

A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF FOSTER CHILDREN
ON THE MARITAL RELATIONSHIP OF FOSTER PARENTS

by

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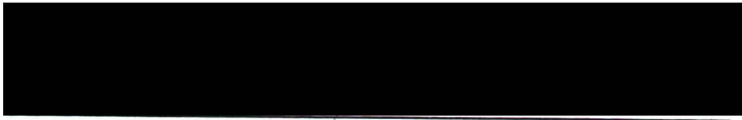
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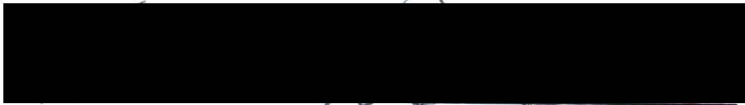
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the marital relationship of foster parents, specifically examining their level of marital quality and the impact that foster children had on their marriage relationship. Forty foster parents completed questionnaires, including the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) and the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens & Bugaighis, 1986). Twelve of the 40 foster parents also participated in face-to-face interviews. Foster parents reported 'average' levels of marital adjustment and 'very satisfied' levels of marital satisfaction. In answers to open and close-ended questionnaire and interview questions, foster parents clearly indicated that foster children did not have a negative impact on their marital relationship, but rather they had either no impact or a positive impact on the married foster couple's relationship. Reasons for the neutral or positive impact of fostering on foster parents' marriage relationship included the common goal and shared experience of fostering, the positive influence of increased communication between spouses and the building of personal relationships with foster children.

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Dedicated to my parents,
who taught me the true meaning of
marital quality and commitment.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My mother is a nice lady. She takes very good care of us. She makes sure is we eat well. And my father always Watches us when we play. My father is a nice man. and my mother too. My mother and father want the best for us and love us very much. My parents Take us to school every day. We have a nice room. She gives us food every day. and we love our foster mother and I love my family too. I Love my real parents too. I miss them too. (Israel, 1985, p. 19)

According to Kendrick (1990), approximately 60,000 Canadian children experience life in foster care each year. In British Columbia alone, 6000 children were living in foster care in 1991 (Family and Children's Services Division, 1992). For various reasons, these children are unable to live within their natural families, and require a safe, caring and nurturing home, for a short or extended period of time. Foster parents provide this competent and loving day to day care for thousands of Canadian children, and in this way support the foundation of social services agencies across the country.

Despite the thousands of children living in foster care, concerns regarding the quality of the foster care system for foster children, natural families and foster families have been reported throughout the literature for the past 30 years. Problems with the system have included an inadequate supply of foster homes, inappropriate placements of children for extended periods of time, multiple placements, abuse of foster children in foster homes, and "burn out" of foster parents (Garrett, 1977; George, 1970; Horejsi, 1979; Kendrick, 1990; Lavine, 1977; Steinhauer, 1984). Kendrick (1990) documented many of these difficulties, concluding that

Canada is experiencing a "foster care crisis" (p. 5). In addition to these concerns, there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting the 'success' of foster care (Colton, 1988; Kendrick, 1990). Rowe (1983) stated that the theoretical basis for work in foster care was also minimal. For decades, researchers and professionals have been calling for increased knowledge in many areas within the field of foster care to strengthen the quality of care given to children (Colton, 1988; Horejsi, 1979; Wolins, 1963).

The marital relationship of foster parents is one area in particular that needs further research. Jordan and Rodway (1984) identified this need when they explored the correlates of effective foster parenting. They found that effective foster parents, defined as those able to manage a wide variety of often serious and maladaptive behaviors of school age foster children, reported significantly higher levels of marital satisfaction than did non-effective foster parents. The authors indicated that this finding regarding foster parent marital relationships was a unique aspect of their study and that "the husband's and wife's satisfaction with each other is an area that merits increased and more intensive exploration" (p. 30).

The influence of a foster child and the impact of the fostering experience on the marital relationship of foster parents is also an unexplored research area. Although several studies have acknowledged that the presence of a foster child in the home has a significant effect on all of the relationships within the family (e.g., Felker, 1981; Lloyd, 1982; Wilkes, 1974), little is known about how the experience of foster parenting affects the marital relationship of foster parents.

This study addresses the lack of knowledge regarding foster parents' marital relationships. Based on previous empirical research and theory,

the two major research questions in this study were: What is the level of marital quality within foster parent marriages, and what is the perceived effect(s) of a foster child on the marital relationship of foster parents? To answer the latter question more specifically, six areas were investigated, including the general impact of foster children on foster parents' marriages, their impact on marital satisfaction, communication between spouses, amount of time foster parents spent together, the impact of foster children on marriages over time, and the specific marital impact of certain foster children. This study provides a valuable addition to our limited knowledge of foster parent marital relationships and the various types of impact that foster children can have on that relationship, based on foster parent experiences. The study also contributes to human service work practice by illuminating the importance of addressing the marriage relationship of foster parents during foster parent recruitment, training and evaluation.

The following definitions will be used throughout the study. A 'foster parent' refers to an individual who has been approved by a social service agency to provide day to day foster parent services within their own home, while the term 'foster child' refers to a child living in the care of a social service agency, in an agency approved residential resource. 'Marital quality' is defined as the subjective evaluation of a married couple's relationship on a number of dimensions and evaluations (Lewis and Spanier, 1979). Sabatelli (1988) defined 'marital adjustment' as those processes that are presumed necessary to achieve a harmonious and functional marriage relationship, while 'marital satisfaction' refers to an individual's attitude toward the marriage relationship or the partner.

In summary, the purposes of this study were to describe the marital quality of foster parent marriages and to explore the impact of foster children on the marital relationship of foster parents, from the foster parents' perspective. This study begins to address the lack of empirical data regarding the nature of the relationship between foster children and the marital relationship of foster parents.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Within the foster parenting literature, reference to the marital relationship of foster parents has been minimal. When it has been referenced, it is included within the literature regarding foster parent recruitment, characteristics of foster parents, and variables of effective foster parenting. The research has focused on the extent to which the marital relationship of foster parents has influenced foster children and foster care placements. This study explores the relationship between the presence of foster children and the marital relationship of foster parents, focusing on the impact of foster children on the marriage of foster parents.

Foster Parenting

Research regarding foster parent recruitment has long considered the marital relationship of foster parents. Hutchinson (1943) indicated that the relationship between the husband and wife is of crucial significance for the foster child. She encouraged social workers to assess the marital relationship of foster parents during the recruitment process. Glickman (1957) and George (1970) confirmed the necessity of appraising the strength of the marriage of potential foster parents. Taylor and Starr (1967) indicated that all of the authors whose work they reviewed regarding foster parent selection stressed the importance of understanding the nature and meaning of the foster family relationships in order to properly evaluate foster parent applicants. Smith (1984) also stressed the need to discuss the marital history and present marital relationship with prospective foster parents.

Taylor and Starr (1967) described the characteristics of foster parents, including their marital relationship. They argued that while many researchers (e.g. Babcock, 1965; Markey & Noble, 1936) investigating foster parent marital relations in the 1960s viewed the foster mother as the dominant figure in the marital relationship and the foster father as the passive follower, there was some disagreement with this conclusion (Kohn, 1961). Markey and Noble's (1936) study of 35 boarding homes found that boarding home mothers were the more masculine and dominant parent in a high number of instances. The authors defined 'feminine' as the characteristics of passivity and submissiveness, while 'masculine' referred to the characteristics of activity and aggressiveness. Markey and Noble judged boarding parents as masculine or feminine according to their observations and discussions with the parents, social workers and employers regarding these traits. The authors stated that it was adequate to assume that foster children exposed to masculine boarding mothers were likely to experience psychosexual difficulty.

In Babcock's (1965) study of the psychodynamic factors of foster parenthood, she also found that foster mothers were the more dominant parents in the household. She indicated that many foster parent marital relationships were stable, but based on the parenthood role. Babcock suggested that foster parents maintained their marital relationships through the roles of father and mother, rather than through companionship relationships. A criticism of Babcock's research is that much of the information regarding the marital relationship of foster parents consisted of speculations and inferences, based on social workers' and Babcock's observations of foster parents' marital relationships.

Kohn (1961) disagreed with Markey and Noble (1936) and Babcock (1965), indicating that through her experiences with foster parent groups, foster fathers participated actively and did not appear to be the passive followers of dominant foster mothers. However, Kohn's analysis is also based on her anecdotal observations of one group of foster parents.

There was also disagreement regarding how the dominance of foster mothers affected foster children. Markey and Noble (1936) suggested that the dominance of the foster mother interfered with the adjustment of foster children, while Babcock (1965) argued that the passivity of the foster father expressed a mutual agreement regarding family roles. Taylor and Starr (1967) concluded that this lack of agreement suggested a need for further research into how the marital relationship of foster parents affected foster children and social service agencies.

More recent research regarding the characteristics of foster parents has simply reported the marital status of foster parents, indicating that the majority of foster parents are married (Carbino, 1980; Madison & Schapiro, 1969; Petersen & Pierce, 1974) and have been married an average of 16 years (Lindholm & Touliatos, 1978).

Researchers have also considered the nature of foster parent marital relationships in predicting the success of foster families and foster care placements. For example, Stone and Stone (1983) attempted to predict the variables involved in successful foster care placements in order to determine the risk of foster placement breakdown and to identify factors associated with potential placement success. Stone and Stone considered, among many other variables, the quality of the marital relationship of foster parents in predicting the success of foster placements. The authors

concluded that the quality of a foster parents' marriage significantly contributed to the successful placement of foster children.

Jordan and Rodway (1984) also considered the marital relationship of foster parents when establishing the correlates of effective foster parenting and successful foster placements. They found that effective foster parents reported significantly higher levels of marital satisfaction than did non-effective foster parents. However, the level of effectiveness of foster parents was rated by social worker evaluations, without controlling for the effect of the social workers' personal judgements and values. Jordan and Rodway indicated that this finding was a unique aspect of their study and suggested that research into the marital relationship of foster parents merited further exploration.

It is evident from this review of foster parenting literature that the marital relationship of foster parents has been acknowledged as an important factor within foster parenting, and that further research into the area is necessary (Jordan & Rodway, 1984; Taylor & Starr, 1967). However, researchers have largely focused on the extent to which the foster parent marital relationship affects the foster child and the foster placement. Lloyd (1982) indicates that there is little research concerning the impact that fostering has on foster parents.

Wilkes (1974) and Felker (1981) have acknowledged that foster children impact on foster families. Wilkes suggested that the presence of foster children on the foster family is stressful and requires adjustment from every member of the foster family. Felker acknowledged the influence of foster children on foster families and foster parent marriages. She included in her advice to foster parents, adoptive parents and

stepparents. that the addition of a new member of the family often requires difficult changes for the foster family and foster parents' marital relationship. She suggested spending time and energy on the marriage relationship, which would in time positively impact on the children in the home. It appears however that both Wilkes' and Felker's reports are grounded in personal experience, not empirical research.

Lloyd (1982) studied the effect of foster children on the growth of foster parents, defined as the movement towards enhancing individual potential or self-actualization. He found that foster fathers displayed significantly more growth than foster mothers. Lloyd indicated that further investigation into the impact of the foster child on both foster parents was necessary. Lloyd did not consider the impact of foster children on the marital relationship of foster parents.

Marital Quality and Children

Research regarding marriage and the family has been extensive over the past 30 years and researchers have used a variety of terms to explore the marital relationship of parents, including marital satisfaction, adjustment, happiness, integration, quality and stability. For the purposes of this study, Lewis and Spanier's (1979) terminology will be used. The concepts of marital stability and marital quality used by these authors have been increasingly used within marriage and family research (Spanier & Lewis, 1980; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Sabatelli, 1988; Harrison & Westhuis, 1989; Fowers, 1990). The authors describe two areas within marital research - marital stability and marital quality. Marital stability considers whether or not the marriage is intact. A stable marriage is terminated by death, while an unstable marriage ends in divorce or

separation. Marital quality however, is defined by Lewis and Spanier as "a subjective evaluation of a married couple's relationship" (p. 269). It encompasses the notions of marital satisfaction, adjustment, happiness and integration. This study focuses on the marital quality of foster parent marital relationships. It should be noted that the research reviewed here has explored marital quality using a variety of terms and measures. These results will be reported using the original researchers' terminology.

