a family, and one child commented: "you are part of the family as every Saturday we eat together" (Mahat-Shamir et al.,

2018, p.15). In Samuels' (2009) study, a former foster child defined food as an indication of familial inclusion, where family is when "You can go in the fridge if you want. …And then you just…sit around and crack jokes and cook and eat (laughs)" (p.1233). Other foster children spoke of family visits and going to social events together as indicative of being a family (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018). Examples of such events were holiday travels, weddings, and Christmas celebrations (Schofield, 2002; Holtan, 2008; Samuels, 2009; Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2017; Boddy, 2019; Van Holen et al., 2020).

Furthermore, among some former foster children, doing particular things together was underscored as crucial when defining and deciding who are family. Their account of family meant going to ball games with their biological or care-based related family members and attending their funerals (Schofield, 2002; Thomas et al., 2017). Family was also defined as the people you greet and send cards to on special occasions, such as Mother's Day, birthdays, and Christmas (Schofield, 2002). For some former foster children, shared experiences and memories among biological family members marked family. When asked who they thought of when they talk about family, one former foster child responded that she thought of her grandmother and mother because of the time they had spent together but added that she thought more of her grandmother as her mother because her grandmother had raised her (Thomas et al., 2017).

3.4. Family as a choice

A few foster children spoke about their memberships within a family as something they chose. As one child pointed out: "My experience is that I can choose who will be my family—neither my biological family nor foster family think it should only be them" (Ellingsen et al., 2011, p.308). This meant, for instance, that they could regard both their birth and foster family as their family — having a sense of 'family belonging' in both families (Andersson, 1999b; Ellingsen et al., 2011; Christiansen et al., 2013; Biehal, 2014; Wissö et al., 2019; Bengtsson & Luckow, 2020). They reported feeling loved by both their foster and birth parents (Ellingsen et al., 2011; 2012; Biehal, 2014), having regular positive contact with their birth parents through social media networks (Wissö et al., 2019), and did not find contact with their birth parents stressful (Ellingsen et al., 2011).

Others included multiple relations in their choice of family (Holtan, 2008; Ellingsen et al., 2011; Boddy, 2019) such as in the study of Wissö et al. (2019). In this study e there were foster children who regarded teachers, friends, and relatives from the birth family as most important to them. A girl who spent six months in residential care spoke of other children she had come to know as sisters and perceiving them as family:

I still have contact with some of the girls I met there. We have a special connection, and we can talk on the phone and we chat, share photos on Facebook, and so on. You could say that they are like sisters to me, just as my custodian's birth children are, they are also kind of my sisters (Wissö et al., 2019, p. 14).

Finally, some former foster children spoke of people they met while in foster care and friends who have become family (Thomas et al., 2017) while others spoke about their teacher, social worker, or scout leader as important in their lives as they were more helpful than either birth or foster parents (Andersson, 2005).

4. Discussion

This paper has synthesised how foster children have come to understand and define family, following the introduction of the UNCRC in 1990. The results revealed that foster children's perceptions of family are (1) biologically defined, (2) imbued with positive emotions, (3) based on *doing*, and (4) based on choice. This shows that their different understanding of family is fluid and reflects multiple ways of family belonging, divided into in three contexts – kinship, non-kinship, and a combination of the two.

This review shows that biology is a determining factor when considering family relations (Chambers, 2012). As Mahat-Shamir et al. (2018) states: commitment to the biological family is related to genetic ties. Previous research has emphasised the decline in the ideology of the nuclear family model in postmodern societies (see Finch, 2007). Our review, however, found that this 'ideal' family type is very much held by most former and current foster children. What remains unclear, however, is whether the meaning of family (in terms of consanguinity) is biological, as suggested by Mahat-Shamir et al. (2018), or discursive (related to the cultural symbolism of blood ties (Allan, 2008). The findings of the review thus support the view of Jackson (2009) that although the traditional family living arrangement is declining, the concept as an ideology is not (in McIntosh et al., 2011).

