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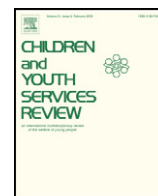
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Matching children with foster carers: A literature review



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ABSTRACT

Matching in family foster care is a form of complex decision-making influenced by more than case factors alone. Organizational, contextual, and decision-maker factors also contribute to the process. This scoping review has synthesized the empirical literature on matching decisions in family foster care. The 12 included studies reveal that a diverse, broad range of case factors is considered during matching. Organizational factors can limit practitioners' ability to choose a desired placement. Furthermore, policy-related influences affect matching practices, as do personal viewpoints of decision-makers. We conclude that matching in foster care is a very complex process. Two interrelated topics can guide future research: outcomes (knowledge of case factors when making matching decisions) and processes (understanding the different organizational, decision-maker, and external influences that might hinder or promote good matching practice). Bringing both together in one comprehensive model could help to improve matching practice.

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1. Introduction

Children in family foster care are vulnerable. They often have been exposed to troublesome experiences, such as prenatal drugs and alcohol, premature birth, failure to form adequate attachments, unstable living arrangements (Vig, Chinitz, & Shulman, 2005) or persistent maltreatment (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010) before being placed out-of-home. Furthermore, out-of-home placement almost invariably implies a disruption in the child's primary attachment relationships (Stovall & Dozier, 2008) and existing social networks (Perry, 2006). Family foster care has the potential to provide these vulnerable children with a safe placement in a family setting (Horwitz, Balestracci, & Simms, 2001; Perry, 2006). However, foster care does not always have a positive effect on foster children's developmental trajectories (Goemans, Van Geel, & Vedder, 2015), and children entering foster care can be retraumatized when experiencing unplanned and negative placement endings, leading to poorer physical and behavioral well-being (Villodas, Litrownik, Newton, & Davis, 2015). To improve the well-being of foster children, it is important to understand the dynamics of foster care placements (Goemans et al., 2015).

The difference between a positive and a negative foster care placement is primarily determined by the foster child's characteristics, the quality of the foster carer, and the interaction between the foster carer and the foster child (Sinclair & Wilson, 2003). Therefore, predicting a beneficial interaction between child and carer characteristics can diminish the negative impact of an out-of-home placement (O'Gorman,

2013). This process of selecting a foster family, which is the best fit with a child, is called *matching* (Strijker & Zandberg, 2001; Quinton, 2012). Matching is a complex decision-making process (Dettlaff, Graham, Holzman, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015) that is most likely influenced by case, organizational, external, and decision-maker factors (Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011).

Since matching constitutes the beginning of a placement and has the potential to influence the chance of favorable and advantageous placements, it is important to understand how these decisions are being made and what research has been conducted. Using an exploratory scope, this review critically examines the existing empirical literature on family foster care matching and aims to answer the following research question: *What is known about decision-making in the family foster care matching process?* Scientific literature on matching is synthesized to gain understanding of factors influencing this decision-making process and to improve future research.

2. Method

This study followed the scoping review guidelines provided by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and enhanced by Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien (2010), which comprise a methodology to synthesize all relevant literature related to a specific topic. A systematized approach was used to increase this study's transparency and replicability.

2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The search criteria were determined after an iterative process. We started by including all references that could contain information on matching, which led to an extensive list of references, most of which

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were not relevant. Based on these search results, we composed initial inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria were specified after a more critical examination of the literature and consultation with other researchers from the field of family foster care, as recommended by Levac et al. (2010).

This study includes empirical studies on the decision-making process of matching in family foster care, published in journals, books, or reports between 1980 and 2015. Long-term, respite, and specialized foster care were included, but monothematic literature on adoption or kinship care was excluded due to the distinction in children's characteristics between those placements (Beeman, Kim, & Bullerdick, 2000; Triseliotis, 2002) and the different placement rationales for these types of care (Meiksans, Iannos, & Arney, 2015; Pösö & Laakso, 2016). Articles on foster care in combination with other types of care were included.

2.2. Search strategy

The approach for the English-language references consisted of searching the databases ERIC, PsycINFO, SocINDEX, and Web of Science for literature published after 1979, using the keyword “foster care” combined with “match,” “placement,” or “decision.” Since the first author's native language is Dutch, the English search words were translated and used in the database Picarta to include Dutch empirical articles. The search led to 8681 results, which were filtered, in a step-wise manner,

for their fit with the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Fig. 1). First, we looked at the titles and, subsequently, at the selected abstracts. The next step was to combine the searches of different search engines, delete the duplicates, and locate the full texts for the remaining references. After multiple efforts to retrieve the text, one full text, published in 1982, could not be found. Full texts were retrieved for the remaining 37 references. After reading these full texts, we excluded 25 references that did not include an empirical study (10), focused on another decision-making process (7) or on a more general matching issue in child welfare (3), did not take the fit of a child with the carer characteristics into account (3), or did not provide enough information on matching (2). Twelve references fitted the inclusion criteria.

