MOTIVATIONS, EXPECTATIONS, AND SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF FOSTER FAMILIES IN ALBANIA

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the lived experiences, motivations, and expectations of foster parents in Albania, a country in transition from institutional to family-based care. It seeks to understand how foster families interpret their roles, navigate institutional structures, and respond to societal attitudes toward non-biological parenting.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine certified foster families, representing all active foster families in Albania at the time of data collection. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring meanings and shared experiences across participants.

Findings – The results revealed four main themes: (1) motivations to become a foster family, (2) perceptions from family and society, (3) expectations regarding the foster care system, and (4) expectations regarding the foster child. Participants described fostering as an act of faith and compassion shaped by inadequate state support, social prejudice, and a growing awareness of children's trauma and adaptation needs.

Originality/value – This study provides one of the first in-depth qualitative insights into foster parenting in Albania, highlighting how motivation, institutional conditions, and social context intersect to influence the sustainability of foster care within a transitioning child-protection system.

Keywords: foster parents, family-based care, child protection, Albania

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Introduction – Foster care system

A child's life begins within a family, even in the care of a single parent. When a family can no longer fulfill its caregiving role, residential institutions have traditionally served as the first alternative. Today, however, there is a growing shift from institutional care toward family-based alternatives, recognizing that children thrive best in nurturing family environments (United Nations, 1989). This global shift, grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), has been reflected in Albania's social policies and child-protection reforms. Since the late 2000s, Albania has undertaken efforts to deinstitutionalize child care through national strategies, legislative reforms, and pilot programs that promote foster care as a preferred option for children without parental care (Xhumari & Xhumari, 2021). However, existing studies in Albania highlight persistent challenges such as limited public awareness, a shortage of trained social workers, weak inter-institutional coordination, and insufficient financial support for foster families (Connelly, Milligan, & Stevens, 2013; Melo, 2009). Moreover, the legal framework remains generic, with limited mechanisms for evaluation and accountability (Melo, 2009).

To strengthen family-based care, the Albanian Government launched the National Plan for Deinstitutionalization of Children (2020–2022) after assessing children in residential institutions and their families. The Social Protection Strategy 2019–2023 further emphasized that a strong family is a strong Albania, prioritizing family resilience and community support (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2023). Recent steps include the creation of Child and Family Support Hubs in Tirana and Durrës and plans to transform residential institutions in Vlora and Korçë into community services (UNICEF, 2023). While these reforms mark progress, the shift from policy to practice remains gradual and uneven.

Broader indicators of child well-being also reflect this reality: many children continue to face economic insecurity, limited access to quality social services, and gaps in community-based support structures (Bradshaw, 2016). In practice, residential care continues to be the primary form of placement for children unable to live with their biological families. As of December 2023, approximately 500 children remained in residential institutions, a slight decrease from 583 in 2019 (UK Home Office, 2025; INSTAT, 2019). This persistent reliance on institutional care reflects the limited development of family-based alternatives, as foster care remains in its infancy, with only a few active foster families across the country. Consequently, many children experience the long-term effects of institutional upbringing, including emotional detachment, weakened attachment bonds, and developmental challenges.

Understanding why individuals become foster parents requires examining both their personal circumstances and deeper moral and psychological motivations. According to Maslow (1943), once basic needs are met, people seek belonging and purpose. McClelland (1961) likewise emphasized social and affiliative needs—connection, care, and contribution. Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2000) Self-Determination Theory further explains that intrinsic motivation arises when actions align with one's values and sense of purpose. From this view, fostering offers intrinsic fulfillment by meeting personal, moral, and social needs. Similarly, Weiner (1972) noted that altruistic behavior evolves from obligation to empathy-driven responsibility, framing fostering as both a selfless and deeply human act. These theoretical perspectives provide an important backdrop for examining why people step into the demanding yet deeply rewarding role of a foster parent.

International literature emphasizes the significance of foster parents' motivations, expectations, and experiences as predictors of placement stability and child well-being. Previous studies have shown that motivations to foster are shaped by diverse psychological and moral factors such as altruism, empathy, compassion, and social responsibility, reflecting both a desire to help vulnerable children and a sense of moral commitment (Denby, et al., 1999; Rodger, et al., 2006; Magalhães et al., 2025). Expectations of institutional and state support, such as financial assistance, guidance, and ongoing supervision, shape caregivers' satisfaction and resilience (Wilson, et al., 2000). At the same time, foster families often confront complex emotional and social realities, including community stigma, role ambiguity, and the challenge of helping children recover from trauma and attachment disruption (Sebba, et al., 2015).

