**PROGRAMA DE DOCTORADO EN INVESTIGACIÓN
TRANSDISCIPLINAR EN EDUCACIÓN**

TESIS DOCTORAL:

Beyond blood ties: Constructing the meaning of 'family' among Spanish children in foster care

(ES) Más allá de los lazos de sangre: La construcción
del significado de 'familia' entre los niños españoles
en acogimiento familiar

Presentada por Judite Ie para optar al grado de
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Summary of thesis

While there is a substantial body of research with children in foster care in Spain, there is little that concerns their perspectives on the concept of 'family'. This mirrors a general trend in research involving foster children, which frequently overlooks wider sociological perspectives related to family and intimate life. This study aims to address these gaps by exploring how children and youth in long-term non-kinship foster care in Spain define and experience the concept of family, utilising contemporary family sociology perspectives as a guiding research paradigm and conceptual framework. The study employs a multi-method qualitative approach involving 14 children and youth (seven boys and seven girls) aged 10 to 22.

This PhD thesis includes three peer-reviewed journal Articles. The first Article offers a comprehensive systematic qualitative synthesis review of existing international literature on the concept of family as understood by children and youth in foster care. The second Article explores how foster children and youth perceive and 'do' family in Spain, while the third Article investigates how birth mothers are perceived among children in foster care. The study reveals that the definition of family is primarily based on (1) blood ties (discourse and genetics), (2) emotions, and (3) doing and displaying family. For many foster children in Spain, the family concept focusing on blood ties becomes deconstructed in the absence of support and regular contact. Emotional and practical support is positioned as superior to family, defined through blood ties. These definitions were shaped by a variety of factors, including reciprocal love, care, support, security, predictability, everyday family practices in foster families, and children's past and current experiences in both foster and birth families.

Resumen de la tesis

Aunque son más frecuentes las investigaciones sobre niños en acogimiento familiar en España, poco se sabe de las percepciones que estos tienen sobre el concepto de 'familia'. Esto refleja una tendencia general en los estudios relacionados con estos niños: la mayoría de las veces no tienen en cuenta amplias perspectivas sociológicas relacionadas con la familia, ni las relativas a las situaciones entre diferentes personas. Este estudio pretende abordar estas lagunas explorando cómo los niños y jóvenes en acogimiento familiar ajeno de larga duración en España entienden y viven el concepto de familia. Para ello se tendrá en cuenta la perspectiva de la sociología de la familia contemporánea como paradigma de investigación y como marco conceptual. El estudio emplea un enfoque cualitativo multi-método con 14 niños y jóvenes (siete chicos y siete chicas) de edades comprendidas entre los 10 y los 22 años.

Esta tesis doctoral incluye tres artículos de revistas revisión por pares. El primer artículo ofrece una amplia revisión sistemática de síntesis cualitativa de la literatura internacional existente sobre el concepto de familia, según es entendido por los niños y jóvenes en acogimiento familiar. El segundo, explora cómo los niños y jóvenes en acogida perciben y 'hacen' familia en España; y el tercero, explora cómo las madres biológicas son percibidas por los niños que viven en esta situación. Los resultados de este estudio revelan que la definición de familia se basa en (1) los lazos de sangre (discurso y genética), (2) las emociones, y (3) el 'hacer' y 'mostrar parentesco'. Para la mayoría de los niños acogidos en España, los lazos de sangre como fundamento del concepto de familia pierde importancia en ausencia de apoyo y contacto regular. El apoyo emocional y práctico se posiciona como rasgo superior al de la familia definida a través de lazos de sangre. Estas definiciones estaban determinadas por diversos factores, como el amor recíproco, el cuidado, el apoyo, la seguridad, la predictibilidad, las actividades cotidianas en las familias de acogida y las experiencias pasadas y presentes de los niños, tanto en las familias de acogida como en las biológicas.

Acknowledgments

List of publications

The thesis is based on the following publications:

Article I:

Ie, J., Ursin, M., & Vicente-Marino, M. (2022). Foster children's views of family: A systematic review and qualitative synthesis. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *132*, 106337. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106337

Article II:

Ie, J. (2022). The concept of family: perspectives of Spanish young people in foster care. *Child & Family Social Work, 28*(2), 503–514. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12980

Article III:

Ie, J. & Ellingsen I.T. (2023). "You've to got to love her" – Perceptions of birth mothers among children in long-term foster care. *Child & Family Social Work.* https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13071

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study examines how children and youth in long-term non-kinship care define and experience the concept of family. The research draws on family sociology concepts as the study's conceptual framework. Given that much of the existing work in this area is restricted to Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries (Ie et al., 2022), this study aims to expand academic knowledge on family conceptualisation in foster care, filling a contextual and regional gap by focusing on children and youth in long-term non-kinship foster care in Spain. The lived experiences of 14 foster children and youth, aged 10 to 22 at the time of the interview, are used to gain insight into their views and practices concerning family while also shedding light on the sociocultural contexts that shape their understanding and experience of family.

Following this introduction to the study, a brief account of how my personal interest in this topic emerged is provided, which follows the background information and the rationale for carrying out this study. The theoretical framework from family sociology is then introduced, followed by the study aims and research questions. The chapter concludes with an outline of the dissertation's structure.

1.2 Why this study?

My decision to choose this topic stemmed from various personal, professional, and educational experiences. Growing up and living in six different countries, each with distinct social, cultural, and political contexts, my understanding of family has constantly evolved. My volunteer work with families seeking asylum in the United Kingdom and Norway and with remote communities in Papua New Guinea as a child protection officer sparked my interest in how young people construct their own social realities within families and other social institutions. My professional training in psychology and criminology, as well as my work experience, also fuelled my enthusiasm for pursuing further education.

In 2014, I joined the MPhil program in Childhood Studies at the Norwegian Centre of Child Research (NOSEB), Norwegian University of Science and Technology. My master's project

explored how Roma youth's transition to adulthood in Cascais, a coastal municipality in the Lisbon District, was influenced by the expectations of the Roma communities, particularly family and mainstream Portuguese culture (Ie & Ursin, 2022). I discovered that the meaning of family is deeply rooted in cultural understandings. Inspired by this study, I wrote a proposal for doctoral research on foster children's views of the concept of family. My interest in children within the child protection system was further motivated by seminars on Child Protection Services at NOSEB involving various stakeholders, including child protection officers, police officers, academics, students, and young people under Child Protection Services.

My research was spurred by the story of Liv, a Norwegian youth who spent years in foster care. Her narrative emphasised her views of her family and aspirations for her future family life. My goal in revealing the meaning of family among young people in foster care is not only to recognise their lived experiences but also to outline practical implications for those who support them. I initially intended to conduct a comparative study between Spain and Norway because one of the central aspects of a comparative perspective is the opportunity to learn from others (Baistow, 2000). However, I limited my study to Spain due to the challenges of recruiting research participants (see Chapter Four). Moreover, due to the limited timeframe, along with feedback from my thesis supervisors and maternity leave, I chose to focus solely on Spain. This PhD study is the culmination of these experiences and reflects my commitment to conducting research in this area.

1.3 Background to the study

Family plays a key role in providing a supportive and caring environment that promotes the full potential of children (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC, 1989). Family is a key context for children and youth's well-being, mental health (Dinisman et al., 2017; Martin & Zulaika, 2016), and identity formation (Rabiau, 2019). It is also the foundation of their sociocultural and economic lives (Carsten, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 1990). The family, as a social institution, provides a site of connection and interdependence wherein children experience their most intimate and significant relationships (McKie & Callen, 2012; Wyn et al., 2012). Therefore, the family is a crucial source of provision and protection for children and young people (UNCRC, 1989). The rights of children and young people in respect to family life under Article 8 of the European Court of Human Rights

(ECtHR) have strengthened its relevance internationally. The ECtHR has affirmed that parental rights should only be revoked in exceptional circumstances, with the paramount consideration being the best interest of the child (Breen et al., 2020).

Out-of-home placement signifies that children are unable to live with their birth families and, therefore, may be placed in public care (Kosher et al., 2018). Despite the lack of data on foster care, UNICEF (2022) estimated that approximately 2.9 million children worldwide were in residential care in 2021. According to the ECtHR, the UNCRC, and the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, out-of-home care is seen as a temporary measure aimed at reuniting children with their families. Foster care placement is the preferred type of out-of-home care for children and young people in Western countries as it can provide a family setting in which they can receive the necessary care and attention for their adequate development (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). The majority of children placed in foster care are due to inadequate parenting, including abuse and neglect, often combined with parental psychopathology, delinquency and/or substance abuse (McDonald & Brook, 2009), with some due to parental incarceration and death (Shawn et al., 2015).

The detrimental effect of out-of-home care on children's normative developmental trajectories is well documented. Despite differences in welfare systems of different countries, empirical evidence concludes that foster children's outcomes are poorer in education, employment, income, mental health, and brain development. They also have more behavioural problems compared to their peers from the general population (Carmen et al., 2018; Gypen et al., 2017; Kääriälä & Hiilamo, 2017; Leve et al., 2012). These poor outcomes can increase when the child experiences placement disruptions (Kojin et al., 2019).

Evidence also suggests that children in foster care face the trauma of being removed from their birth parents and experiencing poor social and family relationships (Andersson, 2005; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011; Leve et al., 2012). Children in foster care must navigate different family settings and create a sense of family belonging (Biehal, 2014). Consequently, the concept of 'family' is complex for foster children (Parker & Mayock, 2019). The perception of family has become a central theme in research regarding the experience of foster children and young people in the last decade (Ie et al., 2022). However, in Spain, research into the experiences of foster children is scarce. This study describes a qualitative study examining

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the experiences of foster children and young people in long-term non-kinship foster care regarding the concept of 'family'.

1.3.1 Foster care research in Spain

In the last two decades, there has been a substantial body of work in Spain on foster care (e.g., Amorós et al., 2003; López-López et al., 2010; Martínez-Miguel, Gimeno-Collado & González Sala, 2021), but only a few examples of perspectives from foster families (e.g., López-López & del Valle, 2016; Muñoz & Rebollo, 2010). Most research conducted with foster children and young people applies a retrospective design (Tarren-Swwney, 2008), focusing on their attachment outcomes (Carrera et al., 2020) or on how to enhance their well-being (Llosada-Gistau et al., 2020). Some studies are narrative-based, aiming to listen to these young people's views (Casas & Bello, 2012). Nonetheless, these studies deal with issues related to what they consider their needs with regard to their birth families (Fuentes-Peláez, 2013). Other studies have focused on specific areas of foster children and young people's views, such as their interpersonal relationships while in care (Ciurana et al., 2014), or their views on social support in promoting successful family reunification (Vaquero et al., 2020).

Despite the numerous studies highlighting different aspects of young people's views, most scholars seem to overlook children's and young people's own perceptions of the family system, which is a deeply ingrained and highly valued social institution in Spanish society (Ayuso, 2019a). This gap in knowledge points to the need to develop a national knowledge base on this issue. Given emerging evidence suggesting that family reunification between children in foster care and biological parents occurs when the child reaches adulthood (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2020), there is a pressing need to examine the family experience of children and young people while in foster care. This exercise has the potential to enhance our understanding of family as experienced by foster children from childhood into adulthood. Furthermore, as the Spanish child protection Law 26/2015 pays considerable attention to contact between children and their biological families, reunification, and permanence arrangements, gaining insight into the reality of family and family relationships of these children can provide key insights from a policy perspective.

1.4 Introducing the theoretical framework from family sociology

Early sociological work on the family that privileged the nuclear family over diverse family forms has had a profound impact on contemporary studies within family sociology. Family sociology provides an integrative framework for exploring the meaning of family that takes shape within a sociocultural context and the quality of relationships between individuals therein (Smart, 2004). Guided by core concepts from contemporary family sociology related to the family (Morgan, 1996, 2011; Dermott & Seymour, 2011; Finch, 2007), this theoretical framework provides an opportunity to analyse and understand the "relationships derived not from biological, legal or normative definitions but in terms of observed interactions" (Ermisch & Brynin, 2009, p. 4). While some studies have applied these advances to examine postadoption "family relationships" (Jones & Hackett, 2011; MacDonald, 2017), there has been a dearth of research integrating these concepts into the study with children in care (Holland & Crowley, 2013).

However, this study also extends this framework to explore the concept of 'family' in foster care, building on previous research conducted in the UK (Biehal, 2014); Italy (Sità & Mortari, 2022); and Sweden (Wissö et al., 2019). Applying the concepts of family sociology to this topic has the potential to provide new insights into how family is conceptualised in foster care. Furthermore, they enable us to determine ways in which children and young people's family experiences may have been influenced by their own culturally taken-for-granted family understandings. The theoretical framework and its relevance are discussed in detail in Chapter Three. Family sociology was applied in this study as both a guiding research paradigm and a theoretical framework. Drawing on this theoretical and conceptual framework informed the use of a qualitative multi-methods approach (Punch, 2002) for data gathering, which allows children and young people to express their views in a variety of ways (Ennew et al., 2009a).

1.5 Rationale for the study

In recent years, there has been growing interest in how family is perceived by different groups in contemporary society (Powell et al., 2010). Children's views on family have also become a subject of great interest, whereas before, children's experiences of family life were communicated through adults, professionals, or adults' recollections of their childhood experiences (Morrow, 1998). A growing body of research in Spain analysing family explored

the effects of class (Carmona, 2014), sexuality (González & López, 2009), separation or divorce (Escapa, 2017), single-parenthood (Marí-Klose & Marí-Klose, 2010), international adoption (León Manso, 2011), and foster care (Montserrat, Casas & Baena, 2015). Moreover, a significant portion of the qualitative research on foster children and young people's conceptualisation of family has focused primarily on views and experiences in Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries (Ie et al., 2022). However, little is known about Spanish foster children and young people's views on the concept of family. This suggests that understanding and exploring foster children and young people's conceptualisation of family warrants investigation.

1.6 The current study

This research project seeks to extend the existing academic knowledge in the area of family and foster care by addressing the regional gap, focusing on Spanish children and young people's perspectives on the concept of 'family' in long-term non-kinship care. By utilising a qualitative mixed-methods research approach (Punch, 2002), we have an opportunity to gain insight into the lived experiences of family life among this group as well as the sociocultural context that influences and shapes their understandings of family. In light of observed changes in family meanings over the past decades in many Western societies (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Segrin & Flora, 2011), and efforts to better understand how these changes have implications for how children and young people in foster care understand and attach meanings to family (Parker & Mayock, 2019), this study draws on theoretical principles central to contemporary family sociology.

1.7 Aims, objectives, and main research questions

The aims of this study are:

1. To contribute to the scientific literature by providing a comprehensive and holistic view of non-kinship foster children and young people's views of family.
2. To identify gaps in previous studies to guide future empirical research and to position my research project within the international literature.
3. To provide new insights into how non-kinship foster children and young people in Spain conceptualise family by drawing on theories and concepts of family sociology.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To explore how family is conceptualised among non-kinship foster children and young people in Spain, using a qualitative mixed-method approach.

2. To ascertain how contemporary concepts of family sociology can enhance our understanding of the ways in which non-kinship foster children and young people in Spain conceptualise and experience family.

Based on the study aims and objectives above, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What does international research say about the perspectives of foster children and young people on the concept of 'family'? (Article I)

2. How do foster children and young people in non-kinship care perceive and 'do' family in Spain? (Article II)

3. Who counts as 'family' for children and young people in non-kinship care in Spain and why? (Articles II & III).

1.8 Overview of approach: PhD by publication

This PhD has been completed 'by publication'. Accordingly, this dissertation is structured around three interconnected Articles. The first Article was co-authored with my supervisors Professor Marit Ursin (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) and Professor Miguel Vicente Mariño (University of Valladolid). The second was single-authored, and the third was co-authored with Professor Ingunn T. Ellingsen (University of Stavanger). I identified the focus of each paper. When the first Article was at an advanced stage of development, my supervisors provided key feedback and guidance. For the second Article, I worked more independently from conception to publication. Article I relies on secondary data and presents a systematic literature review and qualitative synthesis of previous studies on foster children's views of family. Articles II and III rely on original empirical data gathered through photos, drawings, social network maps, recall, and semi-structured interviews with children and young people in foster care in Spain. Table 1 below provides an overview of the Articles.

Table 1

Overview of articles included in this thesis

	Article 1	Article 2	Article 3
Article title	Foster children's views of family: A systematic review and qualitative synthesis	The concept of family: Perspectives of Spanish young people in foster care	"You've to got to love her" – Perceptions of birth mothers among children in long-term foster care
Author(s)	Judite Ie, Marit Ursin & Miguel Vicente-Mariño	Judite Ie	Judite Ie & Ingunn T. Ellingsen
Research question	1	2 & 3	3
Methodology	Systematic literature review and qualitative evidence synthesis	Mixed method qualitative design approach	Explorative study
Journal	Children and Youth Services Review	Child & Family Social Work	Child & Family Social Work
Publication dates	Available online December 2021	November 2022	July 2023

1.9 Definition of some key terms

This thesis focuses on children and young people in long-term non-kinship foster care aged between 10 and 22.

Children refers to participants aged 13 to 17, according to the UNCRC (1989).

Young people refer to participants aged 15 to 24, according to the United Nations. In this study, I use the terms 'children' and 'young people' or 'youth' interchangeably.

Foster care (also known as out-of-home care) is an arrangement where adults provide for the care of children and young people in their families on behalf of social services (Spanish Law 26/2015).

Long-term foster care refers to situations where the family accepts children and young people for permanent care and upbringing.

Non-kinship foster care refers to situations where a family unknown to the child or young person is recruited through social services.

2.0 Thesis outline

The remainder of this dissertation is organised into five chapters. Chapter Two provides cogent background information on the underlying political and sociocultural processes that shape foster children and young people's conceptualisation of family and family life. It draws specific reference to characteristics of Spanish welfare systems, the organisation of foster care in the country, and the situation of foster children and young people in Spain. Chapter Three presents the theoretical and conceptual debates that this study draws on. It reviews and discusses existing literature on family sociology and childhood studies. The chapter highlights the existing disconnection between family and childhood studies and acknowledges gaps in knowledge and the contributions of this study. Chapter Four presents the methodology and methods utilised in the study. It introduces a multi-method qualitative research design as a choice for data collection and discusses specific issues that arise when conducting qualitative research with foster children and young people in Spain. Chapter Five introduces and provides a comprehensive, integrative discussion of the three Articles that form the basis of this PhD. It also discusses implications for policy, practice, and recommendations for future research.

2.1 Introduction

To understand the views about 'family' held by children and young people in foster care, it is necessary to provide information on some underlying characteristics of the Spanish welfare systems, which serve as a contextual background for this dissertation. This chapter establishes the context relevant to the main aim of the study: exploring the conceptualisation of family among foster children and young people in non-kinship care in Spain. This chapter is divided into five sections. After the introduction, Section 2.2 provides a brief country and demographic profile. Section 2.3 describes the Spanish welfare system and the changing political and social context of the family, which provide a background to understand how family relationships are shaped. Section 2.4 introduces the child welfare system in Spain, particularly referencing child protection policies and the initiation of foster care as a protective measure. Section 2.5 offers an overview of some aspects concerning foster care in the Spanish child welfare system.

2.2 Country and demographic profile

Spain, or the Kingdom of Spain, is a southwestern European country mostly located on the Iberian Peninsula, bordered by Portugal to the west, France and Andorra to the north, and Gibraltar to the south. Its territory also includes the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean, the Balearic Islands in the Mediterranean Sea, and the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, the so-called *Plazas de Soberanía* [Places of Sovereignty] in North Africa. Spain is a multilingual country; its 1978 constitution stipulates that while Spanish is the only official language for the country as a whole, it also recognises the right of regional languages (Basque, Catalan, and Galician) to be co-official in their autonomous regions (Balearic Islands, Basque Country, Catalonia, Galicia, Navarre, and Valencian Community). Figure 1 below shows maps of Spain. The left map shows the location of Spain (dark green) within the European Union (light green), and the right map highlights the 17 autonomous regions. The large green circle on this map indicates the autonomous region of Castilla y León, where this study was conducted. Castilla y León comprises nine provinces: Léon, Zamora, Salamanca, Ávila, Burgos, Palencia, Segovia, Soria, and Valladolid.

Figure 1

Maps of Spain

Wikipedia	Source: A world of dresses website

Spain has the lowest total fertility rate among EU countries, and many families are becoming smaller (OECD, 2021). In 2020, there were approximately 47.3 million inhabitants in Spain (National Statistical Institute, 2020a). Of these, 5.1 per cent (2.4 million) resided in the Castilla y León region (National Statistical Institute, 2020b). While the 'traditional' nuclear family has declined over time due to a decrease in marriage and an increase in cohabitation, out-of-wedlock childbirth, divorce, remarriage, and extra-marital fertility (Lesthaeghe, 2010), it still remains the dominant family model in Spain. In 2020, there were approximately 18.7 million households housing 46.8 million people. Over 33 per cent of children under the age of 25 were living with both parents, and 10 per cent were with a single parent (National Statistical Institute, 2020a).

Spaniards often perform similarly to or better than the OECD in work-life balance, health, social connections, and safety. However, a significant part of the population struggles with income scarcity and the risk of poverty, unemployment, and high housing prices (OECD, 2020). This is particularly true among families with children (Moreno-Mínguez, 2017), which tend to be more vulnerable than other population groups. According to the Spanish Office of the High Commissioner against Child Poverty, available data indicates that in 2020, an estimated 27.4 per cent of children under the age of 18 were considered poor (Gobierno de España, 2021). Cases of suspected child abuse are also on the increase, with 37.18 per cent of reported neglect, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse cases involving girls (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2021).

2.3 The Spanish welfare state and the changing political and social context of the family

To understand the current Spanish welfare state and the role of the family, we must go back to the dictatorship of General Franco. The Franco dictatorship was established following the victory in the Spanish civil war (1936-1939) and lasted nearly 40 years (1939-1975). During this time, the family was profoundly influenced by the Roman Catholic Church doctrine and La Falange (Spain's fascist party). Religious traditions and conservative ideologies privileged and promoted the 'traditional' nuclear family structure with a male breadwinner and a housewife. Parents and children were united by indissoluble ties under the patriarchal authority of the husband and father, while the wife and mother were confined to the home to give birth and care for the children (Meil-Landwerlin, 1995, 2006; Miret-Gamundi, 2000; Sanchez & Hall, 1999). Women working outside the home were perceived as a threat to the stability of the marriage and the family (Meil-Landwerlin, 1995).

The male breadwinner family model was accepted among Spanish citizens, politically supported by institutions (Moreno-Mínguez et al., 2017), and reproduced through family policies during the Franco regime (de Ussel & Meil-Landwerlin, 2001). Family allowances (*subsidio familiar*) were introduced to encourage women to return from work to their families and assume responsibility for caring for their children and husbands. This family benefit was a monthly cash payment to employees as a complement to their incomes and depended on the number of children under the age of 14 (Valiente, 1996). Family policies were anti-feminist and pro-natalist (Valiente, 1996), and the fertility rate was high at the time due to restrictions on contraception (McQuillan, 2004).

During the 1960s, the diffusion of post-materialism norms and values, which emphasise self-fulfilment, along with shifting attitudes toward family, marriage, and parenthood, contributed to dramatic changes in family formation (Lesthaeghe, 2010). At the end of Franco's dictatorship, marriage and divorce laws were liberalised, gender roles became more egalitarian, and 'non-traditional' family forms gained wider acceptance (Ayuso, 2019a,b; Flaquer & Garriga, 2009). After nearly four decades of the Franco dictatorship supporting the male breadwinner model and using legal provisions to reinforce traditional family relationships, successive democratic governments have prioritised other social problems, downplaying the importance of family economics as a means of social protection (Meil-

Landwerlin, 2006). This lack of attention can be attributed to the strong cultural expectations about the roles and responsibilities of families in caring for their members (ibid).

Following the Constitution of 1978, the provision and implementation of welfare policies in Spain are decentralised. Basic social security exclusively belongs to the state (Article 149 no.1, xvii), whereas individual social assistance remains a regional policy area (Article 148 no. 1, xx). However, each region is obligated to ensure the protection of the family and children under the Spanish Constitution (Article 39, no. 1-4). In the autonomous region of Castilla y León, where this study took place, the Act 1/2007, 7.3.2007 (BOE no.76) is the legal instrument for the support of families. Although local authorities operate under the regulatory framework provided by the state or regional governments, they have the power to develop certain policies, such as children and youth services.

Esping-Andersen's (1990) influential *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, which describes how different welfare states (liberal, conservative, and social democratic regimes) support individuals' reliance on labour markets, has been criticised for ignoring the distinctive characteristics of welfare systems in the Mediterranean countries (Ferrera, 1996). For instance, his typology did not include countries such as Greece, Portugal, and Spain, while Italy was grouped among the conservative regimes. Others also argued that his typology has a limited focus on the role of the family and women (O'Connor, 1993; Pérez-Caramés, 2014).

Hantrais (2004) provides an alternative typology and arranges countries into four different welfare regimes, reflecting de-familiarized, partially de-familiarized, familiarized, and re-familialized states. These types of welfare states focus on different ways of balancing state and family responsibility. Spain has been identified as representing a familiarized welfare state regime, where state involvement is limited and welfare responsibility rests more on families themselves, compared, for example, with Norway (de-familiarized). The role of the family and women in the provision of family services has been privately assumed as a guarantee of stability and the functioning of familiarized welfare states (Moreno-Mínguez, 2007).