We did not exclusively search for literature written in English, because we hypothesized that matching results might be published on a national level to improve practice and policy. For references from other countries, researchers from the field of family foster care were contacted through the International Foster Care Research Network (see: <https://www.uni-siegen.de/foster-care-research/index.html.en?lang=en>). Researchers from this network were asked to check for relevant articles in their country. Colleagues from Spain, Portugal, Finland, Italy, South Korea, India, Croatia, Lithuania, and Norway responded, but no further references were included.

The search strategy was expanded by scrutinizing the reference lists of the included references (“snowballing”) and by conducting a “cited by” search on Google Scholar (see Fig. 1). For five references, which

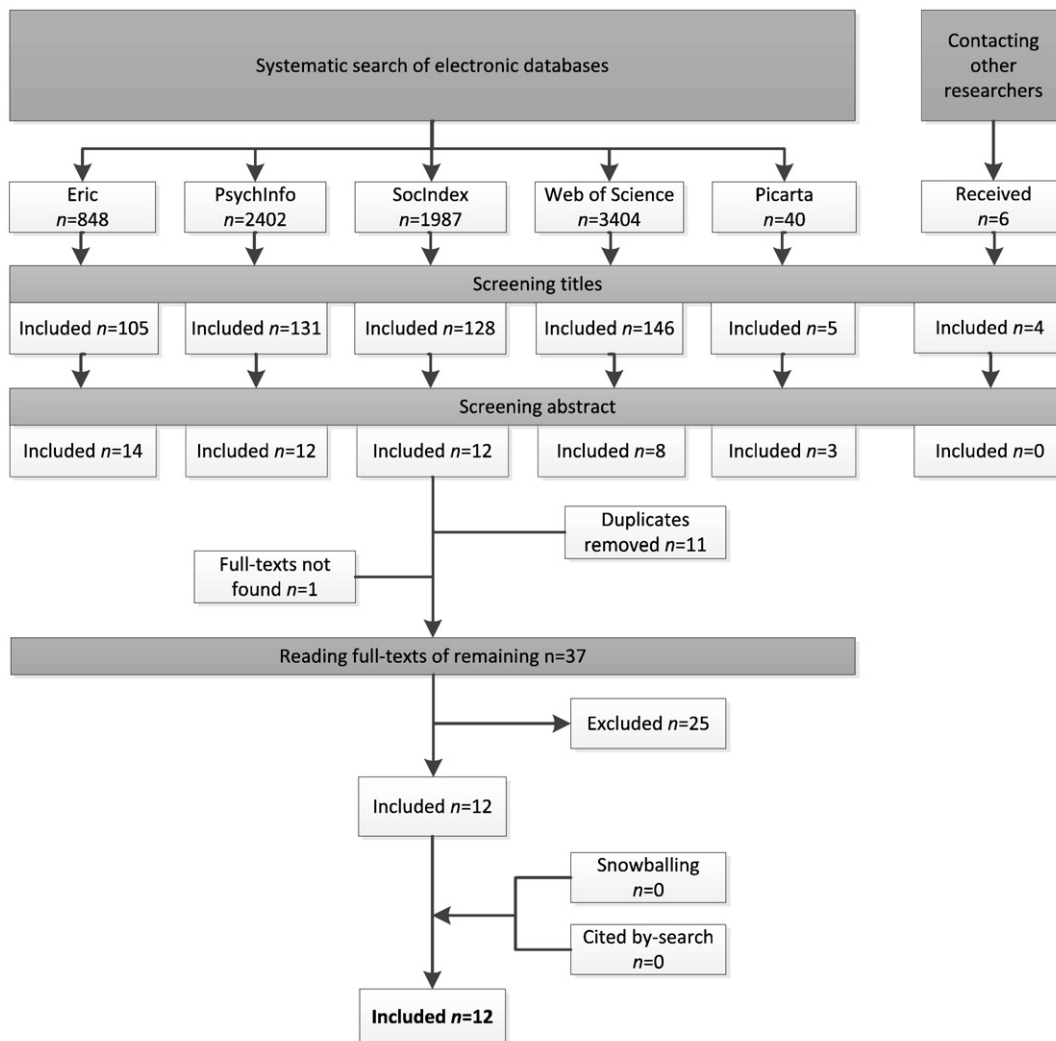


Fig. 1. Overview of systematized search strategy.

