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A story of stories

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CHAPTER 6

A story of motherhood

This chapter is based on : Wubs, D., Batstra, L., & Grietens, H. (2018).
Balancing between caregiving and professionalism - Women's narratives
on fostering a victim of maternal sexual abuse.
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Abstract

The impact of sexual abuse on children is enormous, particularly when a child is abused sexually by a mother figure. In order to gain insight into the experiences of this rarely studied group, the life stories of four foster mothers of victims of maternal sexual abuse were collected. The narratives were coded inductively and several topics concerning foster motherhood were studied more in-depth. Four key themes emerged in the women's narratives: their attitude towards the abusing female, the foster child's sexual behavior towards the foster mother, the emotional and physical distance of the foster mothers towards their foster child, and lastly, their sense of responsibility. The four foster mothers continuously balance between fostering their foster child as a parent and responding as a professional caregiver. The consequences of being a foster mother of a victim of maternal sexual abuse should be more socially acknowledged.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, maternal sexual abuse, foster care, narrative research, professional identity, parental identity.

Introduction

“Because she reacted to me like that, I always felt that she learned that behavior from her mother”, a foster mother told us, reflecting on her foster child’s behavior. As this girl, 10 years of age, showed sexualized behavior to her as a female, this foster mother believed the girl had been abused by her biological mother. Her comment illustrates the complicated position women may have in fostering a victim of maternal sexual abuse.

According to McLeod (2015) female offenders are far more likely to abuse their own children than men, as almost 80% of the offending women in his study were listed as the victim’s parent. Also, women seem more inclined to offend against young children than male offenders. Although the consequences for all child victims of sexual abuse are grave, the abuse is experienced as severe particularly when victims are strongly familiar with the perpetrator, for example when the offender is a child’s mother (Young, Riggs & Robinson, 2011). Next to physical intrusiveness, force by someone well known to the victim makes child sexual abuse ‘a frightening, shameful and isolating experience’ (p. 384). Tsopelas, Tsetsou, Ntounas and Douzenis (2012) note that children are overwhelmed with conflicting feelings of hate and love, especially when they hold a close (familial) relation to the abusers. When a child is sexually abused by a mother figure, the child is denied the feeling that their mother, one of the most important primary attachment figures, is safe (Etherington, 1997; Peter, 2006). Consequently, as a child’s abuse experience colors the perception of people in their world being trustworthy (McFadden, 1989), a foster child with a history of maternal sexual abuse may perceive a foster mother as potentially threatening.

In general, foster mothers hold a traditionally gendered role in the fostering process, meaning they are considered to be the homemakers or main carers (Heslop, 2014). This seems especially true when a family fosters a child with a history of sexual abuse, as several studies review the complications for men fostering a victim of sexual abuse. Foster fathers seem to distance themselves from certain child-rearing activities in order to minimize the risk of being perceived by a child as sexually interested or even abusive (for instance, Gilligan, 2000; Heslop, 2016; Inch, 1999). Thus, foster fathers oftentimes position themselves as secondary carers supporting their female fostering partner.

In fostering victims of maternal sexual abuse, however, it is the foster mothers’ position that may be complicated. A woman’s active involvement in fostering a victim of maternal sexual

abuse may be paradoxical. For example, foster mothers perform the majority of the child-rearing activities. A foster child might interpret these caregiving acts as sexually laden due to their prior experiences with an abusing mother figure. Literature on female sex offenders, for instance, suggests women often commit crimes while engaging in normal child-rearing activities such as bathing and dressing (Groth & Birnbaum, as stated in Vandiver & Walker, 2002). Elliot (1994) even classifies sexual abuse by women as subtle, as the abuse takes place during everyday activities.

The current study explores the stories of women who foster a child who was sexually abused by a maternal figure. As far as we know, this specific group of foster carers has not been studied before. We aim to answer the question: What does it mean to be a foster mother of a child with a history of maternal sexual abuse?

Method

Design

A narrative study was designed to gain insight into the experiences, needs and expertise of families fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. This study was exploratory in nature with roots in constructivism, as we set out to understand the subjective and dynamic reality of families fostering these children (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Through story-telling we co-constructed the reality of each fostering individual, in order to understand the reality of a family as a unit.

