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Original research article

Perceived functioning of the family system in professional foster families

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Abstract
Aim: The aim of this study was to analyse the differences in the perception of the functioning of the family system between professional foster parents, their life partners, biological children, and children placed in professional foster families.
Methods: The sample consisted of 401 respondents. The functioning of the family system was measured using the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale – FACES IV. The Family Communication Scale and the Family Satisfaction Scale were administered to assess communication and satisfaction with the family system.
Results: The results of the statistical analyses did not confirm differences in the perception of the functioning of the family system between professional foster parents and their life partners, nor between the biological children of professional foster parents and children placed in professional foster families. Professional foster parents and children placed in professional foster families differed statistically significantly in balanced cohesion. Professional foster parents and their biological children differed statistically significantly in their perception of disengaged cohesion. Partners of professional foster parents and children placed in professional foster families differed in their perception of family adaptability, with children in professional foster families perceiving family functioning as more rigid compared to partners of professional foster parents. The results also indicated that biological children perceived family cohesion as more disengaged than partners of professional foster parents.
Conclusion: Understanding the functioning of the family system of professional families is important in effectively applying a systems approach when working with this target group.

Keywords: Family adaptability; Family cohesion; Family communication; Family system; Olson's circular model; Professional foster family

Introduction

The professional foster family is an organisational part of the Centre for Children and Families. Professional foster parents provide care for children from the Centre for Children and Families in their own home, twenty-four hours a day. To better understand the functioning of professional foster families, it is important to focus on the family systems themselves. We take a systems approach to the family, which focuses on the processes taking place in the family and on the causes of family dysfunctions and difficulties of family members.

Families should be open to change in order to maintain their stability. Reluctance to change interactions and rules can lead to negative consequences in family functioning (Merkel and Searight, 1992; Watzlawick et al., 1999). The family as an open system is not just the sum of the properties of its individual members, but the system properties extend beyond all its members (Berg, 1992). A professional foster family is an open system, just like a biological family. The individual elements of this open system, *i.e.*, the subsystems, the family members, are in constant interaction (Becvar and Becvar, 2018; Montgomery and Fewer, 1988).

Professional foster families are characterised by many changes and unexpected situations. They should be flexible in developing their relationship rules, traditions, and problem-solving strategies to meet the requirements of individual family members who differ in age, temper, cultural background, and personal and family history. Children who come into professional foster families are among the most vulnerable groups, typically having experienced maltreatment in their families, substance abuse by their parents, poverty, and suffering from mental health issues (Kelly, 2017; Navrátilová et al., 2021). Research shows that children in foster care have two

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to three times higher rates of developmental, emotional, and behavioural problems than other children (Burns et al., 2004; Keil and Price, 2006). In addition, a child in a professional foster family has to cope with "dual belonging" to his/her biological family and to the professional foster family (Rosnati et al., 2007).

It is important for professional foster parents not to overlook these factors (Degarmo, 2013). One reason for this may be inadequate training of professional foster parents (Kirton, 2012; Stace and Lowe, 2009). The above risk factors may have an impact on the functioning of the family system of professional foster families. For this reason, we consider it important to find out how members of professional foster families perceive their family system.

Our study is based on Olson's circular model of couple and family systems, the philosophical underpinnings of which are anchored in systems theory. Family functioning within the circumplex model is described by three core dimensions, namely cohesion, adaptability, and communication, which emerged from a cluster analysis of more than fifty concepts developed to describe couple and family dynamics (Olson, 1993).

Family cohesion is defined as the physical and emotional closeness of family members. Concepts that can be used to measure family cohesion are emotional connection, autonomy, coalitions, boundaries, spending time, space, friends, decision making, and interests (Olson, 1993). Cohesion is made up of five levels that range from disengaged, somewhat connected, connected, overly connected, and enmeshed. The three middle levels form a balanced system and, according to Olson and Gorall (2006), represent the optimal way for families to function. The two extreme levels represent an unbalanced system and point to problematic family functioning. Although it is generally difficult to determine an objective ideal level of cohesion in family systems, according to Olson (1993), functioning in extreme positions is problematic in the long run.