One of the areas which seems to have been well researched within the area of marital quality is the influence of children on the marital relationship. Research regarding marital relationships can be categorized into three areas of interest: the relationship between the presence of children and marital quality, the transition to parenting and its effects on marital quality, and marital quality over the life cycle. This review will focus primarily on research regarding the relationship between the presence of children and marital quality.

Hicks and Platt (1970) reviewed the research regarding marital quality and stability in the 1960s. In their discussion of children's influence on marital satisfaction, Hicks and Platt indicated that despite the popular assumption at the time that children and marital happiness were causally related, little or no support for this assumption was found in empirical research. One of the the first studies in the area was completed by LeMasters in 1957. He found that the the transition to parenthood created a crisis for married couples and a decrease in marital satisfaction. Hurley and Palonen (1967) found that as the number of children in the home increased, the satisfaction within the marriage decreased (as cited in Hicks and Platt, 1970, p. 559). Luckey and Bain (1970) found that satisfied

married couples enhanced their relationship through companionship with each other, while unsatisfied marriages considered children to be the only source of happiness.

Spanier and Lewis's (1980) review of marital quality literature in the 1970s and Schlesinger's (1983) research of lasting and functioning marriages in the 1980s both indicated that marital research continued to confirm the negative relationship between children and marital quality. Although research in the 1970s suggested that the number of children and their spacing did not influence marital satisfaction, Rollins and Galligan (1978) indicated that most of the current research was congruent with the notion that the presence of dependent children in the home placed extra stress on the time, energy, and economic resources of parents, and resulted in a decrease in the marital quality of parents.

Within her research regarding the correlates of marital dissatisfaction, Renne (1970) found that parents, especially those currently raising children, were less satisfied with their marriages than couples whose children had left home or who had never had children. The number of children in the home did not affect the rate of dissatisfaction.

Feldman (1971) studied the effects of children on the marital relationship of parents. He also found that those couples with children had significantly lower levels of marital satisfaction than those without children. Feldman was particularly interested in marital satisfaction over the family life cycle and during the transition to parenthood. He found that those couples with an infant had a significantly lower level of marital satisfactions than those couples who were childless, even when the length of marriage was controlled. Feldman concluded that "since it is unlikely that

a decrease in marital satisfaction yields a baby, a cause and effect relationship is more probably in the opposite direction, i.e., having a baby causes a decrease in marital satisfaction" (p. 116).

Among many other variables, Glenn and Weaver (1978) studied the impact of the presence of children on marital happiness. The results of their study suggested a strong negative relationship between the presence of very young children and the marital happiness of white mothers. Glenn (1975) also measured the psychological well-being of parents with and without children living in the home. He found higher levels of psychological well-being in the postparental category. Although Glenn was primarily interested in researching the empty-nest syndrome of the parenting life cycle, his research also highlighted the negative influence of dependent children on the well-being of parents.

Glenn and McLanahan's (1982) study of marital happiness and children confirmed that the presence of children in a family on average lowers the marital satisfaction of the parents, of both sexes, all races, major religious preferences, educational levels, and employment statuses. In examining the causal processes that lead to the negative correlation between children and marital happiness, White, Booth and Edwards (1986) confirmed that the presence of children had a significant negative effect on the marital happiness of parents. The authors also controlled for eight background factors including religiosity, sex role traditionalism, wife's labor force participation, wife's education, years married, family income and respondent's race and sex. The introduction of these individual variables as well as the interaction between them did not reduce the coefficient for children's presence. The authors stated that the results of

their study confirmed Glenn and McLanahan's (1982) conclusion that the negative relationship between the presence of children and marital quality occurs in all population subgroups.

Houseknecht (1979) studied the relationship between voluntary childlessness and marital adjustment. Comparing fifty currently married women who were childless by choice and fifty married mothers, Houseknecht found that the childless women scored higher in overall marital adjustment than did the mothers. Although focusing on the results of childless women, the notion that children negatively influence marital satisfaction of mothers was supported.

Chester (1982) reviewed the British research regarding the impact of children on marital relationships. He indicated that the work of British researchers, although limited in this area, supported the American findings that the presence of particularly young dependent children negatively affected the marital satisfaction of parents.

Summary

Researchers have acknowledged the importance of understanding the marital relationship of foster parents. However, they have focused on the impact of the marital relationship on the foster child and the foster placement. Few authors have acknowledged the impact of the foster child on the foster parent(s), and this remains a largely unexplored area. In particular, there is a lack of empirical data supporting the notion that the presence of foster children influences the marital relationship of foster parents. Literature regarding the impact of natural children on their parent's marital relationship suggests a negative relationship between marital satisfaction and children. This literature provides a useful basis for

exploring the relationship between the presence of foster children and the marital relationship of foster parents.

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this study, the family is viewed as interactive and systemic in nature. Systems theory views families from this perspective. Although much of the research regarding foster parenting and marital relationships appears to be atheoretical, systems theory is a useful framework for understanding the marital relationships within this study.

Bernier (1990) stated that systems theory serves as the theoretical base for beginning to understand the way in which family and individual systems are linked in circular, causal patterns. Family systems theory is based on the notion that the parts of the family can only be understood as they relate to one another and to the whole. These parts or components of the family interact, so that each influences and is influenced by the other, together producing a whole system which is larger than the sum of its interdependent parts. Systems theory emphasizes wholeness, arguing that no system can be understood once it has been broken down into its separate parts, and that no part within the system can be understood in isolation from the whole system, since it never functions independently (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1985).

Each family system contains many subsystems, described as "units within the overall system that carry out distinctive functions in an effort to maintain themselves and sustain the system as a whole" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1985, p. 37). For example, the marital relationship constitutes a subsystem, as well as the relationship between a foster mother

and a foster child. Individuals can also be considered subsystems within a family (Minuchin, 1974).

Each system has boundaries which hold the system together and protect it from outside stresses. An open system has flexible boundaries which allow input - matter, energy, or information - to come into the system from the environment and also allow output into the outside environment. A closed system has little or no interaction with the environment and operates only within the system. Eastman (1979) indicates the foster families are open systems which allow non-related children and child welfare agencies into the family system.

Systems strive to maintain stability or homeostasis. Homeostasis refers to the internal and ongoing interactional processes which take place within a family and help ensure internal balance (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1985). When something threatens this stability in a family, feedback signals the system to self-correct and reestablish homeostasis (Bernier, 1990). Eastman (1979) argues that each new foster child has a different impact on the foster family and threatens the stability of the family. The foster family is forced to adapt to the change and transition of accepting a new subsystem into the family. However, at the same time, the foster family must remain stable, or risk being torn apart. Thus, static qualities are necessary in foster families in order to maintain the system, as well as flexible qualities which allow for adaptability and movement within the system, all working to provide homeostasis within the family system (Eastman, 1979).

The literature regarding marital quality and the influence of children reviewed here does not explicitly acknowledge any theoretical base. In

fact, Lewis and Spanier (1979) indicate that "there has been no systematic effort at building a theory or even a propositional inventory in the area of marital quality" (p. 270). Despite this fact, the influence of systems theory is evident in some of the research. LeMasters (1957) indicated that his research regarding the negative impact of first born children on the marital relationship of parents was based on a conceptual framework which regarded the family as a social system. Systems theory is useful in this area of research because it acknowledges that other members of the system affect the marital subsystem, and that the marital subsystem affects the other components within the system.

In summary, the literature regarding marital quality suggests that children have a significant impact on the marital relationship of parents. This notion is supported by the theoretical base of systems theory. However, the impact of foster children on the marital relationship of foster parents remains unexplored within the area of foster parenting. A critique of the foster parenting literature reveals a lack of empirical data supporting the notion that the presence of foster children influences the marital relationship of foster parents. This study explores the relationship between the presence of foster children and the marital relationship of foster parents, based on foster parent experiences.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Sample

A convenience sampling technique was used to obtain this study's sample of foster parent couples. Permission to contact foster parents in the South Island Foster Parent Association was obtained in writing from the Association's regional council and from the Ministry of Social Services. After approval was received, an advertisement (Appendix A) requesting volunteers for the study was placed in the 'Fosterletter', the South Island Foster Parent Association's monthly newsletter. One couple was recruited from this advertisement. The author also attended several local foster parent meetings throughout the month of June, 1992 in an attempt to gather further volunteers. Representatives from the Foster Parents Association also assisted in volunteer recruitment by requesting volunteers at all of the foster parent meetings held in June, 1992. In this manner, a total of 60 participants, or 30 couples, agreed to participate in the study.

Data from 40 of these volunteers, or 20 couples, were utilized in the study. Foster parents received two phone calls as a reminder to complete and return their questionnaires. Nine couples returned the questionnaire immediately, five couples returned them after one phone call and six couples returned the questionnaire after two phone calls. Ten couples did not return the questionnaire, two couples due to the sensitivity of the subject matter and three couples due to external time constraints. Five couples did not return their questionnaires after two reminders.

At the end of the questionnaire, foster parents were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up, personal interview. Nine

couples volunteered to participate in face-to-face interviews. Six of these foster parent couples were interviewed. Three couples were unable to participate due to external time constraints.

Characteristics of the Sample

The participants for the present investigation were 20 foster parent married couples ($N = 40$ individuals) involved with the South Island Foster Parent Association. Each couple provided foster parenting services to children in care through the Ministry of Social Services in British Columbia during 1992 and 1993. The participants had been foster parents for an average of 6.0 years, with a range of 1 to 16 years. These foster parent couples had fostered from 2 to 150 children, providing care for an average of 27.4 children during their fostering careers. It should be noted that the demographics presented here were obtained from individual responses and do not reflect couple information.

An equal number of males and females participated in the study due to the fact that only foster parent married couples were recruited for the study. The mean age of the participants was 43.3 years, ranging from 25 to 64 years of age. All of the participants were married, and the average length of each marriage was 19.1 years, with a range of 5 to 38 years.

Sixty percent ($n=24$) of foster parent participants had two or three natural children and the average age of their natural children was 15. Only 12.8% ($n=5$) of the participants had one or more step-children and 22.5% ($n=9$) of the participants had one or more adoptive children. Forty percent ($n=16$) of the participants had neither natural, step or adoptive children presently living in their home, while an additional twenty percent ($n=8$) had only one natural, step or adoptive child in their home. At the time of

data collection. foster parent participants had an average of 2 foster children living in their home, and their average age was 8.7 years.

Race, income and education levels of the participants in this study were similar to those reported in the literature regarding the general characteristics of foster parents (Carbino, 1980; Kendrick, 1990; Petersen & Pierce, 1974). These authors have reported that foster parents are generally Caucasian couples over forty, from lower-middle socioeconomic groups, who lack a high-school education . Within the present study 72.5% ($n=29$) of the participants had a maximum of a high school education, ranging from between ninth and eleventh grade to a graduate degree. Income levels were fairly evenly distributed across participants, with 30.6% ($n=11$) of the participants reporting an annual combined income of \$30,000 to \$39,999. 27.8% ($n=10$) of the participants earned a combined income of \$40,000 to \$49,999, and 36.1% ($n=13$) earned a combined income of \$50,000 to \$74,999 a year. All of the participants in the study were of European decent and 75% ($n=30$) of the participants were in part or entirely of English decent. Participants held a variety of jobs, concurrent to their work as foster parents. Eleven of the participants were homemakers, ten individuals held jobs involving manual labour, six had professional careers, four participants were in sales, two participants were students and two were retired.