2.4 The context of child welfare system in Spain

Until the 1980s, the Spanish child welfare system was based on a charity model in which large residential institutions run by religious orders were the only response when it was necessary to separate children from their families (del Valle, Bravo & López-López, 2009). Following the Spanish Constitution of 1978, democracy was restored and the contemporary child welfare system was founded on social services characterised by territorial decentralisation. Correspondingly, Spain was divided administratively into 17 autonomous regions, each with their own government, parliament, and array of different powers (Kosher et al., 2018). In 1987, state legislation on child welfare, Law 21/1987 of the Civil Procedure in Relation to Adoption and Other Forms of Child Protection (21/1987 Reforma del Código Civil y de la Ley de Enjuiciamiento Civil en Materia de Adopción y de Otras Formas de Protección de Menores) was passed, giving regions and municipalities responsibility for child protection services.

The legislation aimed to establish a community approach to intervention with families, to enhance child welfare workers' ability to detect cases of severe and non-severe abuse, and to ensure that children and young people are being cared for in a family environment rather than being institutionalised. Foster care was introduced for the first time in Spain's Civil Code, simultaneously establishing adoption processes as a protective measure. Although foster care was already present in Spanish society as an informal social practice, the legislation facilitated and recommended its use as a preferential protective measure for out-of-home care placements (del Valle et al., 2009). A 2015 state-level legislation reform of the Organic Law 1/1996 (Ley Orgánica 1/1996 de Protección Jurídica del Menor) sought to modify the child and adolescent system at the national level and unify the definitions and criteria used by the different autonomous regions, starting from the premise that foster care should be preferred to residential care (Law 26/2015). The reform reflects the desire to introduce common criteria regarding the definition of risk situations and the more serious cases of abuse or neglect. Only the latter leads to a child's separation from his or her birth parents. The legislation states that children under the age of six must be placed in foster care unless it is proven that this alternative is not viable. The national administrative body responsible for child protection is the Ministry of Health, Social Services, and Equality, and Law 14/2002 (Ley 14/2002 de Promoción, Atención y Protección a la Infancia) regulates child protection in the autonomous region of Castilla y León.

2.5 The Spanish context of children's rights and foster care

In the last three decades, growing attention has been given to the rights of children, and their legal status as individuals in their own right has been strengthened in Spain as in many other countries (Alanen, 2010; Massons-Ribas et al., 2021). The UNCRC, adopted in 1989, has been of great importance in this development. The UNCRC (1989) views children as human beings with the rights to participation, autonomy, and self-determination. For example, Article 12 gives children the right to participate in decisions that concern them. Similarly, Articles 13 and 5 focus on, respectively, the right of children to be heard and their right to proper guidance in accordance with their 'evolving capacity' (UNCRC, 1989). Changes in Spanish law concerning out-of-home care have been made in line with the UNCRC. The right of foster children and young people to be heard in all matters concerning them has been stipulated in Spanish law in 2015 (Organic Law 26/2015), as has the regulation about serving 'the best interest of the child', which means that the implementation of children's rights has been slow, unlike in Norway, for example, where it began in 1953 (Lov om barnevern av 1953).

In 2019, approximately 18 per cent of the Spanish population were children under the age of 18 (National Institute of Statistics, 2019). Among these, 0.5 per cent (42,529) were in out-of-home care as of 31 December 2019. Residential care comprised 55 per cent (23,209) of these cases. Kinship foster care was the most common placement option at 29 per cent (12,600), and non-kinship foster care accounted for about 16 per cent (6,720). The predominance of kinship foster care placement may be due to Spanish cultural values, which place significant emphasis on family ties (Massons-Ribas et al., 2021, p. 4). Of these 19,320 foster care placements, 90 per cent were ethnically Spanish, and children under the age of 15 represented 81 per cent of foster care placements (15,574). Boys accounted for 51 per cent of placements (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2020).

The placement of a child in foster care occurs through an administrative order. If the birth parents oppose, the placement occurs through a judicial order. López-López et al. (2010) found that children enter foster care in Spain due to a diverse range of birth parents' experiences, such as drug addiction, alcoholism, parental imprisonment, mental health problems, and in the case of birth mothers, prostitution. Foster care placement can be for (1) emergency, where the child can stay with the foster family for up to 6 months, (2) temporary

– up to 2 years, and (3) long-term – up to legal age, with the goal of creating permanence. This placement can be extended beyond the age of 18. If birth parents are unable to care for their child, there is a possibility to apply for temporary care of the child. In addition, public authorities act as the legal guardians of children placed in foster care and only permanent foster parents may be judicially granted full parental responsibility. Foster parents in Spain often consist of a mother, a father, and their biological children, and generally have a higher level of schooling compared with foster parents in Portugal (López-López et al., 2014). Furthermore, foster parents can be remunerated and compensated for the costs of raising foster children.

Law 26/2015, in accordance with the Spanish Civil Code, pays considerable attention to the biological bond between foster children and their birth families. Children are expected or encouraged to have regular contact with their birth families during placements (Law 26/2015 Article 20 no. 2) unless safety reasons advise against it. Furthermore, the legislation prescribes temporary foster care placements with the aim of reuniting the child with his or her birth family. However, the rate of family reunification in Spain is less than 20 per cent of children in foster care cases, which means that more than 80 per cent of children do not return to their birth families before they reach the age of 18 (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2020). Parental visits are regarded as an important predictor of family reunification in non-kinship foster care placements (Bernedo et al., 2016; López et al., 2013).

López-López et al. (2011) reported that children in kinship foster care experienced greater placement stability than children in non-kinship foster care, and outcomes were more favourable for children in kinship foster care with regard to behavioural problems, academic performance, and well-being. Over a period of six years, non-kinship foster parents requested a change in fostering arrangements in approximately 42 per cent of cases (Bernedo et al., 2016). Children in non-kinship foster care seem to have experienced more cumulative adversity than children in kinship foster care placements (Montserrat et al., 2020; Palacios & Jiménez, 2009). Data from Catalonia and the Balearic Islands between 2008 and 2018 from 1,255 cases of non-kinship foster care placements showed that the rate of placement breakdown was greater in temporary foster care (34%) compared to long-term foster care (29%), with no differences found regarding the sex of the child ending the placement (Montserrat et al., 2020). The placement of older children is an important risk factor for placement stability (Bernedo et al., 2016). Furthermore, having previously been in residential

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or kinship care before entering non-kinship foster care increases the likelihood of placement breakdown (Montserrat et al., 2020). Placement breakdown in non-kinship foster care has been found to be associated with the quality of emotional relationships between children and their foster parents, characterised by a lack of warm relationships, poor communication, and criticism and rejection from foster parents (Bernedo et al., 2016). The following chapter establishes the theoretical and conceptual framework of this study.

CHAPTER THREE

Theoretical and conceptual discussion

3.1 Introduction

Over the last two decades, a substantial body of work on foster care and foster families in Spain has been developed (e.g., del Valle et al., 2009; Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2016). However, the views of foster children and young people on 'family' remain largely unexplored within the fields of Family Sociology and Childhood Studies (Ie et al., 2022). This chapter seeks to fill this gap by exploring how theoretical and conceptual contributions of family sociology and childhood studies can be combined and developed, focusing on Spanish children and young people's views of family in long-term non-kinship care contexts.

The chapter is divided into three additional sections. The first two sections critically assess the broader literature of family sociology and childhood studies, focusing on family (Section 3.2), and children (Section 3.3), respectively. Although these sections are presented separately, it is important to recognise the overlapping theoretical and conceptual tenets of both disciplines that need to be combined when studying Spanish children and young people's views of family in long-term non-kinship care. Section 3.4 highlights the existing disconnection between family and childhood studies and demonstrates how these fields can contribute to the existing social science literature on the lives of foster children and young people, particularly in Spain. The studies reviewed in this chapter are contextually related to the cultural context of the global North. Section 3.5 offers a conclusion.

3.2 Family studies

The concept of 'family' has been a matter of intellectual and political interest and the focus of a vast body of research that has increased in pace and scale since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Thomas & Wilcox, 1987). Much of this work has been conducted by researchers in the fields of genetics, physiology, psychology, history, anthropology, economics, sociology, and family sociology; each provides different frameworks for studying children in families (Naldini, 2017). These theories, concepts, and approaches are generally used to explore family relationships, practices, and dynamics and to explain "contemporary processes of *defining* and redefining the *family*, as well as highlighting the differences between countries" (Naldini, 2017, p. 300, emphasis added).

The purpose of this section is to examine how sociology, and family sociology in particular, have evolved and contributed to the conceptualisation of family over the years. Section 3.2.1 focuses on the dominant paradigm of structural-functionalism sociology, which signifies a major shift in how family sociology has been conducted (Morgan, 1975). Section 3.2.2 focuses on the recent turn in sociological studies of the family.

3.2.1 Social construction of family

For decades, social scientists have argued that the meanings of family are defined and constructed in institutions such as schools, workplaces, healthcare, and religious communities (Giddens, 1991; Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; May, 2013). For example, over the last three decades, sociologists such as Gubrium and Holstein (1990), in their pioneering book, *What is family*, explained how institutional and organisational settings contain built-in conceptions, ideals, and practices regarding what a family is or should be. In many Western societies in the mid-twentieth century, the nuclear family - a heterosexual married couple with children (if any) - became the culturally dominant 'proper' and 'normal' family form (Carrington, 2002, p. 73). Smart (2007) notes that the family generally "conjures up an image of degrees of biological relatedness combined with degrees of co-residence" (p. 7). In Spain, for example, despite promoting the equality and well-being of families, there is evidence that the normative ideal of the nuclear family continues to be present in institutional settings. The concept of family in the Spanish Constitution is interpreted as individuals related to each other by marriage or kinship, with a great emphasis on children within families (García-Presas, 2010).

In recent decades, a wide array of social science and sociological work on family "revolves around the theme of social change" (Gillies, 2002, p. 3) and the notion of 'families in flux' (Giddens, 1992), as they respond to changes and trends in families and personal relationships posed by late modernity (Lahad et al., 2018). First, changes in family structure and meaning are generally regarded as a major global trend (Chambers, 2012; Esping-Andersen, 2009; Giddens, 1992). For example, it has been shown that the decline in fertility rates, the entry of women into the labour force, voluntary childlessness, and postponed marriage and parenthood have reformulated families globally since the 1970s (Esping-Andersen, 2009; OECD, 2011; Segrin & Flora, 2011). Although the intensity and cultural significance of these

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changes varies by country (Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004). Second, and more recently, attention has been paid to single parenthood, step-families, increased divorce rates, non-heteronormative families, and growing global migration as key diversifiers of family relations in Western societies (Chambers, 2012; Gahan, 2018). In sociological discourse, the rise of postmodern family diversity has been attributed to the process of individualisation and democratisation of intimate and personal relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2003; Giddens, 1991, 1992).

While recent sociological work on the family has underscored the increased diversity of family life and relationships, and the transformation of the concept of family, it has also been pointed out that some families continue to be perceived as more culturally valued, accepted, and legitimate than others (Heaphy, 2011; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2013; Walsh, 2018). The nuclear family, as an ideological ideal, continues to be referred to as the 'proper' family. According to family scholars, the nuclear family is seen as more legitimate than others, while certain types of family forms are stigmatised or perceived as troubled (Chambers, 2012; Heaphy, 2011; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2013). A systematic review of family stereotypes shows that the nuclear family represents an ideal against adoptive, single-headed, step, same-sex, and foster families (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2016). Some scholars have argued that comparing the nuclear family to other family types places significant pressure on people living in non-nuclear families because they feel compelled to display and perform their families as 'proper' to downplay their position as 'others' (Gahan, 2018; Walsh, 2018).

3.2.2 Theoretical perspectives on family

The structure of the family was first articulated by Murdock (1949), who said that the family had four essential functions, which were always fulfilled universally. These functions were: socialisation of children, economic cooperation, reproduction, and sexual relations. Parsons (1951) updated Murdock's definition of family to include the role of society. For Parsons, individuals in families do not exist in isolation from each other but interact within social systems and institutions that have a certain structure, composed of male and female parents with fixed gender roles and their children. Men are the breadwinners, and women are the homemakers and caretakers. The nuclear family was believed to be suited to the demands of advanced industrial societies, performing more specialised tasks than in pre-modern and pre-

industrial times. Thus, any other variations of family forms were either considered inherently dysfunctional or seen to fulfil some latent functions in society (Bourdieu, 1996).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, there was a major shift in research in family studies from the hegemonic nuclear family towards a more fluid and diverse conceptualisation of individuals' close and intimate relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2003; Giddens, 1992). This paradigm shift emerged in the 1960s when feminist scholars criticised the functionalist model for downplaying the oppression of women and domestic violence (Thorne, 1992), and the persistence of the ideology of the white middle-class North American nuclear family as an assumption in family studies (Allen, 2016). Initially, the idea of 'natural' gender roles in family life was challenged (Thorne, 1992). Later, in the 1970s, scholars drew attention to the diversity of family constellations by incorporating intersectional and cross-cultural perspectives on ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, and wider systems of economic and political structures on family relationships (Allen, 2016; Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015; Few-Demo, 2014).

3.2.3 Contemporary theorisations on family

In the 1980s and 1990s, many of the ideas and concepts introduced by feminist scholars were incorporated into contemporary family sociology (Chambers, 2001). Thereafter, some scholars within social science have studied family, family life, and personal relationships with conceptual tools such as personal life (May, 2011; Smart, 2007), practices of intimacy (Jamieson, 2011), relatedness (Carsten, 2004; Roseneil & Ketokivi, 2016; Smart, 2007), and linked lives (Bengtson et al., 2002). The concept of *family display* (Dermott & Seymour, 2011; Finch, 2007), inspired by David Morgan's (1996, 2011) concepts of *family practices* and *doing family*, informs this study and helps better understand not only the performative, discursive and constructive but also the multifaceted, fluid and intersectional character of family and family life.

Morgan (1996, 2011) notes that family is understood through everyday practices and that family life is a dynamic and ever-changing social construct. As such, the relationships within families also change according to time and space (Morgan, 2011). According to McCarthy (2012), family practices have reconfigured the family from being perceived as a social institution into a set of practices. This understanding of family emphasises the experiences of

family members and the diversity of family practices, focusing on 'doings' rather than 'being'. Thus, family is regarded as a verb, something that people 'do', and not necessarily the family into which they are born. Becker and Charles (2006) refer to examples of 'doing family', such as maintaining frequent contact or giving support, and describe these as key definers of who is considered family and who is not. This suggests that children and young people in foster care who have been separated from their biological family may practice family through maintaining contact and doing things together. Researchers who have applied the concept of family practices do not seek to presume a definition of what constitutes a family but instead seek to investigate the meaning of family from the research participants' point of view (Jamieson et al., 2006). These relations may be based on blood or social ties, and they may not involve co-residence (Gilding, 2010).

Finch (2007) explains that family members need to communicate to each other and others that certain actions constitute 'doing family', because it is a process of revealing "one's chosen family relationships to relevant others and having them accepted" (p. 71). Finch provides an example of weekly phone calls with a sibling as an action of 'family display', showing that this individual is part of one's family. Hence, if a child in foster care maintains contact with a sibling by phone, this may be regarded as practicing family. Family displays are features of all families; however, they might be more urgent in times of ambiguity or change, such as when children and young people move away from their family of origin, as in this study. In social work research, contemporary sociological family perspectives have also been explored through the perspectives and experiences of individuals and family members (See, for example, Walsh & Mason, 2018). Some scholars have operationalised concepts of 'family practices', 'doing family', and 'family display' and argue that they are useful for understanding the social processes through which the family is constituted in foster care research (e.g., Holland & Crowley, 2013; Wissö et al., 2019).

3.2.3 Summary
Family sociology enables us to gain a better understanding of family and family life. Using contemporary family sociology concepts, such as 'family practices', 'doing family', and 'family display' can help examine questions of who and what constitutes a family, as demonstrated through the findings of my study. These perspectives should be extended to foster care research, particularly in Spain, which is still shaped by theoretical approaches in

developmental psychology and the general absence of children and young people's views. To my knowledge, no empirical study in Spanish literature has applied these concepts to explore the meanings and practices of family in foster care. This thesis addresses this gap.

3.3 Theorising childhood, children, and agency

Childhood, as a distinct human category, can be traced back to the end of the fifteenth century (Brockliss & Montgomery, 2013). However, its understanding is socially and culturally contextualised, with no universal validity. Some scholars focus on the natural and biological fixed categories and explore how these are challenged globally (Abebe, 2019; Hammersley, 2017). In contemporary Western societies, it is commonly assumed that childhood should be a happy "time devoted to play and learning rather than work" (Ansell, 2017, p. 15), and children are viewed as an emotional investment (Zelizer, 1994).

Historically, the conceptualisation of childhood was influenced by the development of compulsory schooling and the belief that children and young people should be sheltered from adult concerns regarding sexuality and work (Brockliss & Montgomery, 2013). In the early nineteenth century, the upper classes began to perceive childhood as a distinct category from adulthood because families had the time and money to keep their children from social and economic responsibilities. When the ideal of childhood was normalised, child labour became illegal, and mass schooling was popularised, childhood came to be distinguished from adulthood even among the lower classes, and the social, historical, and political role and position of children and childhood in society and research was strengthened (Ariés, 1962).

The new social studies of children and childhood emerged in the 1980s as a counter-paradigm to dominant theories of children and childhood in developmental psychology and family sociology (Prout & James, 1990; Tidsdall & Punch, 2012). Influential theories in developmental psychology, such as those of Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson, depicted childhood as a set of universal stages where the successful completion of one stage forms the basis for the next one (Walkerdine, 1993). Hence, children were viewed not so much as 'human beings' (complete, stable, rational, and competent individuals) but as 'human becomings' (changeable, incomplete, and incompetent individuals) (Qvortrup, 2002).

In family sociology, children were seen as born completely ignorant of social values, and growing up was a process in which they gradually learnt about and internalised social conventions to become full members of their culture and society (Gallacher & Kehily, 2013). Both psychology and sociology view children as biologically and socially incomplete at birth, exploring the processes through which they develop and are socialised into fully formed adults (Gallacher & Kehily, 2013). However, it's noteworthy that developmental psychology had voiced concerns about the role and place of children and childhood in research (Qvortrup et al., 2011). The new social studies of children and childhood, joined by anthropology, history, education, law, and social work, among others, became the interdisciplinary field that has come to be known as *childhood studies* (Canosa & Graham, 2020; Hammersley, 2017; Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

The interdisciplinary field of childhood studies was highly critical of developmental and socialisation theories, which viewed children as passive recipients of adult influence and dependent on the private family (Mayall, 2002; Qvortrup, 1993). Instead of 'being socialised', researchers in childhood studies have called attention to how children actively and independently construct their own lives (Prout & James, 1990). They argued that children should be given a voice in research, seeing them as their own right; for what they are here and now, not as apprentices of their families, and not what they will become. This has led to a body of literature that tends to offer explanations about children rather than of children (James et al., 1998; Prout & James, 1990). As Sutterlüty and Tisdall (2019) note, children's voices "should be heard and not only spoken for by their parents or concerned professionals" (p. 183). By taking children seriously and listening to their voices, researchers in childhood studies have demonstrated the diversity of ways in which children actively influence their own and other people's lives and well-being (e.g., Corsaro, 2003, 2005; Christiansen et al., 2006).

The theories developed within the new social studies of children and childhood, focusing on children's agency, independence, and voices, have become greatly influential in childhood studies (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). However, early critiques of the new social studies of children and childhood addressed a key concept - that being agency, with children viewed as social actors who are rational and autonomous individuals (Lee, 1998). Mayall (2002) observed differences in meaning between actor and agent:

A social *actor* does something, perhaps something arising out of a subjective wish. The term *agent* suggests a further dimension: negotiation with others, with the effect that the interaction makes a difference – to a relationship or to a decision, to the working of a set of social assumptions or constraints (Mayall, 2002, p. 21).

Some scholars have argued that agency should be understood as something more than a question of whether children produce change. Agency is –

much accomplished in the *re*production of social situations, in children's contributions to the continuous ordering of interactions […] A notion of agency which is centred on the idea of children's visible impact devalues this permanent contribution (Bühler-Niederberger & Schwittek, 2014, p. 506).

In childhood studies, there is a consensus that children are often portrayed as competent, active, and meaning makers - words carrying connotations of determination and power, which aligns well with the intention of childhood studies in terms of how children are viewed and perceived. However, there has been concern that the concept of agency is largely unexamined (Mizen & Ofusu-Kisi, 2013; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). This can be linked to the dichotomous construction of children as either autonomous and competent or vulnerable and dependent, requiring protection (Kjørholt, 2004). Some scholars who have problematised agency point to the potential loss of focus on the importance and role of imposed structure and how these affect children (e.g., Benwell, 2013; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Others suggest a strong emphasis on structural factors, where personal agency largely depends on and is regulated by family contexts and interpersonal relationships (Abebe, 2019; Punch, 2016; Plows, 2012).

3.3.1 The agentic child as a relational being of interpersonal interactions
Recent approaches to the theorisation of agency critically discussed how dominant ideas of agency and independence have overshadowed states of vulnerability and dependency, as well as the relational, contextual, gender regimes, and embodied processes in which children and young people's agency unfolds (Burkitt, 2016; Lee, 2019; Reader, 2007; Tisdall, 2016). Such understanding underlines that the notion of agency cannot be detached from the social world

and relationships (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), and that agency is socially produced and culturally constructed (Raithelhuber, 2016).

Drawing on sociology, an agency in this thesis is understood as the interdependency of lives embedded in larger social structures and institutions and, therefore, subject to the norms and values therein (Landes & Settersten, 2019). The concept of agency within a structure (Landes & Settersten, 2019) reminds us that there is often some degree of individual choice, even in situations where agency is bound and that this choice is influenced by significant others with whom our lives are linked. In Landes and Settersten's (2019) understanding, social relationships and structural contexts can promote or restrict agency, and the level of restriction depends on how much power an individual holds in society. Agency can thus not be conceptualised as absolute power but must be understood as a matter of active engagement and resistance to more subtle forms of negotiation, backstage influence, and even endurance, depending on the recognition of and support for their contributions, whether material, financial, or social (Reader, 2007).

As Landes and Settersten (2019) explain, linked lives can also bound human agency. In instances where individuals are dependent on support or care from others – a characteristic of the human condition that is universal but more obvious in familiarised welfare states and particularly in the lives of many foster children and young people – the ability to engage in agentic family relationships is directly related to the quality of these relationships (Ie, 2022; Ie & Ellingsen, 2023). Within the family context, researchers have explored the interdependence of individuals' agency and the contexts of shared meanings (Boden-Stuart et al., 2021; Lee, 2019; Finch & Mason, 1993). These studies not only see children's agency as relational but also constituted in social contexts and negotiated through social interactions with adults (Abebe, 2019). For children in foster care, their entire context, such as family, community, and friends, can change through the placement, something that may (dis-)qualify their agency (Hammersley, 2017)? That is, the capacity of foster children to construct their own meaning of family is dependent on their daily circumstances with individuals in their everyday lives, in which these individuals can either constrain or expand their agentic capability (Abebe, 2019).

3.4 Bridging the gap between contemporary family sociology and childhood Studies

A recent scoping review has shown that while childhood studies is a widely accepted variable of social analysis, it remains on the margins of other fields such as family sociology and social work (Canosa & Graham, 2019). Graham (2011) argues that social work has been slow to engage with childhood studies and is still very much based on models of childhood that emerged from psychology, for example, the child development framework, which operates within a 'deficit paradigm'. Holland and Crowley (2013) explore the collaborations that can be developed between contemporary family sociology and childhood studies to enhance our understanding of the family life of foster children and young people, as both fields prioritise children's voices and perspectives. In this section, I highlight the existing disconnection between family sociology and childhood studies and show how my study attempts to bring the two together.

Early work in family sociology around the mid-twentieth century presented the family as a static institution, and a bound unit with a defined purpose, most commonly that of children (Parsons, 1951; Parsons & Bales, 1955). Parsons' approach is typical within the field of family sociology in that definitions of family are restricted to the 'nuclear family', where adults take the primary role in the socialisation of children, and men and women play distinct and complementary roles (Parsons, 1951). Men were 'designed' to provide sustenance, working away from home as necessary, and women to stay at home to fulfil their biological role of bearing and caring for children and be a domestic support for the male worker (Parsons & Bales, 1955, p. 23).

This hegemonic ordering of social relations provoked feminist analyses to argue that reducing family relations into functions and roles artificially perpetuates the oppression of women (Gittins, 1993; Thorn, 1992), and the powerlessness of children (Gittins, 1993). According to Jenks (2009), children were viewed as products constituted through the society in which they find themselves. Children were seen as apprentices of their families or as future adults, and childhood as a construct, which positioned children as valuable only in their becoming rather than as social actors with agency (Prout & James, 1990).