Sampling

In collaboration with a foster care organization in the northern part of the Netherlands, we recruited families who currently fostered a child with a putative history of sexual abuse prior to placement in the foster family. All foster care workers reviewed their past and present caseload in order to identify cases of sexual abuse in the foster children's history. These children were a prime determinant in the selection of families and were named "index children". In the first phase of recruitment, an information package was sent to 12 families. The index child residing in these families met the agreed inclusion criteria, thus, they could participate if they so desired. Unfortunately, the non-response was high, as only three families agreed to participate. While awaiting the result of recruitment phase one, a further two families were successfully included in a pilot study.

In order to increase the number of participating families, we sent an information package to eight additional families in phase two. In contrast to the families of phase one, the index foster

children in families approached in phase two were excluded from the study due to, for example, age or legal guardianship. In this second phase six families consented to participate, resulting in a total sample of family members from 11 families. From these 11 families we interviewed 11 foster mothers, six foster fathers, 12 biological children and two foster children.

The circumstances of the index children's sexual abuse varied but in the current paper we focus on the narratives of the four foster mothers who fostered a child who had been sexually abused by a maternal figure. We excluded the narrative of a fifth woman who cared for two children who had been prostituted by their mother, as it remained uncertain if the biological mother had been physically involved in the abuse as offender. The remaining nine women fostered either victims of male offenders, or victims of unknown offenders.

Ethics

Prior to recruiting the foster family members, an ethical protocol was written in which we reviewed matters of informed consent, confidentiality, and participant and researcher well-being among other things. Ethical approval was provided by the Ethics Committee of our department.

Interviews

We developed an interview protocol based on the principles of episodic interviewing (Flick, 1997, 2009). In several stages we explored the narratives of our participants, starting by asking them to share their story since their foster child had entered their lives. Latter stages concerned a focus on everyday life, themes derived from literature, and more general matters. From the very beginning we communicated that participants could share those episodes they thought to be relevant to the topic of the study. Hence, to some extent the interviewees controlled the agenda of the interview. The interviews lasted approximately one to two hours, depending on the available time and energy of the participant and interviewer. After each interview, the interviewer wrote a log containing reflections on the conversation, observations, and preliminary interpretations. These logs were used to prepare for following interviews and were considered as additional data.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded, transcribed ad verbatim, and incorporated in a NVivo project (QSR International, 2015), after which each narrative was coded inductively. Next, codes representing similar themes were clustered and per individual a schematic map of themes was

created, indicating possible patterns and relationships between clusters of codes. To ensure the intersubjectivity of the coding process, the main analyst and a second member of the research team discussed the coded narrative and schematic map thoroughly. After the two researchers reached consensus, the analyst wrote a synthesis of the story of a participant, explicitly referring to each cluster. This synthesis was presented to the participant as a means of member check. During a final face-to-face meeting, the participant and interviewer/analyst reflected on the interviews and the process of analysis. After a thorough read-through, the participant reviewed the synthesis in terms of accuracy and clarity. The suggestions of the participants were incorporated in the synthesis, and if needed in the analysis.

In the present study, we review the four foster mothers' narratives by using results of the inductive analysis, the syntheses, and the thematic maps. This within-case analysis per individual is followed by a search for cross-case patterns, as we explore differences within and between the narratives of the foster mothers in order to gain insight into what it means to foster a victim of maternal sexual abuse (Yin, 2003). In particular, we reviewed those parts of the foster mothers' narratives, which focused on (foster) motherhood, the biological mother of the foster child, and parenthood in general.

Results

The foster mothers and their families

Of the four women, one had fostered a large number of children, two had fostered several children, and the fourth had fostered two children. For one foster mother, the index child was her first foster child. Another woman had a prior experience fostering a victim of maternal abuse. All four women had raised multiple birth children and several foster children. Furthermore, all families were of Dutch nationality and consisted of two parents. In addition, all women identified with the Christian faith. One foster mother had herself been sexually abused in her youth.

