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The self-defined experience of secular foster-care services for ultra-religious women in Israel: Using phenomenology to create cultural sensitive services

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ABSTRACT

This paper qualitatively explores how foster parents from a religious minority group – more specifically foster parents from the Jewish ultra-orthodox sector in Israel experience the act of fostering through secular welfare services. Central themes that the women raised include religious spiritual beliefs as enhancing positive meaning of the act of foster care: Ambivalence of other women in the community because of fostering through external state services: The husband and religious leader as a central support due to the spiritual meanings of foster care. The central themes in terms of the secular services were their role as a protective financial base for creating a clear contract concerning the foster care as compared to informal fostering within the community and a culturally sanctioned exposure to psychological concepts and secular childcare practices. Lack of understanding of the secular welfare services of the importance of each group within their community was also stated as a challenge. Overall, the findings reveal the complex ways that these ultra-religious women from a very closed community negotiate and integrate resources from within their community and from the secular foster services outside of their community. Implications for creating culturally adapted secular foster services for Ultra-orthodox Jewish women are discussed, as are the methodological implications of exploring phenomenological experience of minority groups of foster care services as a base for culturally sensitive understanding, is discussed.

1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to access the phenomenological meanings and motivations and experience of fostering children through external state run foster care services, for minority group foster parents. Studies call for the inclusion of minority group foster parents that are from the same culture as the foster children. In order to encourage this, then it is important to understand how foster parents from minority cultures experience fostering a child within their own community, and how they experience the state foster care services outside of their community. The positive experience of the child in foster care can be conceptualized as dependent upon on the positive experience of the foster parents. This in turn is dependent on the surrounding networks of social support both from within the ecological circles of the minority foster community and from the external state foster care services. This study focuses on the experience of foster parents from an ethnic and religious minority -an ultra- orthodox religious minority group in Israel. The first question is how these parents construct the meaning and motivation for becoming foster parents, in the context of their own culture, beliefs and community organization. Based on this understanding, then the second

question is how the parents experience the secular hegemonic foster care services that they interact with. Research questions aim to access;

- The meaning of fostering a child within the specific minority community, and challenges and supports within the community.
- The experience of the interaction with hegemonic foster care services in light of this.
- The ways that the foster parents integrate these two often opposing social contexts in the day to day care of the foster child.

These questions have relevance for understanding the complex experience of foster care parents from minority groups in general, as a base for enhancing their experience and adjusting policy to suit their needs.

2. Literature survey

Foster care is a welfare service that is used when the biological home cannot provide the care needed for the children at home. It aims to provide an encompassing framework to decide what the best

placement for the child is, with the overall aim of returning the child home if possible while also maintaining a good relationship with the biological parents. The aim is to connect between the child, foster home and biological parents according to the specific culturally contextualized needs of the family and child (Cox, Cherry, & Orme, 2011; Orme, Cuddeback, Buehler, Cox, & Le Prohn, 2007). Motivations for families to foster a child include being relatives of the child, being childless, having an empty nest and financial help. Factors shown to make foster care effective are, when the parents are child- focused rather than obligated to foster due to familial or financial reasons, when both parents are united in their wish to foster children, and when they experience the child as thriving in their care (Andersson, 2001; Cuddeback, 2004: Le Prohn, 1994; Orme et al., 2007; Rhodes, Cox, Orme, & Coakley, 2006). While foster care is an international endeavor, it changes according to the culture of the country, for example, America has a large percentage of foster homes, while in China and Japan, extended family is more central than external foster families. In Israel, the country of this study, then foster families were a central recourse for Jewish orphans from the Second World War, and as such are an inherent part of the welfare services from the setting up of the state of Israel. Foster families tend to become long term in Israel and children are not often returned to their homes (Benbinistiy & Segev, 2002; Yafa, 1990).

2.1. Intercultural issues in foster care

Intercultural interactions between welfare services and service users can be constructed on the level of cultural differences, but also on the level of the power differences between the cultures, Interaction with minority groups can be understood in the context of a range of social, political, historical- and economic forces reproduced in everyday intercultural health care encounters (Kirkam, 2003). Possibilities for relationships between dominant and minority cultures include separationist, assimilationist, or multicultural models. Israel has shifted from an assimilationist "melting pot" ideology concerning minorities, to a more pluralistic society (Berry, 1990; Johnson, 2007).

Johnson (2007) states that while child welfare agencies in the U.S. are seeking to respond to the needs for linguistically and culturally responsive services for children of immigrants and their families as this population continues to grow, the problem is limited information about children of immigrants and about the unique problems they face. This continues to challenge the development of effective interventions. Ethnic identity of children in foster care has been identified as an important factor in the success of a foster care project and highlights the importance of similarity between ethnic identity of the foster children and their parents. (Capello, 2006; White et al., 2008) They state that the "global community will continue to pay the price for society's failure to provide appropriate and culturally sensitive services to children in foster care".