Perceiving parents and carers as primary informants about family relationships and viewing children as lacking cognitive skills to express their feelings and emotions concerning events in their family lives should be avoided. Hence, in this study, the concept of relational agency

is beneficial in understanding family life, as children (as all family members) draw upon family life and depend on these relations in their everyday lives. In some cases, family relations and life restrict their scope of agency, but in others, they enable and strengthen it (Ie & Ellingsen, forthcoming). On the one hand, this study considers aspects of the Spanish familiarised welfare regime that contextualises embodied family relationships of children and young people. On the other hand, it considers family expectations and responsibilities placed on children and the ways in which children and young people navigate those family expectations and responsibilities along with their individual agency. This is done by going beyond recognising children and young people's individual agency to document their relational agency through their understanding and experience of family life that shapes their everyday experiences. Therefore, this study attempts to unravel the understanding of family and family relations within the context of contemporary childhood among children and youth in long-term non-kinship care in Spain.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter builds upon the short methodological discussions featured in each of the three journal Articles. It outlines the personal challenges I faced while conducting interviews to generate data and answer research questions. Heeding Punch's (2010) call for increased awareness of personal challenges to enhance reflexivity and positionality of one's work and to consider the role of emotions during research, this chapter discusses how these factors influenced the research design and methods applied. The interpretations and arguments presented in this thesis are value-laden, partial, situated, and socially embedded, reflecting my own positionality (Levitt et al., 2020).

The remainder of this chapter is divided into six sections. Section 4.2 presents the rationale for the study's qualitative and multi-method approach. In Section 4.3, I provide information about sampling. In Section 4.4, I discuss the process of gaining access to research participants. Section 4.5 presents the methods used for obtaining empirical data. In Section 4.6, I provide information on data analysis, transcription, and translation, and in Sections 4.7 and 4.8, I discuss methodological and ethical considerations, respectively.

4.2 Justification for a mixed-method qualitative design

Changes in the conceptualisation of family and children/childhood (see Chapter Two) have necessitated a reconstruction of research practices and methodologies within family sociology and childhood studies. This section briefly reviews the development of different methodological approaches within both disciplines before presenting the methodology used for this study.

Historically, scholars within family studies, starting with Parsons (1955, 1959), have debated the use of suitable approaches to explore children's family relationships (Cummings et al., 2014; Gabb, 2010). Traditional family research, primarily employing quantitative measurement of relationships focusing on a specific relationship set (e.g., parent-child relations), has been criticised for not adequately representing individuals' family experiences (Kosko & Warren, 2000; Wampler & Halverson, 2009). Critics argue that the emphasis on

generating quantitative results fails to capture the complexity of family life (Lippold & McNamee, 2014; Wampler & Halverson, 1993). The limited focus on children's voices in quantitative research has also been deemed oppressive as it overlooks children's rights and full participation in family life (Scott, 2000).

The development of contemporary family research in the mid-1990s and its criticism of the functionalist approach generated a shift towards qualitative research practices that concentrate on the dynamic interactions and diversity of everyday family experiences (Gabb, 2010; Morgan, 1996; McKie & Callan, 2012). As Chapter Two demonstrated, the experiences of family and everyday family life are complex. According to Gabb (2010), qualitative approaches have the potential to explore and better understand complex family interactions in the lives of children. A mixed-method qualitative approach aims to generate an in-depth understanding of different contexts and forms of interaction in which family is constructed (Gabb, 2010; Ursin et al., 2017). It also seeks to facilitate empowering research relations for children (Berson et al., 2019).

A foundational premise in the mixed-methods approach is that the researcher is not the sole expert in the knowledge production process (Berson et al., 2019). This approach can be particularly useful in social work research addressing complex understandings of family and family relationships (Ursin et al., 2017; Winter, 2010). This principle informed the research approach of this study in an attempt to foster dialogue with foster children and young people who have often experienced parental neglect, abuse, or maltreatment (Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2016; Lindquist & Santavirta, 2014).

Research on children and young people has also witnessed an increased interest in methodologies that foreground their voices and highlight their role as competent social actors, mirroring the methodological shift within family studies (Berson et al., 2019; Hammersley, 2017; Punch, 2002). Within foster care research, Holland (2009) emphasised the need for mixed methodologies that enable young people's individual accounts of their experiences. Common research methods include open-ended interviews, drawings, photographs, and videos, which are then used to gain insight into children's lives and understand their experiences (Hammersley, 2017). Such methods respond to critiques of quantitative methodologies that are characterised by limited interaction between the researcher and the young people and a focus on 'objectivity' (Holland, 2009).

Researchers are increasingly using various qualitative research methods to explore the experiences of foster children and young people (Holland, 2009). Methodological debates within foster care research often revolve around allowing room for young people's meaning construction and issues of positionality (Holland, 2009; Kiili & Moilanen, 2019). Using a variety of methods allows for consideration of the perspectives of children and young people in foster care and detailed understanding of their family experiences (Goodyer, 2016; Scofield et al., 2010). In the context of child welfare research with children at risk in Spain, Inchaurrondo et al. (2020) highlight the usefulness of mixed methods. It is important to conduct research with rather than on children and young people, ensuring that participants have the opportunity to express their own views on issues that affect them (ibid).

Traditionally, research on foster care in Spain has been influenced by quantitative scholarship, primarily concerned with measuring aspects such as children's and young people's well-being related to placement type (e.g., kinship versus foster care) and trends in outcomes (del Valle et al., 2009). Holland (2009) asserts that quantitative approaches rarely provide opportunities to understand the lives of foster youth or explore the nuances in individual cases. In light of this, this study applied a multi-method qualitative approach to provide a rich account of different individual experiences and interpretations of family by foster children and youth in Spain. This approach was deemed the most suitable to address the study's aim. It was particularly advantageous in understanding social-emotional phenomena such as feelings towards family members and how an individual's experience of family depended on their subjectivity.

4.3 Comment on the study sample

As is often the case in qualitative research, I identified an anticipated sample size before data collection (Young & Casey, 2018). This was necessary to secure ethical approval and plan the research project. Initially, I planned to conduct a study comprising young people with both ethnic majority and minority backgrounds in foster care in Spain. I aimed to capture the experiences of young people with ethnic minority backgrounds, given that existing research on foster care and family life often focuses on the views and experiences of young people with ethnic majority backgrounds. For this purpose, I targeted a sample of 28-32 participants. After familiarising myself with the literature and considering the initial focus and aim of the study, I deemed this to be a reasonable and achievable number that would enable me to

gather enough data to sufficiently answer the research questions guiding this study (Kuzel, 1992).

By approaching a variety of foster care organisations in 14 autonomous regions, I had hoped to achieve this diversity in ethnicity, as the vast majority of children placed in foster care in Spain are from the ethnic majority (del Valle et al., 2009). However, due to slow communication and the Spanish national and regional government lockdown restrictions in response to Covid-19 in March 2020, I focused on the autonomous region of Castilla y Léon. While I initially hoped to recruit approximately 28 participants, I managed to recruit 14 participants. According to Terry and Braun (2011), between 15 and 30 interviews are common in research seeking to identify patterns and themes across data. However, there is generally little guidance regarding the minimum sample size needed to adequately identify the themes and codes in an area of inquiry (Young & Casey, 2018). After actively recruiting for five months between March and August 2021, I decided to end the recruitment for several reasons. First, I had reached a point of saturation where no new information was emerging (Low, 2019). Second, I felt the stories were diverse enough to produce meaningful findings (Young & Casey, 2018). Lastly, I needed to be mindful of the time I had available to conduct this study (Young & Casey, 2018).

4.4 Gaining access to research participants

Gaining access to research participants presented several challenges and required both persistence and creative thinking. I attempted to contact the regional Red Cross via email and phone calls, and I even submitted a written application physically. Unfortunately, these efforts were not successful. This was a point of frustration but also an important lesson about the difficulty of gaining access to children in child protection services and navigating the research process. Accepting that I was venturing into uncharted waters, I found sharing my concerns and discussing with my supervisors to be helpful during this process. My supervisor, Professor Miguel Vicente-Mariño, provided me with a contact from his professional network, which I used to gain access to Castilla y León child protection authorities. From there, contact was made to access the regional Red Cross, which oversees child protection cases. Castilla y León authorities act as the legal guardian of children and young people in child protection services. Therefore, no contact was made with the children and young people's biological families.

In June 2020, I was notified that a face-to-face interview with two social workers who oversee foster care placements would be conducted to explain the requirements for the study. This interview was conducted in October 2020. During the interview, the social workers asked about the target sample, plans for the dissemination of findings, and other questions aimed at evaluating the sincerity of my application.

Once access was granted, I drafted an invitation letter presenting myself, the study's aim, participants' characteristics, issues of confidentiality, and plans for the dissemination of research findings (see Appendix 5). This letter was sent to social workers, who then sent it to children and young people and their foster families. The study employed a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) to identify participants with specific characteristics. The main objective of this sampling approach is to obtain rich datasets that shed light on issues of vital importance to a study. According to Sixsmith et al. (2003), research can only offer a partial insight into the lives and experiences of research participants. However, the sample generated in this study sheds light on a broad variety of family experiences and practices across social differences such as age and gender. For instance, the third Article shows gender and age being intertwined in participants' caring expectations in the family.

All the participants were identified and selected by social workers and psychologists in four provinces of Castilla y León. The social workers introduced the study to potential participants in order to gauge interest. If the response was positive, a date and place convenient for the participant were arranged. In total, 14 children and young people in long-term non-kinship foster care (7 boys and 7 girls) participated using different research methods (see Section 3.5.3).

4.5 Methods of obtaining empirical data

This section provides a discussion on why I chose to conduct a systematic review for this doctoral study and reflects upon the exclusion of grey literature from the review search strategy. I then discuss each of the research tools used for data collection.

4.5.1 Systematic review

My aim in conducting a systematic review (Article I) was to provide a rigorous and accurate comprehensive portrayal of foster children and young people's construction of the meaning of family. I found that a review of previous research on the subject was lacking; hence I decided to conduct an Article review due to the detection of a research gap. The systematic review was also used to assess if the meaning of family differs significantly from one culture where the study was conducted from those conducted in other cultural contexts (Davis et al., 2014). While it was initially developed to review medical science studies (ibid), its usage has also been prevalent in analysing and synthesising previous research in out-of-home care. Wilson et al. (2020), for example, used a systematic review and mapped children's overall experience of child protection services, and Häggman-Laitila et al. (2018) studied the transition to adult life from the perspectives of young people leaving foster care.

We chose to conduct a qualitative systematic review since it includes all empirical evidence across different disciplines that fits pre-specified inclusion criteria to answer our review research question. A systematic qualitative review differs from a meta-analysis because it is not restricted to statistical measures (Davis et al., 2014). A systematic qualitative review also differs from other review methods (scoping reviews, integrative reviews, and narrative reviews) in that it requires a narrow research question and assessment and appraisal of the quality and strength of the literature (Davis et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2014). Considering the objectives of our review and the overall study aims, conducting a qualitative systematic review method was found to be more suitable than conducting other reviews.

Commenting on the importance of a literature review, Snyder (2019) argues: "building your research on and relating it to existing knowledge is the building block of all academic research activities, regardless of discipline" (p. 333). It helps to provide an overview of areas in which the research is interdisciplinary, identify and fill in research gaps, and extend prior research knowledge. Based on these assumptions, the systematic review in this dissertation forms part of the data material. What follows are my reflections on the exclusion of grey literature from the review search strategy.

4.5.2 The search strategy

Grey literature could have been included in the systematic review but was left out. Thus, the decision not to include grey literature in the search process was mainly due to limited time and resources for conducting the review. This may have also increased the likelihood of bias resulting from the inclusion criteria in the acquisition of studies for the review.

The broad use of the term grey literature is equated with printed and electronic literature that is produced by government, academics, business, and industry, and it is not controlled by commercial publishers (Bellefontaine & Lee, 2014; Mahood, Van Eerd et al., 2014). Types of grey literature can include academic papers such as theses and dissertations, as well as research, committee and government reports, conference papers, and so forth (Paez, 2017). While Paez (2017) argues that several search strategies (e.g., electronic database search, search in conference proceedings, hand-searching, etc.) should be adopted in a systematic review to increase the number of eligible studies, locating and accessing grey literature is time-consuming and resource-intensive (Hopewell et al., 2007). Furthermore, grey literature may or may not have undergone a rigorous review process and is more likely to vary widely in the quality of their research compared to peer-reviewed Articles (Bellefontaine & Lee, 2014).

4.5.3 Methods of data collection

This study employed qualitative multi-methods to understand the views and experiences of children and young people in non-kinship foster care in Spain regarding family and family relations (Articles II and III). The methods used can be classified into three categories: visual methods, written methods, and verbal methods. Visual methods include photos and drawings; written methods encompass social network maps and recall; the verbal method involves semi-structured interviews. These methods were selected and applied to allow the children and young people to provide in-depth insights into their construction of the meaning of family. Table 2 presents an overview of the participants' age, gender, and involvement with the research tools. Below, each research method is discussed, along with the reasoning and challenges encountered in its use.

Table 2

Overview of participants' gender, age, and involvement in research tools

Name	Age	Gender	Research tools
Pilar	10	Girl	Photos/Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews
Lucas	14	Boy	Drawings/Social network map/Semi-structured interviews
Beltrán	18	Boy	Photos/Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews
Isabel	21	Girl	Photos/Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews
Alonso	13	Boy	Photos/Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews
Emilia	21	Girl	Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews
Carmen	22	Girl	Photos/Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews
Olivia	15	Girl	Photos/Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews
Rodrigo	15	Boy	Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews
María	13	Girl	Photos/Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews
Emma	14	Girl	Photos/Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews
Mateo	16	Boy	Drawings/Social network map/Semi-structured interviews
Eduardo	11	Boy	Photos/Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews
Filipe	13	Boy	Drawings/Social network map/Recall/Semi-structured interviews

4.5.3.1 Photos

A few weeks before the interviews, I asked the foster children and young people to bring photos of the people they considered most important to them. I avoided imposing any specific requests regarding who should be in these photos. It is important to note that participants were no asked to take photos; they were simply requested to bring photos they already in their possession. The content of the interview was largely determined by the photos they brought, and participants were assured that the level of disclosure in the conversation remained entirely under their control. This method aimed to add breadth, depth, and creativity to the other research methods, allowing for rapport building and shedding light on the participants' everyday lived experiences, activities and relationships. My questions revolved around the content of the pictures and why the participant had chosen to bring them.

Beltrán (boy, aged 18) shared his experience of photos he brought as follows:

> I was given this photo album by [his foster parents] when I turned 18 to remind me of my childhood, because sometimes I forget a lot of things. I don't have the photos of me when I was younger. I don't know why my biological family didn't keep them. This is the first photo I have as a kid and I was about 5 years old. These photos are a progression and they go like this. Well, they're from different stages of my life.

Carmen (girl, aged 22) talked profusely about her grandmother and explained:

> Here is my [foster] grandmother. She passed away last year. She loved me very much, like I was her granddaughter because at Christmas her grandchildren always asked her for things, and I always asked her for books because I like to read a lot and she was delighted that I asked her for books, and she dedicated them to me.

The photo method seemed suitable to represent what was said by foster children and young people, a group that has been shown to lack power in their lives (Davies & Wright, 2008). The method had a considerable empowering effect and allowed participants to speak about their experiences and facilitate visualising participants' family members in a way that an interview alone may not (Croghan et al., 2008). The photos often heightened participants' time spent with the family engaging in different social activities, and participants would happily share the photos with me. The advantages of the photo method have been emphasised

in previous studies on children and young people in foster care. Rogers (2017) found that the method encourages participants to become actively involved in the data collection. Epstein et al. (2006) state that the photo method can also be important in creating a comfortable space for discussion, for example, in interviews with children in a way that does not limit their responses. Talking about photos brought Olivia (girl, aged 15), for example, not only upsetting and unpleasant experiences but also memories:

> It hurts me because it's a family that I saw as happy and when I arrived, I liked it, and it made me feel comfortable, but it bothers me that people are becoming distant and that the sense of family is disappearing because my mother has passed away.

Olivia felt sad during the interview because the death of her foster mother brought distance among family members. The use of photos enabled to better understand the experiences of participants (Bates et al., 2017; Harper, 2002). This method has been used to explore children and young people's experiences growing up in foster care and to gain insights into their relationships, which helped to identify nuanced practices that enabled them to access social capital (Rogers, 2017).

4.5.3.2 Drawings

After discussing photos, participants were asked to draw their family map on an A4 paper using coloured felt-tipped pens (see Figure 2 for examples). This sometimes caused confusion about whether the biological or foster family should be represented. I found myself explaining that the map should include anyone or anything they considered most important and whom they regarded as a family.

Figure 2

Examples of participants' family map drawings
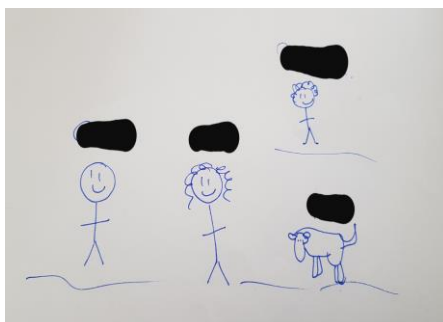
From the left to the right: Foster father's name, Foster mother's name, Participant's name, and dog's name – **Emilia** (girl, aged 21)
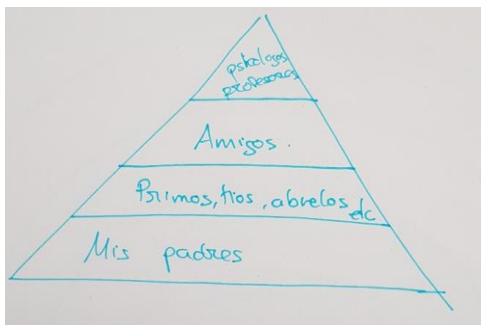
From the bottom to the top: My [foster] parents; [foster] cousins, uncles, grandparents, etc.; friends; psychologists and teachers – **Beltrán** (boy, aged 18)

From the left to the right: Me, [foster] daddy, [foster] mummy, [foster] little sister –**Pilar** (girl, aged 10)

Once completed, they would identify each figure in the drawing, and I would note any additional information the participant shared. Drawings helped capture both practical and emotional relationships (Wissö et al., 2019), offering insights into why certain experiences take on specific forms, values, and understandings of what constitutes a family. Drawings facilitated a detailed understanding of children and young people's relational experiences within the family (Cherney et al., 2006; Gernhardt et al., 2013).

This method finds additional value in the foster care context where young people's construction of family is presented as being complex (Wissö et al., 2019). In some cases, the family map was changed, which gave the participants more control over their form of expression. Drawings have been used to explore young children's views and gain insight into their experiences since it is a popular method among many children (Punch, 2002). Some, however, noted that "[they were] very bad at drawing", yet they insisted on drawing after being given an option to write names, as the following example demonstrates:

> *Pilar:* [Writing] the names is better; I draw very bad[ly].
> *Judite:* Okay.
> *Pilar:* I don't know how to draw [laughs].

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Judite: You can write down the names instead of drawing.

Pilar: I'll write them down when I finish [drawing].

Punch (2002) argued that drawing might be popular with some children but not suitable for others, and researchers should not assume that just because they are children, they enjoy drawing. Some children may feel uncomfortable with their drawing skills, especially older ones. I was careful not to provide clear instructions about how these drawings should look to avoid directing the activity in a specific way. Instead, I asked participants to explain their drawings of family members afterwards.

Eldén (2012) argues that drawings as a research tool have been underutilised in the sociology of family research, which has primarily focused on family relations within the nuclear family. Drawings allow children to articulate complex thoughts, challenging their understanding of family and family relationships beyond the nuclear family. Perceptions and experiences of family vary by gender, social class, ethnicity, and age (Chambers, 2012; Morris et al., 2008; Morrow, 1998). Individual perceptions of family are shaped by experiences and cultural understandings. Therefore, drawings help to recognise that children and young people's construction of family in long-term foster care are socioculturally related (Ie, 2022). Drawings have also been used in social work research to explore children's sense of family belonging in long-term foster care, shedding light on their feelings towards key people in their lives (Biehal, 2014).

4.5.3.3 Social network map

A social network map provided an initial visual tool for evaluating the strength and quality of participants' relationships with, among others, members of their foster and birth, friends, romantic partners, teachers, and social workers. The map was pre-planned and divided into seven different parts: immediate family, family of origin, family of choice, friends, social contacts, neighbours, and diverse acquaintances (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

The   social

                                                                                                                          network

map   *used   in*

this   *study*

Desde abajo hacia arriba
1. Familiares cercana
2. Familia de origen
3. Familia de elección
4. Amigos
5. Relaciones sociales
6. Vecinos
7. Diferentes conocidos

Diverse acquaintance
Neighbours
Social contacts
Friends
Family of choice
Family of origin
Immediate family
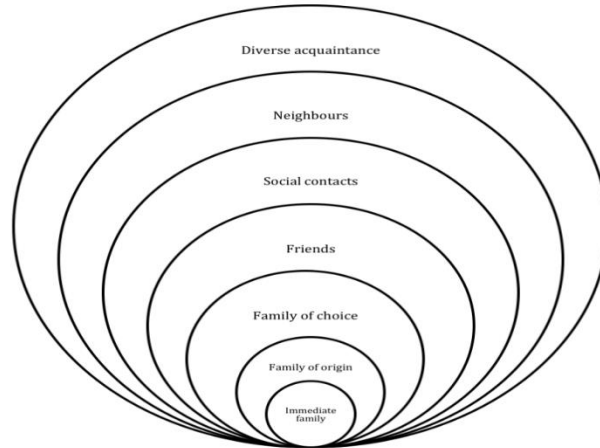
Participants were asked to write the names of people they considered important to them. I ensured that participants understood that they could include not only individuals but also organisations or groups or even family pets. They then described their relationships with these people, and I asked further questions such as: Whom do you like spending time with? Whom do you ask for economic or emotional support? Whom do you ask for advice? This information significantly contributed to the data because discussing the network facilitated conversation about their relationships, and the map helped visualise the people important to them (see Scheff, 1997). Overall, the social network maps enabled me to better understand participants' social support and gain knowledge of foster children and young people's embodied support in different social environments. It also helped me understand how children and young people are aware of the emotional and material benefits provided by their social support network. Crossley (2010) describes the social network analysis method as encompassing "a social world's shared meanings, purpose, knowledge, understanding, and identity" (p. 7), all of which affect how and with whom an individual interacts. Traditionally, this method was developed within the quantitative paradigm to measure the number and frequency of connections between individuals (Tubaro et al., 2016). However, in qualitative sociological research, a social network map is used to locate participants within their broader social relationships (Ryan et al., 2014). Therefore, it has been particularly useful in studies focusing on children and families (Eldén, 2012; Mason & Tipper, 2008; Sousa, 2005). It offers a visual representation of participants' interactions with other individuals and groups in

society (Ryan et al., 2014). In the context of long-term foster care, Mahon and Curtin (2012) argue that focusing on young people's social networks provides a clear understanding of the individuals and groups they relate to and depend on for support.

4.5.3.4 Recall

This study employed the recall method to gain insights into the participants' everyday lives. The recall method involves "remembering past events or routine activities, which can be recorded immediately after they have occurred, often using a chart or a table" (Ennew et al., 2009b, p. 5.24). Before the interview, each participant was sent an A4 table via email or WhatsApp (see Figure 4). They were asked to fill in the data of their daily activities and who participated, over a seven-day period.

Figure 4

'My week' recall activity

LUNES	ACTIVIDADE	PARTICIPANTE (S)
07:00-08:00		
09:00-10:00		
10:00-11:00		
12:00-13:00		
14:00-15:00		
16:00-17:00		
18:00-19:00		
20:00-21:00		
21:00-22:00		

Participants were reminded that the set hours provided were not binding, and they were free to make entries as they wished. Based on the shortcomings of earlier attempts with two participants to arrange a second interview to recount their activity and check if statements were correctly understood, the recall method with the 12 participants was used on the same day as other methods. I had to fill out one participant's recall document at the interview because they had forgotten.

As an exploratory method, I did not have a specific research question connected to it, but it was guided by the broad aim of identifying elements relevant to a description of the participants' family routines, rules in the family, when they feel like a 'family', and their relationships with other people. Participants tended to record how their life was lived in the

foster family. This included morning routines, sharing regular family meals, doing homework and household chores, and spending time and talking together with family. They also recorded their after-school activities, including hobbies or sports, private tutoring, and their relaxation time before bed. They commented on feelings about being together with, for example, foster family members, peers in school and during leisure times, doing activities together with them, or simply being alone.

The use of the recall method, sometimes overlapped school with participants' school work, as they had to allocate extra time to complete the activity. The following quote from one of the participants demonstrates this situation:

> Now that I am in the exam period, my work hours are replaced by studying. Also, on Mondays and Tuesdays, I don't have classes in the afternoons either, so those hours are used to revise the syllabus.

This quote illustrates how the recall method could compete with participants' academic commitments, potentially influencing the depth and quality of the data generated.

Some participants recorded their events very briefly, so the richness of the data varied, depending on their time and commitment. Young participants (aged 10-13) tended to make detailed recordings of their everyday life activities, while older participants focused more on specific occurrences, such as time spent with family, friends, or doing homework. Nonetheless, this method allowed me to gain insights into participants' different interpretations of relationality (McCarthy, 2012), and learn about their experiences based on the places they spent time in and with whom they interacted. Generally, this should cover the children and young people's 'lived daily world' (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014) and the meanings they attached to their daily lives (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). Furthermore, it allowed me to capture not only the participants' interactions with other people in everyday life and emotions connected to them (Scheff, 1997), but also what they were doing at specific moments (Morgan, 1996).