Measures

Data were collected from all 40 participants using self-administered questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire included two standardized scales measuring marital adjustment and marital satisfaction, in addition to close- and open-ended questions regarding the influence of

foster children on the marital relationship of the participants. A smaller number ($n=12$) of foster parents were also personally interviewed by a research assistant, after the questionnaires had been completed.

Sabatelli (1988) indicates that marital quality is measured by two types of scales: adjustment quality scales and satisfaction quality scales. Both scale types were used in this study. Sabatelli states that marital adjustment scales measure those processes that are presumed necessary to achieve a harmonious and functional marriage relationship. Therefore, a well-adjusted couple frequently interacts, seldom disagrees on important marital issues, communicates openly and resolves disagreements in a mutually satisfactory manner. The unit of analysis in a marital adjustment scale is the dyad and the object of analysis in an adjustment scale is objective in nature, in that, respondents report on types of behavior that characterize their marital interactions without passing judgement. Marital satisfaction scales measure the respondent's satisfaction with the relationship or partner. The unit of analysis is the individual and the object of analysis is the individual's subjective impressions of the relationship.

The importance of measuring both marital adjustment and marital satisfaction independently stems from Sabatelli's (1988) concern that all of the major adjustment scales include satisfaction as a component of adjustment. Sabatelli indicates that this threatens the validity of the scale by blending the units (individual and dyad) and objects (subjective evaluations and objective characteristics) of analysis into a single measure. He states that by scaling different units and objects of analyses as if they are comparable phenomena, it is difficult to identify what the resulting score actually represents. As a result, this study measured the two concepts

separately through the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens, & Bugaighis, 1986) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976).

The Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986) was used as a quick and direct assessment of foster parents' marital satisfaction. The scale consists of three items which ask respondents how satisfied they are with their partner as a spouse, with their marriage, and with their relationship with their spouse. The scale has performed reliably in a series of studies, with alphas ranging from .89 to .93 (Schumm et al., 1983a, 1983b, 1986) and test-retest reliability of .71 over a 10 week interval (Mitchell et al., 1983). Evidence of the scale's criterion-related and construct validity have also been found (Sabatelli, 1988).

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale, introduced by Spanier (1976), was used as a measurement of foster parents' marital adjustment. Spanier (1979) indicates that despite the fact that the term marital quality best reflects how well a marriage generally functions, there are no published measures of the concept as he defines it. Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale focuses on marital adjustment as the most general of the measurable indicators of marital quality. In this way, the scale is intended to give a global measure of the quality of the respondent's marital relationship, as well as subscale measures of dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion and affectional expression. The scale reflects the relationship of the dyad, but is scored, measured and analyzed according to individual responses. The 32 item scale gathers self-report data and has been used in over 1000 studies. It has an overall coefficient alpha of .96, with subscale alphas between .73 and .94 (Fowers, 1990). As well, content, criterion-

related and construct validity of the scale have been determined. According to Spanier (1982) and various reviewers of marital quality scales (e.g., Fowers, 1990; Sabatelli, 1988), the scale is best used for its summary measure of the couple's marital quality rather than for its subscale measures. For the purposes of the current study, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale was used primarily as a summary measure of marital adjustment, although subscale measures were also analyzed.

Open-ended and close-ended questions in the questionnaire focused on how foster parents perceived that the experience of foster parenting and the presence of foster children had affected their marital relationships. These questions were developed by the researcher based on the literature and piloting information. The questionnaire was piloted with three married foster parent couples from Smithers, B.C, ranging in age from 33 to 51, with an average age of 43 years. The couples had been married an average of 20 years, and had been foster parents for 12 years. They had fostered an average of 27 foster children during those years.

Demographic data including age, race, job, income, and education level as well as length of marriage, number of natural children and length of foster parenting experience were also collected in the questionnaire. The entire instrument and covering letter appear in Appendix B.

Procedure

Each participating couple was sent two identical questionnaires with covering letters. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaires individually, and not to discuss their responses before completing the questionnaire. Questionnaire data were recorded by the participants on a written form. Each husband and wife completed a separate, though

identical questionnaire in their home at a convenient time for the participants. All of the participants involved in the study signed an informed consent form before participating in the study, and they were assured of their ability to cease involvement in the study at any time (Appendix C). The nature and purpose of the study was disclosed to the participants within the advertisement requesting volunteers and in the letter of informed consent. Participants were also assured anonymity within the initial advertisement and in the informed consent form. Each questionnaire was assigned an identification number before the questionnaire was sent out, in an attempt to keep the names of the participants anonymous. Foster parents had the opportunity to discuss the questionnaire and the research process with the researcher by phone before and after the completion of the data collection, if requested. Completed questionnaires were returned by mail in pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelopes. Foster parents received one phone call as a reminder to return the questionnaire after four weeks, as well as one phone call after six weeks.

Four months after the questionnaire data had been collected, six in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with foster parent couples who had indicated a willingness to be interviewed on the questionnaire. Nine of the twenty couples who returned the questionnaire volunteered to participate in an interview; these couples were recontacted by letter (Appendix D). Couples were only interviewed if both partners agreed to be interviewed. Of the nine couples who volunteered, six couples were interviewed. Three couples were unavailable for an interview due to external time constraints.

The interviews were conducted by a trained research assistant in order to assure anonymity of the participants. The questions discussed in the face-to-face interview were open-ended and were generated from the questionnaire data and the goal to include more of the personal experiences of foster parents in the research. The interview questions appear in Appendix E. Each interview was conducted in the home of the foster parenting couple at a time convenient for both foster parents, and both partners were present during the interview. Interviews were conducted with both partners in an attempt to promote dialogue and discussion of the questions and to gain further insight into the foster parenting couple as a dyad. Since the questionnaires were completed individually by each partner, it was felt that interviewing couples together would add a valuable perspective to the research. Each spouse was encouraged through individual probes to express his or her own answer, opinion and experience, without needing to come to consensus with their partner. The interviews were recorded on audiotape and later transcribed by the researcher. All names were deleted from the transcripts to ensure the anonymity of each couple.

Analysis of Data

The data gathered from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale and the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale were scored according to the procedures outlined by their authors. The close-ended questions on the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. To explore the possible influences on foster parent marital quality, correlations and t-tests were performed between demographic data, and the scale scores and close-ended questionnaire answers. Pearson product moment correlations were

performed between all of the scales and subscales and age, income, education, length of marriage and length of fostering experience, as well as between the close-ended questions on the questionnaire and length of marriage and length of fostering experience. T-tests were used to compare men and women's scores on each of the scales and the close-ended questions on the questionnaire, and Kendall's Tau correlations were performed to compare spousal answers on the scale scores and the close-ended questions on the questionnaire. The open-ended questions of the questionnaire and the interviews were analyzed using content analysis. After carefully reading the data several times, a process of inductive analysis was completed, in which patterns, categories and themes were retrieved from the open-ended questionnaire and interview data (Patton, 1980; Taylor, 1984). Ideas or comments made by at least five foster parents on a repeated basis were included as themes in the interview and questionnaire data. The open-ended questionnaire data were analyzed for themes across participants within each question. The interview data were analyzed for themes within couple responses, within interview questions and across interviews.

The purpose of these analyses was to identify and describe the level of marital quality experienced by foster parents, and to describe participants' understanding and experiences of how foster children influence their marital relationships. Comparisons were made between the different sample subgroups, between the open and close-ended sections of the questionnaire, and between the questionnaire and interview data to identify trends across different subgroups and methods of data collection. This process of triangulation between quantitative data and open-ended

written and verbal responses provided a clear picture of both the objective and subjective realities of the study participants (Patton, 1980). The unit of analysis for all analyses of the questionnaire data was the individual, due to the fact that data were obtained from individual spouses. Couple answers were also correlated to compare spousal responses on the close-ended questions on the questionnaire. The interview data were examined primarily with the dyad as the unit of analysis because couples were interviewed together. However, individual responses were also analyzed since foster parents were encouraged to speak from their own personal experiences without the need to come to couple consensus.

CHAPTER IV

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Analyses of the questionnaire data were tailored to the study's two major research questions. Therefore, the findings will be presented according to these two questions. The first section will describe foster parents' level of marital quality, according to the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens, & Bugaighis, 1986) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) and its four subscales. The second section will describe the impact of foster children on the marital relationship of foster parents, as perceived by foster parents. This section is divided into six smaller sections which examine the impact of foster children on specific areas of the marital relationship. These six areas include the general impact of foster children on the marital relationship, the impact of foster children on marital satisfaction, communication between spouses, and time spent together, as well as the impact of foster children over time, and the impact of certain foster children on the marital relationship. Responses to the open-ended questions of the questionnaire will also be presented in this second section. It is important to note that although the number of foster parents who answered the open-ended questions was not large, definite trends were revealed within their answers. Interview results will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.

Levels of Marital Quality

In this study, foster parents' level of marital quality was measured by the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, et al., 1986) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). Figure 1 lists the scales that were used

to measure marital satisfaction and marital adjustment. General descriptive analyses were performed on the participants' scale scores and are reported in Table 1. As Table 1 illustrates, participants' responses to the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale indicate a 'very satisfied' mean level of marital satisfaction. Participants' responses to the Dyadic Adjustment Scale were in the 'average' level of dyadic adjustment according to Spanier's (1989) interpretive guidelines. Responses to the Dyadic Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction and Affectional Expression subscales also fell into the 'average' category. Only the answers to the Dyadic Cohesion subscale were in the 'slightly above average' category. According to Spanier (1989), the Dyadic Cohesion subscale assesses the common interests and activities shared by the couple.

Kendall's Tau correlations were performed between individual spouses' scale scores to determine the degree of agreement between couples. Couple scores were significantly correlated ($p < .05$) on both of the total scale scores and all four subscale scores. Participants were also divided by gender and responses were analyzed separately for marital quality differences. T-tests were performed, comparing means of men and women's scores on each of the scales and subscales. No differences were found in the means of answers for men and women. Correlations were also performed between all of the scales and subscales and age, income, education, number of years married and number of years as foster parents. Only income and Marital Satisfaction Scale scores were significantly correlated ($r = .50$, $p < .01$); as income increased, foster parents' satisfaction in their marriage relationship also increased.

Figure 1

Variables and Measures

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Measure</u>
Marital Satisfaction	Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale ^a Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale ^b
Marital Adjustment	Dyadic Adjustment Scale ^b Dyadic Consensus Subscale ^b Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale ^b Dyadic Cohesion Subscale ^b Affectional Expression Subscale ^b

^aKansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens & Bugaighis. 1986)

^bDyadic Adjustment Scale and subscales (Spanier, 1976)

Table 1: Levels of Marital Quality

SCALE	MEAN (<u>n</u>)	Standard Deviation	Converted T- Score ^a	Corresponding Adjective
Marital Satisfaction Scale ^b	6.12 (39)	.62	-	Very Satisfied ^b
Dyadic Adjustment Scale ^c	117.150 (40)	12.81	51	Average ^c
Dyadic Consensus Subscale	51.025 (40)	5.98	49	Average
Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale	40.050 (40)	4.16	49	Average
Affectional Expression Subscale	9.225 (40)	1.67	50	Average
Dyadic Cohesion Subscale	16.850 (40)	3.01	56	Slightly Above Average

Note: range for Marital Satisfaction Scale= 4.67-7.00; Dyadic Adjustment Scale= 90-146; Dyadic Consensus Subscale= 40-62; Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale= 31-49; Affectional Expression Subscale= 6-12; Dyadic Cohesion Subscale= 10-24.

a) Standardized scores for the Dyadic Adjustment Scale and subscales (Spanier, 1976).

b) Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens & Bugaighis, 1986). Adjective refers to the authors' descriptive response set from the scale itself.

c) Dyadic Adjustment Scale and subscales (Spanier, 1976). Adjectives refer to Spanier's (1989) interpretive guidelines for T-scores: Above 70 = very much above average, 66 - 70 = much above average, 61 - 65 = above average, 56 - 60 = slightly above average, 45 - 55 = average, 40 - 44 = slightly below average, 35 - 39 = below average, 30 - 34 = much below average, below 30 = very much below average.