Family adaptability measures the quality and expression of roles, rules, organisation, and leadership in the family. Concepts related to this dimension are control, discipline, roles, rules, and negotiation style (Olson, 1993; Olson and Gorall, 2003). A systems understanding of the family suggests that families require both stability and change, as they must meet individual needs while maintaining a sense of stability (Minuchin, 1974). Adaptability is made up of five levels and ranges from rigid, somewhat flexible, flexible, very flexible to chaotic. Similar to cohesion, the three middle levels of adaptability are considered balanced and are associated with healthy development of the individual and the whole system. The two extreme levels represent an unbalanced system and pose a risk to healthy family functioning in the long run (Olson and Gorall, 2003).

Family communication is a facilitating dimension because it helps family members to adjust their level of cohesion and adaptability according to changing situational or developmental conditions. It contains several elements of communication that are applied in the family system. These include listening skills, communication skills, a tendency toward self-disclosure, clarity, effective problem-solving skills, the ability to stay on topic, and respect for the communication partner (Olson, 1993; Olson and Gorall, 2003).

According to Olson (1993), the application of positive communication skills (empathy, active listening, supportive comments) enables family members to share their feelings and to inform themselves about changing needs or expectations, thereby changing the level of cohesion and adaptability in the family system. On the contrary, ambiguous communication, insincere communication, and excessive criticism make it impossible to communicate openly through emotions and needs (and thus to make changes in the dimensions of cohesion and adaptability).

This model is well established in many studies. Several studies have focused on the adolescent group (Baiocco et al., 2013; Craddock, 2001; Everriet al., 2020) . These studies have shown that the FACES IV questionnaire can provide insight into understanding the parent-child relationship as well as measuring adolescent well-being by identifying risk factors during developmental changes such as adolescence (Everri et al., 2020). Other studies have focused on the perception of family functioning from the parents' perspective (Boyraz and Sayger, 2011; Gupta and Bowie, 2016). However, no studies have examined predictors of cohesion, adaptability, and communication in professional foster families.

The aim of our study was to analyse the differences in the perception of the functioning of the family system between professional foster parents, their life partners, biological children, and children placed in professional foster families.

Materials and methods

Procedure

The quantitative study focuses on professional foster families. As a first step, we approached the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family – which is the founder of Centres for Children and Families staffed by professional foster parents – and applied for approval to carry out the research. After the Central Office granted consent to the research, we contacted the directors of the Centres for Children and Families via email and asked them to forward the online questionnaires to professional foster families. Data collection took place between November–December 2022.

Characteristics of the research sample

The research sample consisted of a total of 401 respondents. 203 professional foster parents participated in the study. The mean age of respondents was 48.43 years (SD = 9.02), they had an average of 2 biological children (SD = 1.38), and at the time of the research they had been practising professional foster parenting for an average of 7.47 years (SD = 5.31) and had had an average of approximately 7 children placed (SD = 6.76). They were mostly women (n = 183, 90.1%), with a secondary school diploma (called "maturita" in the Slovak Republic) (n = 147, 72.4%), living with their life partner/spouse (n = 155; 76.4%) in a rural area (n = 139, 68.5%), while their life partner/spouse did not usually carry out the professional foster parenting with them (83.7%).

97 partners of professional foster parents participated in the study, with a mean age of 48.65 years (SD = 11.16). There were 84 males (86.6%) and 13 females (13.4%); 66 (68%) lived in rural areas, 31 (32%) in urban areas, the majority had a secondary school diploma ("maturita") (53.6%), followed by secondary school education without a diploma (40.2%), and only 6.2% of the respondents had a university degree.

As to children placed in professional foster families, 31 respondents participated in the research, 20 females (64.5%) and 11 males (35.5%), with a mean age of 16.19 years (SD = 8.71); 20 children resided in rural areas (64.5%) and 11 in urban areas (35.5%).

Finally, 70 biological children of professional foster parents, 34 (48.6%) females and 36 (51.4%) males, with a mean age of 20.59 years (SD = 8.04), participated in the study;

47 (67.1%) of the biological children resided in rural areas, 23 (32.9%) resided in urban areas.