Table 1
Overview of included references.

| Reference | Country | Purpose | Method | Respondents | Main findings |
|------------------------------|-------------|--|---|--|---|
| 1. Boer and Spiering (1991) | Netherlands | Investigate the incidence of joint placements, the foster care agencies' considerations with regard to such placements, and factors associated with their failure or success | Cross-sectional mixed-method research with a record analysis and interviews with the agencies | 137 individual children of 59 joint sibling placements from 15 agencies for (specialized) foster family care | A joint placement was preferred unless clear contraindications were present. Main influencing factors were: bond between siblings, degree of difficulty of the children, and attitude of the biological parents. There is a connection between breakdown and small age difference with the other children in the foster family, a simultaneous placement, and a high degree of parental involvement. |
| 2. Carter-Black (2002) | USA | Explore the perceptions of black child-welfare workers about transracial adoption and foster care placements, and their views on the effects of the Multiethnic Placement Act and Interethnic Adoption Provision on black children and their families | Ethnographic research through semi-structured interviews | 10 black child-welfare workers | Workers stated that the most important determinant in making a foster care or adoption placement was to ensure that the family was able to meet the child's needs. A majority of the workers voiced concerns that the system was unresponsive to the black community, its children, and their families' needs, both on an institutional and individual level. |
| 3. Farmer and Pollock (1999) | UK | Examine the planning, preparation, and placement choices made for sexually abused and/or abusing young people | Semi-structured interviews, file analysis, and standardized measurements from key residential workers, social workers, and foster carers | Residential workers, social workers, and foster carers of 40 sexually abused and/or abusing young people aged 10 or older from two authorities | Most of the young abusers were placed in foster care, and the majority of the sexually abused went into children's homes. The young person's fit with others in that setting was considered in less than a third of the placements. In just under half of the sample, there was no information about the history of sexual abuse or abusing behavior given to the caregivers. Risks to and from these young people with histories of sexual abuse/abusing behavior were considerable. |
| 4. Folaron and Hess (1993) | USA | Address the unique needs of children of "Mixed American" and Caucasian parentage with regards to the assessment of service needs and the selection and preparation of potential foster families | Multiple case study with a content analysis of the case records together with in-depth interviews with the child, the child's parents, foster carers, the caseworker, service provider, and supervisor | 62 mixed-ethnicity children placed in foster family homes for their protection, who re-entered care between 1989 and 1991 | The need to deal with the actual and potential impact of racism on the children's safety and security received limited attention. Practitioners throughout the service system appeared insufficiently aware of the unique needs of children of mixed racial parentage and paid little attention to those needs. |
| 5. Fox and Winett (1990) | USA | Develop a system capable of suggesting appropriate matches between children and foster care homes | Controlled testing of system performance by comparing output results to expert recommendations, when rating the potential matches for a child | Two social workers and the system for making decisions, using data from 15 homes and 17 foster children | FOCES (FOster Care Expert System) was able to separate the reasonable from unreasonable homes and was fairly reliable at placing in homes, which the social workers considered suitable for a child, and was near the top of the ranked list. |
| 6. Hegar (1986) | USA | Report the incidence of sibling separation; identify the characteristics of children and their placement when associated with separation; explore attitudes of foster care staff towards sibling relationships; investigate workers' perceptions of barriers to placing siblings together; and define those background characteristics of the workers, which are associated with specific attitudes or perceptions | Pilot study of non-random selected children's placement data and main study that used a cross-sectional approach with descriptive information from agency records of randomly selected children from sibling groups along with additional survey data | 38 sibling groups with 108 children in pilot and 202 randomly selected children from sibling groups in Louisiana state custody, and a survey of 108 state child-welfare workers assigned to those children in the main study | 66.8% of the children were placed with at least one sibling. Several children, sibling groups, and situational characteristics were associated with sibling placement. The attitudes of staff showed high valuation of family and sibling ties. Their perceptions of agency placement practice indicate pessimism about siblings being placed together, despite the perception that the agency encourages joint placements. Associations are reported between workers' background |