In Albania, these factors intersect with deeply rooted cultural beliefs that privilege biological kinship and often view non-biological care with skepticism (Xhumari & Xhumari, 2021). Within this context, examining foster parents' motivations and expectations offers vital insight into how Albania can expand its network of family-based caregivers and reduce reliance on institutional care.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences, motivations, and expectations of foster families in Albania. The goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that motivate families to become foster parents and the expectations they hold regarding this role. A qualitative research design was used to meet this goal. This research design was chosen because qualitative inquiry seeks to explore a phenomenon in depth, allowing for a rich and detailed understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Sample

A purposive sampling method was employed to identify officially certified foster parents currently providing care to children without parental care. Participants were recruited directly by the first author through professional collaboration with Bethany Social Services Albania, a non-profit organization coordinating foster care placements in partnership with local authorities in Albania. Recruitment followed predetermined inclusion criteria: participants were officially certified foster parents with a court-issued placement decision, residing in Albania, and providing care for at least one foster child at the time of data collection. In total, nine foster families participated, representing all legally approved foster families in Albania at the time of data collection. Participants included eight women and one man, aged 29–52, from several cities across the country, reflecting both geographic and social diversity. Families had varied professional backgrounds in economics, education, social work, religious institutions, and the private sector. In total, these families were caring for eleven foster children at the time of data collection, out of whom five boys and six girls, ages between three and thirteen years. Each family cared for one or two foster children. The duration of placements ranged from six months to eight years, with the earliest placement beginning in 2017 and the most recent in 2025. Of the eleven children, ten

had been placed from public residential institutions for children aged 0–6, while one child was placed directly from the biological family as a preventive measure to avoid institutionalization.

Measures

A semi-structured interview format was designed to explore foster parents' motivations, expectations, and experiences. This instrument was used to allow participants to share their experiences freely while maintaining a consistent thematic focus. The approach was dialogical and participatory, encouraging active reflection and interaction between the researcher and participants. The interview guide included open-ended prompts covering these key areas: motivations to become a foster family; perceptions from family and society; expectations regarding the system; and expectations regarding the child. This flexible structure allowed participants to share both deeply personal narratives and broader reflections on systemic and cultural aspects of fostering in Albania. Interviews were conducted individually, lasted between two and four hours, and were audio-recorded with informed consent to ensure transcribed verbatim for analysis, and securely deleted afterward. The tone of each interview was dialogical and reflective, encouraging participants to explore their values, emotions, and lived realities in depth.

Procedures

Data were collected between December 2024 and July 2025.At the beginning of each session, the researcher (first author) introduced the study's purpose, explained the voluntary nature of participation, and clarified the ethical safeguards in place. Participants were encouraged to reflect openly on their experiences, allowing the interviews to develop as natural conversations while maintaining focus on the study's central themes. Throughout the research process, the first author maintained a reflexive stance, using field notes and analytic memos to recognize and mitigate potential bias arising from her professional involvement in the foster care system. This familiarity facilitated trust and contextual understanding while ensuring that participants' voices and lived experiences remained central to the interpretation of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the university's ethics committee. All participants received clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, and safeguards for confidentiality before data collection began. Participation was entirely voluntary, and each participant provided written informed consent, including consent for audio recording. They were assured that the recordings would be used solely for research purposes to ensure the accuracy of transcription and analysis. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. To protect privacy, all identifying details were removed from transcripts, and sensitive content concerning children's backgrounds was treated with discretion and care. Moreover, all data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher to ensure compliance with ethical and data-protection standards.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Codes were developed inductively and organized into broader themes capturing motivational, institutional, and socio-cultural dimensions. Recurring patterns such as *faith-based motivation, social stigma, institutional navigation*, and *caregiving preparation* emerged through iterative comparison. The data were carefully organized and interpreted to provide a rich, detailed account of participants' experiences. This method aligns with the qualitative tradition of seeking to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their own realities (Patton, 2015).

Results

The interview data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), focusing on recurring patterns and shared meanings across participants' narratives. Through an iterative process of coding, reviewing, and refining, four central themes were identified that capture the core dimensions of foster parents' experiences in Albania: (1) motivations to become a foster family, (2) perceptions from family and society, (3) expectations regarding the system, and (4) expectations regarding the child. These themes reflect both the emotional and institutional contexts of fostering, illustrating how families construct meaning around their decision and navigate the realities of care. The results that follow present these key themes, supported by representative quotations and interpretive analysis.