The women narrated their experiences with three boys and one girl. Two of these children were diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome. Two boys had been abused by their biological mother, in addition to other family members. One of them had also been forced to have intercourse with his younger sibling, therefore, he was identified as a forced perpetrator. The third boy was abused by a previous foster mother. Two boys disclosed the mother figure's active part in the abuse, while their male partners remained inactive but present during the abuse. The girl was suspected to having been abused by her biological mother. One of the boys was a

teenager (13 years of age), the other children were nine or 10 years old. The severity of the abused ranged from being touched inappropriately to being forced to perform cunnilingus or genital penetration. All children verbally and/or behaviorally disclosed their abuse experiences.

The narratives of the four foster mothers included several accounts of how being a mother of their foster child shaped their lives. Four key themes emerged: attitude towards the abusing female, sexualized behavior towards foster mother, keeping distance, and the responsibilities of being a (foster) mother.

Attitude towards the abusing female

The four foster mothers narrated their thoughts on the actions of the abusing maternal figures. More specifically, they reflected on the culpability of the abusing mother figures. For example, the foster mother, who is quoted in the introduction of this paper, suspected her foster daughter to have been abused by her biological mother, as the girl behaved sexually inappropriately towards foster mother. However, this girl's foster family had no information on what exactly had happened to the girl, as she had come to live with the family at a very early age. The quoted foster mother assumed the abusing mother was abused herself: "Of course she is very damaged too." Additionally, she felt the biological mother did not abuse her children "intentionally":

"She didn't know what is normal. She never learned herself what is appropriate; she was moved from home to home and possibly was abused herself. I imagine that she just taught her daughter, feel this, this feels really good."

It seemed that this foster mother did not hold the biological mother fully accountable, as she related the biological mother's actions to a generational problem. Additionally, she feared continuation of the generational transition of sexual abuse, if her foster daughter was not taught good values. Specifically, she feared her foster daughter would act like her biological mother and possibly abuse her own children in the future. Therefore, to this foster mother, it was of great importance to teach her foster daughter 'normal' sexual values and behaviors.

Two other foster mothers mentioned the generational aspect of the abuse, however, they did hold the biological mother responsible. One foster mother even explicitly protested against using an abuse history as an excuse for becoming an abuser. "This story is so bizarre, I couldn't have made it up. I know that mother probably was a victim herself... Well that's awful, but it did not give her the right to do this herself." This foster mother's worldview was changed dramatically when she learned of her foster son's abuse history: "It is truly unimaginable that someone would do those things to her child". She held both biological parents accountable for their actions,

whereas her foster son mostly saw his biological mother as the guilty parent. This foster mother recalled a conversation with her foster son in which she tried to convince the boy of his father's guilt: "Mommy acted and dad really was not ok with it. But where was your dad? Ehmm...dad just sat there and watched. Well... then he is equally guilty". Still, this boy seemed to blame his mother more for what happened: "When we were trained to be a foster parent, the trainers spoke of how the bond with a mother is truly unbreakable. Well, in this case the mother broke so many things...broke things beyond repair". This foster mother felt very strong in her need to protect her foster son from further harm, more specifically, from his mother.

The third foster mother was conflicted about holding the abusing mother accountable. She too linked the abuse of her foster son to the biological mother's own abuse history: "The relationship with her child just became sick in the course of time. I don't think she... and she was abused herself, so I don't think that, in that sense, it happened in an atmosphere of threat." The foster mother stated that for the intellectually impaired biological mother and her son, sex with each was just a part of everyday life. However, she stated:

"But when you see him reliving things in his sleep, screaming, or you come in his room and he is penetrating his stuffed animal, at that point I despise his mother. She crossed every line when it comes to sex. I get really, really angry, but when I'm with her, that dissolves. When I'm there, I don't see a perpetrator, I just find her really pitiable".

Although this foster mother was conflicted to hold the biological mother fully accountable for her actions, she emphasized her drive to protect the boy from his mother: "We've fostered him for three years now, so now I feel like he is my son. And I'm glad she isn't around anymore."