Measurements and instruments

Family system functioning was measured using the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale (FACES IV) self-report questionnaire (Olson, 2010) that allows us to determine the manifestations of a balanced (functional) and unbalanced (dysfunctional) family system. The questionnaire contains 42 items rated on a five-point Likert scale. It is made up of six subscales containing seven items. The first two subscales assess a balanced or healthy level of cohesion and adaptability. Higher scores indicate healthier family functioning. The other four scales measure the extreme poles of adaptability and cohesion. Higher scores indicate a more dysfunctional family system.

Family communication was measured using the Family Communication Scale (Olson and Barnes, 2004) that allows us to determine positive aspects of communication – the ability to exchange emotional and factual information between family members, and the level of satisfaction and perceived ease with family communication. This is the 10-item Likert scale in which respondents indicated the frequency (1 – almost never to 5 – very often) of various forms of communication within the family (*e.g.*, "understand each other's feelings"). High scores indicated constant and frequent existence of positive forms of communication.

Finally, the Family Satisfaction Scale (Olson, 2010) was used to measure the extent to which family members feel satisfied with cohesion, adaptability, and communication. It is a 10-item Likert scale in which respondents indicate their level of satisfaction (ranging from 1 – very dissatisfied to 5 – very satisfied) with cohesion, adaptability, and communication. A high score indicates a high level of family satisfaction.

Dimensions of family system functioning observed:

- Balanced cohesion – measures the ability of family members to maintain both mutual cohesion and autonomy, to engage in joint and individual activities, to spend appropriate amounts of time together, to make decisions together, and support each other.
- Balanced adaptability – measures the ability of family members to balance between stability and change, the degree of democratic leadership, involvement of all family members in decision-making, flexibility of roles and rules.
- Enmeshed cohesion – measures excessive emotional closeness and dependence of family members, lack of independent, non-family interests, activities, friends and individual time spending of family members, demanding loyalty.
- Disengaged cohesion – measures emotional disengagement of the family members, low involvement in family life, high individual independence, individual activities, interests and time-use, and inability to support each other.
- Rigid adaptability – measures rigidity in family decision making, roles and rules, autocratic leadership and control by one family member – the leader.
- Chaotic adaptability – measures unreliability and unpredictability of leadership, ambiguity of rules, roles and tasks, impulsivity in decision making and shifting of responsibilities among family members.
- Proportional Score of Flexibility, Cohesion and the Whole Circumplex Model – determines the overall level of functioning/dysfunctioning of the family system.
- Family communication – measures the positive aspects of family communication, the ability to exchange emotional and factual information between family members, and the degree of satisfaction and perceived non-coercion with family communication.
- Family satisfaction – measures the extent to which family members feel happiness and fulfilment in the family. Participants comment on their level of satisfaction with three dimensions of family functioning - cohesion, adaptability, and communication.

Statistical analyses

SPSS 21 software was used for statistical data processing. In the first step, the descriptive characteristics were calculated and the normal distribution of the variables tested. The results showed that most of the variables did not meet the conditions of normal distribution (skewness and kurtosis values were greater than 1). Due to the unequal numbers of respondents in each group, we then used non-parametric tests for statistical inference. As this was a comparison of two independent groups of respondents with unequal numbers, in variables without a normal distribution, we used the non-parametric Mann–Whitney *U*-test. The Mann–Whitney *U*-test is one of the most commonly used nonparametric tests in behavioural sciences. The advantage of this test is that it can be used when the number of respondents is uneven. Research data will be made available on request.

Results

The results showed that perception of the family system did not differ statistically significantly between the professional foster parent and his/her partner (Table 1).

Table 1. Differences in the perception of family functioning between the professional foster parent and the partner of the professional foster parent

	PFP (n = 203)			Partner of PFP (n = 97)			U	p
	M_1	SD_1	Md_1	M_2	SD_2	Md_2		
Balanced cohesion	31.78	3.40	33	31.62	3.77	33	9,797.5	0.945
Balanced adaptability	29.63	3.64	30	29.57	3.74	30	9,779.0	0.924
Enmeshed cohesion	15.06	3.83	15	14.59	3.95	15	9,169.5	0.333
Disengaged cohesion	12.56	4.22	12	12.51	3.70	11	9,704.5	0.840
Rigid adaptability	17.23	4.61	18	16.56	5.07	17	9,190.5	0.350
Chaotic adaptability	11.61	4.41	11	11.81	4.66	11	9,835.0	0.988
Proportional cohesion score	2.42	0.61	2.41	2.50	0.73	2.5	9,200	0.358