4.5.3.5 Semi-structured interviews

The interviews took place in different venues chosen by participants. Six of the interviews were conducted in a quiet room in the Red Cross Head Office provided by social workers. Four other interviews took place at my university campus, where I reserved a quiet room for the purpose. Both the Red Cross Head Office and the university campus were conveniently located for participants. Two interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, and two were conducted remotely via Zoom while I was conducting research in Norway.

One interview at the Red Cross Head Office was interrupted, causing me to stop the voice recording. At the end of the interview, I realised the recorder had been turned off, and the second part of the interview was not recorded. However, the participant offered to meet again to continue the interview. The participants and I chose interview times that were convenient for us. The length of the interviews varied from 45 to 90 minutes, with an average of 60 minutes. The shorter interviews were those conducted via Zoom. During the first interview, I overheard the voice of the participant's foster parent and sensed that the participant was uneasy. Consequently, I decided to conclude the interview. The second interview was shortened due to a poor internet connection.

All interviews started with some informal chatting, followed by thanking the participants for deciding to participate in the study. Then, I used an interview guide (Appendix 8) consisting of open-ended questions to explore their experiences and feelings. This approach allowed the participants to control the direction of the conversation and tell their stories in their own way (Ennew et al., 2009b). It also balanced the power dynamic between the children and myself and allowed me to seek more information if needed (Solberg, 2002). The questions revolved around themes such as understanding family, relationships with the foster family, contact and relationship with the birth family, and other significant relationships. I also asked for reflections on how life is lived in the foster family compared to the participant's birth family. Participants were guaranteed the freedom to express their views on the themes discussed. The semi-structured interview guide helped me keep the participants on track while giving them the opportunity to express their own observations, feelings, and perceptions.

Conducting the interviews was an enjoyable experience, and my background in psychology and working with children helped build a rapport with participants, enabling them to speak openly. However, I found it challenging when some participants began to complain about some behaviours of their foster family members. In these cases, I emphasised not judging

behaviours and tried to examine the reasons behind the behaviours. This approach resulted in mixed feelings during the interview process. Upon reflection, I acknowledged the importance of my role as a researcher in maintaining a non-judgmental attitude in order to gain a holistic view of the participants' views and experiences of family. I consider it a positive aspect of my interviewing style that participants felt comfortable enough to share these thoughts and feelings with me. During the interviews, the participants generally seemed more relaxed when talking about their life in the foster family compared to their relationship and contact with the birth family. I tried to end the interview in a positive way to make them feel comfortable and appreciated for participating in the study.

4.5.3.6 Reflection on methods of data collection

It is crucial to reflect on the research methods used and their potential impact on the findings. In this study, the majority of participants engaged in a combination of different qualitative research methods – photos, drawings, social network maps, and semi-structured interviews – all within a single session lasting an average of 60 minutes. The duration of interviews varied from 45 to 90 minutes, mainly influenced by the extent of engagement in each method. For instance, participants who brought many photos and created elaborate recall methods may have utilised the full 90 minutes, while others required less time. It's also important to note that a single interview session was designed to respect participants' time and comfort, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While this study uses multiple data collection in an attempt to empower children in the research process (see Section 3.2), not every participant had the chance to take part in each method due to individual circumstances (or personal preferences). For example, some participants mentioned during the interview that they did not have photos of members of their biological family. In hindsight, I also realised that I didn't offer every participant the same opportunity to take part in the photo-elicitation method due to a lapse in judgement. This became particularly apparent when I assumed that soliciting photos of 'dear ones' was 'appropriate' for children who had been separated from their biological families. This situation illuminates how my subjectivity as a researcher can influence the data collection process and, albeit unintentionally, perpetuate exclusionary research practices. However, I did prioritise the inclusion of participants in all stages of the research process, including their decision to participate in different data collection methods.

Furthermore, the choice of interview location and the use of recall methods may have influenced the depth of data gathered. Interviews conducted in participants' homes might have elicited more candid responses, while the recall method could have affected the level of detail in their narratives.

4.6 Data analysis, transcription, and translation

The three Articles in this doctoral thesis are intended to enrich and complement each other, covering a review (Article I), a first comprehensive analysis of the concept of family in the context of Spain (Article II), and adding to the rapidly expanding field of contemporary family sociology in foster care research (Articles II and III). These studies also provide contextual circumstances. We began with a review of the whole research synthesis of evidence, which also highlighted the lack of Spanish children's views of family in foster care (Article I). This formed the basis for the subsequent in-depth analysis of family and family life, considered to be an interplay between biological preference and foster family affective practices in children and young people's life narratives (Article II). Some categories had emerged by then, which helped in the subsequent analysis of participants' relationships with their birth mothers (Article III). This reflection was largely facilitated by engaging in a community of validation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014), with my supervisors for Article I and co-author for Article III acting as interpretive communities.

All interviews were recorded on a digital tape recorder and transcribed verbatim. I organised all data on each participant in a personal folder, including drawings and discussions from the social network map and recall, which were added to the life narrative interview transcript. I repeatedly listened to the audio recordings until I was confident that I understood the oral text, the written material, and their respective contexts. To preserve the subtlety of the narrative provided by the children and young people, I transcribed all interviews in Spanish. The transcriptions also included all non-verbal utterances such as mmmm", "uh huh", laughs, and pauses to maintain the content, meanings, and structure in their original form. Then, I translated the data into English (the language in which the study is narrated). All utterances were removed during this process to ensure the translated material was readable (Lingard, 2019). This process required considerable time, patience, and energy. If certain concepts or words were difficult to translate into English, such as the Spanish term *Comunidades*

Autónomas, which literally translates to "autonomous regions", I retained the original term but provided an explanation for the reader. In this way, I was able to present some terms more accurately (Liamputtong, 2010). However, translating the Spanish word *pueblo* into the English word village" may have resulted in a loss of meaning in the children's and young people's narratives about going to the "pueblo". In this study, the village was not just a sign of geographical space but a sense of geographical belonging, even if they didn't live there.

In the Articles, key themes were identified according to the study's objectives and research questions and organised first according to the thematic codes (Articles I, II, and III), and then organised into a thematic narrative analysis (Articles II and III). However, there are several ways of analysing qualitative data (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). The former involves sorting and organising the categories of data into themes that emerge from the study, making interpretations, and creating sub-themes that follow the same patterns (see Braun & Clark, 2006, 2019). The latter considers the content, context, and structure through which meaning is constructed as a whole (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019; Riessman, 2008). The process of analysis was facilitated by the use of a qualitative data analysis software package, ATLAS.ti, and guided by the research questions (Articles I, II, and III) and theoretical concepts (Articles II and III).

4.7 Methodological considerations

In the following section, I address methodological considerations, specifically the trustworthiness of the study, and reflect upon my own positionality. This information will provide the reader with the necessary context to assess the trustworthiness of this research.

4.7.1 Trustworthiness of the research

Criteria such as reliability and validity are suitable measures for assessing the quality of quantitative research (Bryman, 2012). However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose alternative criteria for qualitative research, arguing that principles such as validity and reliability "presuppose that a single, absolute account of social reality is feasible" (Bryman, 2012, p. 390). They identify four criteria central to establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By trustworthiness, I refer to the extent to which the findings accurately reflect the phenomenon being investigated (Pratt et al., 2020).

Dependability concerns the degree of consistency in the findings and is closely related to the research process, particularly interpretation. This study's dependability is demonstrated through a careful description of the study's conceptual framework and procedures used throughout the research process. These include participant selection criteria, data collection methods, findings, and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Pilot & Beck, 2014). We provided comprehensive descriptions and used quotations to illustrate how data analysis and interpretations were made. In some instances, alternative interpretations were also presented (Connelly, 2016).

Regarding credibility, the use of different methods, as described in section 3.3, aimed to create a more holistic picture of participants' interpretations and meaning-making (Creswell, 2013). Photos brought by nine participants provided useful insights into how they perceive their family world. A drawing exercise helped ensure we didn't overlook whom children and young people consider to be their family. The use of a social network map visualised participants' connections, or lack thereof, more explicitly than verbal descriptions. It also facilitated conversation about relationships while they were filling it. The twelve recall sheets illustrated different situations in children and young people's everyday life in various social contexts. It allowed to capture explicitly family environment and the importance of 'doing' everyday family life. The use of interviews seemed to facilitate discussion. Even though their responses sometimes were short, they provided good information about, for example, their feelings in various situations and with different individuals.

This triangulation of methods provided a consistent picture of children's and young people's perspectives. When inconsistencies arose, they became topics for reflection to understand why (see Connelly, 2016; Patton, 1990). The preparation of the thesis by publication, with the various studies being based on each other, also qualifies to analyse almost all data and to find categories and themes as a basis for the following studies. Furthermore, we also explored alternative or negative findings (Connelly, 2016) to provide a sense of credibility, which was to some extent facilitated and done by analysing all empirical data.

Another aspect of trustworthiness is the confirmability of the data analysis. As mentioned, I did not have the opportunity to check with participants about their insights on research findings due to time and practical constraints. While this might have provided stronger

certainty of the identified interpretations, the aim of this study was not to explore the consistency of interpretations over time. As with much other research, this study provides insight into children and young people's conceptualisation and experience of family and family life *here* and *now* (Articles II and III).

To meet the requirement of transferability, I provide what Geertz (1973) termed 'thick description'. Participant interviews were in-depth, covering various aspects of each individual's definition of family and those factors that shaped and influenced these definitions. Efforts were made to provide the reader with a detailed description of the various aspects of participant narratives in relation to the relevant themes outlined in Articles II and III.

4.7.2 Positionality

Category memberships, whether self-claimed or assigned, play a significant role in shaping our identity and the way we perceive and are perceived within our social environments (Richards et al., 2015). As a female, foreign, black PhD candidate, my category membership had a notable impact on my interactions. It is not only influenced by thoughts and expressions but also the expectations of participants regarding my viewpoints (Richards et al., 2015). When I began this research, I was unfamiliar with the Spanish child protection system. Yet, due to my family ties, I had spent several summers and holiday seasons in Spain before starting my doctoral studies. This immersion allowed me to gradually become acquainted with Spanish society, culture, and language, which enhanced the research process. Therefore, I asserted my entitlement to investigate the meaning of 'family' in Spain by affirming my cultural connections to the Spanish context, from which my research participants were socialised. However, affirming this entitlement was not without its complexities. My experience revealed that some participants perceived me as an 'outsider', which became evident through statements like "Here in Spain, *we…*" or "I talk to you like you're not from here". Chawla (2007) pointed out that "there will always be facets of ourselves that connect us with the people we study and other factors that emphasize our differences" (p. 2).

In terms of my academic and professional background, I was an outsider. My academic background lies in psychology, criminology, and childhood studies, while my professional background is in teaching and education entrepreneurship. As part of this doctoral project, I

had to familiarise myself with the social work profession and the theoretical discourses underpinning family sociology, and welfare regimes. In Article I, I pointed out that children's views and voices are missing from Spanish social work research. Here, my academic background in childhood studies and prior knowledge may have contributed to a unique understanding. However, had I come from a social work background, other aspects may have emerged in this study.

Being unfamiliar with the Spanish child protection system meant I had to put more effort and time into gaining access to participants through gatekeepers and convincing them of the project's value. Researching the views of foster children and young people can hit a dead end due to difficulties in reaching this group. They are often seen as hard to reach (Pomerantz et al., 2007) and socially excluded (Axford, 2008). I found that participants appreciated being asked and listened to. My experience interviewing vulnerable young people previously likely helped them feel comfortable throughout the interview process.

It was challenging not to reflect on participant experiences through the lens of my own experiences during the interview process, being a woman who has never been in care and whose family life has been predominantly positive. My positive family experiences and prior research with young people kindled my interest in family during childhood, a theme that continuously resonated throughout the research process.

4.8 Ethical considerations

Bryman (2012) cautions that ethical issues in social research are critical, as they directly affect a research project's integrity and the disciplines involved in its execution. Thus, measures were taken to conduct this research ethically, ensuring the safety and well-being of participants as much as possible. The Research Ethics Committee of Valladolid University granted ethical approval for this study prior to recruitment and data collection (Appendix 4). No obstacles arose in conducting the research project as described in the application.

Considerations included privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, and potential harm. The first step was to secure consent from child protection authorities in Castilla y León. Then, with the assistance of regional social workers from the Red Cross and local psychologists, we contacted children and their foster parents. They informed the young people and their foster

parents about the project and asked whether they agreed to their names being forwarded to me. An invitation letter was then provided (Appendix 5), and I also informed participants in the letter that if they felt the need to talk to someone, support could be arranged. If interest was shown, I arranged a personal meeting with all parties (the child/youth and a foster parent), wherever possible, before conducting the interview. These meetings were held at Red Cross Head offices, foster care homes, or online via Zoom. At these meetings, I informed the children and their foster parents in more detail about the study, emphasised that participation was voluntary, and reassured them that they could withdraw at any time without providing a reason (Ennew et al., 2009c). The reason for this approach, even though consent was already obtained from Castilla y León and the regional Red Cross, was to allow the children and young people time to consider participation in the study. This approach also provided an opportunity for the children, young people, and their foster parents to discuss any concerns directly with me.

The child/youth and their foster parents were required to provide written consent for the child/youth's participation (Appendices 6 and 7, respectively). Four youths who were 18 years old at the time of the interview provided their individual consent, and all the participants verbally agreed before the interview commenced. Participants were informed that interviews would be recorded and stored on my personal computer in a secure file. They were also advised that anonymised direct quotes and drawings from their interviews might be included in the final document or future academic publications and presentations. Descriptions of children and young people (in Articles II and III) are generalised or not associated with specific children/youth, the names of their foster and birth family members, or social workers. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were assigned to participants. This measure was necessary because some participants, foster families, social workers, and Castilla y León child protection services requested copies of the Articles for their interest. Consequently, I sent a copy of the study (Article II) after its publication.

I was mindful of the potential for participants to become distressed or anxious during the interview due to the possibly sensitive nature of the topic. This issue arose in two of the interviews. One participant became upset as he recalled not seeing his mother for a very long time. He expressed missing his mother's greetings upon his return from school. At that point, I asked the participant if he wanted to discuss it or if he wished to stop the interview entirely.

He chose to continue but requested a piece of paper to create an origami piece, an activity he and his mother used to enjoy together (see Figure 5). He spent half of the interview crafting the origami.

Figure 5

Origami

Another participant requested a pause to show me a game in her bedroom she had since childhood. This game, a gift from her birth parents, held significant meaning for her. When she felt sad, she played it to feel connected to her birth parents. While some participants recounted distressing memories, I got the impression that the interview process was somewhat cathartic for many of them. It is worth noting that most participants expressed that this was their first time being asked about their views, experiences, and perspectives in such a thorough and emphatic manner. This indicated that the interview process went beyond a mere conversation; it allowed participants to share and reflect on their experiences, potentially leading to a sense of relief and validation. Considering the guiding principle of research ethics is to do no harm (Ennew et al., 2009a), participation in this research was seen as beneficial by participants because it both gave them a voice and provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their views and experiences of family and family relations.

4.8.1 An ethical dilemma

I encountered an ethical dilemma during this study. This dilemma related to an interview I conducted with a participant. During this interview, the participant disclosed that they had been sexually abused by a parent prior to entering care. They mentioned occasionally

encountering the abuser in the city where they lived and mentioned having psychological support. The participant noted that they no longer communicated with the offending parent at the time of the interview. I was cautious about asking follow-up questions as I did not want to trigger difficult emotions and cause harm to the participant. While in Norway, and transcribing this interview, it dawned on me that I had not asked if this incident had been reported to child protection services. Without the participant's private number to clarify this matter and not wanting to involve their foster parents, I chose to email a social worker to discuss the issue. The social worker confirmed that she couldn't provide this information and recommended I contact the Castilla y León child protection services.

This ethical dilemma highlights the complexity and nuances of ethical issues in the research process (Daley, 2012) and presents a significant learning opportunity. It served as a reminder of the need to remain alert to the varied ways ethical dilemmas and challenges can arise throughout the research process. Had I been more attuned to this during the particular interview, I could have asked if the child protection services were aware of these encounters. The key lessons I took from this experience are (1) the importance of asking for clarification during the interview process; (2) the need to address difficult issues as they arise with sensitivity and care, and (3) the awareness that challenging experiences can be raised in the context of general conversations.

CHAPTER FIVE

Synthesis of articles

5.1 Introduction

This study explores how children and young people in long-term non-kinship care define and experience the concept of 'family'. The study utilises concepts from family sociology and employs a mixed-method qualitative research design. In this final chapter of the thesis, I first discuss the three Articles presented in this thesis. I provide a summary of each Article before outlining key themes that emerge across the three Articles, demonstrating how these Articles interconnect and contribute to the study's aims and objectives. Table 3 presents the main discussion points from each individual Article and identifies overarching themes. The identified themes focus on (1) Blood ties (discourse and genetics), (2) Emotional dimension, and (3) Doing and displaying family. Discourse, in the context of this study, refers to the way language, societal narratives, and ideologies influence and shape the and experiences of children and young people in foster care and their understanding of 'family'. Next, I discuss the strengths and limitations of the study, followed by the implications for general knowledge, research in social work, policy, and practice. Finally, I provide a concluding remark on this study along with recommendations for future research.

5.2 Summary of articles

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

Judite Ie, Marit Ursin and Miguel Vicente-Mariño

Published in *Children and Youth Services Review* available online 13 December 2021

The first Article aims to provide a comprehensive view of the current study within the context of existing international literature on the concept of 'family' as it is understood in foster care research. It answers the first research question outlined in Chapter One: What does international research say about the perspectives of foster children and young people on the concept of 'family'? The data synthesised 20 empirical qualitative studies, including samples of foster children and former foster children, using thematic analysis. Most studies were from Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries, with the remaining ones from Israel and Belgium. Biological relatedness was found to be a prominent aspect in constructing the meaning of family. Although the Article reveals the privilege of the ideology of the nuclear family as the

'ideal' family type, a significant number of children construct a family based on a variety of factors, including emotional support and everyday family practices. A few defined family by choice. In defining family and creating a sense of family belonging across multiple settings, we found concepts family sociology useful in conceptualising families not based on biological or kinship ties.

5.2.2 Article II: The Concept of family: Perspectives of Spanish young people in foster care

Judite Ie

Published in *Child & Family Social Work* on 2 November 2022

The second Article drew on concepts of family sociology and childhood studies, employing a multi-method approach with study participants to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter One: How do foster children and young people perceive and 'do' family in Spain? Who counts as 'family' for children and young people in foster care in Spain, and why? In an attempt to expand previous research and advance our understanding of the meaning of 'family' and family relationships of Spanish children in foster care, this Article explored how concepts in the field of family sociology and intimate life could illuminate the less-known views and experiences of foster children. The interviews with 14 children and young people in long-term non-kinship care that participated in this study were first analysed using thematic coding, then thematic narrative analysis. Based on the children and young people's family narratives, the empirical material revealed that most construct family as shared affective practices, emphasising that love creates family, and commitment, consistency in care, and reciprocity are requirements of families The study illustrates how some of these children and young people show a preference for biological connections. Simultaneously, I discovered that their understandings of family are often determined by family rituals and family displays. I found that their family narratives revealed previously ignored dimensions of biological preference as means for identity construction rather than the ideal family type, emphasising the crucial significance of family belonging emerging in a complex web of family relationships. Their sense of family belonging is deeply embedded in their everyday life in foster families. Based on the study, I demonstrated the fluidity and changing character of notions of family when some children and young people recognised the value of blood relations but, at the same time, felt sadness when their relations were viewed as less valid than blood relations.

5.2.3 Article III: "You've Got to Love her" – Perceptions of birth mothers among children in long-term foster care

Judite Ie and Ingunn T. Ellingsen

Published in *Child & Family Social Work* on 15 July 2023

The third Article employed a family sociology perspective, thematic, and inductive analysis of interviews with study participants to further answer the third research question outlined in Chapter One: Who counts as 'family' for children and young people in foster care in Spain, and why? Empirical data provided key insights into the complexity and ambivalent views of how children and young people perceive their birth mothers as a central component of family construction. We found most participants – whether they had contact with their birth mother or not – to define a birth mother as a "life-giver". This view mostly concerned younger participants, possibly a symbolic representation; hence, it can be viewed as a way of expressing gratitude and an idealisation of their birth mothers. Older female participants with contact with their birth mother expressed a more critical and complex understanding of the role of their birth mother. This seems to be because of the feeling of responsibility and expectation imposed upon them by themselves and others. Some participants expressed loving their birth mother despite previous negative experiences, even after moving into foster care. The love for their birth mother sometimes felt forced upon them, resulting in complex and ambivalent feelings. This Article demonstrates how age and gender seem to influence how participants perceive their birth mother's role in their lives and that caring expectations may be socioculturally related.

5.3 Overarching themes identified across the articles

In Table 3 below, I illustrate the core themes that connect the three Articles presented in this thesis, together with an overall reflection and contribution of this study.

Table 3

Themes identified across each individual article

Themes	Art. I – Review	Art. II	Art. III	Overall reflections/ contribution
Blood ties (discourse and genetics)	Ideal: Biology or discourse? Biological understanding: childhood vs. adulthood.	Cultural significance. Loss of status: absence, lack of support. Biological connection: identity construction. Preference vs. validity: biological relatedness, emotional impact.	Birth mother: life-giver, limited contact. Life-giver symbolism: gratitude.	Intergenerational relations: influence definitions. Relational rights: blood ties not granted. Younger children: bound by policies, prone to mainstream discourse. Heterogeneity in blood ties discourse.
Emotional dimension	Mutual acts: love, care, support, and tolerance. Essentials: communication, conflict resolution.	Birth family: supportive status. Affection: constitutes, creates family. Love: essential, natural. Foster family: real, security, stability. Valued in foster family: all aspects of self.	Girls: higher expectations, internalised responsibilities. Caring expectations: socio-cultural, gender, aged-related interplay. Love for birth mother: sometimes forced.	Creating family: efforts, maintaining relationships. Cultural expectations: challenges in family relations.
Doing and displaying family	Shared activities, holidays, meals, events (ball games, weddings, celebrations, funerals), cards. Choice vs. gender: individual agency, gender differences.	Behavioural and affection: family constituents. Involvement and inclusion: day-to-day practices, sense of family	Birth parent contact: policy-practice gap.	Family practices: strengthening children relationships.

Having outlined the core themes that connect the three Articles presented in this thesis, I will now progress to discuss them.

5.3.1 Blood ties (discourse and genetics)
A key finding across Articles I and II is that biological family can contribute to foster children and young people's lives in varying ways and degrees. The findings suggest that there is substantial heterogeneity in how children and young people in foster care perceive blood ties, varying from 'the ideal', 'being loyal', to 'identity construction'. Within Articles I and II, children and young people's understanding of family reflects the traditional view that family is built around and based on blood and genetic ties. From a social constructionist perspective, the ways in which children in foster care define family is embedded in larger societal assumptions of what constitutes a family (Crotty, 1998). When a family is socially constructed based on biological relatedness, it is perhaps not surprising that some children and young people in foster care are placed in a different social status. This may explain the feeling of sadness when they are viewed as less valid than biologically related kin by the children of their foster parents (Article II). Study findings highlight that the societal message of what a family is can be complex and multifaceted. The meaning of family based on biological ties places children and youth in foster care in a complex position in their relations with members of their foster family.

Although studies show diversity in family meanings, the majority of child welfare policies in Western society, including Spain, appear to privilege and promote the biogenetic conception of family (Spanish Law 26/2015; UNCRC, 1989). When the government fails to provide the family with sufficient support, these policies still include a focus on the family of origin by making an effort to reunite the child with the biological family. In Article I, we found that children's relationships with their birth family in foster care can be challenging, with continuous disappointments for the children. Despite disappointments, younger children rarely engage in distancing themselves from their birth family compared to adults (former foster children). This suggests that younger children's relations with their birth family are bound by structural policies, legislations, regulations, and social work practices. Consequently, their relationships can be involuntary compared to adults with foster care experience. The younger children may believe that they have no choice but to maintain these relationships based on biological ties. They may also be more prone to believe in the

traditional view that a family is based and built around blood ties, have less negative experiences with the biological family, and have fewer positive experiences with the foster family, friends, and others for support and love in life. This may explain why they feel a high sense of loyalty, forgiveness, and honour towards their biological family compared to adults with foster care experience. A longitudinal study in Norway suggests that some young people in foster care romanticise their relationship with their birth parents through adulthood (Skoglund et al., 2019). My study shows that this is not necessarily the case (Article III).

In similar studies, Andersson (2009, 2018) gathered data at three-to-five-year intervals in Sweden. Andersson suggests that the role of the birth family could become less significant in the lives of foster children as they grow older. Children can redefine their relationships with their birth families according to their preferences when they gain more independence. This suggests that adults (former foster children) may rely less on biological ties and that adulthood may provide the emotional space to distance themselves from their birth families (Article I). As shown in Article III, older foster children revealed a more complex and nuanced understanding of their relationships with their mothers. However, Andersson (2009) found that young adults who became parents themselves talked about parents in a conciliatory way and stressed the importance of having good relationships with their birth families. Thus, this suggests that age and time might change the sentiments and views of the study participants about their birth mothers.