2.2. The ultra-orthodox minority in Israel

This study will use the ultra-orthodox Hasidic minority in Israel as it's field site and as an example of a closed community that maintains clear differences from the overall secular population.

In general, the Hassidic community is about 10% of the overall Israeli society and so is a small minority. It's values include studying the Talmud and its interpretations as a way of life, and living according to strict observance of Jewish laws, with the Rabbi's authority as central in all areas of life. The values of conformity to the community's rules, gendered separation, modesty, clear gendered role divisions, and the centrality of the extended family characterize this collective community (Bilu, 1994; Brazilai, 2003). The community expresses these values through codes of indirect communication, not speaking badly of others, and conflict avoidance through the use of mediators within the community. Marriages are arranged, and social meetings are based on

rituals: Indeed, welfare services in general are managed within the community, with care for poor, sick disabled and old members of the community as a central value and activity. There is mutual responsibility of the group for the individual and cultural norms of respect for people in authority, for old people, privacy of feelings, politeness as a value, and belief in God as directing fate and thus acceptance of the status quo. Men study and are in charge of the spiritual and Jewish content of the family, with a learned husband bringing much respect to his family. The average Hassidic woman in Israel has seven children, and the value of a large family united around a Jewish lifestyle is paramount. Women are in charge of bringing up children when young, and in financing the family through work. Marriage is organized within the community by the parents and is built to include children from the first stages, so that mothers are very young. Central celebrations are around the children and marriage and the surrounding community supports the young family and also supports families who have financial, emotional or health problems through childcare, cooking cleaning, and social and financial support. Children are expected to be independent and to help raise the younger children from an early age (Elior, 1992, 2006; Gurevich & Cohen, 2004; Kaplan & Stedler, 2009). As stated Rabbis have say in every small detail and proposed change including fostering a child and foster care is traditionally accepted and organized within the community (Bilu, 1994; Cole, 1996 Stadler & Ben-Ari, 2003; Ravitski, 1997). Within the bible, many central characters were fostered, such as Moses. As stated, as part of the welfare oriented society, then the community shoulders responsibility for helping the poor, sick and those that cannot bring up their own children. Children in Hassidic communities have rights, and cannot be physically or psychologically hurt. The community must intervene to save the child in this situation. As stated, the community itself has social mediators who will turn to a family and ask it to bring up the child if a placement within the extended family cannot be organized (Agasi, 2007). The Rabbi is part of this process, and has the authority to intervene in these situations and to rule concerning the family. It is very important for the family to receive the Rabbis blessing for fostering a child. On a spiritual level, then the acts of "Hessed"- grace or loving kindness, reverberate to strengthen the giver, and the act of saving one soul is like saving a whole world. The concept of "Pikadon", or lending of things, reminds us that all people belong to God and thus all children are only 'lent' to their parents, equalizing between biological and foster children (Agasi, 2007; Gurevich & Cohen, 2004; Loifer, 2007). At the same time, on a community level, the Hassidic community place strong value on biological family lineage, as exemplified in Jewish prayer ritual where the name of the biological father is mentioned when the child or adult reads from the Bible. Women and girls cannot be in intimate proximity of young boys not from the family, and a disabled child born into the family can seriously disturb the chances of the other children making a good marriage match (Gurevich & Cohen, 2004; Levi, 1988). It is very difficult to receive Rabbinical blessing and social acceptance if the fostered child is from a different Hassidic groups.

Hassidic ultra-orthodox communities in Israel are made up of many sub-groups and constitute? of the community (Gurevich & Cohen, 2004; Kaplan, 2007; Levi, 1988). However, similar to other traditional cultures, while it may appear static to outsiders, but in actuality, it is constantly changing and interacting with the hegemonic secular society in many different ways in Israel and in other countries where they live (Bilu, 1994; Brazilai, 2003; Elior, 1992; Fader, 2009; Gurevich & Cohen, 2004; 2006; Shilhav, 2005). Hassidic groups, in search for cheap living arrangements for large families, moved into development towns and into the periphery of Israeli life. This intensified their interaction with secular Israeli sectors, including the welfare authorities in general and the welfare services in charge of fostering children specifically (Elior, 1992; Kaplan & Stedler, 2009; Shai, 2002). Indeed most Hassidic foster parents now foster through the secular social services. This research was undertaken with a group of women from the Hassidic communities of Gur and Baalez that are mainstream Hassidic groups that agree to