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

| Reference | Country | Purpose | Method | Respondents | Main findings |
|---|-------------|---|---|---|--|
| 7. Hollows and Nelson (2006) | UK | Explore the thinking behind judgments made in five complex cases involving large sibling groups | Phenomenological approach with a multiple case study using interviews with social workers | Social workers of five sibling groups with four or more siblings | characteristics, and particular attitudes and perceptions. The practical difficulties of finding a placement for a sibling group can conflict with the aim of a joint placement. Differences in treatment of siblings are not of apparent immediate concern to the practitioners. Meeting individual needs militates against equality of treatment. |
| 8. Jayaratne, Faller, Ortega, and Vandervort (2008) | USA | Explore child welfare workers' views regarding the role of race in child welfare decisions and the appropriateness of placement with gay, lesbian, and single foster/adoptive parents | Cross-sectional study with a questionnaire | 259 African American and White child welfare workers who just completed their initial training | African American child welfare workers are more likely to believe that race should be considered. Conservative White workers are more likely to endorse racial matching compared to their liberal counterparts. Both African American and White conservative-leaning workers are more likely to disagree with the placement of children in gay/lesbian households. |
| 9. Rhodes (1992) | UK | Examine the introduction of a new policy of racial matching and review its implications for the recruitment of black carers | Case study of a London borough using postal survey, document analysis, participant observation, qualitative interviews, and elements of action research | Documentary records (team meeting minutes, party reports, and policy guidance) over a ten-year period, and fieldwork conducted in 1984 and 1985 using observations, a survey of 20 principal fostering officers, and focused interviews with management, social workers, foster parents, and applicants | The change from a colorblind approach towards an acceptance of racial matching had two consequences: a need to recruit black families and a commitment to a more ethnically sensitive service. |
| 10. Smith (1996) | USA | Determine caseworkers' and foster parents' basic attitudes and beliefs about siblings and sibling placements | Cross-sectional survey study | 31 caseworkers and 38 foster mothers of preschool-age foster children | Foster mothers and caseworkers have decided opinions about the nature and importance of sibling relationships. They differ in their beliefs about the difficulty of fostering siblings. Caseworkers appear to take both child and relationship factors into consideration when making placement decisions. |
| 11. Strijker and Zandberg (2001) | Netherlands | Explore which type of foster child fits best with which type of foster family | Longitudinal research with pre-test and post-test design, with surveys for the foster children and carers at the start of the placement and 1.5 years later | 136 foster children and their foster families placed between 1996 and 1997 with the intention to stay for more than 6 months | Four typologies of foster children and four typologies of carers were distinguished. There is a pattern between the behavioral typologies of foster children and carers. Based on the typologies, a predication was made about which children would be more likely to disrupt and in which families. |
| 12. Van Dam, Nordkamp, and Robbroeckx (2000) | Netherlands | Test and enhance a practice-based matching instrument in terms of the completeness of information and the ability to help with matching | Literature study, Delphi method with two rounds among foster care workers and a questionnaire for foster care agencies | 8 questionnaires in each Delphi round (could be from different foster care workers) and 13 foster care agencies | Opinions on the most important matching factors diverge, which shows the complexity and intangible nature of matching. The matching model is enhanced, based on new or recurrent factors from the research. |

were all published between 1980 and 1990, we could find no information after various efforts to locate the text or contact the authors. These additional search strategies did not result in new studies that were included.

2.3. Data charting and analysis

The twelve references were analyzed using a data-charting technique ([Arksey & O'Malley, 2005](#)). The recorded information consisted of author(s), year of publication, country of research, purpose, method, respondents and main findings. Table 1 presents an overview of the

references included and their characteristics. The Decision Making Ecology model was used as a heuristic framework for understanding the different influences on the decision-making process. This model was created as a framework for organizing decision-making research in child welfare (see [Fig. 2](#); [Baumann et al., 2011](#)); however, it has not been previously applied to matching research.

The findings for each cluster of the Decision-Making Ecology model are presented descriptively in the results section. In each cluster, a distinction is made between factors that are important for matching and factors that are barriers to implementing a matching approach.

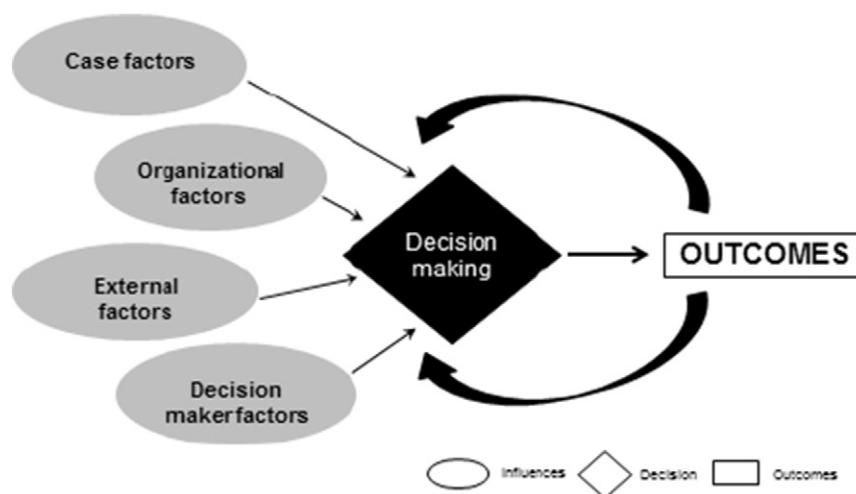


Fig. 2. Decision Making Ecology by Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke and Kern (2011, p. 5).