Though the significance of the biological family may diminish if its members are absent or unsupportive, children show agency in their family relations with their birth families, as demonstrated in the narratives of the study participants (Article II). Their apparent involuntary relations, embedded in child welfare policies, can become acts of choice, creating an opportunity for children in foster care to redefine what it means to be a family. In this study, when considering the discourse on blood ties by study participants, it seems that the focus on biological ties could be decentralised in policy by emphasising other definitions and functions of family rather than attempting to refute the importance of biological family relations. Specifically, in a child welfare system that positions a cultural understanding of family based on biological ties as best practice and in the best interest of a child, it is at times difficult to undermine the significance of biological understandings of family. Rather, within this system, the biogenetic conception of family can be temporarily suspended to

accommodate children in foster care's definitions of their 'ideal' family - that differ from, but are not incompatible with, biological ties - to take priority at a given moment. In fact, the ECtHR is increasingly shifting towards a more child-focused interpretation of 'family life', thereby giving more consideration to the situation of the child in the foster family (Breen et al., 2020). This is consistent with the 'best principle that Banda and Ekeelaar (2017) highlight in changing conceptions of the family in international legislation.

5.3.2 Emotional dimension

Biological relatedness is not the only discourse that helps children and young people in foster care make sense of family and create a sense of family belonging. Across each Article's findings (Articles I, II, and III), the concept of family is also constructed through shared affection and behavioural practices that form individuals' everyday life. Positive emotions challenge the blood ties' understanding of family and offer an alternative ideology for making sense of what it means to (not) be a family. The emotional dimension counters the biological principle that children and their birth families belong together by pointing out that creating a family relies on the efforts of its members to maintain a (close) relationship. In Articles I and II, this was initially outlined when children and young people voiced that a (close) family relationship does not just 'happen'; instead, it needs to be nurtured. Children and young people tended to emphasise the importance of reciprocal love, care, and support on one hand and commitment and consistency on the other. These findings align with Mason and Tipper (2008), who found that these emotional dimensions were perceived as meaningful in defining a "real" or "proper" family (p. 451). However, reciprocal love, care, and support pointed towards multiple relations regardless of biological connections or shared residence, while commitment and consistency pointed towards their foster family. For some study participants, as presented in Article II, foster parents provide emotional and moral support, including listening, talking, giving advice, and helping them to put their own lives in perspective (see Finch, 1989).

The emotional aspects of creating a sense of family belonging for children in long-term non-kinship foster care through support and care, security, and predictability have been highlighted by Schofield (2002). The current study also suggests that there is a wider positive emotional dimension in non-kinship foster families for providing study participants with a sense of family belonging. This was often prominent when study participants used terms such as 'father', 'mother', 'brother', and 'grandparents' to define foster family members as a

symbol of closeness and a form of kinship status (see also Mason & Tipper, 2008). Therefore, the focus on biological families can mean a denial of the role of relationships and family membership in non-kinship foster care. The fact that the study participants define family as not consisting of biological characteristics but as the provision of constant and reliable affection and care shows evidence of a shift in our understanding of family. As we are moving towards a more inclusive definition of family (Chambers, 2012), so are the children in non-kinship foster care arrangements. As such, it can be argued that a more flexible approach to the meaning of family by policymakers and practitioners in child welfare in Spain will aid the acceptance of foster care as a flexible family form that includes foster and birth families in the wider community in general.

The preference for the emotional dimension in defining family provides us with an opportunity to deconstruct what it means to be a family in long-term non-kinship care (Articles I, II, and III). The emotional aspects allow some study participants to distance themselves from their biological family and make the concept of family and family relations meaningful (Articles II and III). This seems a significant move, as it creates opportunities in which children and youth in foster care no longer have to acknowledge harmful and/or unwanted relationships. In Article III, study participants provide accounts in which they explained that despite feeling love for their birth mothers, even when this love felt forced at times, their birth mother was not performing as she 'should'. Thus, some participants actively engaged in practices to maintain distance from their birth mothers, such as bestowing the title of 'mother' to 'just' a name or word.

However, the current study findings also show that not all participants engage in distancing themselves from their birth mothers despite having bad experiences. One important finding that this study reveals is how certain values are embedded in contemporary childhood in Spain and how these shape the familial expectations placed on children and young people. Some study participants mentioned feeling obliged by their foster and birth families, as well as social workers, to display affection and care towards their birth mothers (Articles II and III). Within this context, it seems that the importance of emotional and practical support is more about following cultural expectations. In addition, gender is also an essential dimension in caregiving practices in family relationships. Girls mentioned more often that they care for their own birth mothers in childhood and adulthood compared to boys. This reflects gender roles in contemporary Spain, where women tend to fulfil caring responsibilities in the family

(Moreno-Mínguez et al., 2017). As caring expectations and gender are sociocultural constructs, this may encourage scholars to examine the ways in which such practices of intimacy can be problematic for children and young people in foster care, forcing them to stay in negative, even unhealthy relationships with their birth mothers (Articles II and III).

5.3.3 Doing and displaying family

A key theme across Articles I and II is that for children and young people in foster care, family is defined by how individuals 'do' family through routines and interactions embedded into daily family life practices. Family practices identified in Article I involve participation in family routines and activities, such as shared holidays, eating together, attending ball games, and joining in celebrations. In Article II, study participants acknowledged becoming part of the foster family because they were included in the family's practices, such as spending time in the pueblo (village), partaking in family holidays and outings, joining in (religious) celebrations, watching television together, and being included in household chores. These activities represented the 'doing' of family and the young person's inclusion as a member. The way study participants 'do' family through interactions and routines becomes a way to display family – for themselves as reassurance they belong to the foster family and for others, like members of their foster family communities. These displays demonstrate how family is shown, similar to a window display, and that these activities in the family are not only an activity itself but also a reflection of "ideas, values and norms of what counts as a 'proper' way of doing family" (Ursin et al., 2017, p. 933).

The findings of this study suggest that some children and young people engage in family displays to achieve validation and recognition from a specific audience (Walsh, 2018). They exercise their agency by engaging in displays associated with "the core value attached to" a "type" of family (Morgan, 2011, p. 63); in this case, the reassurance of belonging in the foster family. These children and young people develop creative strategies to support a desire to 'belong' in their foster families by attending mass or having their photos displayed at their foster grandparents' home. The findings also suggest that in the context of foster care, the displays may be interpreted as cultural, as Morgan (2011) suggests, since family practices are partially shaped by cultural definitions. Drawing on previous research (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018), it can be surmised that doing and displaying family is cultural, and for family display to be recognised it must occur in a given cultural context. The study findings show how some

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activities, such as spending time in the pueblo and attending mass (Article II), are interdependent and blurred in the cultural understanding of study participants' definition of family membership. Morgan's (1996) concept of 'doing family' and Finch's (2007) concept of 'displaying families' highlight the importance of understanding family through social and relational practices.

The study participants, however, also managed 'doing' family, being "separated yet connected" (Smart & Neale, 1999, p. 67) with their birth family. This included regulated visitations by birth parents, telephone calls, and WhatsApp messages with family members. The findings show how family members 'do' and 'display' differently when they lack opportunities for more common everyday displays. In the absence of family displays, such as 'being always there' if they had a problem or needed to talk, phone calls on birthdays or 'check-ins', some study participants excluded their birth family from their family map. Hence, such displays are important to be recognised as family members by some study participants. This necessitates a potential reconceptualisation and rethinking of how we research, discuss, and consider what it means to be a family. With the increasing fluidity, diversity, and multifaceted nature of family, doing and displaying have become significant aspects of family life (Heaphy, 2011).

5.4 Relevance of study beyond long-term non-kinship foster care

While the primary focus of this study is on children and young people in long-term non-kinship foster care, the findings may also hold relevance for individuals who have experienced separation from their birth parent (s) and/or who have not been placed in long-term non-kinship foster care. The definitions of the concept of 'family' observed in this study are unlikely to be exclusive to children and young people in long-term non-kinship foster care. Evidence suggests that family definitions based on biological relatedness, doing and displaying family are observed among children and young people in care or care experienced backgrounds, as seen in studies by Boddy (2019) Gwenzi (2020), and Skoglund et al. (2022). Moreover, research on adopted children by Jones and Hackett (2011) and MacDonald (2017) reinforces the importance of recognising the significance of flexible family definitions. This underscores the importance of allowing flexibility in defining 'family' to provide adequate support to children and young people in different care arrangements. This flexibility should align with their personal experiences, encompassing both past and present, without rigidly

adhering to a fixed definition based solely on one defining characteristic, such as biological or legal ties. Such efforts align with existing 'widening' understanding of family, which aims to increasing our understanding of family dynamics that do not stem solely from innate reproductive or socialisation roles (Smart, 2004; McCarthy, 2012).

5.5 Strengths and limitations of the study

This study provides unique insights into the ways the concept of family is defined and experienced by children and young people in long-term non-kinship care in the Spanish context. Given the considerable dearth of knowledge in this area in Spain (Article I), especially when compared with other Western countries, this contribution to knowledge is significant and hopefully represents the first of many studies and data collection efforts in this area of research in Spain. This study gathered information about the views and experiences of 14 children and young people in long-term non-kinship care. The findings, therefore, cannot be deemed representative of the wider population of foster children in long-term non-kinship care. The findings in this study emerged in a context-specific and relational setting between me and the participants. Therefore, I acknowledge that the findings presented in this study may differ if another researcher conducted the study and interviewed the participants. However, the findings here provide insights that can prompt reflections within other contexts, thereby contributing to understandings and practices in other contexts (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014).

This study has drawn on core concepts of family sociology – 'doing family', 'family practices', and 'family displays' – to examine the views of long-term non-kinship foster children and young people on family. While these concepts provided valuable insights, it's essential to acknowledge that the strong emphasis on micro-level aspects may have limited the interpretation of findings. For example, the focus on 'doing family' and 'family display' may have overshadowed broader communicative dimensions such as non-verbal cues and shared narratives among family members. This may suggest that the study findings do not fully capture the depth of family dynamics experienced by participants, potentially missing elements contributing to their understanding of family. Moreover, focusing on family practices from children and young people's perspectives may have portrayed these practices as solely driven by their individual choices, possibly neglecting the influence of broader structural and societal constraints (Heaphy, 2011). According to the research findings, social norms about what defines (or does not define) a family pose a significant obstacle for those

who don't conform to the traditional family model. Research indicates that 'family practices' often diverge from enduring ideals centered around nuclear families (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000; Stoilova et al., 2017). As a result, the findings may have reinforced a perception that foster children and young people in Spain have more agency in shaping their family relations than is practically feasible within the constraints of the foster care system.

In addition, this study provides two key methodological contributions to knowledge. Different methods were included in this qualitative research than those typically included in earlier work on this issue. These methods were slightly more varied than those included in previous research on this topic, as it included recall and participants' family photos. To the best of my knowledge, the use of the family photo method of data collection has not previously been applied to studies on this topic. This method of data collection, although not without some ethical issues (discussed in Section 3.5.3.6), was invaluable to the successful execution of this study.

A limitation of this study lies in the representation of the participants within the research sample. Most participants interviewed for this study were from a homogenous group – white, Spanish, and placed in heterosexual foster families. This parallels other studies on the characteristics of foster families, which show heterosexual couples are more likely to foster (López-López et al., 2014), and that the vast majority of children placed in foster care are from the ethnic majority (del Valle et al., 2009). It's also important to highlight that not including the views and experiences of foster parents and social workers may be regarded as a limitation of the study. Wyness (2013) suggests that it's necessary to bring adults back into the analysis as partners and collaborators within a framework of an intergenerational dialogue between children and adults. While prioritising children's views has become central to the research field in childhood studies, it "has led to adults being pushed into the background, occupying more marginal positions and standpoints" (Mannion, 2007, cited in Wyness, 2013, p. 429). Bearing this in mind, it may be worth gathering the perspectives of foster parents and social workers in future research about the concept of family and family practices.

5.6 Implications of study findings for policy and practice

While implications for policy and practice were provided in Articles II and III, I will provide a final reflection on the key implications of this study for policy and practice.

Empirical findings in this study show that the understanding of family by children in foster care does not always follow normative ideals. While some perceive family according to the 'traditional' understanding based on biological connections, this was not the norm in the sample in this study. This suggests that it might be helpful to develop policies related to family and a foster care for children with foster care experience that allow for and expect diversity in definitions and understandings of family among children. This could aid social workers in better-supporting children in foster care as they navigate relationships with their birth families. In Spain, as in many other countries, policies tend to conform to the image of the nuclear family. Findings from this study suggest that such policies may be problematic given the diversity of family definitions and experiences reported by the participants. Recent research in Western countries points to a growing consensus that families have undergone significant changes in their structure and meaning (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Chambers, 2012). In light of these changes, and building on the findings from this study, it might therefore be valuable to conduct a longitudinal study of children in long-term non-kinship foster care in Spain to inform and guide policy development.

The importance of recognising changes in family meanings and the fluid nature of family relationships over time is vital in policy and political campaign discourse, as well as in child welfare practices. While this message is crucial for social workers and judges in child protection services, the findings of this study may also resonate with and be relevant to other fields, such as adoption. It is important to listen to children and read signals to determine whether contact with birth parents is too distressing (Articles II and III). This information is needed to support positive contact with birth families and provide protection. To do so, this should be a combined effort from social workers, foster and birth families. As a result, this message of aiding navigation through family relations is key, especially for children who often have challenged, negative, or disrupted family life experiences in their earlier years. Social workers and policymakers are encouraged to appreciate the importance of taking a long-term perspective on issues related to the family, paying due attention to the impact of any early adverse family experiences while at the same time not compromising children's family relations. Additionally, social workers, policymakers, and social work students could benefit from remaining aware of the role of key factors in influencing family life experiences. It may be beneficial to create a physical space for engagement with foster children and former foster children to cultivate the development of supportive family relations and

connections through adulthood. Creating a committee of foster children and youth, where they can freely discuss policies and their own experiences of family life, might be one such way of identifying positive family connections. This could assist those children with foster care experiences in nurturing their family relations and being part of future policy development. Furthermore, foster parents could benefit from being attentive to the impact of both individual expectations and foster children and young people's family relationships with birth families.

5.7 Concluding remarks

This study demonstrates the value of involving children and youth and applies family sociology and childhood studies conceptual frameworks to the study of family meanings in foster care in the Spanish context. The empirical material presented in this thesis reveals how children and youth in foster care define and experience the concept of family in a variety of ways. The foster children and youth in this study resisted the blood ties discourse and genetics in defining the term family, showing a preference for relationships based on love, consistent care, support, and everyday family life. This contradicted the conflation of biology, permanence, and positivity. Emotional affection and everyday family life, including mutual activities, such as having dinner and watching television together, helped children and young people in this study make sense of what it means to be a family. Theoretically, exploring these emotional and everyday family practices and displays would significantly contribute to answering contemporary family scholars' call for more family deconstruction research. This is particularly important, considering critical social work scholars are exploring how family is constructed and experienced in foster care but have often speculated about family deconstruction from a discourse-dependence perspective.

The oppositional interplay of these discourses unsettled this culturally idealised Western family form, exposing the distinction between structural constraints and definitions of family. The blood ties discourse of family emerged to construct closeness through distance. This suggests scholars may need to rethink the meaning of blood ties in creating (close) family relationships. For example, this study shows that foster children and young people's bonds to their birth families are often based on a sense of obligation and expectations. While child–birth–parent relationships are often perceived as positive, this study illustrates that this can also function more negatively when foster children and youth engage in unhealthy

relationships. For social work scholars, this study provides evidence that, in some instances, not only are alternative family forms equally legitimate, but they can also function in healthier ways than families bound by blood and genetic ties.

The study findings suggest a need for flexibility in terms of policies and practices of family when considering children and young people's meaning-making of family and family life in foster care. In an era when comparative perspectives between countries are heralded as potentially leading to transnational policy development (Nygren et al., 2018), findings from this study suggest that we would do well to consider how the concept of family is experienced by children in foster care placements from a comparative child protection system guided by the country's social policies towards the family.

While the current study sought to explore children's perspectives and experiences of family, including those from an ethnic minority background, this goal was not achieved despite recruitment efforts. Therefore, future research that includes the perspectives of ethnic minority children in foster care could potentially contribute valuable information on issues regarding sociocultural expectations in family relationships in foster care. It is also possible that children placed in kinship foster care or in non-traditional families, such as same-sex, single families, and families formed through gamete conceptions, might draw on blood ties discourse and genetics differently. Future research should explore this possibility. Moreover, the research could also benefit from the perspectives of parents, foster carers, and social workers about what family means in the context of foster care, given that they represent the state guardianship of children. Lastly, it would be interesting to explore how family conceptualisation in policies has evolved over the years.

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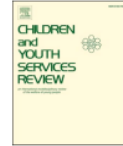
APPENDICE

Appendix 1 – Article I

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 multidimensional 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.
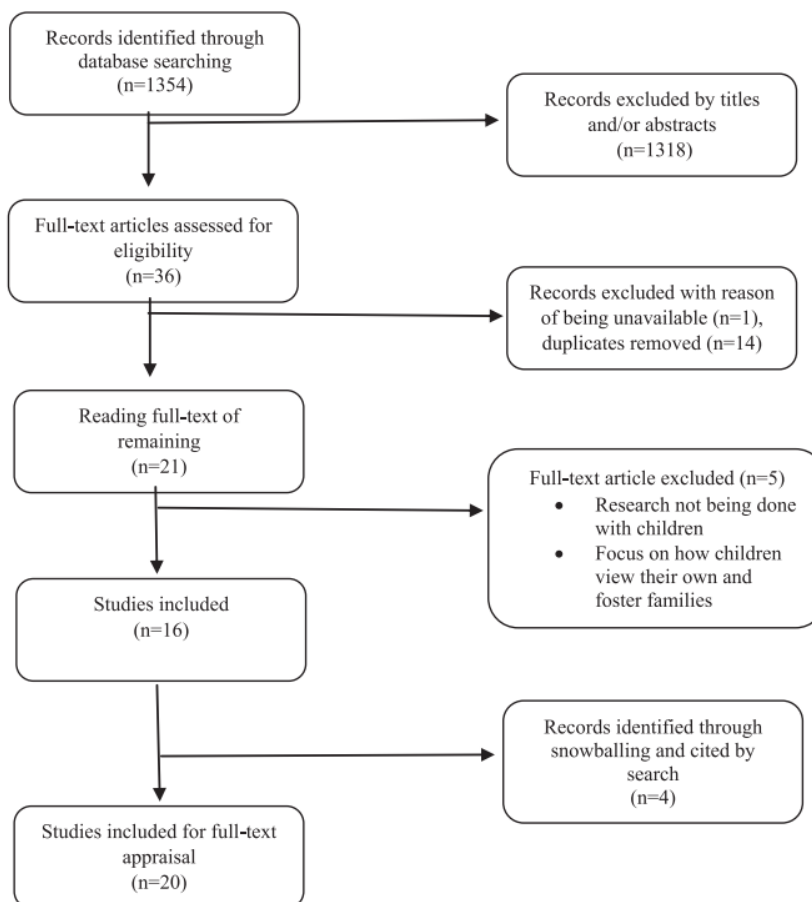
Fig. 1. PRISMA flow chart systematic review process.

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 2of 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

(continued on next page)

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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

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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 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.

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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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Appendix 2 – Article II

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

CHILD & FAMILY SOCIAL WORK WILEY

The concept of family: Perspectives of Spanish young people in foster care

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Abstract

This article employs concepts from family sociology to explore how 'family' is conceptualised in 14 life narratives of young people in foster care in Spain. The article draws on a multi-method approach with young people who are in long-term non-kinship foster care. Seven girls and seven boys aged 10 to 22 took part in the study. The empirical material reveals an interplay between biological preference and foster family affective practices in young people's narratives, illuminating a struggle to make sense of the concept of family in foster care. Most of the participants understand family as shared affective practices sustained through love, commitment, consistent care and reciprocity rather than blood ties. Some show a preference for biological connectivity, while others describe family as determined by rituals and family displays. The key practice implications highlight the importance helping young people positioning themselves in birth family relationships, and supporting their sense of family belonging.

KEYWORDS
family display, family practices, foster children, long-term, non-kinship, social work

1 | INTRODUCTION

> ... it's just that Spanish people are very Mediterranean, very family-oriented ... very customs-oriented. I think; we like to spend time with the family, we do not uproot from it (Emilia, aged 21).

Emilia is a Spanish youth who spent years in foster care, and her narrative emphasises Spanish family culture and the value individuals attach to family. The policy in Spanish child welfare, as in many other countries, is that, if at all possible, children should grow up with their birth family. It prioritises foster care (in kinship and non-kinship families) placement when out-of-home care is necessary for children who, for example, suffered neglect, abuse or maltreatment (Jiménez-Morago & Palacios-González, 2008; Palacios & Amorós, 2006). Foster care provides a stable family environment and individual attention for children who lack adequate care from parents (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). The Spanish Law 26/2015 on the modification of the child protection system includes three types of foster care according to their purpose: (1) emergency foster care, where the child can stay with the foster family up to six months; (2) temporary foster care—up to 2 years, and (3) long-term foster care—up to the age of 18, with the goal of creating permanence, and this can be prolonged after the age of 18. Furthermore, if birth parents are unable to care for their children, they may apply for temporary care of the child. Placement in foster care in Spain is a temporary arrangement with the aim at reuniting children with their birth family, and where this is not possible, extension and permanent care or adoption is recommended. Also, it is assumed that children stay in contact with their birth family (Law 26/2015 Article 20 no. 2).

Despite the growing body of research on foster care and foster families in Spain (del Valle et al., 2009), few studies have documented

the views and voices of children (Balsells et al., 2010; Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2013; Mateos et al., 2012). As noted by Casas and Bello (2012), Spanish children's voices are noticeably absent from the literature and in child welfare policies and practices. The United Nations Convention on The Right of the Child (UNCRC) promotes child-centric perspectives in all actions and decisions concerning them (UNCRC, 1989). In the United Kingdom, there is a growing body of research of foster children' voices and their care relationships (e.g., Biehal, 2014; Schofield, 2002; Schofield et al., 2012), suggesting that acknowledging children's views on family relationships is central to their everyday emotional and practical well-being. A direct engagement with children in research (Holland & Crowley, 2013) to better understand their views on and experiences with family life might improve foster care services (Schofield & Beek, 2009; Whiting & Lee, 2003). A recent review revealed that the growing body of literature on foster children's understanding of family is mostly restricted to Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries and points to the importance of understanding family meaning-making in relation to a particular state or local context (Ie et al., 2021). In this article, I asked: *How do children and young people in long-term non-kinship foster care in Spain perceive and 'do family'?* The analysis draws upon concepts of family sociology.

The aim of the article is twofold. First, it fills a gap in the understudied topic of how children and young people in long-term non-kinship foster care think about family in Spain. Second, it responds to calls for the application of sociological theories related to family and intimate life with children and young people in foster care (Holland & Crowley, 2013). Family sociology can create new approaches to understand contemporary family life and advance professional discretion, communication and rapport in working with institutionalised children and their families (Ursin et al., 2017). I begin with a description of my theoretical framework and previous research in the field of foster care. I then provide the context of the child welfare system in Spain, followed by a description of the study methodology, findings and a discussion on the empirical material on children and young people's conceptualisations and 'doings' of family (Morgan, 1996) and familial relationships. Implications for social work practice are offered.

2 | THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Within the field of family sociology, there is widespread agreement that we need theoretical concepts that are sensitive enough to identify and explain the diversity and complexity of today's families. The focus within sociological family studies is primarily on relatedness as socially constructed (Chambers, 2012) rather than reflecting the traditional hegemonic discourse of how family 'should' be. Central to contemporary theorising of family life is the study of *family practices* and *doing family* (Morgan, 1996, 2011a), with 'family' being a socially constructed concept constituted by qualities, activities and everyday actions. The notion of *displaying family* (Dermott & Seymour, 2011; Finch, 2007) refers to family members communicating to each other and others that they 'do family', thereby confirming that these

relationships are "family relationships" (Finch, 2007, p. 67). Examples of 'family display' are weekly phone calls, family narratives and shared meals (Finch, 2007). These two concepts highlight social practices and communicative aspects in everyday life, providing an empirical basis for the analysis of interactions between family members that are not derived from naturalistic reproductive or socialisation functions (McCarthy, 2012; Smart, 2004). In this view, family is "a quality rather than a thing" (Morgan, 1996, p. 186), and a facet of social life rather than a social institution (Finch, 2007), recognising different family forms and practices that are historically and socio-culturally contextualised (Ursin et al., 2017). Analysing how people 'do family' is at the heart of valorising the lived experiences of family (Finch, 2007; McCarthy & Edwards, 2010).