To determine the extent to which the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, et al., 1986) and the Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale (Spanier, 1976) measured the concept of marital satisfaction similarly, responses on each were correlated. The two scales were found to be highly correlated ($r=.80$, $p<.001$), suggesting that the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale and the Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale in fact do measure similar aspects of marital satisfaction.

In summary, foster parents viewed their marital relationships similarly to their spouses in all areas measured by the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, et al., 1986) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). Men and women did not differ systematically in their marital relationship scores. Foster parents reported a 'very satisfied' level of marital satisfaction, according to scores on the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale and an 'average' level of marital adjustment, measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale. Within the four Dyadic Adjustment subscales, foster parents reported 'average' levels of dyadic consensus, satisfaction and affectional expression, and 'slightly above average' scores of dyadic cohesion.

Impact of Foster Children on the Marital Relationship

The remainder of the questionnaire focused on the impact of foster children on the marital relationship of the fostering couple, as perceived by foster parents. These questions fell into six areas, including general impact, impact on marital satisfaction, communication, time spent together, impact over time and the impact of certain foster children on the marital relationship. The specific questions which addressed each of these areas

and their corresponding close-ended response alternatives are listed in Appendix F.

Each of the close-ended variables was separated by gender and T-tests were performed, comparing means of men's and women's individual answers to each of the variables. Though there was variability among responses, no significant differences were found between the means of answers for men and women on any of the variables. Foster parents' individual answers were also correlated with couple answers to determine if spouses answered each question in a same or different manner. Using Kendall's Tau, spousal answers were correlated to a significance level of $p < .05$ on seven of the fifteen close-ended variables on the questionnaire. Correlations were also performed using each of the variables and length of marriage and length of fostering experience. No significant correlations were found between the length of fostering experience and any of the variables describing the impact of foster children on the marital relationship of foster parents. Only one significant correlation was found between the length of foster parent marriages and these variables. The number of years foster parents were married was found to be significantly correlated ($r = .75$, $p < .01$) with the number of arguments foster parents reported on issues of importance. That is, as the length of the fosters' parent marriages increased, the number of arguments couples reported on issues of importance also increased.

General Impact of Fostering

When answering questions about foster parents' general perceptions of foster children's impact on their marital relationship, 50% ($n = 20$) of foster parents stated that foster parenting had brought them closer together,

while 40% ($n=16$) stated that their relationship stayed the same, and 10% ($n=4$) stated that foster parenting had brought them farther apart. More than half of the foster parents (56.4%; $n=22$) indicated that in general, foster parenting has had some effect on their relationship, with 76.9% ($n=20$) of the 26 participants who responded stating it had a positive effect on their marriage and 23.1% ($n=6$) stating it had a negative effect. Seventeen (43.6%) foster parents stated that foster parenting did not affect their marital relationship at all. When asked to identify the degree of impact that fostering had on their marital relationship, 35% ($n=14$) of foster parents indicated that they experienced either no impact or a small impact on their relationship, 27.5% ($n=11$) indicated a moderate impact and 37.5% ($n=15$) indicated a significant or great impact.

Answers to the open-ended questions of the questionnaire provided support and enrichment to the frequencies reported above. When foster parents were asked how they thought foster parenting had influenced their marital relationship, many couples ($n=10$) mentioned the notion of teamwork and a common goal which contributed to the positive effect fostering had on their relationship. They felt that fostering had taught them to work together, learn together, and share and enjoy things together. They described a common sense of purpose in fostering together that had a positive effect on their marital relationship, in words such as "it has given us another area in our life that we can share together and enjoy together;" and "it taught us how to work together and how to draw on each others' strengths." Some foster parents ($n=4$) also indicated that their ability and need to communicate increased when they became foster parents, and this also had a positive effect on their relationship. The negative effects of

fostering were identified as less time to be together ($n=1$), the increased stress of parenting difficult children ($n=3$) and conflicting parenting ideas ($n=1$). The pressure of dealing with the Ministry of Social Services and social workers was also mentioned by one participant as a reason why fostering had a negative effect on their relationship.

When asked why they thought foster parenting brought them closer together, twenty-five percent ($n=10$) of foster parents again indicated that the aspect of team work and working together towards a common goal played a significant part in bringing them together as a couple. Answers such as "it gives us something we do together as a team" and "because we have a common goal focused on the foster children" were given. This notion was repeatedly expressed in the open-ended answers and may be connected with the fact that foster parents reported 'slightly above average' levels of dyadic cohesion, which addresses common interests and activities shared by the couple.

Foster parents ($n=6$) also indicated that fostering brought them closer together as a couple because of the increased communication that was necessary when they became foster parents; for example "fostering requires that we both have much more communication on a continuing basis." Two foster parents also indicated that the extra time they spent together since they became foster parents helped to bring them closer together.

Foster parents who indicated no change in the closeness they felt as a couple also mentioned the teamwork and goal sharing aspects of fostering ($n=2$), and the impact of good communication ($n=1$). Three foster parents indicated that the reason they did not experience a change in the closeness

they felt as a couple was because they fostered very young children who did not cause an emotional strain on their relationship or their family. They made comments such as "because they are young, no emotional problems occurred." This notion was probed further in the interview questions.

Foster parents ($n=2$) who indicated that fostering brought them farther apart mentioned that the loss of privacy and time together was a contributing factor to their loss of closeness. Increased responsibility and pressure, and disciplining of foster children were also mentioned as reasons why fostering brought them farther apart ($n=2$).

Impact on Marital Satisfaction

Foster parents also responded to questions regarding the perceived impact of foster children on their marital satisfaction. Sixty-three percent of foster parents ($n=25$) indicated that their satisfaction with their marriage relationship stayed the same since they started fostering. Twenty-seven and a half percent ($n=11$) of foster parents reported an increase in marital satisfaction while 10% ($n=4$) noted a slight decrease in their marital satisfaction since they became foster parents. Of those foster parents ($n=16$) who indicated that they had experienced an increase or decrease in marital satisfaction throughout their relationship, 75% ($n=12$) indicated that some of these changes in satisfaction could be attributed to the presence of foster children in their home. Twenty-five percent ($n=4$) of them reported that the changes they experienced in marital satisfaction could not be attributed to foster children.

When asked in an open-ended question why they felt that foster children had contributed to any changes in overall satisfaction with their

marriage relationship, some foster parents again indicated that fostering was a common goal and something they could work on together ($n=5$). They reiterated that "it caused us to come together and work as a couple;" and "our relationship has grown because of many...common goals and objectives." The lack of quality time together ($n=2$) and the stress of fostering in difficult situations ($n=2$) were also mentioned as reasons why foster children had contributed to the changes they had experienced in their marital satisfaction.

Impact on Communication

Foster parents were queried about how foster children affected the communication between spouses. Seventy-seven and a half percent ($n=31$) of foster parents indicated that they spent more time communicating since they became foster parents, while only 22.5% ($n=9$) indicated that they spent the same or less time communicating. Fifty-five percent ($n=22$) of foster parents indicated that the quality of their spousal communication improved since they had become foster parents, while 45% ($n=18$) stated that the quality of their communication had stayed the same or decreased. When asked whether they argued more or less often on issues of importance, 72.5% ($n=29$) of foster parents stated that the number of arguments they had were the same or less than before fostering, and 27.5% ($n=11$) stated that they argued more often on issues of importance. These answers suggest that fostering is not perceived by most foster parents to be related to the quality of their communication or the number of arguments they have, but that for most, it is positively related to the amount of time couples communicated with one another.

When foster parents were asked in open-ended questions to indicate any specific issues or areas which generally caused conflict between them as foster parents, several foster parents ($n=5$) cited discipline and consequencing issues as a source of conflict. For example, they stated that "matters of discipline" and "rules and consequences of children" were areas that caused conflict between them. Several foster parents ($n=7$) also indicated that the lack of time for each other and the structured lifestyle also added to the conflict they experienced. Two foster parents stated that financial issues were a cause of conflict between them.

Impact Over Time

Foster parents were asked how foster children affected their relationship over time, including the impact of initial placements as well as current foster children on their marital relationship, and the experience of phases or difficult periods in their relationships. When asked how fostering affected their relationship when they first became foster parents, 42.5% ($n=17$) of foster parents indicated that it had no effect on their relationship initially. Twenty-five percent ($n=10$) of foster parents indicated that it had a small effect and 32.5% ($n=13$) of foster parents stated that fostering had a significant effect on their relationship when they first became foster parents. In comparison, of the 35 foster parents who responded, 45.7% ($n=16$) indicated that foster children had an affect on their relationship at the present time, while 54.3% ($n=19$) stated that they did not. Foster parents were also asked whether their marital relationship had experienced phases or periods that were more difficult than others. Of the 82.1% ($n=32$) of foster parents who experienced phases or difficult periods in their relationships, 35% ($n=14$) of foster parents indicated that

some of these difficult phases could be attributed to the presence of foster children in their home, while 65% (n=26) indicated that the difficult phases they experienced in their relationship could not be attributed to foster children. These frequencies seem fairly inconclusive in determining the extent to which fostering has an effect on foster parents' marital relationship across various time periods.

When asked to identify, in an open-ended question, the ways in which the presence of foster children affected their relationship when they first became foster parents, some foster parents (n=7) stated that the quality and amount of time they spent communicating increased when they became foster parents. They stated that fostering "forced us to improve communication between us" and that "our communication skills would have to be extremely effective if we were going to be able to cope with the added stress in our home." Three foster parents also experienced "unexpected parent against parent situations," in which foster children played one spouse against the other. Several foster parents (n=7) also indicated that the loss of freedom and time to spend together were negative ways in which fostering initially affected their relationship.

Foster parents were also asked how they perceived current foster children influencing their marital relationship. Several foster parents (n=2) reiterated that foster children positively affected spousal communication, and negatively affected their freedom and time available for each other or for their natural children (n=3). Four foster parents also indicated that the difficult situations they were experiencing with current foster children, such as past sexual and physical abuse and violent tempers, significantly affected their relationship at the present time. They indicated

that "a lot of foster children have been abused sexually and physically" and that "the child-in-care has a violent temper and was destructive of personal property."

When asked how fostering affected the difficult periods or phases experienced within the spousal relationship, foster parents again indicated that issues such as communication ($\underline{n}=2$), finances ($\underline{n}=1$), less time together ($\underline{n}=4$), difficult times with foster children ($\underline{n}=4$) and 'parent against parent' conflicts ($\underline{n}=2$) all negatively affected their marital relationship at times.

Impact on Time Spent Together

Foster parents were asked how foster children affected the time they spent together as a couple. Thirty-eight percent ($n=15$) of the 36 foster parents who responded indicated that they spent less time together since they began fostering, 33% ($\underline{n}=13$) stated that the amount of time they spent together stayed the same, and 28% ($\underline{n}=11$) indicated that they spent more time together. Foster parents were also asked how much of the time they once spent with their spouse was now being spent with foster children. Eighty percent ($\underline{n}=32$) of foster parents indicated that foster children took up some of the time they once spent with their spouse, and 20% ($\underline{n}=8$) indicated that foster children took up most of the time they once spent with their spouse.