The review also reveals that within biological perceptions of family, foster children included certain aspects in their family definitions that former foster children did not emphasise. This includes forgiveness, care, and honouring birth family even when there is abuse. This indicates that family loyalty is stronger among children than adults, suggesting that the independence of adulthood provides an emotional space to distance oneself from the biological family.

In the second category of the review, the emotional dimension of family belonging is accentuated. This is coherent with the concept of family practices by Morgan (1996, 2020), where family is marked by an emphasis on the active or 'doing' as well as a sense of the everyday, the regular. Acts of mutual love, care, support, but also tolerance, communication, and conflicts—all found in the reviewed literature—are common activities within families, affirming, reproducing, and even redefining family relationships (Morgan, 2020). Morgan (2011) and others use 'family talk' as an example of a common family practice. A practice also appreciated by foster children:

> This talk may be face-to-face or via mobile phones, skype or email. Much of it will be based upon shared, unexplicated assumptions or may include abbreviated references to past experiences or jokes. In engaging in this kind of talk, members are re-stating that a particular kind of relationship, a family relationship, exists between them (p.3).

The concept of family practices highlights the active roles family members have, and contains an emotional dimension, including so-called 'caringscapes' (Morgan, 2011).

The third category, doing family things, is a continuance of the family practices described above, underscoring the social and relational practices through which families are (re-)produced (Heaphy, 2011). The review confirms what scholars in family sociology have noted concerning 'doing family' (Morgan, 2011): that shared holidays are archetypical family events that build and maintain family identity (Jones & Hackett, 2011); that eating together is a family ritual (Chambers, 2012; Jones & Hackett, 2011) and shared meals are central to defining and sustaining the family as a social unit (McIntosh et al., 2011; Ursin et al., 2017); and that going to events such as ball games, funerals, weddings, and celebrations are of high importance (Chambers, 2012; Ursin et al., 2017). In addition, some of the family practices that emerged in the review, (i.e. attending funerals and sending cards) could also be perceived as family displays (Finch, 2007). According to Finch, such displays are efforts to demonstrate (well-functioning) family relations, and thus, for instance, acts of giving gifts or cards are "carefully selected for a particular individual to convey the meaning of the relationship" (Finch, 2007, p. 77).

The fourth category demonstrates that some foster children perceive family membership as a choice. Perceiving families as a choice is seen as more inclusive, as they are based on personal choice rather than rigid customs and imposed obligation from their surroundings (Chambers, 2012). This understanding is in line with sociological literature of the 1990s, emphasising more flexible and egalitarian relationships. This was, however, later criticised for exaggerating individual agency and overlooking power differences in terms of social class, gender inequality,

and intergenerational connections (Chambers, 2012). As Heaphy (2011) argues, a focus

> on reflexive family practices may overplay the agency, choices and 'freedom' that people have with respect to how relating practices are institutionalised, structured along axes of differences and linked to the flow of power (p. 26).

Costello (2003) reminds us that children often do not have the option of choosing family as they are commonly considered as 'belonging' to their parents. They also have the least power in making choices concerning family. The findings of this review suggest that the status in-between family systems of foster children and former foster children increase their opportunity to choose their family membership.

In addition to these four categories, the review demonstrates that within the last decade the perspectives of children and young people received more attention in research. Most of the studies were conducted in Scandinavian (10) and Anglo-Saxon countries (8). These countries child welfare systems have been at the forefront in advocating for children's participatory rights (Burns, Pösö & Skivenes, 2017). Hence, we might assume that there are more studies exploring children's perspectives on family within these countries than in other regions of the world. This might be linked of the categories of welfare regimes of Esping-Andersen, and others within which they operate (Studsrød et al., 2018), where the state emphasise care outside of the family. In family-oriented welfare regimes where there is marginal state intervention and people's well-being are rooted in and supported by family relationships (Studsrød et al., 2018), the views of foster children under state CPS are excluded from this search though they might have a different understanding of family.