Table 1. ***(continued)***

	PFP (n = 203)			Partner of PFP (n = 97)			U	p
	M_1	SD_1	Md_1	M_2	SD_2	Md_2		
Proportional adaptability score	2.17	0.60	2.15	2.24	0.71	2.07	9,309.5	0.446
Total proportional score	2.30	0.55	2.27	2.37	0.66	2.44	9,085.0	0.279
Family communication	44.01	5.94	46	44.04	6.04	46	9,648.0	0.778
Family satisfaction	43.87	6.26	45	44.31	6.20	46	9,160.5	0.326

Notes: PFP – professional foster parent, M – mean, SD – standard deviation, Md – median, U – Mann-Whitney U-test, p – significance

The results showed that the professional foster parent and the child placed in the professional foster family differed statistically significantly only in their perception of balanced cohesion, with children in professional foster families perceiving family cohesion to be lower ($p < 0.01$) than the professional foster parents. In terms of substantive significance, this is a small difference ($\eta = 0.13$) – Table 2.

Table 2. Differences in the perception of family functioning between the professional foster parent and the child placed in the professional foster family

	PFP (n = 203)			Child in PFC (n = 31)			U	p
	M_1	SD_1	Md_1	M_2	SD_2	Md_2		
Balanced cohesion	31.78	3.40	33	30.16	4.54	31	2,434.5	**0.04**
Balanced adaptability	29.63	3.64	30	30.06	4.13	31	2,797.0	0.317
Enmeshed cohesion	15.06	3.83	15	15.16	4.51	14	3,000.0	0.675
Disengaged cohesion	12.56	4.22	12	14.39	5.31	13	2,497.0	0.063
Rigid adaptability	17.23	4.61	18	19.42	6.10	19	2,551.5	0.089
Chaotic adaptability	11.61	4.41	11	12.97	5.49	12	2,750.5	0.256
Proportional cohesion score	2.42	0.61	2.41	2.23	0.76	2.20	2,625.5	0.138
Proportional adaptability score	2.17	0.60	2.15	2.00	0.63	1.94	2,695.5	0.199
Total proportional score	2.30	0.55	2.27	2.11	0.64	2.14	2,621.5	0.135
Family communication	44.01	5.94	46	42.58	6.09	44	2,652.5	0.158
Family satisfaction	43.87	6.26	45	43.23	6.48	45	3,002.0	0.679

Notes: PFP – professional foster parent, PFC – professional foster care, M – mean, SD – standard deviation, Md – median, U – Mann-Whitney U-test, p – significance

The results showed that professional foster parents and their biological children differ statistically significantly in their perception of disengaged cohesion. Biological children perceive the family as more disengaged ($p < 0.01$) than their parents. In terms of substantive significance, this is a small difference ($\eta = 0.17$) – Table 3.

Table 3. Differences in the perception of family functioning between the professional foster parent and his/her biological child

	PFP (n_1 = 203)			Biol. child of PFP (n_2 = 70)			U	p
	M_1	SD_1	Md_1	M_2	SD_2	Md_2		
Balanced cohesion	31.78	3.40	33	30.47	4.42	32	6,026.0	0.057
Balanced adaptability	29.63	3.64	30	28.81	4.29	30	6,485.5	0.275
Enmeshed cohesion	15.06	3.83	15	14.44	4.34	14	6,273.5	0.142
Disengaged cohesion	12.56	4.22	12	14.21	4.64	14	5,540.0	**0.006**
Rigid adaptability	17.23	4.61	18	17.34	5.10	17	6,998.5	0.851
Chaotic adaptability	11.61	4.41	11	12.7	4.79	11	6,147.5	0.091
Proportional cohesion score	2.42	0.61	2.41	2.33	0.83	2.23	6,405.0	0.219
Proportional adaptability score	2.17	0.60	2.15	2.10	0.77	1.97	6,446.5	0.248
Total proportional score	2.30	0.55	2.27	2.21	0.74	2.19	6,427.0	0.234
Family communication	44.01	5.94	46	42.27	6.84	44.50	6,021.0	0.056
Family satisfaction	43.87	6.26	45	42.7	7.80	45.5	6,809.0	0.601