Theme 1: Motivations to Become a Foster Family

The decision of Albanian families to become foster parents was shaped by profound emotional, spiritual, and humanitarian motives. Religious faith, compassion, and a deep desire to nurture a child consistently emerged as central motivations. Participants described fostering not as a duty, but as an act of love and moral commitment, an opportunity to give a child *"a new life."* One recalled how a missionary's church testimony about being raised as an orphan deeply moved their son, who asked, *"Mom, are we going to take that boy?"* That emotional moment became the family's turning point, leading them to view fostering as the purest expression of unconditional love.

Faith was a unifying force. Many expressed that *"God intended families, not institutions, to raise children, emphasizing that every child should feel that parental love without limits."* For several families, religious belief provided the moral foundation for their commitment, guided by the principle that *"blood does not connect us, love and faith do."* One foster mother expressed *"There are many children; I can't save them all, but at least one I wanted to save, that was my wish."*

For many, the motivation was simple and heartfelt. As one participant said, *"Simply love, because I love children very much."* Couples without biological children saw it as both a divine mission and a way to fulfill their parenting aspirations, while families with grown children viewed it as a way to bring new energy into their homes. For one family, the decision arose from urgent empathy, such as taking in a child needing health assistance. One participant from a foreign family living in Albania was inspired by relatives who had fostered and adopted in their home country, while one family felt compelled by personal connections formed through missionary

work with specific children: *"I couldn't leave them alone; we had a connection, and they had suffered so much."*

Theme 2: Perceptions from Family and Society

Foster parents' immediate social environments played a decisive role in shaping their early experiences. Most participants initially faced disbelief, criticism, or even condemnation from those around them, although some also encountered admiration and support. For most, the dominant response was negative. Many relatives or acquaintances questioned the purpose of taking in a child not of their own blood. Common remarks included: *"Why are you burdening yourself?"* or *"You already have children; what more do you need?"* Others linked the decision to superstition, that *"a stranger's blood will never be yours."* Such remarks reflected deep-rooted cultural attitudes that equate family strictly with biological lineage and regard non-biological caregiving as unnatural or temporary.

Traditional attitudes also shaped how foster parents were perceived within their own families. Several participants said relatives initially disapproved of their decision, viewing care for a non-biological child as an unnecessary burden. One parent shared that a family member "took a stand" and stopped speaking after learning about the decision to foster. Yet once the child arrived, emotional bonds gradually softened these views, turning early resistance into affection and acceptance, and recognizing the moral and emotional value of the fostering act.

Judgment also came from institutions. One foster parent recalled being told by a government employee, *"Don't take the child away from the biological mother,"* when seeking a child's legal document. Instead of gratitude for helping a child in need, they were met with discouragement and disbelief, an experience that reflected how societal prejudice can permeate even professional contexts.

Despite these challenges, several families received strong emotional support from relatives, friends, and church members who viewed their actions as acts of generosity. Those connected to local Christian communities often relied on their church for spiritual guidance, occasional financial help, and a sense of belonging within an "extended family." Some also experienced immediate admiration, being told they were *"wonderful parents"* who had *"done the right thing."*

Family support also played a stabilizing role. Spouses were often described as "more generous-hearted" in embracing the decision, while biological children frequently became enthusiastic advocates, though some needed time to adjust. In moments of exhaustion, one parent recalled how her sons took the foster child out to give her rest, an example of the quiet but vital support that helped families withstand social prejudice.

Theme 3: Expectations Regarding the System

Navigating the foster care system in Albania presented prospective families with a blend of initial hopes, deep-seated skepticism, and often harsh realities concerning institutional operations and state support. Families often entered the process holding divergent assumptions about how bureaucratic and legal mechanisms would function.

For some families, particularly those with professional experience in the social sector or exposure to foreign systems, expectations were already low, driven by a prediction of inefficiency and complication. One foster parent, anticipated the system in Albania would be *"very difficult and more closed."*

Conversely, other families approached the journey with a pronounced idealism, often rooted in the emotional motivation of providing a home. One family, eager to welcome a child, believed the process should move swiftly, ideally consisting of only two court sessions: "*the first session the family is introduced, the second session the child is taken home*".