3. Results

The studies differed in methodology and research scope. Five studies used qualitative methods (Carter-Black, 2002; Farmer & Pollock, 1999; Folaron & Hess, 1993; Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Rhodes, 1992), five used quantitative methods (Fox & Winett, 1990; Hegar, 1986; Jayaratne et al., 2008; Smith, 1996; Strijker & Zandberg, 2001), and two used mixed methods (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Van Dam et al., 2000).

3.1. Case factors

The studies all incorporate case factors, to understand either their importance as perceived by practitioners or how those were considered in practice. Ten studies focused on a specific aspect of the matching decision, such as the role of siblings (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Hegar, 1986; Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Smith, 1996), similarity of race (Carter-Black, 2002; Folaron & Hess, 1993; Jayaratne et al., 2008; Rhodes, 1992), or how the behavior of a child would fit in with a foster family (Farmer & Pollock, 1999; Strijker & Zandberg, 2001). Only two studies presented an overview of matching in general (Fox & Winett, 1990; Van Dam et al., 2000).

3.1.1. Siblings

Agencies, caseworkers, and policymakers favor placing siblings together (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Hegar, 1986; Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Smith, 1996). However, the placement decision can become complex when meeting the needs of an individual child conflicts with the needs of the sibling group (Smith, 1996), or if the decision creates inequality between siblings due to differences in treatment (Hollows & Nelson, 2006). Case factors that create a barrier for finding a placement for a sibling group were a wide age gap or the age range (Hegar, 1986; Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Smith, 1996), opposite genders (Hegar, 1986), different dates of entry into care (Hegar, 1986), and a larger number of siblings (Hegar, 1986; Smith, 1996).

3.1.2. Ethnicity

In general, an individualized assessment of the child's needs with regard to cultural identity is favored, which can be achieved by listening to the wishes and opinions of children, parents, and foster carers (Folaron & Hess, 1993; Rhodes, 1992). Practitioners mentioned the importance of assessing foster carers' potential to help the child with racial identity development, knowledge and acceptance of cultural heritage, and racial socialization (Carter-Black, 2002; Folaron & Hess, 1993), as well as their sensitivity to racial issues, and the composition of the neighborhood or school (Folaron & Hess, 1993; Rhodes, 1992). Less attention

was paid to ethnicity in the case of young children or short-term placements (Rhodes, 1992).

3.1.3. Behavior

Two studies focused on the role of foster children's behavior in matching (Farmer & Pollock, 1999; Strijker & Zandberg, 2001). The first study (Farmer & Pollock, 1999) focused on placements of children with a history of sexual abuse or showing abusive behavior. In less than a third of those placements, practitioners considered how a child would match with others in the setting. When previous sexual experiences of the children were considered, the age of the children, the level of required surveillance, and the presence of other children in the foster care setting were assessed. At the end of the matching process, the potential foster carers had the final say on whether the child was suitable for their family. However, in some cases the practitioners did not disclose the child's incidents of abuse or abusive behavior, leaving foster carers ignorant of the child's history.

The second study (Strijker & Zandberg, 2001) focused on children's problem behavior in combination with the family's parenting approach. These authors found that children with emotional problems are frequently placed in families with warm affectionate relationships that stimulate a child's autonomy. Children with frequent conflicts were placed in families with a clear family structure. However, the authors preferred the matching decision to be profile-oriented and created *typologies* of children and foster carers. They distinguished four types of child-behavior problems and four types of foster families using a cluster analysis. The child profiles were: Normal (as labeled by the authors), with no notable problem behavior; Aggressive-Delinquent, with heightened social, aggressive, and delinquency problems; Attention-Social problems, indicating internalizing problems with prominent scores on attention and social problems; and Withdrawn-Social, with severe withdrawn and social problems, and feelings of depression and fear. The four family profiles were: Conforming, with a strong emphasis on adjustment and conforming to family rules, norms, and habits; Structured, with high social control between family members along with an organized performance of daily tasks; Involved, indicating high societal involvement, room for individual emotions, and limited emphasis on adjustment; and Fragile-Structured, distinguished by few regulations and little focus on adjustment or personal development, showing a clear structure but frequent conflicts. Children with a Normal or Aggressive-Delinquent profile were preferentially placed in Structured or Involved families, children with an Attention-Social profile in Involved or Fragile-Structured families, and children with a Withdrawn-Social profile in Conforming families.