Notes: PFP – professional foster parent, M – mean, SD – standard deviation, Md – median, U – Mann-Whitney U-test, p – significance

The results showed that the partner of the professional foster parent and the child placed in the professional foster family differed statistically significantly only in the level of rigid adaptability. Children in professional foster families perceived family functioning as more rigid ($p < 0.01$) compared to partners of PFPs. In terms of substantive significance, this is a small difference ($\eta = 0.18$) – Table 4.

Table 4. Differences in the perception of family functioning between the partner of the professional foster parent and the child placed in the professional foster family

	Partner of PFP ($n_1 = 97$)			Child in PFC ($n_2 = 31$)			U	p
	M_1	SD_1	Md_1	M_2	SD_2	Md_2		
Balanced cohesion	31.62	3.77	33	30.16	4.54	31	1,164.0	0.056
Balanced adaptability	29.57	3.74	30	30.06	4.13	31	1,331.0	0.335
Enmeshed cohesion	14.59	3.95	15	15.16	4.51	14	1,446.5	0.750
Disengaged cohesion	12.51	3.70	11	14.39	5.31	13	1,212.5	0.103
Rigid adaptability	16.56	5.07	17	19.42	6.10	19	1,135.0	**0.04**
Chaotic adaptability	11.81	4.66	11	12.97	5.49	12	1,337.0	0.350
Proportional cohesion score	2.50	0.73	2.5	2.23	0.76	2.20	1,193.0	0.084
Proportional adaptability score	2.24	0.71	2.07	2.00	0.63	1.94	1,230.0	0.128
Total proportional score	2.37	0.66	2.44	2.11	0.64	2.14	1,185.5	0.077
Family communication	44.31	6.20	46	42.58	6.09	44	1,246.0	0.150
Family satisfaction	44.04	6.04	46	43.23	6.48	45	1,339.0	0.354

Notes: PFP – professional foster parent, PFC – professional foster care, M – mean, SD – standard deviation, Md – median, *U* – Mann-Whitney *U*-test, *p* – significance

The results showed that the partner of the professional foster parent and the biological child of the PFP differed statistically significantly only in the perception of disengaged cohesion. Biological children perceived family cohesion as more disengaged ($p < 0.01$) than partners of PFPs. In terms of substantive significance, this is a small difference ($\eta = 0.18$) – Table 5.

Table 5. Differences in the perception of family functioning between the partner of the professional foster parent and the biological child of the professional foster parent

	Partner of PFP ($n_1 = 97$)			Biol. child of PFP ($n_2 = 70$)			U	p
	M_1	SD_1	Md_1	M_2	SD_2	Md_2		
Balanced cohesion	31.62	3.77	33	30.47	4.42	32	2,882.5	0.092
Balanced adaptability	29.57	3.74	30	28.81	4.29	30	3,141.0	0.408
Enmeshed cohesion	14.59	3.95	15	14.44	4.34	14	3,263.5	0.669
Disengaged cohesion	12.51	3.70	11	14.21	4.64	14	2,669.0	**0.018**
Rigid adaptability	16.56	5.07	17	17.34	5.10	17	3,137.5	0.403
Chaotic adaptability	11.81	4.66	11	12.7	4.79	11	2,970.0	0.165
Proportional cohesion score	2.50	0.73	2.5	2.33	0.83	2.23	2,899.0	0.108
Proportional adaptability score	2.24	0.71	2.07	2.10	0.77	1.97	2,925.0	0.127
Total proportional score	2.37	0.66	2.44	2.21	0.74	2.19	2,895.0	0.105
Family communication	44.04	6.04	46	42.27	6.84	44.50	2,834.5	0.068
Family satisfaction	44.31	6.20	46	42.7	7.80	45.5	3,009.5	0.207

Notes: PFP – professional foster parent, PFC – professional foster care, M – mean, SD – standard deviation, Md – median, *U* – Mann-Whitney *U*-test, *p* – significance

The results showed that biological children and children placed in professional foster families did not differ statistically significantly in their perception of family functioning (Table 6).