Impact of Certain Foster Children

Finally, foster parents were asked whether certain foster children had a different affect on their marital relationship than other foster children. Twenty-one (58.3%) foster parents confirmed that certain foster children affected their relationship differently than other foster children, while fifteen (41.7%) indicated that there was no differentiation between

foster children. Respondents were also asked to identify, in an open-ended question, the ways in which certain foster children affected their marital relationship differently than other foster children. Five foster parents indicated that 'parent versus parent' issues initiated by certain foster children significantly affected their marital relationship. Fourteen foster parents, however, identified the stress and difficulty of dealing with troubled children, each with unique emotional and physical needs, as the reason why one foster child could affect their relationship differently than another. Foster parents cited the difficult times they spent caring for children who were HIV positive or who had Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and dealing with the 'acting out' behaviors and 'rebellion' of certain foster children, as having an increased negative impact on their marital relationship. They stated that "some children have acted out more than others, and have therefore demanded more time and energy;" "one child had F.A.S. and required constant attention;" and "we took in an infant with HIV infection and looked after her not knowing if she was going to become ill and die." Foster parents reported that each of these children affected their marital relationship in a unique and different manner.

In summary, foster parents' answers to the questionnaire items regarding the perceived impact of fostering on their relationship illustrated clearly that, in general, fostering did not have a negative impact on the marital relationship of foster parents. The data suggest that fostering had either no impact or a positive impact on the marriage relationship of foster parents.

CHAPTER V

INTERVIEW RESULTS

Personal interviews with six foster parent couples were included as a second phase of data collection to clarify specific inconsistencies or unanswered questions from the questionnaire data, as well as to address in more depth themes that arose from the questionnaire data. The personal experiences of foster parents were also included as valuable data that would add depth and context to the research. The seven questions asked in the interview are found in Appendix E. Foster parents' answers to the interview questions are reported in the first section of this chapter. One of the seven interview questions specifically asked for further clarification of questionnaire data, three questions explored new themes which surfaced in the questionnaire data, and three questions provided context to the research by addressing the fostering experience as a whole. Using qualitative methods of analysis, various themes emerged from the answers to these seven questions. These themes will be discussed in the second section of the chapter.

Description of Interview Answers

Although addressed in the questionnaire, the issue of time spent together as a couple required further clarification in the interview. Many foster parents indicated in the close-ended questionnaire items that fostering did not significantly affect their time together. However, throughout a number of the open-ended questions they frequently mentioned "lost time" as a negative aspect of fostering. Answers to the interview questions which asked whether fostering made less time available for doing the things they used to do, and whether that lost time was

considered a sacrifice were equally inconclusive. Three fostering couples stated that fostering did not affect the time they once had available, and three foster couples said it definitely affected the time they once spent doing other things. Four of the six couples stated that the time fostering took within their schedules was not considered a sacrifice or a burden. It can be speculated that while fostering may have affected the time foster parents had available to do other things in general, it may not have significantly affected the time they spent together as a couple. The researcher may indeed have been asking about two very different aspects of 'time', that of time spent doing other things and time spent together as a couple, which resulted in such unclear answers.

Three of the questions in the interview addressed themes that had surfaced within the questionnaire data. For example, one series of questions specifically probed the finding that 90% of the foster parents in this study found that foster children affected their marital relationship in a positive way or not at all, despite research regarding the negative impact of natural children on natural parents. All six couples were again asked whether fostering had a positive, negative or neutral impact on their marital relationship. Five couples stated that fostering had a positive impact on their relationship, and one couple stated that fostering had no impact on their marital relationship because they already had a successful marriage before fostering. Two foster parent couples expressed surprise at the research on natural children, stating that their own natural children had had an extremely positive impact on their marital relationship. Foster parents also perceived that fostering not only positively affected their marriage relationship, but that it positively affected the family unit as a

whole. Foster parents had a realistic understanding that fostering also had its negative aspects, but that overall it was a positive experience for themselves and their family. When asked why they thought foster parenting had no affect or a positive affect on the foster parent relationship, three couples indicated that the increased communication necessary to be foster parents contributed to the positive influence of fostering. The other three couples indicated that the conscious choice to foster and the ability to quit at any time added a positive aspect to fostering and to the impact on the marriage relationship.

Another theme emerging from foster parents' questionnaire responses was the differing impact of taking younger or older foster children into one's home. Participants in the interview confirmed questionnaire data by unanimously stating that fostering teenagers was more of an emotional strain, while fostering younger children necessitated more physical work. Four of the couples interviewed indicated that the emotional stress of fostering adolescents had a negative impact on the marriage relationship.

The third questionnaire-based theme addressed in the interview questions was the notion that foster parenting brought couples closer together because of the common activities and goals they shared in fostering. Within the interviews, three of the four couples who answered this question expressed an agreement with this notion, stating that "it does have...a common goalness to it" and that it was "something [they] could do together." However, one couple stated that although fostering was something they enjoyed doing together, it was just one more thing that

brought them together and that if "we hadn't done this, we would have done something else."

The remaining three questions in the interview provided context to the research and pertained to the fostering experience as a whole. Foster parents were initially asked about their first experiences of fostering, whose decision it was to start fostering and whether they had had any expectations of what it would be like before they started. All of the couples stated that the decision to begin fostering was a joint decision made between them both, and four couples added that the idea originated with one spouse. Five of the couples had some preconceived expectations of what fostering would be like, mostly from watching friends' or family experiences. Most couples noted that despite their preconceived notions of what it would be like, they were surprised by many things when the fostering experience actually started, such as the workings of the Ministry of Social Services and the strength of their emotional attachment to the children. Four of the couples admitted that they did not anticipate that fostering would affect their marriage relationship and two couples realized that it would affect the time they would be able to spend together.

Foster parents were also asked whether they felt that the experience of being a foster parent was "worth it" over all. The six interviewed couples unanimously agreed that the experience was definitely worthwhile, and that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. Foster parents expressed such notions as "it was the best thing we have ever done;" it was "a positive learning experience" and an experience with "its own set of rewards in which you can look back on the stressful situations with fondness."

Finally, foster parents were asked to describe their experience as foster parents in several words or phrases. Positive words ($n=12$) such as rewarding, satisfying, interesting, worthwhile, enjoyable and a learning experience were mentioned. However, almost as often ($n=9$) negative adjectives such as exhausting, demanding, frustrating, heart breaking and heart wrenching were mentioned. The phrase "satisfying yet frustrating" seemed to capture their experience as both positive and negative at the same time. This was an over-riding theme within the interview data. Foster parents repeatedly described throughout their answers to different questions the constant interplay between the ups and the downs, the happy and the sad, the positive and the negative. Phrases such as "demanding, challenging and it can be very rewarding;" "wonderfully positive experiences and really, really heart wrenching, devastating experiences;" and "it's heartbreaking and it's rewarding and it's frustrating and it's enjoyable and it's worthwhile" all illustrate this theme. However, all of the interviewed foster parents also indicated that in the end, it was worthwhile and that the positives outweighed the negatives. They indicated that "when you're finished the bump, its wonderful:" "there's good times and bad times, but there's more good times than not:" and "the rewards are few and far between, but when they happen, they're major and they make up for a lot."

Themes Within Interview Answers

Using qualitative methods of analysis, various themes emerged from the answers to the interview questions. Content analysis was used to describe the various patterns, categories and themes within the interview data (Patton, 1980; Taylor, 1984). They included the importance of

communication between spouses, the common goal of fostering together, the personal relationships which developed between foster parents and foster children, the learning experience of fostering, the impact of fostering on the natural children in the foster home, the negative impact of working with the Ministry of Social Services, and the coping mechanisms developed by foster parents to deal with the day-to-day stresses of fostering.

The importance of communication between spouses was a theme evident in the words of the foster parents. Foster parents indicated that in order to be successful foster parents, constant communication was necessary between partners. Foster parents indicated that "we really communicate a lot;" "if anything, it has increased our communication skills;" "if you start fostering and you continue to foster, that means you are continually keeping the communication lines open;" and "you have to communicate because if you don't, you're in real trouble." These comments provide further support to the findings obtained in both the close-ended and open-ended sections of the questionnaire that the increased communication necessary to be successful foster parents provided a positive influence on their marital relationship as a fostering couple.

The theme of working and supporting each other in a common activity was identified throughout foster parents answers to various questions in the interview. Foster parents indicated that "it gives us something to jointly focus and work on, and in that aspect had a positive influence;" "there's so many of them that we need to be together, to do it together;" and "that's probably why we went into fostering, basically, to share something together." These data provide further support to the

information foster parents gave in both the open- and close-ended sections of the questionnaire that the common activity and goal of fostering had a positive impact on the marriage relationship of foster parents.

Foster parents also regularly discussed the valuable learning experience that fostering provided for them. Foster parents stated that as they became more experienced, they continuously learned new things about the foster care system, team work, communication, relationships, behavior problems and other difficulties that foster children face, such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Foster parents indicated that "it has been an excellent learning experience:" "even if there's a negative situation, we've learned from it;" and "we learned a lot about each other, and our limitations and about teamwork." These foster parents valued the learning experience that fostering created for them, and took the opportunity when they experienced problems or the things they did not know to increase their learning.

Another theme evident in the interview data was the personal relationship and attachment that foster parents experienced with their foster child(ren). Two couples indicated that when they first started fostering they were surprised at how emotionally involved they became with the foster children, stating that they experienced an "unanticipated emotional attachment." Foster parents expressed a real commitment to the foster children and a sincere enjoyment in being part of these children's lives. They indicated that "social workers look at them as cases or caseloads, but we look at them as real kids;" "they are literally our children, part of our family;" "the kids call you dad and that's pretty special;" and "there's no word that describes a hug." The commitment that foster parents had for

the foster children in their home was evident throughout this research process.

The effect of fostering on the natural children in the home was another theme mentioned by foster parents. Foster parents indicated that it was important to only foster children who were younger than the natural children in the home. In this way, foster parents could work from a base of experience. Foster parents also commented on the positive impact that fostering had on their natural children. For example, they stated that "our children have really benefitted from the experience:" and "our natural children love the foster kids." There seemed to be a general consensus that "natural children of foster families are really special" and that additional research into the impact of fostering on the natural children in the home needs to be undertaken.

On a more negative note, foster parents expressed frustration with the Ministry of Social Services and some social workers. Foster parent couples indicated that many of the real problems they encountered in fostering were related to the Ministry of Social Services, rather than the foster children themselves. Foster parents stated that "we seem to have more problems with the system than we do with the children;" "if you could just deal with the children, the job would be very rewarding;" and "the babies are no problem, but I can't say the same for the Ministry and the social workers." These foster parents expressed frustration with the time it takes for decisions to be made by the Ministry, the frequent turnover of social workers, the lack of orientation to the workings of the Ministry and the lack of support provided by the Ministry for foster parents. Foster parent couples also indicated that they had developed ways

of having less contact with social workers or only during certain times of the day. It seemed that along with the genuine commitment to the foster children, foster parents expressed a sincere frustration with the bureaucracy which provided the children for them.

The last theme emerging from the interview data described the many and various coping mechanisms that foster parents have developed to handle the stresses and difficulties of the fostering experience. Comments made throughout the interview data revealed the various ways foster parents made more efficient use of time, had more time together and less contact with Ministry personnel. For example, foster parents stated that "[we] will tell the social worker when to call:" "we went away lots, we took weekends off, at first we took lots and lots of weekends off;" "when a new [social worker] comes on board, I just say to them 'okay, you probably will never hear from me unless I need you!'" and "we try to insist that the kids go to bed at 10:00 at night so that we have that time...They're not major, but they're enough to make things a little easier." It appears that although foster parents have a clear commitment to the foster children in their home, they also have a realistic view of the difficulties inherent in the experience and are continually devising ways to better cope with the day-to-day stresses.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study explored the marital relationship of foster parents by examining foster parents' level of marital quality and their perceptions regarding the impact of foster children on their marital relationship. The findings discussed here contribute to a clearer understanding of foster parent marital relationships. This chapter will include a discussion of what was learned from the study in terms of the two major research questions; what is the level of marital quality of foster parents and how do foster children affect the marital relationship of foster parents. Discussion of the six minor research questions, including the general impact of foster children on the marital relationship, the impact of foster children on marital satisfaction, communication between spouses, and time spent together, as well as the impact of foster children over time, and the impact of certain foster children on the marital relationship will be included. The limitations of the study, areas needing future research and the policy implications of this study for the foster care system will also be discussed.