Some research has used these sociological concepts as base for interpreting the multiple belongings experienced by children and young people who are in foster care (e.g., Biehal, 2014; Sità & Mortari, 2022; Wissö et al., 2019). Some scholars emphasise the continued significance of the collective views of what families should look like (McIntosh et al., 2011) and the idea of family as a pervasive cultural symbol (Jackson in McIntosh et al., 2011), particularly in 'familial' cultures. The lack of and shortcomings in public services, subsidies and interventions to support families in their caring activities and responsibilities for its members are features of familialism, such as in southern Europe. Historically, political and social actors assumed that care was provided by the family unit and that this contributes to the familial nature of the family in Spain (Flaquer, 2004; Moreno-Domínguez, 2004), further explained below.

For children in foster care, fluidity in family relationships is often discussed in terms of instability (Wissö et al., 2019). Removal from birth families and being placed in foster care might raise questions about children's identity as it relates to their families of origin and the degree of family belonging to the new family (Samuels, 2009). Studies emphasise the fluidity and diversity of children and young people's experiences of family and their engagement with it. Several studies have explored how children understand and perceive 'family', and findings suggest that most children and young people's understanding of family is based on genetic ties (Ellingsen et al., 2011, 2012; Sità & Mortari, 2022; Van Holen et al., 2020; Wissö et al., 2019). Mahat-Shamir et al. (2018) also suggest that commitment to a biological family is not necessarily based on the quality of the relationship but to biological ties. Processes of care, support and love are primary criteria for the concept of family for many children (Biehal, 2014; Schofield, 2002; Van Holen et al., 2020). Some studies also found that some foster children depicted a fluid understanding of family that was based on doing family things through everyday rituals such as spending time together, shared meals, vacations and celebrations (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018; Schofield, 2002; Van Holen et al., 2020).

3 | CHILD WELFARE IN SPAIN

Child welfare systems in modern states can be loosely categorised into two types (Gilbert et al., 2011): a *child protection orientation* and a

family service orientation. The former is characterised by early intervention and family support, while the latter focuses on preventive family services through parental support. According to del Valle et al. (2013), child welfare in Spain was historically characterised by care outside of family, where institutionalisation was considered the only available measure for children in care. However, the authors note that much development in welfare in the last decades has occurred. Although child welfare systems are not often seen in connection with welfare state regimes (Pösö et al., 2014), common features seem to exist between the child protection orientation category and the Spanish Mediterranean welfare state system. Moreno-Domínguez (2004) argued that in such welfare model, family issues are considered as belonging to the private sphere, giving rise to a model of society and state based on intergenerational solidarity and family dependence. Moreno-Domínguez (2004) highlighted that family in Spain, although impacted by global and economic processes, is still a patriarchal system with strong and extended family ties along with the idea that care is a family responsibility.

The contemporary child welfare system in Spain is very much linked to the political situation that arose after the civil war (1936–1939) and the following dictatorship (lasting until 1975). Since the end of 39 years of dictatorship, there has been a move away from the charity-based child welfare model characterised by large residential care institutions run by religious orders (del Valle et al., 2009; del Valle & Casas, 2002). Following the Constitution of 1978, Spain was divided into 17 autonomous regions (*Comunidades Autónomas*), each with their own government, parliament and a range of administrative powers. Youth and foster care policies and services are exclusively carried out by each region, and each region has a public department that is responsible for issuing protection orders for children at-risk (Kosher et al., 2018). National Law 26/2015 regulates each region's child protection policies, aiming at ensuring an adequate legal framework for protection that is consistent with the international treaties ratified by the signatory countries, in particular the UNCRC (Massons-Ribas et al., 2021). This law prioritises: (1) stable over temporary placements, (2) foster over residential care and (3) placements agreed to by parents and services over enforced placements. Exceptions are that children under 3 years old cannot be placed in residential care, and ideally children under 6 years not either.

In 2019, approximately 18% of the Spanish population were children (National Institute of Statistics, 2019). Among these, 0.5% were child protection users, amounting to 42,529 children. Of these, 55% (23,209) were in residential care, 29% in kinship care (12,600) and 16% (6720) in non-kinship care (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2020). The vast majority of children in foster care placements in Spain are from the ethnic majority (del Valle et al., 2009). Of relevance to the analysis in this article is the fact that the number of children in non-kinship care has decreased by approximately 5% over the last 4 years (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2020). As López et al. (2010) point out, non-kinship foster care has not proven as successful as expected since it began in the 1990s. The fact that over 50% of out-of-home placements are still in residential care reflects the challenges of the Spanish child welfare system. Almost half of Spanish children are placed in kinship foster care due to, among other things, strong family ties, comparatively low cost and positive outcomes (del Valle et al., 2013; Kosher et al., 2018). In the autonomous region of Castilla y León (northern Spain)—in which the present study took place—about 984 children were in foster care in 2019: 475 in kinship care, and 509 in non-kinship care (Servicios Sociales Castilla y León, 2020).

4 | RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

4.1 | Participants

Fourteen children and young people aged between 10 and 22 years (seven boys and seven girls[1]), residing in non-kinship foster care, from four Spanish cities of Castilla y León took part in this study. An

TABLE 1 Overview of participants

Name	Age	Gender	No. of years in the foster family	Contact with birth family
Pilar	10	Girl	4	Mother
Lucas	14	Boy	6	Mother
Beltrán	18	Boy	7	Brother
Isabel	21	Girl	8	Mother, sister, great aunt
Alonso	13	Boy	5	Mother
Emilia	21	Girl	15	Aunt and cousins
Carmen	22	Girl	6	Mother, siblings
Olivia	15	Girl	7	Mother, siblings
Rodrigo	15	Boy	5	Brother: Filipe (who he lives with)
María	13	Girl	4	No contact
Emma	14	Girl	3	Grandmother, uncles
Mateo	16	Boy	6	No contact
Eduardo	11	Boy	4	No contact
Filipe	13	Boy	6	Brother: Rodrigo (who he lives with)

overview of participants' information is presented in Table 1. All names are pseudonyms. Participants were recruited in cooperation with the regional Red Cross, an administrative body responsible for child protection in Castilla y León, targeting approximately 28 children and youth. Participation criteria restricted the sample to young people who had been in a foster family for over 2 years. Spanish national and regional government lockdown restrictions in March 2020 due to Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts in social services made it difficult to recruit and conduct face-to-face interviews. Thus, recruitment occurred as follows: Regional social workers asked social workers and psychologists of each province to approach young people and their foster parents and ask whether they might be interested in participating in the study. They located 14 participants from four provinces, and none dropped out of the study. Most participants (eight out of 14) had been in their foster family for over 5 years and none with the foster family for fewer than 3 years. One participant (Carmen, aged 22) had left foster care at the time of the interview. Carmen and Olivia (aged 15) are siblings. Of the 14 participants, 12 had ethnic majority background. Most young people ($n = 12$) in this study came from residential care placement before being placed into non-kinship foster families and had some contact with their birth family. Some had contact only with their birth mothers or siblings, while others also had contact with grandparents and other relatives. Only a few ($n = 3$) had no contact with any member of their birth family. The contact consisted of regulated visitations by birth parents, telephone calls, WhatsApp messages and visiting and spending time with family members. For some young people, the lockdown introduced in Spain in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic limited time spent with families.

4.2 | Procedure

Informed consent and authorisation from the University of Valladolid Ethics Committee and permission from the Castilla y León child protection authorities were obtained to access children in foster families. In addition, the collaboration of regional Red Cross was requested through the Castilla y León child welfare authorities. An invitation letter was sent to Red Cross social workers to give young people and their foster parents, presenting myself as a female PhD candidate who is interested in young people's views on family. The letter also contained information about the aim of the study, young people's and their guardian's rights to decline participation at any time and confidentiality by anonymising any identifiable information or material prior to publication. If interested, two consent forms were sent to foster parents by email for them and the child or youth to sign. Four young people who had reached the age of 18 at the time of the interview gave their own consent, and all participants gave verbal consent before the interview started. From an ethical perspective, I was wary of the risks of causing emotional distress that might result from the research (Ennew et al., 2009a). Different research instruments were administered to enable young people to share and express themselves freely (Article 13) so that knowledge generated reflects their lived family experience (Ennew et al., 2009a, p.1.23), see below for more.

4.3 | Multi-method approach

The study had a multi-method approach that included photos, drawings, social network map, recall and semi-structured interviews. The aim of photos as visual method (Punch, 2002) was to break the ice and start the conversation and elicit young people's perspectives on who belonged to their family. Before the interview, I asked participants to bring photos of the *most* important people in their lives. The drawing method (Punch, 2002) of 'family map' was introduced by the question: "Can you draw your family map with people that are most important to you and whom you consider family?" This is a way of visualising those they see as part of their family. The participants chose how they wanted to perform this activity. Some wanted to make sketches that assessed their relationships: "Well, I'd draw the family in a pyramid. At the base, which is what holds me up ..." (Beltrán, aged 18). Others wrote names of members of their families. Based on these drawings, participants were interviewed on what each family member meant to them. The social network method (Ryan et al., 2014) was used to access their everyday lives through their personal relationships and connections with family, friends and acquaintances. The recall method (Ennew et al., 2009b) was used primarily to understand which family members were part of young people's everyday weekly routines (see Figure 1). The drawings, social network map and recall activity provided information about people, interactions and events. In the interviews, participants were asked open-ended thematic questions about their perceptions of family. Examples of questions were as follows: What does family mean to you? Why do you

MONDAY	ACTIVITY	PARTICIPANT (S)
07:00-08:00		
09:00-10:00		
10:00-11:00		
12:00-13:00		
14:00-15:00		
16:00-17:00		
18:00-19:00		
20:00-21:00		
21:00-22:00		

FIGURE 1 'My week' recall activity used in this study

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consider him/her as family? Have you always seen him/her as part of your family? Can you tell me about the time you spend together? The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min with an average of 60 min. Participants decided on the location of the interview. Six participants were interviewed at the Red Cross Head Office, four at the university campus, two online via Zoom and two in their foster home. The data were collected between March and August 2021.

4.4 | Analysis

The interviews were tape-recorded with permission of the interviewees and transcribed verbatim. To adapt the verbatim material into readable communication (Lingard, 2019), all non-verbal or affirmative utterances were removed. All interviews were translated from Spanish into English. The transcribed interview material was analysed first by thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2019) aided by ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software and guided by the research questions and theoretical concepts of 'family practices', 'doing family' and 'family display'. This enabled a layer of narrative to emerge and provided opportunity to give voice to different aspects that do not fit into a conventional narrative structure. The data were read multiple times to generate coding categories. Then the coding categories were clustered into related groups to generate initial main categories. To reinforce the value of including young people's views in research about their welfare (Holland, 2009), I strayed from Braun and Clark's process and returned to the data, examining each narrative in its entirety. According to Riessman (2008), thematic narrative analysis theorises from intact stories instead of across the corpus.

Emergent thematic categories are salient to narrative thematic analysis, but the focus is on how these categories comprise stories rather than how stories produce overarching three themes as shown in Tables 2–4.

5 | RESULTS

Three key themes related to how young people 'do' family were identified: (1) family as constructed through affective practices, (2) family as (in)visible biological ties and (3) family as everyday practice. These themes all relate to family being constructed in and through everyday interactions and functional processes.

5.1 | Family is constituted in and through affective practices

This section is constituted through a set of three interrelated themes: (a) Love makes a family, (b) Family provides stability, continuance, and predictability, and (c) Family is a place of reciprocity.

5.1.1 | Love makes a family

For most young people in this study, family is based on the way family members act and feel about one another. Young people described relationships with members of the foster and birth family, teachers, and friends, social workers, psychologists, boyfriends, and school

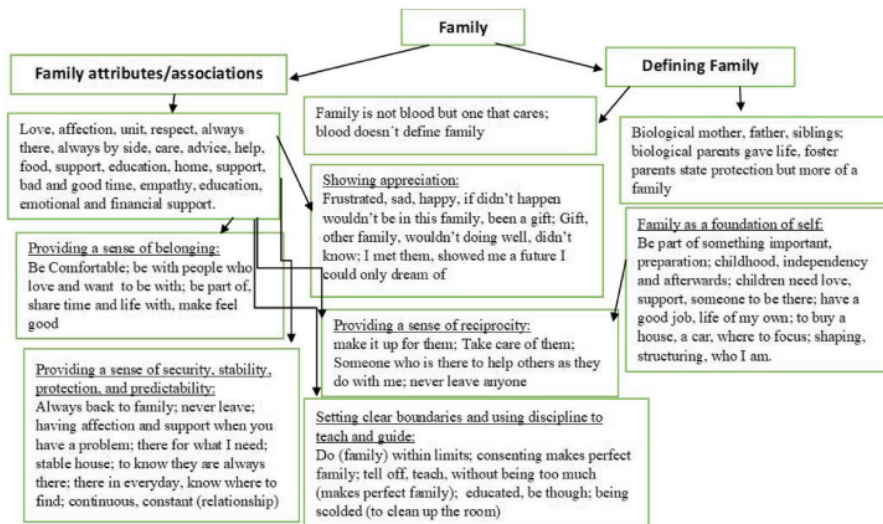**TABLE 2** First emerging theme in the analysis process
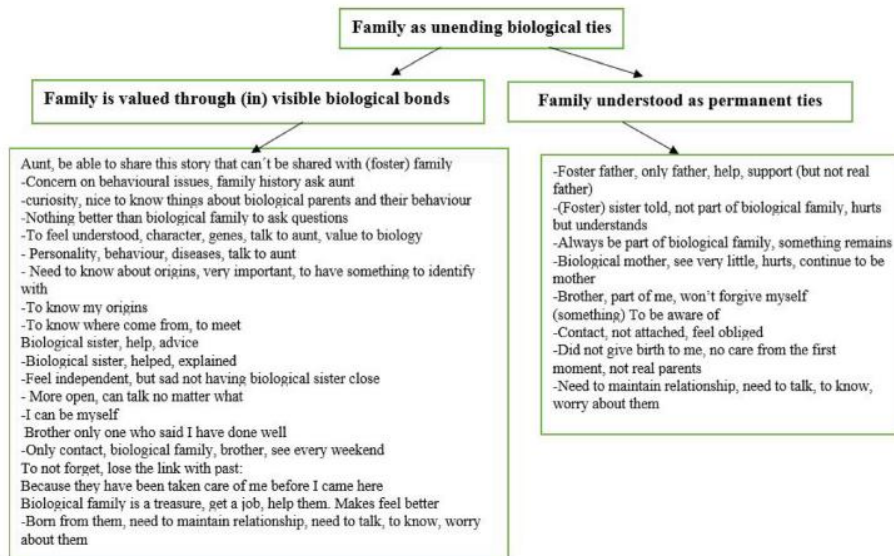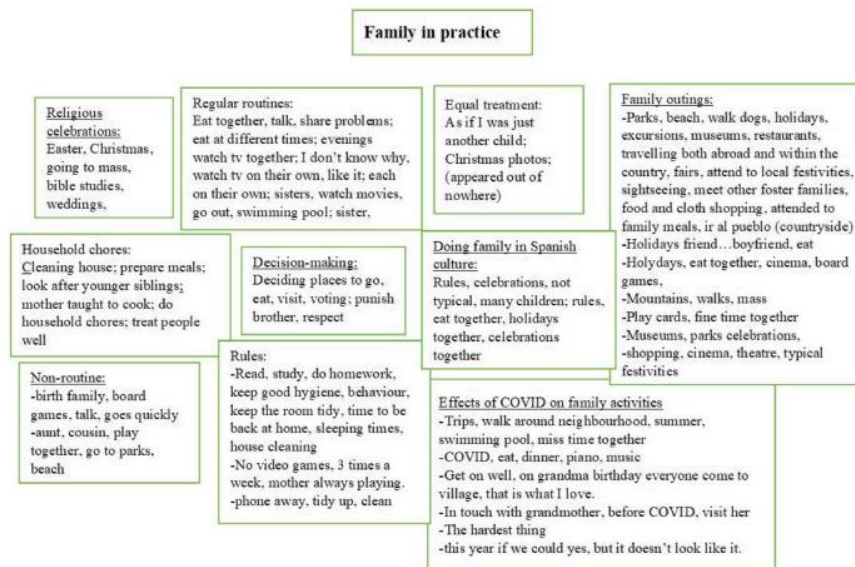
TABLE 3 Second emerging themes in the analysis process

Family as unending biological ties

Family is valued through (in) visible biological bonds

Aunt, be able to share this story that can't be shared with (foster) family
-Concern on behavioural issues, family history ask aunt
-curiosity, nice to know things about biological parents and their behaviour
-Nothing better than biological family to ask questions
-To feel understood, character, genes, talk to aunt, value to biology
- Personality, behaviour, diseases, talk to aunt
- Need to know about origins, very important, to have something to identify with
-To know my origins
-To know where come from, to meet
Biological sister, help, advice
-Biological sister, helped, explained
-Feel independent, but sad not having biological sister close
- More open, can talk no matter what
-I can be myself
 Brother only one who said I have done well
-Only contact, biological family, brother, see every weekend
To not forget, lose the link with past:
Because they have been taken care of me before I came here
Biological family is a treasure, get a job, help them. Makes feel better
-Born from them, need to maintain relationship, need to talk, to know, worry about them

Family understood as permanent ties

-Foster father, only father, help, support (but not real father)
-(Foster) sister told, not part of biological family, hurts but understands
-Always be part of biological family, something remains
-Biological mother, see very little, hurts, continue to be mother
-Brother, part of me, won't forgive myself
(something) To be aware of
-Contact, not attached, feel obliged
-Did not give birth to me, no care from the first moment, not real parents
-Need to maintain relationship, need to talk, to know, worry about them

TABLE 4 Third emerging themes in the analysis process

Family in practice

Religious celebrations:
Easter, Christmas, going to mass, bible studies, weddings,

Regular routines:
Eat together, talk, share problems; eat at different times; evenings watch tv together; I don't know why, watch tv on their own, like it; each on their own; sisters, watch movies, go out, swimming pool; sister,

Equal treatment:
As if I was just another child; Christmas photos; (appeared out of nowhere)

Family outings:
-Parks, beach, walk dogs, holidays, excursions, museums, restaurants, travelling both abroad and within the country, fairs, attend to local festivities, sightseeing, meet other foster families, food and cloth shopping, attended to family meals, ir al pueblo (countryside)
-Holidays friend…boyfriend, eat
-Holydays, eat together, cinema, board games,
-Mountains, walks, mass
-Play cards, fine time together
-Museums, parks celebrations,
-shopping, cinema, theatre, typical festivities

Household chores:
Cleaning house; prepare meals; look after younger siblings; mother taught to cook; do household chores; treat people well

Decision-making:
Deciding places to go, eat, visit, voting; punish brother, respect

Doing family in Spanish culture:
Rules, celebrations, not typical, many children; rules, eat together, holidays together, celebrations together

Non-routine:
-birth family, board games, talk, goes quickly
-aunt, cousin, play together, go to parks, beach

Rules:
-Read, study, do homework, keep good hygiene, behaviour, keep the room tidy, time to be back at home, sleeping times, house cleaning
-No video games, 3 times a week, mother always playing.
-phone away, tidy up, clean

Effects of COVID on family activities
-Trips, walk around neighbourhood, summer, swimming pool, miss time together
-COVID, eat, dinner, piano, music
-Get on well, on grandma birthday everyone come to village, that is what I love.
-In touch with grandmother, before COVID, visit her
-The hardest thing
-this year if we could yes, but it doesn't look like it.

friends, and love was the most common word to describe these relationships:

> I think you consider your family [as] those you love. For example, your friends can be your family. You can choose your family. I consider them family but not genetically (Isabel, aged 21).
>
> My dog [is my family] because he welcomes me when I arrive, he's a very loving … and very affectionate dog (Emilia, aged 21).

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I think of my sister Olivia. To me, family is her because she has given me everything. She has given me love, which I never had (Carmen, aged 22).

A family is people who love each other (Mateo, aged 16).

Olivia reported that love consists in the formation of a 'union', depicting it as the true meaning of what family is:

… it means a lot of people who love each other … who have been born into it, or who have been fostered into it. It's like being part of that union.

Although Olivia talked of family as love experienced by people in their birth and foster families, her views of family fall within the traditional definition of nuclear family. When asked what comes to mind when she thinks of family, Olivia said:

Biological mother, father, and siblings. Although, I have not lived with it myself, it's something that became familiar to me, and I think about it because my whole classmate has it and other people are used to the normal family.

For Olivia and Mateo, blood ties define family. However, for Mateo, the existence of biological ties did not guarantee a sense of family. According to Mateo, birth parents are family "because of having the same genes, but not in sentimental terms". Some young people considered their love to those they consider family. For example, Filipe (aged 13) on his birth mother: "She also means love but like less". Filipe and Pilar (aged 10) recognised that having had not much of a relationship played a role in loving the mother less, but they still expressed a strong desire for regular contact.

5.1.2 | Family provides stability, continuance and predictability

Most young people reported that commitment and consistency in care and support are central to their perception of family, describing these experiences in foster families as making them a family. Such actions included family members 'being always there' if they had a problem or needed to talk, phone calls on birthdays or 'check-ins'. Lucas (aged 14), for example, explained why he considers his foster parents and his three foster siblings as family:

I think family takes care of you from the time you are little until you are older or you become independent, even after that. Family is there in difficult times… And if you have a problem, they give you advice according to what they think is best for you.

Lucas drew two concentric circles of his family map.
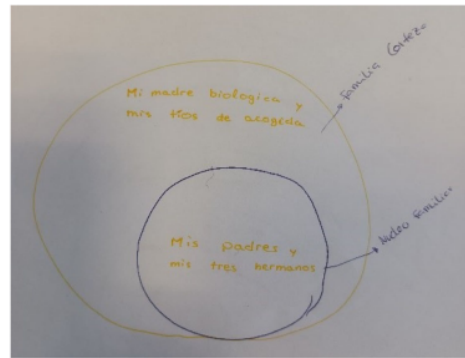
The small circle represents his 'nuclear family', which is composed of foster parents and three foster siblings. Lucas explained that these people raised him from a young age. If he had a problem, they were the first ones he would tell, and they would help him. Then I asked him why his foster uncles and birth mother were in the second circle, to which he replied:

Because I think they can help me as much as my birth mother but I do not have much contact with them so I think if I put my birth mother, I should also put my aunts and uncles. They're not always there but they care about me.

Other participants shared Lucas' view that care provided by foster family is unconditional and lasting. Both Rodrigo (aged 15) and Filipe talked about their previous foster parents with whom they stayed for two and a half years as their 'real family', explaining that

… they have taken care of me a lot, very loving people, they will always be there for me for whatever I need, said Rodrigo.

Emilia not only described foster family as providing her with a sense of continuance, but also outlined what seems to be at core of this relational endurance:

… they [social workers] introduced me to [name of foster mother] and [name of foster father] … after a while and you see that they take care of you, that you are their daughter and that you go to school and when you are back they are there for you … I thought I understood what a family means, but until then I did not understand it at all … they are always there, and you always know that they are always going to be there.

I'm here studying, but I know that when I go for a weekend, they are going to be at home. So, for me that's stability.

For her, relational continuance indicated stability and predictability – all of which she associated with family. The young people made clear, however, that that this does not mean foster parents satisfying their every whim; rather they set boundaries to teach and guide them. María (aged 13) said:

With my [biological] mother I did not have any rules. I could do what I wanted and here I have to behave … I have to study for my future and be a good person … have an education …

For María and seven other young people, foster family rules are important for ensuring their social and emotional well-being as well as providing them with opportunities for (formal) education or personal development: "I became more interested in studying and be able to be somebody when I grow up and have a family [of his own]", said Rodrigo.

5.1.3 | Family as a place of reciprocal exchange

Some young people noted that they feel a strong sense of obligation to take care of people they know and who show emotional care and concern towards them, irrespective of shared residence and kin ties. Emma (aged 14) talked about her role in foster family as "someone who is also there to help others as they do for me". When asked about how their 'family' made them feel, Pilar and María explained:

It makes me feel brave, it has made me know that I never have to leave anyone behind. I have to say positive things to people and encourage them … and that I have to help those who need it, said Pilar (aged 10).

… be kind and respect others, said María (aged 13).

Individual obligations to others are not simply an abstract principle of firmly established norms; they are created through a set of family practices that are reciprocally "oriented to another family member" (Morgan, 2011b, p. 5) over time:

… they have done so much for me over the last five years and one day I'll make it up to them (Eduardo, aged 11).

Being with them until I'm 18 years and to take care of them (Filipe).

Maintaining reciprocal relationships within the foster family is expected by Eduardo and Filipe, and failure to meet these expectations is likely to weaken their family relationships. For example, Rodrigo talked about wanting to work and help his biological grandmother:

… with a little bit with money [because] … above all [she] is the one who has taken care of me the most when I was there, supported me and fed me. I owe it to her basically.

Rodrigo's economic reciprocity is not only associated with his grandmother's finances but also relates to how young people position themselves within the foster and birth families. This sense of duty to birth family members can result in young people not always having close or even healthy relationships:

I'm there because I have to be there … and when the time comes, then I leave. I mean, I do not think that I enjoy the time I spend with her, said Isabel.

Isabel's mother is not in good health, and she is committed to her mother, believing her mother' health will deteriorate if communication ceases. However, she finished:

I want to have contact without feeling obliged. I want to have contact without feeling like I have to.