3.1.4. Other case factors

Multiple other case factors were described in the studies of Fox and Winett (1990), and Van Dam et al. (2000). Fox and Winett (1990), who designed a computer program to make matching decisions, included age, gender, special needs, school information, reasons for placement, prior care, and notable behavior (e.g., bedwetting) as characteristics of the children assessed during matching. These characteristics were combined with the type of housing, family members, foster care training, and notable strengths and weaknesses of carers. However, the authors did not report which interaction between characteristics was considered a good fit. Van Dam et al. (2000) also did not clarify the relationship or the fit between the children's and carers' characteristics. They presented a list of *child factors* (including information about the biological family; development on cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and other areas; affective possibilities and leisure activities) and a list of *foster carer factors* (which included religion, their own youth experiences, acceptance of the child's biological family, expectancies, distance between biological and foster family, learnability, and openness for guidance).

3.2. Organizational factors

Organizational factors often conflicted with the ability to act in the child's best interests or to consider the above-mentioned case factors during the matching process (Farmer & Pollock, 1999; Folaron & Hess, 1993; Hegar, 1986; Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Smith, 1996).

3.2.1. Limitations as to choice

The most frequently described organizational factor is the limited choice due to the lack of available foster families (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Folaron & Hess, 1993; Farmer & Pollock, 1999; Hegar, 1986; Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Smith, 1996; Van Dam et al., 2000). This limited choice was also present vis-à-vis large sibling groups, since most families did not have the space to take in all the siblings (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Smith, 1996). The lack of foster families resulted in some foster homes being reserved for a certain group of children or concealment of information out of fear that foster carers would reject a child (Farmer & Pollock, 1999). When lack of choice was paramount, practitioners faced the hard decision of delaying placement or settling for a less optimal family (Rhodes, 1992). In these situations, practitioners showed "judgment creep," in which they adjusted their choice until it no longer resembled their original preference (Hollows & Nelson, 2006). A sufficient and diverse range of foster carers on the waiting list can help avoid hasty and inappropriate placements (Rhodes, 1992). The level of optimism of practitioners about their ability to find a placement appeared to be related to the organizations' location, with rural workers being more optimistic than their urban colleagues about finding a joint sibling placement (Hegar, 1986).

3.2.2. Available time

Quick judgments are often needed to provide an immediate response to a child's dangerous living situation (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Hollows & Nelson, 2006). Where the urgency of a placement seemed pressing and immediate, practitioners had little time to make their decisions (Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Farmer & Pollock, 1999). Furthermore, workload made it difficult to make an adequate placement (Van Dam et al., 2000).

3.2.3. Organizational guidance

Farmer and Pollock (1999), Van Dam et al. (2000), and Rhodes (1992) showed that a lack of guidance could lead to interpersonal differences in decisions and "guessing practices," since no certainties were proposed and practitioners were left to predict on their own whether a placement would be in the child's best interests (Farmer & Pollock, 1999). Interestingly, despite the absence of official guidelines, practitioners still sometimes referred to implicit organizational policy

(Folaron & Hess, 1993; Hegar, 1986). A formal model or policy for matching could help provide guidelines for decision-making and enhance matching (Van Dam et al., 2000). However, a clear policy did not necessarily mean that it was applied in practice (Rushton et al., 2001).

3.2.4. Missing information

Information about certain experiences, such as sexual abuse, was sometimes unknown at the time of the match or took too long to retrieve (Farmer & Pollock, 1999). Information could also be withheld as it was considered unimportant or for social desirability reasons (Rhodes, 1992).

3.2.5. Other organizational factors

Other organizational factors were: financial considerations and constraints (Hollows & Nelson, 2006), a change of practitioner during the process (Farmer & Pollock, 1999) and the type of care being offered (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Rhodes, 1992).

3.3. External factors

Three external factors were related to decision-making in the matching process: policy (Carter-Black, 2002; Jayaratne et al., 2008; Smith, 1996), competition with other organizations, and outside pressure on an organization to change (Rhodes, 1992). Carter-Black (2002) reported that social workers indicated that they were fearful of the "big hand" of the law and, therefore, tried to find a match that was in accordance with the legislation. However, as was the case with organizational policies, "external" policies were not always present; they differed in strength, flexibility and content; and they were not always compatible with the complexities of practice (Rhodes, 1992).

3.4. Decision-maker factors

Decision-maker factors, such as personal beliefs, led to internal conflicts when practitioners were required to engage in conflicting policies or practices (Carter-Black, 2002; Jayaratne et al., 2008), making them appear unwilling to comply (Carter-Black, 2002; Folaron & Hess, 1993). A change of policy could mean that practitioners needed to accept that their previous decisions might not have been in the child's best interests (Rhodes, 1992). However, a strong ideological commitment on the part of practitioners could help to mount robust evidence to change the organization's approach (Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Rhodes, 1992).