What Was Learned From This Study?

Marital Quality

A measure of foster parents' marital quality was obtained through standardized scales of marital satisfaction and marital adjustment. Foster parents reported a 'very satisfied' level of marital satisfaction, according to scores on the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens, & Bugaighis, 1986) and an 'average' level of marital adjustment, measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). Within the four Dyadic Adjustment subscales, foster

parents reported 'average' levels of dyadic consensus, satisfaction and affectional expression and 'slightly above average' scores of dyadic cohesion. These results raise several questions which require further discussion.

This study compared the current findings on foster parent marital quality with literature on the level of marital quality among natural families. Based on this research, the author expected that foster parents would exhibit lower levels of marital quality than this study found. Marital quality research with natural families has shown that the increased emotional, financial and societal stresses involved in parenting adversely affect marital quality (Goetting, 1986; White, Booth and Edwards, 1986; Glenn and McLanahan, 1982; Glenn and Weaver, 1978). It was therefore expected that the increased stress, time and energy involved in parenting often troubled children who are not one's own would negatively affect the marital relationship of foster parents, and result in below average levels of marital quality. However foster parents within this study reported average or above average levels of marital satisfaction and adjustment. There are several explanations for these unexpected results.

The first possibility for the higher than expected levels of marital quality involves the notion of foster parent control over the fostering experience. Several foster parents indicated in the interview data that they suspected that fostering did not have a negative impact on foster parent marital relationships because it was a volunteer position in which foster parents had the ability to decide when to begin fostering, which children they were willing to take into their home and when to stop fostering. Unlike natural parents, foster parents are able to begin and end the

experience when they wish. This notion of increased control over the experience of parenting implies that foster parents are not forced to sacrifice their relationship or other important aspects of their lives if the experience becomes too difficult, because they have the ability to terminate the experience at any time.

This notion leads us to the second possibility for higher than expected levels of marital quality. One of the limitations of the current study was that it only recruited foster parent couples who were currently involved in the fostering experience. One foster couple indicated that a true exploration of the marriage relationship of foster parents should include the experience of those who have left the field. It can be suggested that foster parents' level of marital quality was higher than expected because those foster parents who experienced the negative influence of fostering on their marriage, and thus lower levels of marital quality, are no longer involved in the fostering experience. Those foster parents who may have begun fostering with lower levels of marital quality may in fact have been unwilling or unable to continue fostering. The current sample of foster parents may in fact be representative of those foster parents who had a good marital relationship before fostering, and who have experienced enough of a positive impact on their relationship to enable them to continue. This explanation is partially supported by the notion within systems theory that systems continually strive to maintain stability or homeostasis. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1985) indicate that homeostasis refers to the internal and ongoing interactional processes which take place within a family and help to ensure internal balance. When something threatens this stability in a family, positive or negative feedback signals the

system to self-correct and reestablish homeostasis (Bernier, 1990).

Possibly, the need to maintain homeostasis within the marital unit or any other unit within the family has led certain foster parents to quit fostering, and thus their lower levels of marital quality would not have been included in this study.

Glenn and McLanahan's (1982) research on natural children and marital happiness also sheds light on why this study found higher than expected levels of marital quality among foster parents. The authors state that one major reason for reports of lower levels of marital quality for natural parents may be due to the fact that many couples remain in unhealthy, unhappy relationships because of the children. According to Glenn and McLanahan, the presence of children actually deters unhappy couples from divorcing, at least for a time. The notion of control over the parenting experience discussed earlier is again applicable. Natural parents may feel that they are unable to leave a relationship because of the children, and thus contribute to the lower levels of marital quality found among natural parents, while foster parents have the ability to leave the experience if it becomes too stressful, and this results in higher levels of marital quality for currently fostering parents.

The second puzzling result found in foster parent reports on marital quality was that foster parents reported a 'very satisfied' level of marital satisfaction on the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens, & Bugaighis, 1986) and only an 'average' level of marital satisfaction on the Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale, within the Dyadic Adjustment scale (Spanier, 1976). This result occurred despite the fact that correlations were performed between the Kansas

Marital Satisfaction Scale and the Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale, and the two scales were found to be highly correlated, suggesting that they both measured similar aspects of marital satisfaction. Grover, Paff-Bergen, Russel and Schumm (1984) and Schumm et al. (1986) also found significant correlations between the Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale and the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale.

There are two possible methodological reasons for this result. As mentioned earlier in this study, several authors have cautioned against using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale as a multidimensional measure of marital adjustment which measures the four distinct concepts of dyadic consensus, satisfaction, cohesion and affectional expression. Researchers, including the author of the scale, indicate that the Dyadic Adjustment Scale is reliable and valid as a global measure of marital functioning (Spanier & Thompson, 1982; Sharpley & Cross, 1982). However, reliance on the scale to accurately measure the subscale concepts such as marital satisfaction is not recommended. Based on this literature, we could have expected the results obtained in this study, and can now add our findings to those supporting the use of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale as a more global measure of marital quality.

A second methodological reason for the difference in results between the two scales may be found in the patterns of skew for the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale. These patterns have always represented significant departures from normality, with scale scores negatively skewed in the direction of greater marital satisfaction. Throughout the extensive testing of the reliability and validity of the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale, the nonnormality characteristics of the scale have been consistent (Burnett,

1987; Schumm, Scanlon, Crow, Green & Buckler, 1983; Schumm, Nichols, Schectman & Grigsby, 1983; Mitchell, Newell & Schumm, 1983; Schumm et al., 1986). Schumm et al. (1986) speculate that this characteristic may be due to the brevity of the scale: it consists of only three questions. Similar short scales, such as the Quality Marriage Index (Norton, 1983) have also been susceptible to this problem. Schumm et al. (1986) also note that the Dyadic Adjustment Scale was designed to minimize skewness by eliminating items which were highly skewed during the construction of the scale, whereas the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale was not. This pattern of skewness was also replicated in the present study. Sixteen of the thirty-nine participants scored 'very satisfied' to all three questions, compared to the wide range of scores (31-49) reported on the Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale, with no more than five people reporting the same score.

It should be noted that the lower levels of marital quality reported by some foster parents do not suggest that the foster children in their home had a negative impact on their marital relationship. The marital quality scales measured the level of marital quality of the marriage relationship in general, and did not specifically examine the influence of foster children on these scores. It can be suggested that some of the lower levels of marital quality obtained were in fact due to the negative influence of natural children on the marriage relationship of foster parents, rather than the influence of foster children. To the extent that this is the case, the level of marital quality foster parents experienced may in fact resemble the relatively negative reports of natural parents found within the literature.

Impact of Foster Children

The current study also explored the impact of foster children on the marital relationship of foster parents, in the areas of general impact, impact on marital satisfaction, communication and time spent together, impact over time and the impact of certain foster children on the marital relationship. Foster parents' answers to the questionnaire items regarding the general impact of fostering on their relationship illustrated clearly that fostering did not have the negative impact on the marital relationship of foster parents expected by the author. Contrary to research on natural families, this study's data suggest that, in general, foster children had either no impact or a positive impact on the marriage relationship of foster parents. Across questionnaire and interview data, foster parents reported varied experiences of how fostering had affected them, and they remained divided as to whether it had a positive effect or no effect at all on their marital relationship.

The expectation that foster parenting has a negative impact on foster parent marriages was not met in this study. The results suggest that foster children are generally seen as not having a negative effect on the marital relationship of the foster parents in this study, and that they have either a positive effect or a neutral effect in all areas explored in this research. Within these parameters foster parents describe a variety of ways in which fostering affects their marital relationship. The neutral effect and the positive affect of fostering on the marital relationship of foster parents can be attributed to a variety of reasons.

For example, several foster parents described earlier that the increased control over the experience, which stems from the volunteer

aspect of fostering, may have contributed to the lack of a negative impact of fostering. It may be speculated that foster parents would not decide to continue fostering if it were a negative experience for them.

Foster parents also reported that the common goal and shared experience of fostering was a positive aspect of fostering, and would therefore lead to a lack of negative results within the study. The theme of working and supporting each other in a common activity was found in several levels of data, from the open-ended questionnaire items to the interview responses. The standardized scale responses also confirmed this finding in that foster parents were 'slightly above average' in their level of dyadic cohesion. According to Spanier (1989), the Dyadic Cohesion subscale assesses the level of common interests and activities shared by the couple, using increased shared interests and activities as a positive measure of marital adjustment.

The notion that communication is a positive aspect of fostering was also frequently mentioned throughout the three types of data collection. Foster parents repeatedly indicated throughout close- and open-ended sections of the questionnaire and in the interview data, that regularly communicating together about their daily experiences of fostering had a positive influence on their relationship overall. This positive experience around increased communication between spouses may also help to explain the findings.

Foster parents' positive view of the experience of fostering as a whole may have also contributed to the lack of a negative impact found on the marital relationship of foster parents. Most of the foster parents who contributed to this study expressed a realistic understanding of the positive

and negative aspects of the fostering experience. They were clear about the difficulties involved in dealing with the Ministry of Social Services, resistant or difficult children and the influence on their family as a whole. Many coping mechanisms used by foster parents were discussed by the participants throughout the study. But foster parents were also very optimistic about the positive aspects of fostering, including the shared experiences, increased communication and the building of personal relationships with foster children. Many foster parents stated that the positive definitely outweighed the negative. For most foster parents, the experience was enriching and valuable, despite the obvious need for improvements to the foster care system. It is encouraging to find that despite the difficulties that foster parents identify in the current foster care system, many of them find the experience to be beneficial and rewarding overall.

Limitations

Given the small, non-representative sample of foster parents who participated, the results are not generalizable to all foster parent couples in B.C. or across Canada. Specifically, despite concentrated efforts to find a broad range of volunteers for the study, the final sample size consisted only of 40 volunteer foster parents, or 20 foster parent couples. The sample also consisted of a non-random convenience sample of middle class Canadians of European decent, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings to foster parents of other economic or ethnic origin.

The issue of social desirability may have also influenced the findings of the study, because foster parents may have been resistant to disclosing negative information about themselves. This issue has been addressed by

marital quality researchers as a recurrent limitation of all marital quality research (Schumm and Bugaighis, 1986; Harrison and Westhuis, 1989). Foster parents may have reported higher levels of marital quality and fostering impact than actually occurred because of the possible risk of losing future placements of foster children if an admission of difficulties or problems is made.

Due to the lack of control over administration of the questionnaire data, it is also possible that foster parents discussed the issues on the questionnaire prior to answering, or that one spouse may have completed both questionnaires. These factors may have contributed to the high degree of agreement on questionnaire answers between spouses.

Future Research

Future research in the area of foster parent marriages should include a replication study which utilizes a larger, random sample of foster parents. This would enable researchers to explore further the experiences of those foster parents who have found a positive impact on their marriage and those who do not, and to determine the generalizability of this study's findings.

Researchers should consider using qualitative and longitudinal methods for exploring the relationship between fostering and the marriage of foster parents. More in-depth interviews with a larger sample of foster parents are necessary for a fuller understanding of their experiences, and to add greater depth and richness to the body of knowledge currently available regarding foster parenting. Individual interviews with each spouse should also be considered in future research so that the individual experiences of both spouses can be examined in greater detail.

In addition, more experimental studies which attempt to find cause-and-effect relationships between marital quality levels for both foster parents and natural parents should be attempted. An examination of the different ways in which foster children influence current foster parents and those who have left the field would also be beneficial. In this way a clearer understanding of how this experience affects those who continue to foster and those who do not could be obtained.

