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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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A B S T R A C T

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

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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

work with the welfare authorities over foster care (Loifer, 2007; Ravitski, 1997).

3. Methods

The theoretical orientation of this qualitative research is qualitative and phenomenological so as to access how the Hassidic women themselves conceptualize their foster care and their interaction with the welfare services. It is also ethnographic, that is, situating the women's experience within a specific culture. Additionally, because the fostering process is a linear process, with a beginning middle and end, then the story of the fostering is organized in narrative form, and will relate to each of these stages (Hubberman & Miles, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

3.1. Field of research

This study interviewed twenty women from the ultra-religious Ashkenazi Hassidic groups of Gur and Balez, who live in their communities in the south and center of Israel. The women were from the age of twenty to forty, and typically had between six and twelve other children at home. They were all married. They had all been foster mothers for over two years through a secular foster welfare service within their area.

3.2. Data gathering protocol

The first part of the interview was open and narrative, starting with the question "tell me the story of your foster care". After this initial narrative, specific issues were returned to in a semi- structured format, so as to cover the relationship with the community and with the welfare services: The interview continued for about an hour to an hour and a half within the women's own homes.

3.3. Data analyses

The data was transcribed, and then thematically analyzed according to the narrative themes of motivations to foster, supports and challenges within the community and supports and challenges from the secular state foster care in the ecological circles of foster child, natural children, husband, nuclear family, community and welfare support (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

3.4. Ethical issues

The participation was voluntary and the interviews were undertaken in the privacy of the home so as to make the women feel comfortable and in control. The women were recruited through a snowball method of a friend telling a friend, and a notice hung up on the welfare offices wall. The women signed consent to take part in the study. The study underwent the university and welfare ethics committees (Hubberman & Miles, 2002).

In general, the Ultra-Orthodox community is suspicious of outside researchers, who can misrepresent the community (Bilu, 1994). and so all identifying features were hidden. The data was presented as a single whole. The women were explained that the potential of the study was to help adjust the welfare services to their needs. The fact that the second author is a familiar figure, and also orthodox, but outside of their specific communities and not a direct foster welfare worker, helped to make the interview more familiar for the women and less "anthropological" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hubberman & Miles, 2002).

3.5. Trustworthiness and validity

A possible hurdle to the validity and trustworthiness of this paper is the power relations between the interviewer who is known as a social worker, and the subjects, as foster mothers. This was neutralized by interviewing only women outside of the authors area of work. Another difficulty in terms of validity is to ensure cultural understanding of the data so as to enable transferability and confirmability of the contents to similar but different social groups. To ensure this the data was analyzed by both the first and second author, and by a peer group of social workers specializing in foster placement within an ultra-religious area. This enabled to reach a majority concerning disagreements in the analyses. The authors also triangulated the analyses through three different theoretical prisms, phenomenological, ethnographic and narrative as well as the peer analyses as described above. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hubberman & Miles, 2002).

4. Data presentation

As stated above, the themes are organized according to the consecutive stages of the foster care process, starting from the decision to foster a child and moving on to the experience of bringing up the child, within the ecological circles of the women's other children, husband, extended family, community, Religious and community leaders, and secular welfare services. Quotes are used to illustrate the themes so as to give a sense of the women's own voices and of how they conceptualized the issue in their own words.

4.1. Religious – spiritual motivations for fostering a child

This stage includes the spiritual religious motivations for fostering a child such as the value of "Hessed" or of doing something for God.

"***Hessed-Grace***, "**-or giving**" *thank God we have everything we need, we have enough of everything, - so we wanted to give to someone who has less- I wanted us to have a house of "Hessed" - of giving, the knowledge that we are giving to someone who doesn't have, gives me a lot of satisfaction".*

"***Lashem Shamayim***, "**-or for the love of God**"*, you are doing something day by day, hour by hour, that is for the love of God, not for yourself, and that makes me happy".*

"***Saving a single child is like saving a whole world***" *"It is said that whoever saves one soul of Israel, has saved a whole world. A child instead of growing up poor and alone - you can give him a whole world - my dream is he will also set up a good healthy happy home - please God he will set up a family".*

These good dead's will eventually bring good luck and compensation to one's own family.

"***The good dead will return to me***" *"I know that God will return good things to my natural children because of the mitzvah, that I took in a child and gave him a home, I remind God when things are hard with my children- remember what I did…".*

Another concept is that all children belong to God anyway, and are only "leant" to parents. This conception equalizes the status of the biological and foster children.