The fourth foster mother did not mention any possible "excuses" for the abuser, and spoke only in general terms about how abusers are responsible and guilty. She related an abuser's guilt to her own experience with sexual abuse:

"What I see in him and always experienced myself, is that you are the guilty one. That's what I've been telling him for over a year now: You are innocent. The adults are guilty. You can't say it often enough."

Sexual expressions towards foster mother

Three foster mothers narrated how their foster child showed sexualized behavior towards them, while one foster mother described her child is "a-sexual". This latter foster mother recounted

how her foster son did not allow himself any pleasurable sexual experiences: “According to him, it should not feel good.” His aversion towards sexuality worried his foster mother. The narratives of the other foster mothers contained accounts of sexualized behavior towards them, specifically, to them as women.

One foster mother, for example, noted how her foster son tried to figure out if he was safe in the beginning of the placement. She recalled him asking “why are you never in the shower with me... naked?”. In addition, he would try to touch the foster mother’s breasts. She reflected on this behavior as follows:

“Child experiences and adult experiences have been mixed so badly, he doesn’t know what is for adults and what is for children (...). This is what he was taught (...).”

This foster mother did not feel threatened by the boy’s behavior. One of the other foster mothers, however, expressed strong negative emotions about her foster child’s behavior, especially with regard to a child’s expressions of physical affection:

“She hugs me in the most inconvenient moments. For example, when I’m doing the dishes and have wet hands, she stands behind me and strokes my breasts. ‘By accident’. And then she apologizes for touching me there at least three times. It isn’t accidental, I always feel it is intentional.”

This foster mother struggled with the negative emotions the child’s behavior evoked, as she felt she should respond to the girl’s need for physical affection. This internal conflict was rooted in her view on what kind of (foster) mother she wanted to be:

“...she can’t help it, but it doesn’t feel natural, it feels very unpleasant (...) And I struggle to be pleasant to her, because at that particular moment I just want to push her away. But you can’t. She is your child too and she has the right to get attention and affection.”

In contrast to this experience, another respondent mentioned her foster son’s sexualized behavior specifically directed at her, however, she did not report feeling threatened by it. She narrated a memorable situation, early in the placement, in which the boy started masturbating in the shower. “It was very clear he wanted me to come back and do something with his penis (...). It’s odd, but he doesn’t do it when my husband helps him in the shower. So, since then my husband has helped him to shower”. Her husband’s active role in intimate care activities was out of the ordinary, as foster parents generally choose to limit the father’s part due to the risk

of abuse allegations. What shocked this foster mother most was how normal this seemed to the boy. This shock of normalcy had an ongoing emotional impact on her.

Keeping distance as a foster mother

The four women narrated their need to find a balance between keeping physical and emotional distance on the one hand and being an affectionate and caring mother figure to the children on the other. More specifically, some of them considered distance to be a part of their professional identity as a foster mother. However, this distancing aspect of foster motherhood was in contrast to the women's predisposition to be an unconditionally affectionate mother. Three women spoke of their professional identity as a foster mother explicitly. As they considered foster motherhood to be a profession, they cared within a framework in which creating physical and emotional distance was done consciously. In particular, the framework allowed the women to explain their need to maintain some distance, while also staying an affectionate mother figure.

One of the foster mothers described the evolution of her view on foster parenthood, as a certain amount of distance was not always evident:

"We visited the zoo and we saw a group of people in wheel chairs, and I said to my husband: 'those people have a right to a dignified life, and they need help in creating that'. That's what we need to do for her. Just making sure she has a good life. And that's it."

However, a difference between being a professional and being a foster mother remained: "Those people [professionals] get off around five o'clock, and they leave. They only have to be professional during office hours. But because I'm human I'm not always my professional self".

A second foster mother voiced her difficulty in balancing between professional distance and emotional investment in her foster son, as she feared professionals would condemn her for being too invested. "You don't want her to say 'I'm not sure if they are able, foster mother is very emotional". Particularly when children disclosed sexual abuse, this foster mother was very conscious of creating enough space for the child to speak freely. However, her natural reaction would be to comfort a child: "That's the most difficult, the balance between caregiving, giving attention, and wanting to comfort... and still maintaining a certain amount of professionalism". She compared this experience to a hypothetical situation concerning her biological children: "In that situation I would hold them and comfort them instantly, and act upon demand. Because then I'd have the authority to act immediately, then I would be allowed." This foster mother also

struggled with regulating the amount of physical affection she offered as any form of physical contact or intimacy could quickly become sexually laden.