Finally, several foster parents expressed the need for future research on the influence of fostering on the family as a whole and specifically on the natural children in the foster family. Several foster parents indicated that they could not continue to foster unless they had the support of their natural children. The need for a positive fostering experience for the whole family is a primary concern for foster parents and remains an understudied area.

Policy Implications

This study has policy implications for several levels within the foster care community. Social service agencies need to acknowledge that both the literature and foster parent responses within this study have shown that foster parent marital relationships are an important factor within foster parenting. Although not all of the foster parents in this study experienced an impact of foster children on their marriage relationship, many foster parents did. For these foster parents, increased support and acknowledgement of foster parent marriages should be considered within the policies of social service agencies and the practice of social workers. For example, the availability of marriage enrichment courses and counselling, as well as increased respite away from foster and natural

children would support the marital relationship of foster parents. Also, several foster parents commented on the fact that foster children did not have a negative impact on their marriage because of the high degree of marital quality they experienced before they began fostering. Social Service policy regarding the recruitment of new foster parents should consider the health of the marital relationship of parents during foster parent recruitment, or before the foster parenting experience begins (George, 1970; Glickman, 1957). Procedurally, social workers could ask recruited foster parents about their marriage relationships, present and past, as well as specific questions assessing such areas as spousal communication and the sharing of activities and goals. Marital quality scales could be used as a starting point for further discussion of the marriage relationship.

Foster parents' repeated descriptions of the negative influences of the Ministry of Social Services and certain social workers should be carefully considered by social workers and management teams. Foster parents' high degree of dissatisfaction and difficulty with the Ministry as a whole and some of its staff needs to be acknowledged by the Ministry, and increased dialogue between Foster Parent Associations and Ministry employees should be considered. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective helps to inform this interactive relationship between foster parents and the Ministry of Social Services. Ecological theory recognizes the influences of the person on the environment as well as the impact of the environment on the developing person. Of particular interest to this study is Bronfenbrenner's reference to the 'exosystem', which he defines as the system in which the developing person does not take an active part but

which does affect his or her development. An exosystem would include the relationship between the foster parent and the social service agency. Bronfenbrenner recognizes the reciprocal relationship between these systems and the continuing influence they will have on each other. Unfortunately, foster parents are presently experiencing this relationship as negative.

Research regarding foster parent marriages should provide insight for foster parents who are living the experience, and for parents who are considering becoming foster parents. Increasing foster parents' information and awareness of foster care affirms their own experiences and successes, and may assist them in seeking the assistance and support they require from their family, community and social worker.

Foster children may also be affected by continued research on foster parent relationships. Research in the area of marriage and the family indicates that higher levels of marital satisfaction within a relationship positively affect a child's development in the home (Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984; Howes & Markman, 1989; Webster-Stratton, 1989). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective is also helpful in understanding this relationship. The 'microsystem', as defined by Bronfenbrenner, includes the physical and social settings in the developing person's immediate environment in which he or she has direct interaction. The 'mesosystem' describes the interactions between two or more microsystem settings in which the developing person actively participates. Thus, mesosystems, such as the interaction between a foster child and the foster parent marriage relationship should be expected. Based on theory and research, a more satisfying marital relationship of foster parents could

have direct implications for the other members of the family, including the foster child.

In conclusion, further research on the impact of the fostering experience for the various players involved, including the married foster parent couple, is important for all levels of the fostering community. Foster parents within the present study illuminated various difficulties and problems with the foster care system, as well as describing its joys and satisfactions. Only with a clearer understanding of the foster care experience, founded in the life experiences of foster families, social workers, natural families and foster children, will future advancements in the field of family and childrens' services occur.

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Appendix A

RECRUITMENT ADVERTISEMENT

**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED
FOR IMPORTANT FOSTER PARENT RESEARCH!!**

We know from experience and research that having foster children affects all of the relationships in the foster family. However, little has been demonstrated about how foster children affect foster parent marriage relationships. I am seeking volunteers who are willing to participate in a research study for my Masters degree in Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. The study, under the supervision of Dr. Valerie Kuehne, will explore the impact that foster children have on foster parent marital relationships. All participation in the study will be confidential and anonymous. Married foster parent couples will be sent a written consent form and a questionnaire that each spouse will complete individually. If you are a married couple and are willing to participate in this study, or require further information, please phone Audrey Kruisselbrink at 479-2497 any time before June 25, 1992.

Appendix B

QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Foster Parents,

Thank you for volunteering to participate in my study regarding the influence of foster children on foster parent marital relationships. As mentioned in my advertisement in the 'Fosterletter', this study is a partial requirement of my Master of Arts degree in Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. If you have any questions regarding the study or the questionnaire, please phone me at 479-2497 or my supervisor, Dr. Valerie Kuehne at 721-2929.

Please find attached two separate, though identical, questionnaires. They are to be completed individually, by you and your spouse. The first page of each questionnaire is a consent form. Please sign the consent form before completing the questionnaire. After you and your spouse have completed both questionnaires, please place both completed consent forms and questionnaires in the enclosed addressed, stamped envelope and mail it back to me by August 15, 1992. I will also be conducting personal interviews with foster parent couples on this subject. If you and your spouse are willing to participate in an interview, please indicate this in question 15 on the last page of the questionnaire, and I will contact you at a later date. Thank you for your participation!!

Audrey Kruisselbrink

**A Descriptive Study of the Impact of Foster Children
on the Marital Relationship of Foster Parents:
Questionnaire**

I.D. #: _ _ _

Instructions:

Please complete Sections I and II of the questionnaires individually, and remember that it is important for you not to talk to your partner regarding the items on the questionnaire before or during the time that you are filling in your responses. It is your choice whether you do so afterward. You are welcome to discuss your responses to Section III regarding family background information with your spouse. I realize that it may seem redundant for both of you to respond to these questions. However, I would ask that each of you respond individually, as this will make it easier for me to work with the data. Also, you may wish to circle more than one answer in response to some of the questions. However, please circle only the answer which best answers the question, unless otherwise indicated. If you need more room to respond to any questions, please feel free to use the back of page 6.

Section I.

Most persons have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following list.

1. Handling family finances
 - a) always agree
 - b) almost always agree
 - c) occasionally disagree
 - d) frequently disagree
 - e) almost always disagree
 - f) always disagree

2. Matters of recreation
 - a) always agree
 - b) almost always agree
 - c) occasionally disagree
 - d) frequently disagree
 - e) almost always disagree
 - f) always disagree

3. Religious matters
 - a) always agree
 - b) almost always agree
 - c) occasionally disagree
 - d) frequently disagree
 - e) almost always disagree
 - f) always disagree

*Reproduced by permission of Multi-Health Systems Inc., 65 Overlea Boulevard, Toronto, ON (416)424-1700. The remainder of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale can be obtained from Multi-Health Systems.

Item	Extremely Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Mixed	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Extremely Satisfied
1. How satisfied are you with your marriage?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. How satisfied are you with your husband/wife as a spouse?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your husband/wife?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

SECTION II. The following questions pertain particularly to your marital relationship **after you became a foster parent**. Please respond as fully and specifically as you can to each question. Due to confidentiality, please do not use the actual names of foster children in your answers. Thank you very much!

1. a. When you first became a foster parent, to what extent did the experience of foster parenting affect your relationship with your spouse?

Circle one:

- i. foster children had no affect on my relationship
- ii. foster children had a small affect on my relationship
- iii. foster children had a significant affect on my relationship
- iv. foster children had a great affect on my relationship

If you answered (i), go to question 2.

b. In what ways did the presence of foster children affect your relationship with your spouse when you first became foster parents? Be as specific as you can.

2. In general, how has the amount of time you spend together as a couple changed since you became foster parents? Circle one:
- we spend much less time together
 - we spend slightly less time together
 - the amount of time we spend together has stayed the same
 - we spend slightly more time together
 - we spend much more time together
3. Since you became a foster parent, how has the amount of communication with your spouse changed? Circle one:
- we communicate much less often
 - we communicate slightly less often
 - the amount we communicate has stayed the same
 - we communicate slightly more often
 - we communicate much more often
4. Since you became a foster parent, how has the quality of your communication with your spouse changed? Circle one:
- greatly improved
 - slightly improved
 - stayed the same
 - slightly decreased
 - greatly decreased
5. Foster children take up _____ of the time I once spent with my spouse. Fill in the blank by circling one:
- none
 - some
 - most
 - all
- 6.a) In general, do you and your spouse argue more or less often on issues of importance since you became foster parents? Circle one:
- we argue much less often
 - we argue slightly less often
 - the amount we argue has stayed the same
 - we argue slightly more often
 - we argue much more often

7. Please indicate any specific issues or areas which generally cause conflict between you and your spouse as foster parents.

8. a) Do you feel that foster children have brought you and your spouse closer together or farther apart? Circle one:

- i. Closer together
- ii. Farther apart
- iii. No change

b) Why did you select the response you did? (Be as specific as you can)

9. a) In general, how has your overall satisfaction with your marital relationship changed since you became foster parents? Circle one:

- i. greatly decreased
- ii. slightly decreased
- iii. stayed the same
- iv. slightly improved
- v. greatly improved

(If you answered (iii), go to question 10)

b) Do you attribute any of the changes in your overall satisfaction with your marital relationship to the presence of foster children in your home?

Circle one: i. Yes ii. No

c) Why did you select the response you did?

10. a) Since you have been married, has your relationship with your spouse experienced any periods or phases that were more difficult than others? Circle one: i. Yes ii. No

b) Did the experience of fostering or the presence of foster children influence any of these difficult periods? Circle one: i. Yes ii. No

c) If yes, please explain.

11. a) In general, do you think that foster parenting has influenced your relationship with your spouse in any ways? Circle one: i. Yes ii. No

(If no, go to question 12)

b) In general, what effect has foster parenting had on your marital relationship? Circle one:

i. foster parenting has had a very negative effect on my marriage

ii. foster parenting has had a somewhat negative effect on my marriage

iii. foster parenting has had a somewhat positive effect on my marriage

iv. foster parenting has had a very positive effect on my marriage

c) How do you think foster parenting has influenced your marital relationship?

12. Place an "x" at the point on the line that most reflects the way you feel about this statement.

Foster children have had a _____ impact on my relationship with my spouse.

large -----small

13. a) In your experience, has one or more foster children affected your marital relationship differently than other foster children? Circle one: i. Yes ii. No

If you have only fostered one foster child, go to question 14.

b) If yes, please explain how and why.

14. a) At the present time, does the foster child(ren) in your home influence your relationship with your spouse? Circle one: i. Yes ii. No
 b) If yes, in what ways?

15. Is there anything else about the impact of foster children on the marital relationship of foster parents that you think I should know?

SECTION III. Family Background Information

1. What is your gender? Circle one:
 1. Male
 2. Female
2. What is your age in years? _____
3. To which ethnic or cultural group(s) do you or did you ancestors belong? Circle as many as applicable.