Even though the review included publications in Spanish and Portuguese, we found no articles in these languages exploring former and current foster children's perspectives and meaning of family. This might be explained by at least two reasons. First, as discussed above, children's participatory rights are not as highly emphasised in Spain, Portugal, and Latin-American countries as they are in Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries. Second, although informal foster care has been common in these countries, formal foster care administered by CPS is a less common institutionalisation and this continues to be the norm in cases of parental neglect or abuse.

In this meta-synthesis, there was a coherence in the understanding of family across the geographical locations, including the study in Israel. This suggests that there are many similarities in notions of family in the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries. However, the lack of research in Asia, Africa, and the Americas means we cannot speak to the diversity and fluidity in family life globally and therefore cannot increase our understanding of the impact of global economic and cultural processes. Furthermore, this review shows that there is a lack of comparative, cross-cultural, and longitudinal research on how foster children and former foster children from different 'welfare regimes' conceptualise family, which may help to identify key features of successful interventions. Foster children are not a homogenous group. Therefore, applying findings from their perspective should be done with caution. Future research needs to explore children's perspectives across ethnicities, social class, and religion and compare those from a majority background in foster families with those from a minority background.

By highlighting foster children's key defining characteristics of what constitutes family, we find that concepts with family sociology and child-friendly methods within childhood studies are useful to develop a holistic understanding of foster children as active participants in family relations rather than families just passively receiving the child and the child passively receiving care (Holland & Crowley, 2013). Those who have applied a sociological lens in research about children in care argue that it is the most powerful approach to understand the social processes through which family is constituted, shifting away from traditional conceptualisations of family (which are based only on biological or legal

ties (Biehal, 2014; Wissö et al., 2019). In their study, Ellingsen et al. (2011) found that listening to foster children's perspectives on family relations, when deciding upon foster placement, increase their self-worth and self-esteem. Strengthening their resilience and ability to bounce back from diversity. To capture the meaning and significance of foster children's family relations, listening to their views during childhood and adulthood is essential. While it does not make child welfare work easier, it makes it potentially more reflective (Andersson, 2005).

4.1. Strengths and limitations

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first systematic literature review with a focus on foster children's understanding of family, and the meanings they attach to it. Therefore, it contributes to scholarly insights to this field of research. This review provides an overview not only of existing knowledge but also of prominent gaps in our knowledge and understanding.

There were, however, some limitations concerning the review in this study. The literature search was conducted in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Thus, the review excludes publications in all other languages. In addition, we did not find any article in Spanish or Portuguese. Studies selection bias might have resulted from the initial process when choosing databases, translation of the search terms, and the combination of key words, hence we might have missed relevant publications. In this review the vast majority of foster children and former foster children were from the global North, which might potentially have caused a biased perspective.

5. Conclusion

This review has screened 1354 journals, selected, and synthesised 20 articles based on 19 studies which contained qualitative information regarding understandings and meanings of family, from former and current foster children's perspective. Although research capturing children's perspectives on family is increasing, it remains limited. The review shows that foster children's understanding of family is fluid and reflects multiple ways of family belonging in kinship, non-kinship and the intersection of the two. Even through (former) foster children revealed that positive emotions and doing family are important when defining what constitutes family, most spoke of family as tied to biological bonds. Some, however, felt that family is a choice.

To fully understand the contextual and changing nature of family and the understanding thereof from different groups of children in CPS, further comprehensive studies are required. These studies should explicitly explore the perspectives of family from different groups (in terms of their ethnicity, social class, religion and disability), and also carefully analyse these in relation to the country welfare state (or particular local context). Such studies would be a welcome addition to the rather limited body of literature on the meaning and understanding of family of various groups of children experiencing out-of-home placement. It can be surmised from this review that any policy and practical intervention targeting children and young people in foster families should acknowledge normative ideals of what family is while considering differences in children and young people's experiences of family.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Judite Ie: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Writing – original draft. **Marit Ursin:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Miguel Vicente-Mariño:** Methodology.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106337.

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