In the narrative of another foster mother, the foster child identified her as a perfect mother, creating a complex dynamic. More specifically, the boy had come to the conclusion that foster mother had to be his “true” mother, as his biological mother had failed to protect and care for him, and he had been sexually abused by his first foster mother:

“Sometimes you have to teach children what a father and a mother are. A mother is not the person in whose tummy you grew, but a mother is the one who sticks up for you and cares for you. Who clothes you, guides you, and keeps you safe. So then he realized: you are my true mother”.

However, the boy came to identify her as a perfect individual: “I told him that I’ll try to help him and that I love him very much too. But that I also make mistakes”. This foster mother recognized this idealization of a trustworthy person, as she did the same in her youth as a means of coping with abusive experiences. Furthermore, because of what she experienced herself, this foster mother explained she always had a desire to care for foster children. She consciously created a happy home for her family, and expressed her wish to keep investing in this. To be able to maintain this, she choose to ‘not be a foster mother’ on certain days: On those days, this foster mother very consciously invested time, attention, and energy in her spouse, her biological children, and herself.

The last foster mother reported creating some distance between herself and her foster son, however, she did not link this to a professional identity.

“Some days the arguments begin at breakfast. And sometimes I check out: I’m not going to do this today. I’m not going to monitor his every move continuously and check what he is doing and if everything is all right.”

This foster mother differed strongly from the other foster mothers, as she did not maintain an emotional distance towards her foster son. In contrast to the others, this foster mother stated how her emotional commitment to the boy helped her through difficult times: “Once my husband said to me, ‘how far will you go?’. And my reply was ‘that’s my child, and I will not put my child on the streets. That’s not what I’d do with my children.’”

Feeling responsible and being held responsible

The four women all shared their thoughts on the tasks of motherhood in general, one of which was to protect both foster and birth children from harm. Additionally, all women felt they have been held accountable for their way of child-rearing by persons close to them. Lastly, they reported feeling responsible for failures.

Three foster mothers spoke of having to explain themselves or their actions to people in their immediate surroundings. For instance, one foster mother described how she, in the past, had felt the need to explain everything to others, so they fully understood what it meant to foster a child. However, she had stopped doing so: "It's frustrating, as no one has a clue what it is like to be her foster mother." She recalled how her experience, as stay-at-home foster mother, even differed from that of her husband: "He saw her at dinner, in the evenings, and at the weekend (...). And I told him what the days were like, and he had no idea (...). He truly thought things weren't that bad."

Similarly, another foster mother recalled reflecting on her parenting style, when her husband's parents said to her "You are really, really strict when it comes to him". However, when bystanders would judge her similarly, this impressed her less. For example, when she received comments from a stranger because she was quite stern in reminding her foster son to maintain boundaries: "I saw her talking to her husband until we were out of sight (...). Nowadays, I don't feel the need to explain myself anymore".

The third respondent differentiated between people to whom she felt she did or did not owe an explanation. This foster mother opened up more to 'true family friends'. For example, when people visited, she sometimes had to clarify why the timing of the visit was not good for her foster son. "Sometimes I have to say, he isn't capable of handling this right now. I've noticed that people don't understand why he reacts the ways he does, and they don't visit anymore. I feel I have to explain everything constantly."

The women also seemed to hold themselves accountable, mostly, when they felt they failed one of their children. One foster mother narrated her way of coping with these feelings of failure: "You have to realize, it's not me, it's not him...or her. It's the situation." She remembered some situations in which she had acted as she did with her other children, but in doing so, had unknowingly failed to act sensitively towards her foster son: "He had lived with us for three or four weeks. And I was on the couch and pulled him on my lap. He was as stiff as a board. So much resistance. I really had no clue back then..." Another foster mother felt, as she made the choice to foster, it was her responsibility to limit the negative impact of fostering for others. As a consequence, she isolated herself in the fostering experience so as not to burden anyone

but herself with the child's traumatic behavior. Moreover, she questioned her efforts, as she sometimes felt she fostered without positive result: "I don't really feel this is doing her some good, even though she deserves a place to live".