1. French	9. Chinese
2. English	10. Jewish
3. Irish	11. Polish
4. Scottish	12. Black
5. German	13. Inuit
6. Italian	14. North American Indian
7. Ukrainian	15. Metis
8. Dutch (Netherlands)	16. Other (Specify _____)
4. What is your educational level? (Please circle the appropriate level)
 1. Below 8th grade
 2. 9th grade - 11th grade
 3. High school
 4. College credits
 5. Diploma
 6. College graduate (Undergraduate)
 7. Graduate school credits
 8. Graduate degree
 9. Other (Specify _____)

5. In what range does your annual family income fall? (Please circle one answer)

1. Under \$9,999
2. \$10,000 to \$19,999
3. \$20,000 to \$29,999
4. \$30,000 to \$39,999
5. \$40,000 to \$49,999
6. \$50,000 to \$74,999
7. \$75,000 and over

6. Please state your occupation _____

7. How many years have you been married? _____

8. How many natural children do you have now? _____

Their ages are _____

9. How many step children do you have now? _____

Their ages are _____

10. How many adoptive children do you have now? _____

Their ages are _____

11. How many of the above children are living at home? _____

12. How many foster children do you presently have living in your home? _____

Their ages are _____

13. How many foster children have you fostered since you became a foster parent? _____

14. How many years have you been a foster parent? _____

15. Would you be willing to participate in a personal interview with me about foster children's influence on foster parent's marriages, at a later date? Circle one: i. Yes ii. No

16. Do you have any other comments about this research study or the questionnaire?

Appendix C

LETTERS OF INFORMED CONSENT

**A Descriptive Study of the Impact of Foster Children
on the Marital Relationship of Foster Parents:
Letter of Informed Consent for Questionnaires**

Purpose of the Study

After an extensive review of the foster parenting literature, a clear lack of knowledge regarding the effect of foster children on the marital relationship of foster parents was found. The purpose of this study is to provide further information and knowledge regarding the extent to which foster children affect the marital relationship of foster parents. Although theory and research have acknowledged that the presence of foster children in the foster home affects all of the relationships within the foster family, little is known about how it affects the marital relationship of foster parents. This study will examine the impact of foster children on the marital relationship of foster parents.

Informed Consent

I, the undersigned, consent to complete a questionnaire for the research of Audrey Kruisselbrink. I understand that this will take about 45 minutes. I may refuse to answer any questions for any reason. If I do not wish to answer a question, I may leave that question blank. My answers will be kept confidential, and because my name is not on the questionnaire, they will also be anonymous. Finally, I may withdraw this consent at any time, without having to supply a reason. If I have any questions regarding the questionnaire, the research process or the research results I will contact the researcher at 479-2497 or her supervisor, Dr. Valerie Kuehne at 721-7987.

Participant:

Name

Signature

Date

**A Descriptive Study of the Impact of Foster Children
on the Marital Relationship of Foster Parents:
Letter of Informed Consent for Interviews**

Purpose of the Interview

As you will remember the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of foster children on the marital relationship of foster parents. The questionnaires you have already completed have led me to ask still more questions about the impact of foster children on the marriage relationship of foster parents. As you have expressed an interest in discussing the impact of foster children on your marriage relationship further, interviews are being conducted at this time. The interview questions are meant to provide clarification to the questionnaire information and to include the personal experiences of foster parents in the research.

Informed Consent

I, the undersigned, consent to participate in an interview for the research of Audrey Kruisselbrink. I understand that this will take about 45 minutes. I may refuse to answer any questions for any reason. If I do not wish to answer a question, I may skip that question. My answers will be kept confidential, and because my name is not on the interview data, they will also be anonymous. Finally, I may withdraw this consent at any time, without having to supply a reason. If I have any questions regarding the questionnaire, the research process or the research results I will contact the researcher at 479-2497 or her supervisor, Dr. Valerie Kuehne at 721-7987.

Participant:

Signature

Date

Appendix D

LETTER REGARDING UPCOMING INTERVIEWS

Dear Foster Parents,

Thank you for completing my questionnaire on foster parent marital relationships! For the past few months I have been digesting the valuable information you gave me through the questionnaires. The questionnaire information has led me to ask still more questions about the impact of foster children on the marriage relationship of foster parents. I hope to have these questions answered through interviews with those of you who indicated on the questionnaire that you would be willing to participate in personal interviews. You and your spouse were among those who volunteered to participate. I hope to complete these interviews in January, 1993.

Due to the position I have recently accepted with the Ministry of Social Services as an auxiliary social worker, I have decided not to conduct the interviews personally. Instead, I will hire an experienced research assistant to conduct the interviews confidentially. Under my direction and instruction, the research assistant will ask questions that I have prepared and written. No identification numbers will be used to identify your audio taped answers to the interview questions. In this way, your identities and the answers each of you give to the interview questions will remain anonymous, confidential and unknown to myself.

The research assistant will contact you in January to set up a time for the interview, which will take you and your spouse approximately half an hour. If you have any questions about participating in the interview process, ask her at that time. Or you can contact me directly at 479-2497. Once again, **thank you** for participating in my study!! Your experiences are important to my work.

Sincerely,

Audrey Kruisselbrink

Appendix E
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

Just for your own information, interviews are being held with all of those foster parent couples who stated on the questionnaire that they would be willing to participate in an interview about the influence of foster children on the marriage relationship of foster parents. You were one of those couples. Both foster parents who stated that fostering had an impact on their marriage relationship and foster parents who felt that it did not have an impact on their marriage are being interviewed.

Instructions: Thank you for volunteering to participate in this interview! I will be asking you eight questions, and all you have to do is answer each question, based on your own thoughts and experiences. You are being interviewed together as a couple in order to promote discussion about how fostering influences your relationship as a couple. You don't need to agree with your spouse on any of the answers or come to a consensus on your answers to each question, and I would like to encourage both of you to participate in individually answering the questions for yourselves, speaking from your own perceptions. If you wish, you may think for a minute before you answer any question, and you may return to any question if you would like to add something later. These questions are meant to provide clarification to the information Audrey received on the questionnaire and to include the personal experiences of foster parents in the research. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. a) Tell me about when you first started thinking about becoming foster parents. Did you discuss the idea of becoming foster parents between the two of you? Was it a joint decision or something one of you wanted to do more than the other?

b) Before you started, what did you expect foster parenting would be like?

c) When you were thinking of becoming foster parents, or perhaps going through the process of becoming foster parents, did you anticipate that the whole experience would affect your relationship with your spouse in any ways? **(if yes, ask question d)(if no, go to question e)**

d) How did you think it would affect your relationship? Did you do anything or think of any ways to protect the relationship from any negative affects fostering might have on your relationship?

e) Tell me about the experience of fostering your first foster child. What was the experience like for you? Were there any surprises or was it what you had expected it would be like?

2. According to researchers who have looked at the impact of natural children on the marriage relationship of their parents, over and over again it seems that when a couple has children, they are usually less happy and satisfied with their marriage. But, when we looked at the answers that foster parents gave to questions about the influence of foster children on the marriage relationship of foster parents, we found that most foster parents said that foster children had either no influence or a slightly positive influence on their marriage.

a) What has your experience been? Do you think that fostering had a positive influence, a negative influence or no influence on your marriage. (yes/no)

b) Why do you think that most foster parents said that foster children had either no influence or a slightly positive influence on their relationship?

c) Do you have natural children? **(if yes, then ask)** Did you experience a difference in parenting foster children and your natural children. What was the difference?

d) More specifically, was there a difference between the influence that natural children had on your marital relationship and the influence of foster children on your marriage relationship? What was that difference, from your experience?

3. Do you think that the age of the foster children you take into your home makes a difference on the impact foster children have had on your marriage relationship? (e.g. some foster parents have stated that taking infants and young children is less stressful on the relationship than adolescents)

4. Many foster parents indicated that one of the things that brought them closer together as a fostering couple was the common goal they shared in being foster parents together (ie. doing it together as a couple). What do you think about that? Can you give me any examples, based on your own experience as foster parents?

5. Many foster parents indicated that after they became foster parents they had less time available for things they used to do.
 - a) Has this been your experience? (yes/no)
 - b) Have you had to sacrifice things to make up for the time lost? **(if yes, then ask c)**
 - c) What have you had to sacrifice and did it "feel" like a sacrifice?

6. Was/is foster parenting worth it? Despite all of the things that changed in your life when you became foster parents (for example, time, communication, family relationships, possibly including your own marriage relationship), was it worth it overall? Why or why not?

7. If you had to describe your experience of being a foster parent in some key words or phrases, what would those words be?

8. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about this study, the questions you answered, or foster parenting in general?

Thank you very much participating in the study, both in the interview and the questionnaire.

Appendix F

QUESTIONS ADDRESSING THE PERCEIVED EFFECT OF FOSTER PARENTING ON THE MARITAL RELATIONSHIP OF FOSTER PARENTS AND CORRESPONDING VARIABLES

Questions Addressing the Perceived Effect of Foster Parenting on the Marital Relationship of Foster Parents and Corresponding Variables

A. General impact of foster children on the marital relationship questions and variables

1. Do you feel that foster children have brought you and your spouse closer together or farther apart? (closer/farther)

- a) Closer together
- b) Farther apart
- c) No change

2. In general, do you think that foster parenting has influenced your relationship with your spouse in any ways? (relationship effect)

- a) Yes
- b) No

3. In general, what effect has foster parenting had on your marital relationship? (general effect)

- a) foster parenting has had a very negative effect on my marriage
- b) foster parenting has had a somewhat negative effect on my marriage
- c) foster parenting has had a somewhat positive effect on my marriage
- d) foster parenting has had a very positive effect on my marriage

4. Foster children have had a _____ impact on my relationship with my spouse. Place an "x" at the point on the line that most reflects the way you feel. (amount impact)

small-----large

Coded: 0-3 cm.= small impact; 4-6 cm. = some; 7-9 cm. = quite a bit; 10 cm. = large impact.

B. Impact of foster children on marital satisfaction questions and variables

1. In general, how has your overall satisfaction with your marital relationship changed since you became foster parents? (satisfaction change)
 - a) greatly decreased
 - b) slightly decrease
 - c) stayed the same
 - d) slightly improved
 - e) greatly improved

2. Do you attribute any of the changes in your overall satisfaction with your marital relationship to the presence of foster children in your home? (child attributed)
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

C. Effect of foster children on communication between spouses questions and variables

1. Since you became a foster parent, how has the amount of communication with your spouse changed? (amount communication)
 - a) we communicate much less often
 - b) we communicate slightly less often
 - c) the amount we communicate has stayed the same
 - d) we communicate slightly more often
 - e) we communicate much more often

2. Since you became a foster parent, how has the quality of your communication with your spouse changed? (quality communication)
 - a) greatly improved
 - b) slightly improved
 - c) stayed the same
 - d) slightly decreased
 - e) greatly decreased

3. In general, do you and your spouse argue more or less often on issues of importance since you became foster parents? (arguments)
 - a) we argue much less often
 - b) we argue slightly less often
 - c) the amount we argue has stayed the same
 - d) we argue slightly more often
 - e) we argue much more often

D. Impact of foster children on the marital relationship over time questions and variables

1. When you first became a foster parent, to what extent did the experience of foster parenting affect your relationship with your spouse? (initial effect)
 - a) foster children had no affect on my relationship
 - b) foster children had a small affect on my relationship
 - c) foster children had a significant affect on my relationship
 - d) foster children had a great affect on my relationship

2. At the present time, does the foster child(ren) in your home influence your relationship with your spouse? (current effect)
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

3. Did the experience of fostering or the presence of foster children influence any of the difficult phases in your relationship? (phases)
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

E. Effect of foster children on time spouses spent together questions and variables

1. In general, how has the amount of time you spend together as a couple changed since you became foster parents? (time effect)
 - a) we spend much less time together
 - b) we spend slightly less time together
 - c) the amount of time we spend together has stayed the same
 - d) we spend slightly more time together
 - e) we spend much more time together

2. Foster children take up _____ of the time I once spent with my spouse. (once spent)
 - a) none
 - b) some
 - c) most
 - d) all

**F. Effect of certain foster children on the marital relationship
question and variable**

1. In your experience, has one or more foster children affected your marital relationship differently than other foster children? (different children)

- a) Yes
- b) No

VITA

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Given Names: Audrey Wilma

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Date of Birth: July 29, 1966

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Title of Thesis:

A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF FOSTER CHILDREN
ON THE MARITAL RELATIONSHIP OF FOSTER PARENTS

Author:


AUDREY WILMA KRUISSELBRINK

September 28, 1993