In children placed in professional foster families, there were statistically significant associations between perception of the family system and age. The older the children in the professional foster families, the more enmeshed (overly cohesive) ($r = 0.51$; $p < 0.01$), disengaged ($r = 0.47$; $p < 0.01$), and chaotic ($r = 0.41$; $p < 0.05$) they perceived the family system to be. There were no differences in the perception of the family system with respect to the gender of children in the professional foster families. Similarly, there were no differences with regard to whether or not they lived with their siblings in the family. For biological children, perception of the family system did not correlate with age, nor did they differ with respect to children's gender.

Table 6. Differences in the perception of family functioning between the child placed in the professional foster family and the biological child of the professional foster parent

	Child in PFC (n_1 = 31)			Biol. child of PFP (n_2 = 70)			U	p
	M_1	SD_1	Md_1	M_2	SD_2	Md_2		
Balanced cohesion	30.16	4.54	31	30.47	4.42	32	1,015.5	0.607
Balanced adaptability	30.06	4.13	31	28.81	4.29	30	887.5	0.144
Enmeshed cohesion	15.16	4.51	14	14.44	4.34	14	987.0	0.468
Disengaged cohesion	14.39	5.31	13	14.21	4.64	14	1,081.5	0.979
Rigid adaptability	19.42	6.10	19	17.34	5.10	17	897.5	0.166
Chaotic adaptability	12.97	5.49	12	12.7	4.79	11	1,083.5	0.991
Proportional cohesion score	2.23	0.76	2.20	2.33	0.83	2.23	1,022.0	0.643
Proportional adaptability score	2.00	0.63	1.94	2.10	0.77	1.97	1,044.5	0.766
Total proportional score	2.11	0.64	2.14	2.21	0.74	2.19	1,014.5	0.604
Family communication	42.58	6.09	44	42.27	6.84	44.50	1,081.5	0.979
Family satisfaction	43.23	6.48	45	42.7	7.80	45.5	1,074.0	0.935

Notes: PFC – professional foster care, PFP – professional foster parent, M – mean, SD – standard deviation, Md – median, *U* – Mann-Whitney *U*-test, *p* – significance

Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyse the differences in the perception of the functioning of the family system between professional foster parents, their life partners, biological children, and children placed in professional foster families. The results of the statistical analyses did not confirm any differences in the perception of the functioning of the family system between professional foster parents and their life partners, *i.e.*, they have the same perception of the family system and they are satisfied with the family system. It is possible that professional foster parents and their life partners tried to create a more positive image of family functioning in terms of more positive cohesion and communication according to what is socially desirable. Similarly, there were no differences in the perception of family functioning between biological children of professional foster parents and children placed in professional foster families.

Family cohesion is one of the key protective factors in the family (Gupta and Bowie, 2016). When assessing cohesion, we found several differences among members of professional foster families. Professional foster parents and children placed in professional foster families differed statistically significantly in balanced cohesion, *i.e.*, children placed in professional foster families perceived their families as less cohesive than professional foster parents. Our results correspond with the findings of Prange et al. (1992), whose results showed that adolescents perceive their families as less cohesive than their parents. This difference may reflect adolescents' desire for independence from family (Graham, 2004). Although adolescence may not cause serious conflicts between professional foster parents and adolescent children placed in professional foster families, it should be noted that adolescents tend to behave in ways that parents may not approve of. Balanced family systems are said to guide their children towards optimal individual development. In such families, adolescents can spend time alone as well as together with their families, there is sharing of activities, leadership tends to be democratic, there are stable roles that can be shared, and family rules are consistent and better suited to the developmental needs of its members (Gomes and Pereira, 2019).

The results confirmed that biological children perceive the family as more disengaged than their parents. The results also indicated that biological children perceived family cohesion as more disengaged than the partners of professional foster parents. This result may be due to the fact that as adolescents gradually become more independent from their families, they may feel less obligation to their parents. Similar data have been reported from studies that used Olson's Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems to compare parents' and adolescents' perception of the functioning of their own families. In their research, Noller and Callan (1986) found that adolescents perceived their families to be less flexible and less cohesive compared to their parents. The trend observed in these findings corresponds with the theoretical assumption that adolescents are in the process of developing autonomy, and are thus becoming independent from their parents (Noller and Callan 1986; Wagner, 2012).