A third foster mother questioned herself throughout the placement of her foster son. For example, after an incident in which her foster son had touched a young child, she had had many questions: "At that point you go through everything in your head. (...) Should I have done things differently?" This foster mother mentioned how she had struggled to speak to her social worker about this incident. More specifically, even though this foster mother was shocked by the boy's behavior, she feared the boy would be taken away from them due to her failure: "She [the social worker] said, but I spoke to you before. And I told her that I just couldn't tell her (...). I thought that because I let this happen, he had to leave our family." Still, the foster mothers also voiced how they felt they were not fully responsible for the care of the child, as they remained dependent on legal guardians for some things. One foster mother was particularly frustrated with this, as she felt her foster son was harmed by "the system".

Discussion

The narratives reflect how the four participating women, each in their own way, sought a balance between being a professional carer and an affectionate (foster) mother, while being sensitive to their foster child's needs and history. Similar to the findings of several earlier studies (e.g., Broady, Stoyles, McMullan, Caputi, & Crittenden, 2010; Blythe, Halcomb, Wilkes & Jackson, 2012; Kirton, 2007; Schofield, Beek, Ward & Biggart, 2013; Wozniak, 2002), our results indicate that the professional and the parental dimension of fostering are interrelated. More specifically, one dimension can help in shaping the other, while at the same time hindering it.

A first complicating feature was the foster mothers' attitude towards the abusing mother figure, and consequently towards the child. Peter (2006) reviews how the culpability of the abusing female is oftentimes marginalized, as her agency and choice are not considered. Additionally, the labels given to abusing mothers as 'mad', 'bad' or 'victims' are considered as stable or fixed traits. In our study, however, the narratives of the four foster mothers reveal how they held the abusing mothers to some extent accountable for their actions. Still, two foster mothers limited the accountability of the abusing female, as they suspected the abusing mothers were not consciously abusing or harming their children, but were victimized themselves. In addition, intellectual disability was mentioned as a partial excuse for the sexually aggressive behavior. The generational aspects of the abuse complicated the women's fostering experience:

They saw how having sex seems ‘normal’ to these young, abused children. However, some of our respondents felt that, despite continuous efforts in teaching the child otherwise, their foster child made a conscious choice to behave sexually towards others. Intentionality of actions seems to be key as to whether to hold a person accountable for their actions, adult or child. More specifically, the foster mothers’ view on the abusing mother figure as both victimizer and victimized (Peter, 2006) appears to influence their views of their foster child.

Secondly, the women’s accounts of situations in which their foster child behaved sexually towards them as females, illustrate the need for a balance between the parental and professional dimensions of foster motherhood. Only one of the foster mothers narrated experiencing the child as potentially sexually threatening to her as a person. Hence, the narratives of the foster mothers seemed to differ from literature on males who foster (e.g., Gilligan, 2000; Heslop, 2016; Inch, 1999). These studies show that fostering males oftentimes experience and anticipate personal risks and distance themselves from parenting activities to prevent allegations. Furthermore, even though male foster carers might enjoy being involved in caregiving, they get less chance to incorporate their male parental identity in their fostering experience. For instance, Newstone (2000) illustrates how societal attitudes and cultural pressure do not acknowledge men’s role in fostering, as fostering is still regarded a primarily female activity. Thus, while male foster carers may struggle incorporating their identity as father in the everyday practice of fostering, the females in this study seemingly were able to do so.