"***Children are leant to parents and belong to God- they will be reunited with their natural parents in heaven***" *"My father asked me before he died to look after the child, until he is reunited with him at the resurrection of the dead, till then we look after him".*

Finally, the fostering act is God's ordainment, and so was meant to be, and as such becomes a personal challenge to fulfill.

"**The fostering is ordained by God**" *"I believe that if it reached me, - then it's a sigh I am the right person and it's my contribution- not that it's not hard, it's very hard- but it's my contribution it was meant for me because the child ended up in my family".*

"*This child is my personal trail – everyone has his personal challenge that*

God gives him, this is my ordainment from God, to bring up this child".

Above, the motivations for fostering a child were all religious, moral or spiritual: The following motivations stem from social needs:

4.2. Social or inter-community motivations for fostering a child

4.2.1. A special needs child as lowering marriage changes of other siblings
This fact can reduce the chances of the other children in the family to find a good marital match. To avoid this, then a few families will ask that the disabled child go up for foster care so as not to affect the marriage prospects of their other children (Engelsman, 2012). Additionally, because the fostering is a mitzvah, or good deed, as described in the first theme, then the fostering act heightens the value of the foster family as a whole and so enhances their chances of finding good matches for their children.

"*I did not initiate the foster home, but when my brother asked me - because the child had disabilities, I agreed- there was no choice - but, I am very proud and fulfilled when the child tells the rest of the family how happy he is with us I am proud that we are doing a good job*",

"*The poor mother, to have a down- syndrome baby- what could she do other than give him away*".

4.2.2. The Community asks a woman to foster a child because of lack of direct family
When there is not a relative available to foster a special needs child then the Rabbi or a social mediator can approach a woman who is suitable and ask her to foster the child for a few months, but the child is left there, in the hope that the parents will become attached to the child. The request to foster a child by a Rabbi is on the one hand an honor, and on the other, something that you cannot refuse.

"*He told us it was only for a month- but meantime it's been for a year…. this often happens*".

"*I was very young when the Rabbi approached me, only eighteen, but it was such an honor that did not refuse, he said it would be for a short time, but meantime we have become attached to the child…*".

4.3. Motivation for fostering a child through the secular welfare services rather than through the community

A central motivation for turning to the welfare offices is being financially re-reimbursed, as well as having the choice to refuse, and having a clear contract in terms of the length of the fostering procedure.

4.3.1. Having a clear contract
"*I was only eighteen, and the Rabbis decided I would be the mother to an eight year old - it was so difficult, We wanted to do it, but it was hard to take such a responsibility - we also didn't know for how long, when you do it through the welfare, they tell you exactly, and you get paid*".

4.3.2. Being financially reimbursed
"*A mother came to me to take her child, I wanted to, and I asked her to go to the Welfare so that I could get money – since then he has been with us and we have received other children through the welfare offices and the financial support is a big help*".

4.3.3. Support in bringing up the child
"*I didn't want someone strange outside the community coming into my house, - but in the end I turned to the welfare offices and created some order. I could get paid, also, the child understands that there is another element looking after her, I tell her we have to ask the welfare social worker, before we make decisions it's hard to have someone else involved,*

but it also helps to share the responsibility-".

4.4. General challenges of fostering the child

The first themes are universal to foster care, and last ones are specific to the community.

4.4.1. Difficulty of understanding the child's behavior because don't know his past
"*because I didn't know him as a baby - so I get confused, is he testing our limits all the time because he doesn't understand - or because of how he was bought up in his first home? It's hard to know because you didn't bring him up in the beginning*".

4.4.2. Jealousy of the natural children because the mother has to give him more time if he has special needs
"*My children get angry, because it makes it much harder to go out to the park, by the time I get him ready, the afternoon is nearly over, because he has special needs*".

"*My youngest is very jealous of the new child, and it creates a lot of tension at home - suddenly this new child arrived - there was no time to prepare him, like a pregnancy - and we spend a lot of energy trying to understand the new child, so my son is jealous*".

4.4.3. Anger at biological parents who don't share the responsibility
"*Why do I have to face all of the tests of his disability alone? I understand she could not keep him, but still - he does have parents*".

The next themes are the difficulties particular to the religious and cultural life of the Hassidic community:

4.5. Challenges in fostering the child specific to the religious minority community

4.5.1. Modesty rules do not allow interaction between different sex non biological children
The male child cannot be kissed by the mother or be alone with opposite sex children after the age of nine; This means that the mother has to always be with the foster child, if she has biological children of the opposite sex. As older children are central to raising their siblings in large families, this is a big limitation.

"*This is a big problem; I have to make sure the children are always together, I cannot leave my oldest girl to look after him*".