Decision-maker differences were found in the value that they attributed to certain case factors during matching (Carter-Black, 2002; Farmer & Pollock, 1999; Fox & Winett, 1990; Hegar, 1986; Jayaratne et al., 2008; Smith, 1996; Van Dam et al., 2000). Attitudes towards racial matching and the placement of children with gay, lesbian, or single parents appeared to be related to their own ethnicity, and liberal or conservative ideology, with African American social workers being more inclined to value race as important (Jayaratne et al., 2008). Decision-makers' views of sibling placements were influenced by their own upbringing (Hegar, 1986; Hollows & Nelson, 2006), having siblings themselves, an older age and being a parent (Hegar, 1986). A longer career in social work influenced perceptions of implicit organizational policy; more experienced practitioners perceived the policy to support joint sibling placements as more pessimistic, while less experienced staff were more optimistic about the chances of finding a joint placement (Hegar, 1986). Educational background, tenure with the agency, age and race did not prove to be relevant (Hegar, 1986).

3.5. Outcomes

Three studies focused on the development of placements (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Farmer & Pollock, 1999; Strijker & Zandberg, 2001). In

the study of Boer and Spiering (1991), 14 of the 59 sibling placements (24%) ended at an inappropriate moment in the opinion of the agency and the foster carers for one or all of the siblings. A statistically significant relationship was found between a positive placement development and a step-wise instead of a simultaneous placement. However, ample involvement of biological parents or a narrow age difference between (one or more of the) siblings and other children in the family increased negative placement endings (Boer & Spiering, 1991). There was no relationship between the placement development and the reasons for placing the siblings together or the presence of other foster children.

Farmer and Pollock (1999) investigated histories of sexual abuse in foster children, and concluded that children with a history of sexual abuse posed risks to themselves or their foster family. Seven of the 36 victimized children in their sample and three of the 17 children with sexualized behavior had sexually abused a child during placement, and three-quarters of the sexually abused children were involved in sexual activities. However, it remained unclear whether more careful matching would have resulted in different placements outcomes. Subsequent decisions could also impact on the progress of a placement. Children's stability in foster care could worsen when other children were placed in the foster home (Farmer & Pollock, 1999).

Srijker and Zandberg (2001) reported that children with certain profiles of behavioral/emotional problems seemed to fare better in families with certain characteristics, but that some children had a high risk of breakdown in general and might have done better in other types of care. Furthermore, some families might not be suitable for caring for a foster child. They provided guidelines for each of the four clusters of child behavior described earlier (see section 3.1). Children with a Normal profile did well in all family profiles, except Involved. Those families with an Involved profile had a high risk of breakdown with all foster child profiles. Children showing Attention-Social problems were best matched with families showing Fragile-Structured or Structured family profiles; children with an Aggressive-Delinquent profile were best placed in Structured families; and children with Withdrawn-Social problems were hard to match successfully with any of the families.

4. Discussion

This scoping review aimed to examine what is known about decision-making in the family foster care matching process. Research on matching remains scarce. A systematized search of the past 35 years resulted in twelve publications, with a wide range of empirical methodologies, originating from three countries.

4.1. What did we learn from this review?

Case factors are often used as a means to narrow the scope of research on matching. Instead of matching in general, the majority of studies focused on one type of case factor (e.g., siblings, ethnicity, or behavior), which was often mentioned concurrently with organizational, external, or decision-maker factors. Second, organizational factors exerted a significant influence on matching and were an important prerequisite for matching decisions. Without a diverse range of foster carers or sufficient time to assess the fit of a child and a foster family, practitioners often had no choice but to place a child in the only foster family available. Third, matching is complex and the outcome uncertain, which makes research into this topic very challenging. As expected, a broad range of factors appeared to influence the matching process and outcomes, and most of these factors are intertwined.