She then reflected that these mixed feelings could be a result of having been, at times, uncomfortable being around her mom. Likewise, Carmen could not explain why she "will always be there for her" mother even though she does not consider her to be family, saying:

I cannot explain to you or tell you why because I do not know. It's a feeling that's there. I've never been able to identify it.

Regardless of the state of the relationship, Isabel, Carmen and others voiced obligations to their birth family, specially to their birth mothers, highlighting the strong sense of one-way relationships.

5.2 | Family is valued through (in)visible biological ties

For six young people, blood and genetic familial ties provided a desire to have a relationship: "… I was born from them, so I need to maintain a relationship with them in some way" (Olivia). They talked of being forever connected to parents not only biologically but also through extended family networks. Olivia and four others talked about appreciating being related to their parent(s) because other family members linked them through information. For example, Emilia recounted:

… there are times when you need to feel understood in the sense of, for example, your character, right? It's

inevitable that you get it from your genes. I talk to my aunt like [and she says] "your mother had that temperament too" and you feel recognised. These are things that I value of biology. Things about personality, behaviour, even diseases that run in families. Those things that, for example, when I talk to my aunt, she can tell me about it. Also, I ask about things about my mother out of curiosity. Not about my father because she knew him very little. It's good to know things, curiosities that you have about your biological parents ... my biological family, we are very intense.

We've all been through something; my aunt also had a bad time with her mother ... we feel we can identify very well with each other and we talk about it, and that's nice ... and there's nothing better than them; your biological family who have lived through it ... It reassures me to say well, this character [laughs] ... it's normal to us because biologically it's very noticeable ... my parents [referring to foster parents] are super calm, and I ask myself who do I look like, and I go to my aunt and we talk about it and Ah! I look like you or my mother.

Emilia explained that by reaching out to her aunt, she learned about her mother and about important psychological, behavioural and medical information to help chart her own identity formation. Likewise, Isabel explained why keeping contact with her birth family is important:

> So that I do not forget how I'm right now. I do not want to lose that link with my past and with my biological family.

For Isabel, the link to biological family is a reminder of her life trajectory. Others expressed concern towards their siblings. Beltrán admitted: "... having six siblings sometimes without wanting to, I like to know a little bit about where they are and what they do because not knowing kills me". He explained that the only brother he has a close relationship tells him about his other siblings. When participants were asked whether they were told things that made them feel different from their foster family, Olivia said when her foster mother passed away, her foster sister told her that although she is not part of their biological family, she is part of their family. Olivia favoured blood relatedness and at the same time expressed sadness for being viewed as less valid than biological family members.

5.3 | Family as everyday practices

The young people's accounts of foster family life included family activities such as spending time in the *pueblo* (village), family holidays and outings, taking part in (religious) celebrations and watching television

together. However, three mentioned a lack of shared interest in family practices, yet they felt obliged to take part, as they thought of it as strengthening a sense of family belonging. As Olivia revealed about her mass attendance: "It's something that I've never been interested in, but I go because apart from having to, I also try to be more involved in the family". Young people talk about being included in and contributing to the household chores: "If my sisters had to do something they [foster parents] would tell me; "you too, Isabel, now you're part of this family"", recounted Isabel. They also talked about feeling close to the extended foster family, and of fighting with their foster parents, siblings, and other family members as 'real' family do.

While family narratives conveyed acceptance and an acknowledgement of young people's relationships with members of the foster family, the photos in young people's home reinforced meanings about these relationships. Photos were referred to by several as a meaningful illustration of the level of acceptance and the feeling of togetherness in the foster family. Emilia recounted when she first joined her foster family, she felt different because there were family photo albums of all her cousins but not of her, and during family gatherings, they would tell stories from before and she is being not part of any:

> I felt like I suddenly appeared out of nowhere, there are no photos of me. It's like I've my own story and they have a different story together.

Emilia recounted that her foster grandmother hung three photos of her on the living room walls (one as a child, one on her uncles' wedding and one when she graduated from high school), so that she is represented in the family. Beltrán said that before joining his foster family, he lived in the residential care and could not choose anything, not even the bed sheets. However, due to Covid-19, he missed his graduation trip. His foster parents know of his love for decorating and gifted him the money meant for the trip so he could redecorate his room. They also paid for his drivers' licence when he turned 18 years old. For these young people, these everyday family practices, communications, display and 'just being together' during family meals shaped how they make sense of, and attach significance to, family and familial relationships.

6 | DISCUSSION

This article has drawn upon concepts of family sociology (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 1996, 2011a) and analysed how family is conceptualised by Spanish young people in long-term non-kinship foster care. The empirical material reveals that most young people attached family meanings to behavioural practices and expressions of affection. They included multiple relations as constituting their family, as found in the study of Wissö et al. (2019). Young people felt valued and appreciated and associated these to their physical, social, intellectual, identity and emotional needs being met (Schofield, 2002) by different family members (including family pets). Young people felt they can love and be loved within these relationships, highlighting the emotional aspects as

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natural and essential when doing family (Ursin et al., 2017). In line with other research (e.g., Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018; Van Holen et al., 2020; Wissö et al., 2019), some young people considered biological ties in defining family. However, young people in this study acknowledged that birth family members could lose the status of family if they are not supportive and if contact becomes infrequent. Their understanding of family seems to be grounded in cultural symbolism discourse of blood ties (Allan, 2008) that became 'familial' to them rather than perceiving family in terms of consanguinity as suggested by Mahat-Shamir et al. (2018). In line with Jackson (2009 in McIntosh et al., 2011), I argue that although the traditional family living arrangement is declining, the concept of family as an ideology is not for young people in long-term foster care in Spain.

In general, most young people in long-term foster care were remarkably satisfied with the foster family and considered them as 'real' family. This corresponds with research findings in other countries (e.g., Ellingsen et al., 2011, 2012; Schofield, 2002; Van Holen et al., 2020). This is encouraging because of the caring, supportive and continuity of relationships with the foster family that offered security and predictability (Schofield, 2002; Van Holen et al., 2020), and feeling safe, having a stable environment including school, friends, leisure activities and other supportive adults (Wissö et al., 2019). In line with other research (e.g., Biehal, 2014; Van Holen et al., 2020), the general feeling of connectedness with the foster family was linked to young people feeling "valued for all aspects of the self" (Schofield, 2002, p. 262). As family scholars point out, family is formed through different social settings through love, care, support and quality of relationships (Chambers, 2012; McCarthy, 2012; Smart, 2007).

For young people, family functions in long-term care were not only based on care and support (e.g., Van Holen et al., 2020) but were also coupled with a sense of loyalty and responsibility, grounded in the strength of emotional, social and material reciprocity of their experience in their foster family as well as in birth family relationships. These young people engage in care and support with members of their families, and they present family as a place of reciprocity and care-giving practices. In these reciprocal expectations, some young people's relationship with the birth mother was compromised, and in repeated cases, the biological mother was excluded in their family representation. The birth mother experience was mostly one of inadequate care, neglect or abuse as also found in Schofield (2002). This supports Finch and Mason's (1993) argument that caregiving is a process of negotiation in which the specific needs of all parties involved are considered in a framework of affection and reciprocity.

A key finding of the current study is the interplay between biological preference and foster family affective practices that young people in long-term foster care experience in both families, thus providing a nuanced understanding of meaning of family in long-term foster care through a family sociology lens. Some young people valued foster families' affective practices, even in their attempts to privilege biological relatedness, as a means for their identity construction. Others valued biological ties but felt sad for being viewed as less valid than biological related family members. This sheds light on the fluidity of the concept of family (Finch, 2007) and on the struggle to make sense

of it in long-term foster care. In addition, young people's account of foster family life supports what family scholars have noted concerning 'doing family things' (Morgan, 1996). In accordance with previous research (e.g., Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018; Van Holen et al., 2020), shared holidays are typical family events that build and maintain family identity (Jones & Hackett, 2011), attending celebrations is of high importance (Chambers, 2012; Ursin et al., 2017) and the giving of gifts "carefully selected for a particular individual to convent the meaning of the relationship" demonstrate (good) family relations (Finch, 2007, p. 77) for young people in long-term care. As found in other studies (Biehal, 2014; Christiansen et al., 2013), young people talked about being treated as any other member in the foster family and feeling close to them.

7 | STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Although the perception of the concept 'family' has been examined frequently in long-term foster care, this is, to the best of my knowledge, the first study in the context of Spain. A strength of this study is its exploration of young people's views by applying visual and task-based methods to a more 'direct' representations of their family life in variety of ways, not only verbal. In particular, looking at the photos of family members and recalling family moments was a popular method among many young people. The fact that participant selection was influenced by social workers might have caused bias, for example, by selecting young people who are content with foster care placement. Hence, the findings cannot be generalised. However, findings point to general themes and questions on how contemporary family concepts can shed light on young people's perspectives in long-term foster care in Spain.

8 | IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

The young people's experiences of family in long-term foster care, including their feeling of being in close and warm family relationships, should be viewed as potential indicator of the strengths of non-kinship foster care in providing children sense of stability, family belonging and identity through adulthood as well as a sense of membership of and relationships with birth family. While it is important to acknowledge the importance of young people's relationships with their birth family, helping young people positioning themselves in birth family relationships and supporting their sense of family belonging to their long-term non-kinship foster families should be of value for social work practice and policy in Spain.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by Valladolid University Ethics Committee and Castilla y León child protection authorities.

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

All participants provided written and verbal informed consent before participation. The consent was audio-recorded.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

The materials in this study do not require permission to reproduce.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared for ethical reasons.

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ENDNOTE

[1] For this article, the term 'young people' will be used to refer to the participants.

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Appendix 3 – Article III

"You've got to love her"– Perceptions of birth mothers among children in long-term foster care

ABSTRACT

Research shows differences in gendered caring expectations between mothers and fathers across countries and how they are affected by the development of different family forms and cultural practices. In this study, we explore the meaning that 14 children and youths in long-term non-kinship foster care in Spain ascribe to their birth mothers. We found three main perspectives among the participants. Within these perspectives, age, gender and socio-cultural context seem to be intertwined in how children and youths in foster care perceive their birth mother's role in their lives. The analysis gives insight into the complexity of child–mother relationships and how young people navigate these. In light of these findings, we discuss some practical implications for social workers in child protection services.

1 INTRODUCTION

Several studies have explored foster children's relationships with their birth parents, and the findings suggest that birth parents remain important and that foster children may want contact despite giving negative accounts of their experiences with their birth parents (Andersson, 2018; Atwool, 2013; Iyer et al., 2020; Maaskant et al., 2016). Most foster children feel connected to their parents, even if there is limited or no contact, and feelings of loyalty, concern and an eagerness to forgive are not unusual among foster children (Maaskant et al., 2016; Van Holen et al., 2020). In Spain as well as internationally, foster care has become the first option of choice for children in need of out-of-home care up to the age of 18 and beyond when, for various reasons, they are unable to live with their birth family (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). Foster care has traditionally been seen as an attempt to provide a family experience for children, which, through recruitment and selection, focused on traditional gender roles (Hicks, 2011). However, in an international perspective, LGBT families have become included in fostering practices in recent years (Riggs, 2020).

Previous research has highlighted differences in gendered caring expectations between mothers and fathers across countries, and how they are affected by the development of different family forms and in different cultural practices (Featherstone, 2004; Nygren et al., 2019; Wash & Mason, 2018). The role of birth mothers in society can be reflected in the fact that, in many countries, women continue to be the main caregiver in most families despite policy efforts to increase gender equality in caring expectations – i.e., the development of parental, paternity and maternity leave policies (Nygren et al., 2021). Nygren et al. (2019; 2021) found that mothers are often positioned as the main carers of the children by social workers in child welfare services, whereas the fathers are excluded. This is supported by other previous studies (Baum, 2017; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015; Nygren et al., 2019; Skramstad & Skivenes, 2017; Storhaug, 2013). Furthermore, several studies have shown that children in care have more frequent contact with their mothers than with their fathers (Cashmore & Taylor, 2017; Fossum et al., 2018; Skoglund et al., 2019).

Birth mothers often continue to play an important role in their children's lives after they have moved into foster care (Baker et al., 2016). Much research has shown that social workers in child protection services tend to focus on the mother in their work (Baum, 2017; Nygren et al., 2019; Osborn, 2014; Scourfield et al., 2012), and even

social work textbooks portray the mother as the default client (Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2015). The mother is considered to be the main carer, and is held more responsible for the child's situation than the father, and, as such, child abuse becomes, to a larger extent, a women's issue (Nygren et al., 2021; Scourfield, 2014). The work of social workers and the provision of their services in child protection are, however, highly dependent on the welfare system and policy contexts in which they operate (Hämäläinen et al., 2012; Nygren et al., 2018). In out-of-home care, parental contact between children and their birth parents ranges from being professionally supported and regulated by social services (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011) to the use of smartphones, tablet computers and social media (Skoog et al., 2015; Aamodt & Mossige, 2018; Wissö et al., 2019). Whilst contact between children and their birth mothers appears easy to define, the relationship between them can be complex and can be explained from different perspectives.

In the contemporary sociology of family life, family relationships have come to be understood as constituted through 'family practices' that are constructed, relational, active, negotiated and understood over time (Morgan, 1996, 2011), rather than reflecting traditional hegemonic biological or legal connections. The meaning that individuals attach to family relationships has been described as taking shape within social-cultural contexts (Smart, 2004), as seen in areas such as emotions, family stories and family displays (Finch, 2007). This sociological perspective allows us to explore the ways in which family members perceive their relationships with others.

A longitudinal study in Norway suggested that foster children's accounts of their birth parents depend on a variety of factors, including their own and their parents' life situations, expressed emotions and their relationships with others, and that such accounts might change over time (Skoglund et al., 2019). The study indicated that children have different resources available for managing their relationship with their birth parents. Furthermore, some appeared to be unable to escape relationships with their birth mother, despite such relationships being challenging or difficult. In-depth studies focusing on children's perspectives of their birth mothers are rare, and this article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the meaning that children and youths ascribe to their birth mothers. In this article, we explore how children and youths in long-term non-kinship foster care in Spain perceive their birth mothers.

2 STUDY CONTEXT – THE SPANISH SOCIAL POLICY AND CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

Esping-Andersen's (1990) influential welfare state regime typology is often used to describe how state policies support individuals' reliance on labour markets. His model, however, has been subjected to criticism because it underrates gender inequalities and neglects the role of the family in care (Geist, 2005). Hantrais (2004) provides an alternative typology that reflects how some welfare states place the burden of care on families (familialisation), whereas other welfare states aim to relieve this burden (de-familialisation). Within this framework, Spain is described as 'familialised', whereby the state plays a limited role in redistributing resources, and family members, particularly the women, are expected to care for the well-being of the family themselves (Hantrais, 2004; Moreno-Mínguez et al., 2017). A crucial feature of the Spanish welfare state is its decentralised character, both at the level of formation and at the level of implementation (Moreno & Arriba, 1999).

Since the 1978 Spanish Constitution, social provision is the responsibility of the 17 autonomous regions (*Comunidades Autónomas*), each of which has its own government, parliament and an array of different powers (Kosher et al., 2018). As a regional policy, social workers are to provide support and services when families are unable to care for their members (Article 148 no. 1, xx), and each region has a public department that is responsible for issuing protection orders for children at risk (Kosher et al., 2018). The autonomous regions are directed to ensure the protection of the family and children, in accordance with the Spanish Constitution (Article 39 no. 1-4). The National Law 26/2015 of July 2015 regulates autonomous regions child protection laws to ensure that children and youths have an adequate legal framework that is consistent with the international laws, in particular the UNCEC (Massons-Ribas et al., 2021). The work of social workers in child protection services must adhere to the national law.

In Spain, foster care placements occur through an administrative order. In cases where the birth parents object, the placement occurs through a judicial order. Only the more severe cases of abuse or neglect lead to a parent-child separation (Law 26/2015). The birth parents of children in foster care have a diverse range of adverse experiences, including drug addiction, alcoholism, imprisonment, and, in the case of birth mothers, mental health problems and prostitution (López-López et al., 2010). Foster care placement can be: (1) as an emergency, where the child can stay with the foster family

for up to 6 months, (2) temporary – up to 2 years, or (3) long-term – up to legal age of majority, with the goal of creating permanence, and this can be prolonged after the age of 18. The legislation, in accordance with the Spanish Civil Code, pays considerable attention to the biological bond between the child and his or her birth family. Children are expected or encouraged to have regular contact with their birth family during placements (Law 26/2015 Article 20 no. 2) unless safety reasons advise against it. Furthermore, the legislation prescribes temporary foster care placement with the aim of reuniting the child with his or her birth family.

Traditionally, children at risk have been placed in residential care despite an emphasis on family placements (del Valle et al., 2009). In 2019, the child population was 8,282,246, representing approximately 18 per cent of the Spanish population (National Institute of Statistics, 2019). Of these, around 42,529 were subject to child protection orders, representing 0.5 per cent of the total population of children in Spain. Of these children, 55 per cent (23,209) were in residential care, 29 per cent (12,600) in kinship care, and 16 per cent (6,720) in non-kinship care (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2020).

3 METHODS

This study was funded by the European Social Fund and the grand administrated by Castilla y León regional Ministry of Education, and aims to examine how long-term non-kinship foster children and youths experience and perceive their family relationship with their mothers. This study draws on a multi-method qualitative design, including visual and task-based techniques using photos, drawings, social network maps, recall and semi-structured interviews (Punch, 2002). Such qualitative research methods are preeminent in allowing children and youths to express their views in various ways, not only verbally (Ennew et al., 2009). Initially, this study set out to explore how family is perceived in long-term non-kinship foster care. However, many participants had very limited or no contact with their fathers, and their reflections concerning their mothers were more prominent in the data. We thus chose to explore these perceptions in a more detailed manner by analysing patterns in the data addressing their relationship with their birth mothers. This paper builds on the analysis of the responses to the semi-structured interviews.

3.1 Research context and participants

This study was conducted in the autonomous region of Castilla y León in northern Spain. In December 2019, there were 984 children subject to Castilla y León child protection services, of which 475 were in kinship care, and 509 were in non-kinship care (Servicios Sociales Castilla y León, 2020). Castilla y León child welfare services were asked permission to gain access to the participants. The regional Red Cross social workers who oversee child protection cases in collaboration with social workers in each province assisted with the recruitment of children and youths who had been in non-kinship foster care for over 2 years. Fourteen children and youths from four provinces in the autonomous region of Castilla y León decided to participate, comprising 7 boys and 7 girls aged 10–22 years. The mean age of the children was 15.42 years (SD = 3.76).

In Spain, most children in foster care placements are ethnically Spanish (del Valle et al., 2009), and of the 14 participants, 12 had an ethnic majority background. Only six participants were still in contact with their birth mothers at the time of the interviews. Among the eight who had no contact with their birth mothers, the lack of contact was the 'choice' of four children, as they felt the contact to be too much of a burden. For two of the eight children, the absence of contact was felt to be their mother's choice. For one participant, contact had been stopped without the participant knowing why, and one participant had never seen their mother since entering foster care. Eight participants had been in foster care for over five years, and six for over three years. Five participants had experienced neglect, and three had experienced physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse. Of those eight, four participants' birth mothers had experienced drug addiction, alcoholism and/or mental health adversities. All participants had experienced neglect and/or abuse by their mothers prior to entering foster care. In the results section, all participants' names are pseudonyms to protect anonymity and confidentiality, and the participants' ages are presented in parenthesis. The study was reviewed by the University of Valladolid Ethics Committee.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Interviews were conducted between March and August 2021. The main question in the interview guide, 'What does your biological mother mean to you?', sought to elicit nuances in the significance that birth mothers have in the foster children's lives, and the reasons for this. Other questions asked about the participants' past and present relationship experiences in relation to their mothers. The interviews took place at a location of the participant's choice, including the Red Cross Head office (n = 6), a

university campus (n = 4), their foster care home (n = 2), or online via Zoom (n = 2), and each interview lasted 45–90 minutes, with an average of 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated from Spanish into English by the first author.

The presentation of the findings incorporates two analytical approaches. The first was a thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), aided by the ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software. This method was chosen because its structure follows procedural phases that are flexible and have the potential to meet the trustworthiness criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). We used an inductive approach, constantly moving back and forward between phases. We sought to understand the derived themes across the research data through regular discussions about the dataset as a whole, until a consensus was reached. After familiarisation with the data, a number of subthemes describing the participants' experiences and views of their biological mothers were coded and subsequently developed into themes. Narrative analysis was then conducted to examine how the narrative constructions of these themes might differ depending on the participant's individual experiences and background. According to Cortazzi (2014), the application of narrative analysis is useful when considering how themes are used in a specific context. In the final analytical phase, the following three main themes relevant to the focus of this paper became apparent: (1) *The life-giver*, (2) *A lifelong commitment*, and (3) *"A love I cannot understand"*.

4 RESULTS

4.1 The life-giver

A common feature among the majority of the participants' narratives was to see the birth mother as the life-giver, whether they had contact or not. There were also differences in participants' use of expressions to assimilate the term 'life-giver'. Most participants used expressions such as "she gave me life" and "she gave birth to me". Most of the participants, particularly the boys, emphasised the life-giver role although they did not have a close family tie with their mother nor included her in their nuclear family.

> I don't really want to see her, but for me she is very important because she gave life to me. (Filipe, 13)

> After all, she is the one who gave birth to me and who cared for me, even if it was only for a short time, but she cared for me […] I don't want to be with them (my biological family) or know anything about them… (Lucas, 14)

> She is a person that I am not very close to, I don't know much about her, but she is important because she is the one who gave me life. (Rodrigo, 15)

Although Filipe and Rodrigo said that not having contact was their mother's 'choice', they too perceived their mother as a life-giver. Pilar (10) also acknowledged her mother as her life-giver. However, unlike the participants above, she made a clear connection between her mother as life-giver and her mother's caring love for her by saying:

> She is the one who always supports me, the one who has given me life, the one who takes care of me, the one who loves me a lot, and no matter what happens, she won't let anyone hurt me and she will never leave me on my own.

Most participants who expressed gratitude for the life-giver found it difficult to elaborate on the matter. Despite attempts to elicit more detailed comments, it seems that the brevity of the responses signifies that these participants understood the term life-giver as so palpably obvious that a comprehensive explanation seemed unnecessary to them. Even so, some, whether they had contact or not, also expressed a justification for their mother's drug addiction or mental health problem situation when talking about her as the life-giver, such as Emma (14), who had no contact and said that both good and bad things come to mind when thinking of her mother:

> Good things because she has given me life, and bad things because she hasn't treated me very well, but it's not her fault.

Some participants did not explicitly express the life-giver gratitude perspective, and this mostly applied to the older participants. They believed that their view of their birth mother was triggered by negative experiences with her in the past. Emilia (21), who stopped contact with her mother, said that her mother meant nothing to her apart from her name: "I love my name [which denotes freedom], [it] was the best thing she left me". Referring to the name 'Freedom', she explained:

> I like to have the freedom to choose who I want to see, and when I want to see [them]… because before I didn't have the freedom to choose. Now, I have the freedom to decide [on my own].

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Carmen (22), who has contact with her mother, clearly maintained: "To me, it's just another word; I mean, I have never had a real mother – or father". Mateo (16) has not seen his mother since entering foster care. He said that nothing but sharing "the same genes" connected him to his mother. Whilst acknowledging the study's small sample, boys and younger participants seemed to a greater extent to underscore their appreciation of their mother as a life-giver, whereas older and mostly female participants expressed a more nuanced portrayal of their relationship with their mother (positive, negative or both) without limiting her to solely being a life-giver. Nevertheless, the idea of being given life provided participants with a sense of continued emotional connectedness with their birth mothers.

4.2 A lifelong commitment

Several participants described how their relationship with their birth mother often required them to take responsibility for her. Female participants were more likely to express the role they played in meeting their mothers' wellbeing needs, and they also addressed the expectations made of them when their mothers did not act according to the societal norms of being good mothers. Notions of care, help and support were central to their narratives. Carmen (22) talked about these responsibilities, which began at an early age when her grandmother died, and then continued through her adolescence:

> She had a really hard time, and I was always like her mother, supporting her and comforting her, but she didn't transmit that to me… Whenever she had problems with men who mistreated and abused her, the one who stood up for her at the age of 12… [was] me.

Most of the female participants who had made their own decision to stop contact with the mother believed that they always acted 'like mothers' to their own mothers from an early age. María (13) explained that she was unwilling to have a relationship with her mother because she did things she should not have done:

> I realised a long time ago that it isn't worth it because, at the end of the day, I want to be with people who really love me and want to be with me, but not with my mother […] I was like a mother to her, because I was always taking care of her.

The participants' sensemaking of their caring roles and responsibilities can be understood in terms of expectations that they placed on themselves from an early age, which continued as they got older, such as Isabel (21), who said:

> I know if I stop seeing my mother, if I stop talking to her, my mother will relapse. So, in a sense, I feel responsible for her.

The implication of past negative experiences did not undermine how participants felt about undertaking these obligations and responsibilities. As Olivia (15), who has contact with her mother, said: "She is still my biological mother, and even if she hurts me, for me, she will continue to be my mother". Several participants described how these responsibilities were not usually reciprocal. Emilia (21) said:

> I was six years old and took more care of her than she took care of me. I wanted her, my mother, to take care of me.