Often the Rabbis do give a special allowance in this situation, because Rabbis are interested in the fostering relationship succeeding.

"*I received a special allowance from the Rabbi to continue to hug and kiss my nine year old foster son, but it's still a problem - I can't leave him alone with my daughters, this makes life very complicated*".

4.5.2. The child uses his biological name in prayer
Part of the prayer service (that occurs for a boy twice a day) is stating one's biological parents names. This means that the child is confronted with the difference between him and his foster siblings every day.

"*it's a problem, when he goes up to pray, that the name of his parents are always stated as part of the prayer, and then he feels confused and shamed, - the biological family will never go away - it is always there - we are just looking after him- we now that, but it is confusing for the child and for us*".

4.5.3. Worry over the chances of the child receiving a good marriage proposal

Arranged marriage proposals are organized by a special person in the community when the young people reach the age of seventeen-eighteen, and are based on the biological lineage of the family. The foster child, because he is cut-off from his biological lineage, will find it hard to find a good match, and this in effect will make his entry into adult life very difficult.

"*I am so scared that I won't be able to find a match for this child, because he doesn't have a biological family behind him, I think about this a lot, who can help me to solve it - this is my biggest worry about him*".

4.5.4. Difficulty in fostering a child from another Hassidic house
"*it's ok if it's a child from the same Hassidic, Difficult, but ok, but if it's from another Hassidim, the community really doesn't like it - very difficult – it's very hard for him to fit in*".

"*The problem of taking a child from a different Hassidic is very big, - the surname gives him away, - his customs are different, the society will never really accept him, he will never find a marriage match, in our Hassidic house, this is a big problem…*".

In continuation of this theme, then the women in the extended family and community are suspicious of the fostering. The next theme is the resistance of women within the family and community, due to the above difficulties:

4.5.5. Ambivalence of extended family over adoption versus giving birth to more children
"*My parents were very against the fostering at the beginning, they said, how will you continue to bring up a special needs child and also have more children? You don't have enough children yet, wait till you finish having your own children-but I said, by then I will be too old and too tired.*".

4.5.6. Ambivalence of other women in the community
"*At the beginning they ask who is that child, is it your child? and you don't want to say no in front of the child - to make him feel different, I have to think how to answer, I say he's being bought up by me for now …*".

"*Other mothers said, what do you need it for? They didn't' understand, but I just ignored them, and they gradually got used to it- you need to get them used to it*".

4.6. Sources of support from within the community.

Recourses include an enactment of the values outlined in the first theme:

4.6.1. Inherent pride in doing a good deed
As in the first theme that motivated the fostering, the spiritual and religious ethics provide ongoing support. "*You feel proud because you took a child who could have been in the street, and you build him up it's always there with you, the pride, that gives strength in the difficulty*".

4.6.2. Eventual support from extended family and community
As stated, the family is ambivalent at the beginning because they fear the women will stop having her own children, or will endanger the marriage matches of her own children. However when they become attached to the child, they accept the dead and are able to acknowledge it's value.

"*Over time they also come to know the child and to love him-it takes time*":

"*At first they didn't go near him, but gradually they got used to him, and now they all love him and accept him as part of the family, it's a process-they tell me I did a great mitzvah.-good dead*".

"*In the park, gradually I get the women to understand…*".

4.6.3. The husband as appreciating the religious meaning of the act
Interestingly- the husband is cited as a central support, as opposed to the above female initial resistance, because the husband understands the spiritual impact of the act.

"*My husband encourages it, also the financial help but especially - the mitzvah, he sees the mitzvah - and so he is prepared to be involved, he took time to learn about the child, he encourages me not to feel sorry for the child but to give him the limits he needs*".

"*My husband told me, go get him food, he's not crying because he was abandoned, but he's hungry - and he would forgive him things, because he was nearly on the streets*".

"*At hard times, he reminds me that without us the child would be on the streets and we are doing a big mitzvah*".

"*My husband loves him, as his special mitzvah (- good dead) and that helps me a lot*".

4.6.4. The support of the religious leader
The rabbi, like the husband understands the spiritual meaning of the act, and is also interested in placing children within the community. His blessing becomes a source of support.

"*The Rabbi is the first person I consult about the child - if I can hug him after he is nine, if he needs a medical intervention - overall the Rabbis support what I did, they say I am doing a great mitzvah and this helps me a lot, they allow me to hug the child, because he still needs a mothers affection*".