In addition to family cohesion, another key variable observed is family adaptability. When it came to adaptability, differences were only confirmed between the partners of professional foster parents and the children placed in professional foster families; with the children in professional foster families perceiving family functioning as more rigid compared to the partners of the professional foster parents. Walsh (1998) suggests that after a major life crisis families may struggle to return to normal life. Indeed, adopting a child into a professional foster family can require major changes in the roles of the professional parents, their life partners, and biological children. According to Patterson (2002), it is important for families to find balance between maintaining a stable family structure and allowing for change in response to developmental and environmental demands. Several researchers (Patterson, 2002; Walsh, 1998) have highlighted that family adaptability can be an important variable that supports family adjustment, especially during crises.

In children placed in professional foster families, there were significant associations between the perception of the family system and age. The older the children in profession-

al foster families, the more they perceived the family system as overly cohesive, disengaged, and chaotic. Differences in adolescents' perception of family may depend on their age (Trommsdorff and Schwarz 2007). However, research findings confirm that the family remains an important factor in adolescent development despite a slight decrease in cohesion with increasing adolescent age (Bokhorst et al., 2009; Macek, 2003; Sentse and Laird, 2010).

Differences in the perception of the family system with respect to the gender of children in professional foster families have not been demonstrated, which is consistent with the results of Cumsill and Epstein (1994), Feldman and Gehring (1988), Pereira and Texeira (2013), and Sarour and El Keshky (2021), who did not find any cross-gender differences in family system cohesion and adaptability. In contrast, Baiocco et al. (2013) and Popelkova and Šeboková (2015) confirmed gender differences, with women showing higher scores in family cohesion and adaptability.

The results of this study indicate existing differences in the perception of the functioning of the family system among members of professional foster families. Caring for a child from the Centre for Children and Families is challenging and often stressful and impacts the entire family system. Therefore, it is important that every single member of the professional foster family feels satisfied. Placing a child in a professional foster family may require the professional foster parents to strengthen their belief in their ability to positively influence the life of the placed child. Mutual respect and good relationships provide a sense of security for the child (Olecká et al., 2023). Doležalová et al. (2022) highlight the importance of a secure relational bond for children removed from their natural family environment. Participation in intervention programs that promote parenting skills and expand the stress management repertoire of professional foster parents can have a positive impact on the functioning of the family system in professional foster families. Another effective intervention is supervision; when professional foster parents are under the supervision of an experienced supervisor they are better able to respond to the unpredictable changes that are often associated with the practice of professional foster parenting.

A strength of our study is the research focus on professional foster parents' perception of the functioning of the family system in professional foster families. This has not previously been a study focus in the area of family system research. Another strength is that we chose to examine the differences between individual members of professional foster families.

However, this study also has some limitations that need to be considered when interpreting these findings. One limitation is the unbalanced numbers of respondents in each group. Another is the online form of data collection; it is not guaranteed that respondents completed the questionnaires independently, and this may have biased the data somewhat in the sense of "embellishing" the results. Another limitation is the absence of studies focusing on the functioning of the foster family system. The use of only one methodology is also a limitation as it cannot capture the complexity of family functioning, thus combining a wider range of diagnostic tools is recommended (Kouneski, 2000). Future research could focus on comparing professional foster families' and ordinary families' perception of the functioning of the family system. Equally interesting could be the correlation of the functioning of the family system of professional foster families with feelings of mental well-being and parenting style.

Conclusion

The study findings provide insight into the functioning of the family system of professional foster families and highlight the importance of assessing multiple family members to understand the dynamics of professional foster families. The study has provided interesting results and suggested starting points for future research. It has pointed out the predictors where the perception of professional foster family members differs and where they coincide. We believe that attention should continue to be paid to the functioning of the family system in professional foster families.

Ethical statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the data protection regulations (GDPR) and the Declaration of Helsinki (2013). The questionnaire was anonymous and voluntary. Participants were provided with written information about the aims and relevance of the study and data processing, including guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality of any data they provide.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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