This literature review underlines the existence of major gaps in our knowledge about decision-making in the matching process vis-à-vis all aspects of the Decision-Making Ecology model (Baumann et al., 2011). Regarding case factors, the relationship between matching and factors related to *successful* foster care placements, such as age at placement (Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007; Van Oijen, 2010), the child's placement history (Oosterman et al., 2007;

Van Oijen, 2010; Villodas et al., 2015), and a match in temperament (Doelling & Johnson, 1990; Green, Braley, & Kisor, 1996), has not been investigated conclusively. Some organizational aspects have not received any attention in matching research either, such as the training requirements for employees, the use of structured decision-making (Maguire-Jack & Font, 2014), caseload diversity, and organizational support (Graham, Dettlaff, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015). Furthermore, the external context of the research is missing for the most part. There have been no international comparative studies and, despite efforts to include literature from diverse countries, the studies included originated solely from three countries, providing insufficient data to allow for an analysis of cultural differences. However, inter-cultural differences have been significant in other decision-making research (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Gold, Benbenishty, & Osmo, 2001), and it is well known that foster care systems differ considerably across countries (George, Van Oudenhoven, & Wazir, 2003). Specific decision-maker factors that are missing in matching research are years of experience (Drury-Hudson, 1999) and coping mechanisms of practitioners to deal with uncertainty (Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997). Finally, the lack of follow-up studies hinders any possibility of concluding which case factors are important to consider during the matching moment in order to achieve positive outcomes. The influence of organizational, external and decision-maker components on outcomes has been neglected.

The studies included have some major shortcomings related to the findings presented, methodological approaches, and theoretical frameworks. First, the findings reported in the literature were conflicting. Practitioners mentioned a wide range of factors that were explicitly considered during decision-making. Lack of choice, however, was profoundly present in most cases. To deal with this, some case factors must receive priority over others. However, practitioners' strategies to deal with these competing interests have not been explained.

Second, the quality of the studies varied considerably. The majority of studies relied on retrospective reports with limited conclusions and some used small unrepresentative samples drawn from only a few sites. The quantitative studies ranged from small-scale surveys using descriptive analyses or non-parametric tests, to large follow-up studies using cluster analysis. In the qualitative and mixed method studies, data analysis was not always clearly described.

Finally, the studies do not result in any theoretical framework that might help practitioners in the matching process. The publications are mainly clustered on three subtopics found in matching: sibling placements, ethnicity, and behavioral aspects. Only two studies started from a more general perspective on matching. To improve matching, there is a need for a more comprehensive and in-depth model of decision-making in the matching process.

4.2. Strengths and limitations

This review may improve our understanding of decision-making processes in child welfare services. To our knowledge, this is the first compilation of international evidence on matching decisions in family foster care. The wide exploratory scope of this review provides an overview not only of existing knowledge but also of prominent gaps in our knowledge. Strengths of this review are the consultation with other researchers in foster care, the comprehensive literature search, and the use of an existing model to organize the results.

Nevertheless, this review also has limitations. The interrater reliability was not systematically tested for the inclusion and exclusion criteria. However, we, as a research team, did meet repeatedly to discuss the inclusion or exclusion criteria, as well as the studies we included, until we reached consensus. Due to the decisions incumbent in the search strategy, some potentially interesting studies may have been excluded. Finally, some of the studies we included were based on small samples or used less rigorous methods.

4.3. Recommendations for a research agenda

Overall, this scoping review proves the need for more research into matching in foster care. Future research should focus on relevant case factors to consider during matching decisions, but should also aim to understand different organizational, decision-maker, and external influences that might hinder or promote good matching practices. It should focus on the process of matching as well as on the outcomes of the matching process (Gambrill, 2005; López, Fluke, Benbenishty, & Knorth, 2015).

More knowledge about the *process* of matching would allow us to identify which factors might influence practitioners' abilities to consider the well-being of the child. Knowledge about the obstacles to good practice and the subjective input of decision-makers could provide valuable insights needed to improve practice. As mentioned earlier, qualitative studies are best suited to initially explore how matching works in practice. Subsequently, quantitative studies are needed to test the resulting framework in large samples. Furthermore, comparisons between practices and policies of different regions or countries could increase our sensitivity to cultural differences in the matching process.

Research on the *outcomes* of matching are needed as well to understand the case factors that predict positive placements. Studies should follow up children from the point of entry into foster care to understand the impact of the matching on placement development. A literature review on the interaction of child and parent characteristics or interviews with stakeholders, especially children and foster carers, about the characteristics that are important for them could also help to find case factors that are important in the matching decision.

Overall, the effect of different variables on matching can be tested with multilevel structural modeling to assess the significance and size of the different features of the Decision-Making Ecology model on matching decision-making and outcomes (see for example Graham et al., 2015). Understanding the case characteristics related to the best outcomes, while simultaneously taking into account the organizational, external and decision-maker factors, would make it possible to improve the well-being of children in foster care.

4.4. Conclusion

Assessment of a foster child's best interests in a matching decision is complex due to the multitude of case factors that might be related to placement success, as well as to the influence of organizational, external, and decision-maker factors. This scoping review can be seen as a research-informed overview of a complex field that needs our attention in the years to come in order to improve our ability to meet the needs of foster children.

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