Emilia and others who had no contact with the mothers also felt that this responsibility was constituted in terms of expectations coming from other people, such as social workers, foster parents and others:

> I didn't want to see her, and I cried and clung to the walls, the doors – I mean, when a child does that, it's for a reason. They [social workers] would say: "Relax, it's your mum." I know she's my mum, but I don't want to see her. So, they would force me and drag me out the door with her, and my mum would take me away... they would say: "She's your mother and you have to love her."

Within the narrative of commitment, certain normative expectations were imposed upon the participants, emphasising that a child should not lose contact with their birth mother. Adults (both social workers and foster carers) held certain beliefs that structured the responses to what should be expected from the participants. Isabel (21) recalled being told by her foster parents, social workers and other professionals to always keep in contact with her birth mother:

> They've told me that you can't lose contact with her [...] I want to have contact [with her] without feeling obliged. I want to have that contact without feeling like I have an obligation to her.

In a way, she shared a similar belief as the social workers and foster carers; however, she believed her mother's health would deteriorate if contact ceased. Not enjoying contact moments with her mother, Isabel said:

> I don't know if it's more like a daughter's obligation… I have to be careful because, at the end of the day, I know she's my mother.

4.3 "A love I cannot understand"

Participants also conveyed having a kind of love for their mothers, independently of having contact with her. However, bad past and present experiences made this love difficult to understand and articulate. Carmen (22) said that only people who have been in the same situation could understand what kind of love this is:

> I've talked to many people who are in foster care, and it's a love that we have for our mothers that we don't know why we have. If they ask us for help, we'll go even if we get two kicks in the ass, because that's the way it is. But we're going to be there… It's a feeling that is there. I've been asked many times and I don't know how to explain it. Only a person who has lived it with their mothers or with their family understands it. We don't know how to explain it to others, but we have it.

Isabel (21) also found it difficult to explain, and revealed her ambivalent feelings by saying:

> I feel I would like to have a relationship with her beyond the responsibility that I have towards her. I would like to have more contact, even though I don't feel that. I don't know how to explain it, I mean, I do like to have contact, but I don't feel that I want it.

Filipe (13) also described feelings of ambivalence towards his mother that were linked to being repeatedly disappointed:

> I really don't want to see her, but still, she also means love, but less [compared to what I feel towards my foster parents]. I don't want to see her, because she looks like she's going to disappear again.

Filipe thus showed the ambivalence that is present in his life, and his fear that contact will only result in him getting hurt. Several participants expressed a belief that they do love their mothers unconditionally, yet they do not understand this love because they, at

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the same time, feel neglected and uncared for. Emma (14), Eduardo (11) and others acknowledged that moving into foster care was a good thing, saying:

> I feel frustrated because I have my mother and I love her, but at the same time I'm happy because if this [moving into foster care] didn't happen, I wouldn't be in this family [the foster family]. At the end, it's been like a gift. (Emma)

> Before, I had nothing, and now, I have almost everything. I now believe that I am surrounded by people… that I matter a lot to them. (Eduardo)

Although missing her mother, Pilar (10) also said: "I feel better this way than being with her". The other side of the coin of not understanding the love applies to participants who felt forced to love their mothers without understanding why or how. Emilia (21) felt forced by her social workers: 'They told me many times: "You have to love her, she's your mum". She elaborated on how difficult it was to connect with her mother and how she tried to love her but never felt able to. During the interview, she questioned rhetorically: "If my mum is not behaving well, why should I love her?". For many of the participants, the feeling of being forced to love was also pushed onto them by relatives, such as for Beltrán (18), who felt forced by his own biological family:

> My biological family opposed the fact that I don't want anything to with my mother or know anything about her because my mother wasn't good [to me].

Overall, the findings presented above reveal mixed feelings embedded in how the foster children perceived their birth mother's role in their lives. Below, we discuss the implications of these findings in terms of gender, age, socio-cultural and political context, as well as practical implications for social work in child protection services.

5 DISCUSSION

This article explores how birth mothers are perceived by children and youths in long-term non-kinship foster care in Spain. Previous studies have shown that birth mothers often continue to play an important role in children's lives after they have entered foster care (Baker et al., 2016; Skoglund et al., 2019). This was, to some extent, also the case in our study; however, the participants revealed complex and ambivalent thoughts when reflecting upon their relationships with their birth mothers. Despite addressing feelings with positive connotations, many participants had a difficult relationship with their

mothers due to childhood experiences of abuse and neglect, disappointment, and the need to provide care for their birth mother even after moving into foster care. In the following, we will discuss these findings and the implications they may have for child protection work.

Several participants talked about their birth mother as a life-giver. Notably, this view predominantly applied to younger children with very limited or no contact with their birth mother, or when the absence of contact was the mother's choice. As such, this view appears to represent a form of symbolic significance for the children and is a way of expressing gratitude to their birth mother. Skoglund et al. (2019) found a tendency among young people in foster care to romanticise their birth mothers. This could be a possible rationale for the life-giver perspective; however, most of them did not feel a sense of connectedness or experience family relationships beyond the life-giver perspective.

Moreover, older participants expressed a more critical and complex understanding of their birth mother's role in their lives. Research also suggests that, when children are mature enough to have their own life, they seem to be more critical towards their birth parents, deliberating over whether to maintain or avoid contact with them (Andersson, 2018). These reflections, which were particularly noticeable among female participants with birth mother contact, were grounded in feelings of responsibility and the expectations imposed upon them by themselves and by others. Our findings therefore suggest gendered experiences of young people with regard to how they perceive their relationship with and their view of their mothers. These young girls generally experienced more expectations and responsibilities with regard to their birth mothers, and tended to internalise the role of having responsibility for caregiving. More specifically, they highlighted moral obligations and care responsibilities in emotionally supporting their mother. These gender-specific experiences suggest that we must consider the role these young people have within the wider Spanish family and cultural constructions of what it means to be a woman. Moreno-Mínguez et al. (2017) argue that traditional gender stereotypes of womanhood are still present in Spain, in which being 'a good mother' is associated with caring for children and the family. The young girls seemed to embrace these teachings and expectations by considering themselves to be responsible for and having moral obligations towards their mother, more so than the male participants. Such expectations can also be seen in relation to Spain being a familialistic country. In familialised welfare regimes, the fulfilment of

caring responsibilities for family members is first and foremost considered to be a family (and female) matter (Hantrais, 2004; Leithner, 2003; Nygren et al., 2018). If the mother has a limited family network and therefore limited support alternatives, caring expectations may be left to the older and particularly female child. As such, caring expectations may be related to socio-cultural factors, gender and age, and these may be intertwined.

Policies, legislation and regulations emphasise the importance of contact between children in out-of-home placement and their birth families, which is also a priority goal of the UNCRC (UNCRC, 1989 Article 9). This emphasis may have an impact on how social workers approach children in out-of-home care. However, policies (and practices) focusing on birth parent contact do not necessarily reflect what children feel (Morrison et al., 2011). Nevertheless, social workers have a crucial role in assisting and supporting young people in foster care to make sense of their experiences (Ellingsen et al., 2014), particularly when children find their relationship and contact with parents problematic. The findings from this study show that complex and ambivalent feelings may arise after out-of-home placements. For example, some felt love for their mother despite having bad experiences of her, whereas others felt forced to love their mother. Previous research has shown that children in foster care may have very good reasons to distance themselves from their parents (Skoglund et al., 2019), and forcing contact and expecting specific feelings from the children can add weight to these complexities. A paramount principle should be that feelings of love cannot be forced – they must be experienced. It is therefore important for social workers to acknowledge that children may have different feelings towards their birth families. Furthermore, birth mothers (and other family members) also need support and follow-up to manage their situation and their expectations towards the child, and social workers should acknowledge the fluid nature of families and family relationships that change over time (Morgan, 2011; Ellingsen, 2011). Most children can reflect metacognitively upon their family relationships (Allen, 2008), and exploring children's perceptions of family and what family members mean to them can offer valuable insights that are important for child protection work. With a growing number of varied families and living arrangements, social workers might also benefit from reflecting critically upon their own and culturally taken-for-granted understandings of family. In doing so, listening to young people's experiences of family life and paying close attention to how

they go about making sense of their family relationships in the context of foster care is crucial.

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although the present study contributes to social work research and foster care literature by shedding light on how children in long-term non-kinship foster care perceive their birth mothers, it nonetheless has several limitations that leave room for potential avenues for future research. First, our study describes the perspectives of a small group of children from the care system and policies that govern protection services in Spain. Foster children in other contexts might describe their views on birth mothers differently, or new perspectives altogether may emerge in narratives put forth by younger children, LGBT children, and children who are placed in foster care with same-sex families. Future research should explore these possibilities.

In addition, although some children had experienced at least one form of neglect and abuse from their mother, it is unclear to what extent this affects how birth mothers are perceived. Future research might explore whether the various types and severity of maltreatment affect how children perceive birth mothers. In addition, the number of participants in this study whose birth parents had experienced diverse adversities makes it difficult to say anything about the impact of these on children's relationships with and feelings towards their parents. Despite these limitations, this is an important issue that has hitherto been the subject of little research with regard to social work and foster care.

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Appendix 4 – Ethical Approval from Ethics Committee University of Valladolid

**COMITÉ DE ÉTICA DE LA INVESTIGACIÓN CON MEDICAMENTOS
ÁREA DE SALUD VALLADOLID**

Valladolid a 12 de marzo de 2020

En la reunión del CEIm ÁREA DE SALUD VALLADOLID ESTE del 12 de marzo de 2020, se procedió a la evaluación de los aspectos éticos del siguiente proyecto de investigación.

PI 20-1621 NO HCUV TESIS	NIÑOS Y JÓVENES EN CASA DE ACOGIDA Y SU PERCEPCIÓN DE LA FAMILIA EN ESPAÑA	I.P.: JUDITE IE UVA

A continuación, les señalo los acuerdos tomados por el CEIm ÁREA DE SALUD VALLADOLID ESTE en relación a dicho Proyecto de Investigación:

Considerando que el Proyecto contempla los Convenios y Normas establecidos en la legislación española en el ámbito de la investigación biomédica, la protección de datos de carácter personal y la bioética, se hace constar el **informe favorable** y la **aceptación** del Comité de Ética de la Investigación con Medicamentos Área de Salud Valladolid Este para que sea llevado a efecto dicho Proyecto de Investigación.

Un cordial saludo.

Dr. F. Javier Álvarez.
CEIm Área de Salud Valladolid Este
Hospital Clínico Universitario de Valladolid
Farmacología, Facultad de Medicina,
Universidad de Valladolid,
c/ Ramón y Cajal 7,47005 Valladolid
alvarez@med.uva.es,
jalvarezgo@saludcastillayleon.es
tel.: 983 423077

Appendix 5 – Invitation Letter for Children

¿Qué es la familia?

Estás invitado/a a participar en un estudio de investigación. El estudio tiene como objetivo explorar el significado de familia para niños/ niñas, jóvenes y adultos que estén o que hayan estado en familias de acogida. Actualmente hay falta de investigación sobre experiencia de las personas que han convivido durante poco o nada de tiempo con sus familias de origen y esta investigación pretende retratar un lado diferente de la vida familiar y la infancia.

¿Por qué debería participar en este estudio?
Como persona con experiencia e información de primera mano sobre este tema, nadie puede contar la historia mejor que tú. No se ha realizado ninguna investigación que dé voz a las personas que están o han estado en familias de acogida sobre su infancia, y ese conocimiento, mejorará nuestra comprensión de la vida vivida fuera de la atención familiar. Esto podría beneficiar a otros que están pasando por la misma experiencia, al saber que alguien se preocupa por sus resultados.

¿Quién está invitado a participar?
Puedes ser parte de este estudio si tienes entre 10 y 24 años y ha estado en familias de acogida más de 2 años. Esperamos que entre 28 y 32 niños/niñas y jóvenes participen en este estudio.

Riesgos potenciales de la participación
Recordar tu infancia y hablar de la vida fuera de su familia de origen puede desencadenar emociones sobre tu infancia y sobre el momento actual en tu vida. Si te sientes angustiado en algún momento de la entrevista, esta se interrumpirá inmediatamente. Si tienes ganas de hablar con alguien se puede organizar o concertar, pero la continuación de la entrevista depende de ti.

¿En qué consiste?
Si estás de acuerdo en participar en este estudio, vamos juntos a explorar formas de realizarlo de acuerdo con la normativa legal española y no poner a nadie en riesgo debido a situación actual en que estamos viviendo bajo el COVID-19. Me reuniré contigo en el lugar que elijas, donde te sientas más cómodo para hablar sin ser molestado. La entrevista será grabada y también tomaré notas para poder captar los puntos principales. Las entrevistas girarán en torno a tus experiencias en relación con la vida familiar y lo que familia significa para ti. Haré preguntas similares a cada participante, pero las experiencias de cada uno serán diferentes, lo que intentaré representarlas en su totalidad. Se trata de experiencias individuales sobre el significado de la familia.

Confidencialidad
Si decides ser entrevistado, tu anonimato será prioritario. Esto significa que tu nombre no se mencionará en ningún momento durante la redacción de este estudio. Utilizaré pseudónimos (nombre falsos) para mantener tu información privada. Las respuestas se transcribirán de audio a texto y se guardarán en un ordenador protegido por contraseña al que sólo tiene acceso el investigador.

¿Qué pasará con los resultados de este estudio?
Los datos recogidos se plasmarán en una tesis con el fin de obtener un doctorado en Investigación Transdisciplinar en Educación. La tesis se conservará en la Universidad de Valladolid y será accesible en línea para los interesados. Un resumen de la investigación podrá será publicado como artículos académicos por el investigador y los supervisores, o la información puede ser presentada en conferencias o seminarios académicos. Una vez más, se utilizarán nombres falsos cuando se utilicen citas directas.
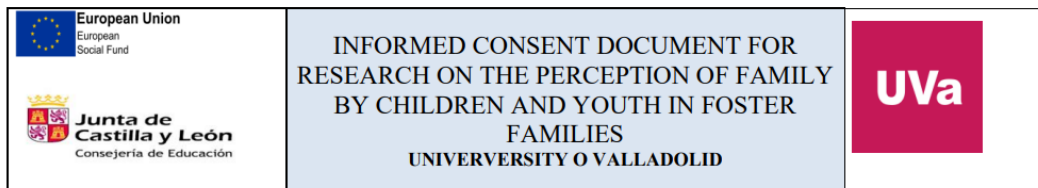
Se decides formar parte de este estudio, te pediremos a ti y a tus padres/tutores legales un consentimiento formal. Puedes contactar a la siguiente persona, se deseas participar y/o deseas más información.

Nombre: Judite   Email: judite.ie@uva.es   Teléfono: 675880010

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Appendix 6 – Participant Informed Consent

European Union European Social Fund **Junta de Castilla y León** Consejería de Educación	**INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT FOR RESEARCH ON THE PERCEPTION OF FAMILY BY CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER FAMILIES** **UNIVERVERSITY O VALLADOLID**	**UVa**

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Judite Ie
EMAIL: judireie@uva.es
PHONE CONTACT   675880010
RESEARCH FOCUS: The perceptions of family among children and youth in foster families in Spain

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I) The study objectives:

This study aims to explore different contexts and forms of dialogue in which the family is portrayed, defined, and negotiated from the perspectives of children and youth who have been in long-term foster families (more than 2 years) in Spain.

1. ***Participant involvement, risks, and potential benefits.***

   The study will conduct interactive semi-structured interviews and social network mapping to gather your opinions, understandings, and experiences related to family life. The interviews will be conducted as informal conversations with an interview guide and will last a maximum of one hour. I will use a voice recorder and also take notes to capture key points. The interview will revolve around your experiences with family life and what family means to you. I will also ask if you can write a journal for a typical week and a weekend day for further discussion.

   Your perspectives can provide valuable information and deepen our understanding of what constitutes family among children and youth in foster families. Exploring these issues is particularly important for Spain, that is, giving voice to children to express their views on decisions that affect their lives beyond normative legislations valued from an adult-centered perspective.

   The results of these studies will likely help raise awareness about the current condition of children and youth and promote evidence-based practice that considers the opinions of children and youth when developing public policies that directly or indirectly affect them.

II) Some considerations about your participation:

A) Participation is entirely voluntary.

B) You can raise any questions you may have about your participation in this study.
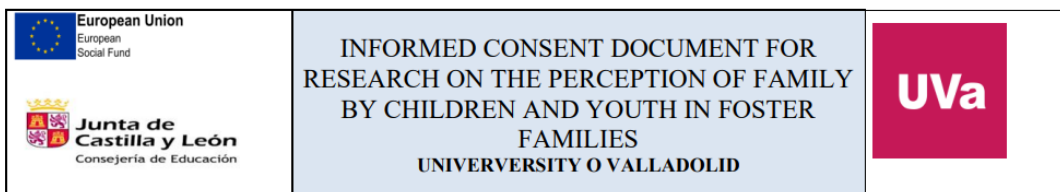
1

C) You will not receive any financial or other compensation for participating in the study. However, the information generated may be included in the final research document and possibly in academic publications, reports, or presentations.

D) Your name will be replaced with a false name in the final written or oral presentation of the project to prevent your identification.

E) The information obtained will be securely stored on the principal investigator's personal computer, protected with a password.

F) At all times, you have the right to access, modify, oppose, rectify, or cancel the information provided, as long as you expressly request it. To do so, you should contact the principal investigator. The data will be kept under the responsibility of the Principal Investigator of the Study, **Judite Ie.**

G) The data will be stored indefinitely, allowing the principal investigator to use them in future research studies related to the aforementioned work line.

H) The lack of consent or the revocation of previously given consent will not harm the protection you receive and your well-being. If you feel distressed at any point during the interview, it will be immediately interrupted. If you wish to speak with someone, arrangements can be made, but the continuation of the interview depends on you.

I) Only if you wish, there is the possibility of being contacted in the future to complete or update the information associated with the study.

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT IN WRITING

I,

_____
(Your full name)

I have read the information provided to me.
I have received the information sheet that was given to me.
I have been able to ask questions about the study.
I have received sufficient information about the study.
I have discussed the study with

2

_____
(Researcher's full name)
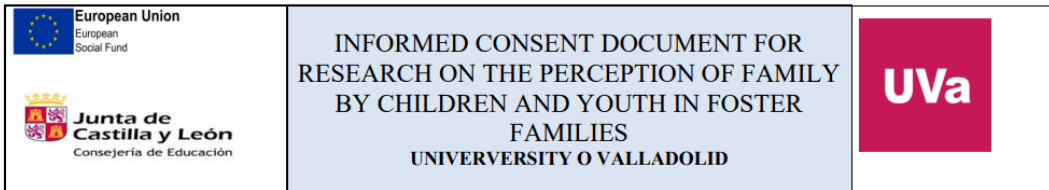
I understand that my participation is voluntary.
I understand that I can withdraw from the study:

      1.- At any time.
      2.- Without having to provide explanations.

By this, I give my informed and voluntary consent to participate in this research.

I agree that the principal investigator may contact me in the future if new data needs to be obtained. YES NO (mark with an X as applicable).
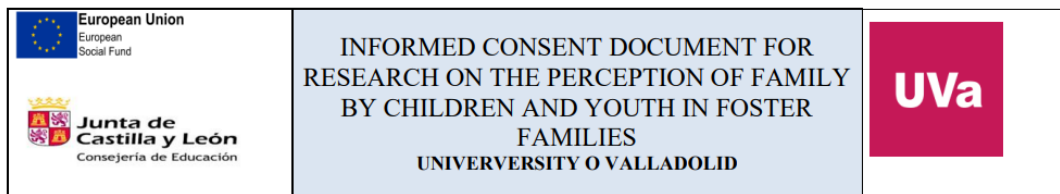
Once signed, I will be provided with a copy of the consent document.

_____

SIGNATURE OF LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE   FULL NAME   DATE

I attest that I have explained the characteristics and objectives of the study, its potential benefits for the participant, that the minor has been informed according to their capabilities, has understood this explanation, and there is no opposition on their part. The minor gives their verbal and written consent through their signature dated on this document.

_____

SIGNATURE OF THE RESEARCHER   FULL NAME   DATE

3

Appendix 7 – Gatekeeper informed consent

	INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT FOR RESEARCH ON THE PERCEPTION OF FAMILY BY CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER FAMILIES **UNIVERVERSITY O VALLADOLID**	UVa
European Union European Social Fund / Junta de Castilla y León Consejería de Educación		

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Judite Ie
EMAIL: judireie@uva.es
PHONE CONTACT   675880010
RESEARCH FOCUS: The perceptions of family among children and youth in foster families in Spain

----

I) The study objectives:

This study aims to explore different contexts and forms of dialogue in which the family is portrayed, defined, and negotiated from the perspectives of children and youth who have been in long-term foster families (more than 2 years) in Spain.
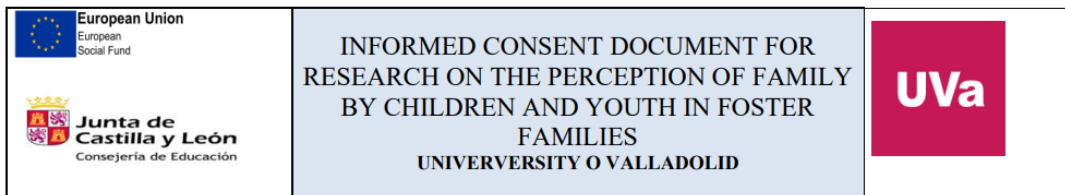
1. *Participant involvement, risks, and potential benefits.*

The study will conduct interactive semi-structured interviews and a social network map to gather your opinions, understandings, and experiences related to family life. If you agree to have your child participate in this study, we will work together to explore ways to conduct it in accordance with Spanish legal regulations and without putting anyone at risk due to the current COVID-19 situation. The interviews will be conducted as informal conversations with an interview guide, lasting a maximum of one hour. They will take place at a location and time convenient for the research participant, and I will use a voice recorder and also take notes to capture the key points. The interview will revolve around their experiences with family life and what family means to them. I will also ask if they can write a diary for a typical week and a weekend day to discuss with them later.

Their perspectives can provide valuable information and deepen our understanding of what constitutes family among boys/girls and youth in foster families. Exploring these issues is especially important for Spain – giving a voice to boys and girls to express their views on decisions that affect their lives beyond normative legislations valued from an adult-centered perspective.

The results of these studies will likely help raise awareness about the current condition of children and youth and promote evidence-based practice that considers the opinions of children and youth when developing public policies that directly or indirectly affect them.

II) Some considerations about your participation:

1

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A) Participation is entirely voluntary.

B) You can raise any questions you may have about your child's participation in this study.

C) You will not receive any financial or other compensation for participating in the study. However, the information generated may be included in the final research document and possibly in academic publications, reports, or presentations.

D) The name of the child (s) and youth will be replaced with a false name in the final written or oral presentation of the project to prevent their identification.

E) The information obtained will be securely stored on the principal investigator's personal computer, protected with a password.

F) At all times, the participant (your child) has the right to access, modify, oppose, rectify, or cancel the information provided, as long as you expressly request it. To do so, you should contact the principal investigator. The data will be kept under the responsibility of the Principal Investigator of the Study, **Judite Ie.**

G) The data will be stored indefinitely, allowing the principal investigator to use them in future research studies related to the aforementioned work line.

H) The lack of consent or the revocation of previously given consent will not harm the protection you receive and your well-being. If your child feels distressed at any point during the interview, it will be immediately interrupted. If your child wants to speak with someone, arrangements can be made, but the continuation of the interview depends on your child.

I) Only if you wish, there is the possibility of being contacted in the future to complete or update the information associated with the study.

INFORMED CONSENT OF THE LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE IN WRITING

I,

_____
(Your full name)

2

I have read the information provided to me.
I have received the information sheet that was given to me.
I have been able to ask questions about the study.
I have received sufficient information about the study.
I have discussed the study with

_____

(Researcher's full name)

I understand that my child's participation is voluntary.
I understand that my child can withdraw from the study:

       1.- At any time.
       2.- Without having to provide explanations.

By this, I give my informed and voluntary consent for my child to participate in this research.

We agree that the principal investigator may contact me in the future if new data needs to be obtained. YES NO (mark with an X as applicable).

Once signed, I will be provided with a copy of the consent document.

_____

SIGNATURE OF LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE   FULL NAME   DATE

I attest that I have explained the characteristics and objectives of the study, its potential benefits for the participant, that the minor has been informed according to their capabilities, has understood this explanation, and there is no opposition on their part. The minor gives their verbal and written consent through their signature dated on this document.

_____

SIGNATURE OF THE RESEARCHER   FULL NAME   DATE

3

Appendix 8 – Interview guide

General questions

1. Age years spent in foster care, country of origin, age when placed in foster care, who lived with before being placed in foster care.

Interview questions

2. Can you draw your family map with people that are most important to you and whom you consider family?

   - What makes this into your family?

   - Why do you reckon him/her as your family?

   - Have you always seen him/her as part of your family?

3. I would like to talk to you a little bit more now about your time in foster care/birth family if that's ok.

   - Can you tell me a bit more about your foster family?

   - Do you still have contact with your birth family? If yes, how is your relationship with your birth family?

   - Can you tell me about the time you spend with your foster/birth family?

   - What is a typical family situation?