4.7. Sources of support within the welfare services

4.7.1. Educational support and encouragement of flexibility
The women describe the welfare support groups as helpful in providing new educational skills, flexibility, and understanding of special needs. These skills reverberate also into raising their own children:

"*I understand now that bringing up a child that isn't yours is a challenge-to understand what's going on. When he does well, I feel very proud – and I learnt skills in the welfare foster parents group that help with my own children, I'm less up tight now, more relaxed*".

"*I'm more flexible, because I have learnt methods to take it easy with him, and so I'm much more flexible with my own children than my mother was or my sisters are with their children*".

4.7.2. Reflective skills in parenting
"*What I learnt in the group, forces me to think more carefully about motherhood, less spontaneous and more understanding – this knowledge returns to my own children – makes me a better mother, I think more what I am doing*".

"*They have special needs, and I learnt to accept it, to live with it, with the help of the group now I don't' get so upset if she (the foster child) blows up – my children don't behave like that, - but it made me more accepting of all my other children*".

5. Discussion and conclusions

The above themes reflect the usual challenges of fostering a child such as the jealousy of the other siblings, difficulty with biological

parents (Andersson, 2001; Cox et al., 2011; Cuddeback, 2004). Beyond this, thought, they also show how fostering children within the Hassidic community bought specific challenges to the foster parents. On the one hand, the spiritual and religious concepts give fostering intrinsic meaning and gains, while on the other hand, the day-to-day community life focuses on biological familial connection, and so challenges the inclusion of someone outside the family or outside the sect (Agasi, 2007; Gurevich & Cohen, 2004).This creates a duality between the spiritual level that supports the act of fostering, and the community level, who discourage non biological children, in issues of marriage matches, prayer, and day to day life. These two opposing levels create an inner tension in fostering a child, on the one hand giving meaning to the act, and on the other, demanding of the women to be strong, and to challenge their own community's norms. Interestingly, we saw that a strong recourse was the husband's encouragement of the "mitzvah" or spiritual component of the fostering, that enabled them to counteract the other women's suspicion of fostering a child rather than giving birth. The women describe overcoming this tension by using both internal sources of power, and external sources of power (Kaplan, 2007; Kaplan & Stedler, 2009). For example, the women navigated between the internal community recourses to solve problems with modesty concerning an adopted child through turning to the Rabbi for allowance to leave the child with opposite sex siblings or to allow them to hug their male foster children, and they also gradually persuade the community to accept the child, but also turn away from inter-community fostering, to secular fostering services so as to have financial support and more control, as well as access new types of educational support. These groups also enabled them to learn psychological and educational practices of childcare that they bought back into their community. These included the use of reflectivity and flexibility-concepts that are in opposition to the traditional internal educational practices. The foster care in effect became a gate into the dominant secular Israeli society, and the interaction with the welfare becomes part of the modernization process for these minority group women, through the culturally sanctioned area of child rearing (Bilu, 1994; Brazilai, 2003; Gurevich & Cohen, 2004; Shai, 2002; Shilhav, 2005). This resonates with the literature on the complex ways that minority group ultra-orthodox women negotiate and interact with the non- orthodox community around them (Benbinistiy & Segev, 2002; Brazilai, 2003). It also resonates with third world feminist literature on traditional minority group women who manage to navigate between traditional and modern cultures but in culturally sanctioned areas such as childcare, that is, from within the frame of the traditional female roles (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Elior, 1992; Mills, 1997; Mohanty, 2003; Ravitski, 1997; Shilhav, 2005).

Limitations of this study are the small sample and lack of longitudinal follow up. Another limitation is the potential bias that the study was undertaken by representatives from the secular foster services, although direct connection between the women and the service was controlled. However, this preliminary study on an under-researched area does provide a rich and complex picture of the tensions, but also potentials inherent to foster care within minority group cultures. It revealed the importance of understanding the religious and social meanings of foster care within a specific minority community. It also revealed a complex utilization of recourses in both the community and the external foster care services, by the foster mothers. The perspectives of minority group foster parents themselves is lacking in the literature, and as stated above, is central to ensuring the success of the foster care endeavor. Implications for culturally relevant foster care services are learning to listen to the phenomenological but also culturally embedded experience of foster parents in minority communities as a base for adjusting to needs. Another implication is the importance of religious leaders in terms of meaning, but also authority in relation to the foster mothers. Just as the women integrate the recourse of community leaders and religious leaders with the secular foster services, so the external foster care services can work in direct collaboration with

the community and religious leaders to negotiate difficulties, and terms of foster care. This model is implemented in health care but less in foster care where the focus tends to be on the child rather than on the community that surrounds the child (Al-Krenawi, 2000; Kacen & Lev-Wiesel, 2002; Sue, 1996).

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