“ *Our results indicate that the professional and the parental dimension of fostering are interrelated* ”

‘Keeping a distance’ may be part of all foster mothers’ professional approach. Similar to what several other studies report, all the foster mothers in our study approached foster motherhood as their profession (e.g. Blythe, Wilkes, & Halcomb, 2014; Kirton, 2007; Vanderfaillie et al., 2016). This enabled them to keep an acceptable distance. In accordance with this, Kirton (2007) suggests detachment as a dimension of being a fostering professional. However, the four women also identified as warm, affectionate mothers to their foster child, or they felt they should be. Thus, foster motherhood, according to these women, should not be viewed from a binary perspective of either being a “distant” professional or a fully invested warm mother figure. In general, our results indicate that, similar to what Newstone (2000, p. 43) suggests of fostering men, we need to realize that fostering women ‘model different facets of their sex at different times’, especially when fostering a victim of maternal sexual abuse. Still, in accordance with some of the results of Schofield et al. (2013), the four women did not seem to experience a conflict between the ‘carer’ or ‘parent’ role. Although they deem fostering to be work, they seem

to primarily identify as parents, not as carers. Nonetheless, fostering a victim of maternal sexual abuse especially influenced the “warm caring mother figure” part of fostering. Our respondents narrated how they had to adjust child-rearing practices, given their foster child’s history of sexual abuse. For example, they referred to differences in expressing physical affection to the child. Similarly, Broady et al. (2010) state that “the foster parent’s self-identity as a warm, loving and kind parent figure becomes threatened”, when the anticipated relationship with a foster child is not matched in everyday life (p. 569). Thus, the foster mothers seemed to keep some emotional (e.g., being a carer) and physical distance (e.g., reframing the role of being a parent in their work) .

Lastly, the women’s sense of responsibility reflects the balance between the professional and the personal dimension of foster motherhood. Kirton (2007) notes that ‘the ‘work’ of fostering is carried out in and through the family’ (p.12). This means that the family is managed within the care system. This is illustrated by foster mothers’ feeling of being held responsible for their foster child’s behavior. This responsibility is similar to that of professionals who work in care settings, for example, in residential care. However, foster mothers also hold themselves responsible for situations where they feel they have failed as a mother. Lastly, they feel responsible for preventing harm being done to any of their children, mostly their birth children, as they have chosen to foster. Thus, fostering a child with a history of abuse impacts everyday life as pressure not only builds from within, but also from the care system surrounding the child.

As the four participating foster mothers reflected on specific experiences with their foster child, as well as on foster motherhood in general, our study presents similar and additional themes. Some themes, for example “the attitude towards the abusing female’ and “sexual expressions towards the foster mother” seem more linked to fostering a victim of sexual abuse by a female carer, while the professional dimension of fostering is observed in foster parenthood more commonly. Nonetheless, fostering a victim of maternal sexual abuse does seem to have a distinctive influence on the women’s everyday fostering experience. Being the foster mother of a victim of maternal sexual abuse proves to be a particularly complex endeavor.

Strengths and limitations

The accounts of the four participants in our study illustrate what it means to foster a child with a history with maternal sexual abuse. However, several limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, the study was not designed as a multiple case study. In the data collection and the data analysis process in the broader study we came across

four women with similar experiences and chose to study their narratives more in-depth. We did not purposefully select such foster mothers. Secondly, only the content of the four narratives was analyzed. We did not study the structure or the discourse of the narratives, for example, we did not analyze story lines or word choice. Lastly, we need to consider some of the characteristics of the sample. For instance, two women fostered a child with fetal alcohol syndrome. This could have influenced their foster experience significantly. These limitations notwithstanding, this study revealed some interesting parallels and differences to previous studies on the experience of foster carers.

Future directions

More research on fostering victims of maternal sexual abuse is needed to deepen our knowledge of this understudied topic. Multiple case studies with a larger sample may add to our knowledge on the topic. The parental identity of foster carers is an interesting feature, which should be examined more thoroughly. For example, how do foster parents, male and female, position themselves as parents, while sexually abusive biological parents are also in their foster children's lives? Additionally, the results of this study imply that in foster care practice, social workers should be aware of the complicated and demanding role of foster mothers caring for a child who has been victim of maternal sexual abuse.

Conclusion

This study begins to illustrate how caring for a foster child with a history of maternal sexual abuse influences foster motherhood. More specifically, the narratives of foster mothers illustrate how they sought to maintain a balance between the professional and parental dimensions of parenting a foster child. Our results give some insights into the complexity of fostering a child with a history of maternal sexual abuse, as foster mothers' responsibilities, expectations, and ambitions are continuously challenged.