Regardless of whether they expected smoothness or difficulty, most families encountered a cumbersome system marked by delays, lack of coordination, and institutional resistance. One mother found the process "*very slow*" because court sessions were frequently postponed, leading to constant anxiety that the biological family might perform a "*step back or change their mind before the placement was finalized.*"

Misunderstandings about state financial support were widespread and often led to frustration. Two foster parents began fostering believing "*the state would cover all expenses*" and were even told they would become "*professional foster parents*", formally employed and compensated for their caregiving. One foster mother left her job based on this promise, but the arrangement never materialized because the required Council of Ministers' Decision was delayed. Two years later, the foster mother was still receiving only the standard monthly allowance of 9,000 Albanian lek (ALL; approximately €90). These unfulfilled promises fostered disappointment and mistrust, with several participants feeling that institutional visits and media attention served merely as "*publicity,*" while real support remained absent.

Theme 4: Expectations Regarding the Child

Prior to beginning their journey, families often held idealized assumptions about the foster care experience and the children they would welcome into their homes. Some imagined the experience as "*very good, very beautiful,*" expecting something "*fantastic*". For some parents who had already raised biological children had assumed that welcoming a foster child would be a familiar and beautiful commitment, perhaps leading to a family much more gathered. One participant expected a child raised in an institution to be "*very calm and very understanding,*" someone who would "*adapt quickly*" to the new environment.

However, the training programs offered by affiliated organizations served as a crucial turning point, reshaping families' often idealized expectations. One mother recalled a particularly impactful training session where the social worker provided a sobering statement: "*You take a child who might have 3 traumas*". These three major traumas were explicitly outlined, preparing prospective parents for the complexity of the task ahead: 1. Trauma during Pregnancy: Adversity experienced while the child was in the womb, which could include being exposed to violence or living with a mother who lacked good familial guidance; 2. Trauma of Abandonment: The trauma of being removed from the biological mother's breast or presence; 3. Trauma of Institutionalization: The trauma associated with being placed and raised within an institution.

These discussions helped families recognize that fostering would involve addressing these complex needs rather than simply welcoming a grateful child. One participant noted that this information was "*eye-opening*", providing necessary awareness without causing panic. She recalled leaving the training "*aware but not afraid*", finding that the realistic picture actually strengthened her conviction that she "*could manage it*" if she committed to the task alongside her spouse.

Other families, though, still faced a steep learning curve in practice. Despite receiving training that the child might eventually be returned to the biological family, one foster mother

admitted she had to actively train herself to get used to the idea that one day the child could leave. This realization solidified the notion that foster care was not just an act of love, but an act of service requiring deep patience and psychological preparation for both the present challenges and the possibility of future separation.

Discussion

The findings confirm that the decision to foster is primarily rooted in emotional, moral, and spiritual convictions rather than material or institutional incentives. This resonates with international studies showing that altruism, empathy, and moral duty are central drivers of fostering (Denby et al., 1999; Rodger et al., 2006; Magalhães et al., 2025).

The findings also expose a sharp discrepancy between families' expectations and the realities of institutional support. Participants' expectations often clashed with bureaucratic inefficiencies and incomplete policy implementation. These experiences echo broader findings from European contexts showing that limited systemic support contributes to stress and the discontinuation of fostering among parents (Wilson et al., 2000; Sebba et al., 2015). In Albania, the absence of clear operational guidelines and delays in policy enforcement undermine families' trust and may discourage future participation in fostering initiatives.

Cultural perceptions add an additional layer of complexity to fostering in Albania. Deep-rooted beliefs that privilege biological ties often generate resistance within extended families and the wider community. Participants' testimonies reflect the persistence of stigma against non-biological caregiving, indicating that traditional norms can constrain the expansion of alternative care. In several cases, family members initially rejected the idea of fostering, perceiving it as socially inappropriate or unnecessary. However, direct emotional experience with the foster child frequently transformed these attitudes from skepticism to acceptance. This shift underscores Weiner's (1972) and McClelland's (1961) argument that social norms can evolve when empathy and personal connection replace abstract moral judgment. Raising public awareness and creating community-based support networks could therefore play a crucial role in normalizing fostering as a socially valued practice.

The study underscores the transformative role of professional training in preparing foster parents. Before fostering, many idealized the experience, expecting gratitude and easy adjustment from the child. Training sessions addressing trauma, abandonment, and institutionalization fundamentally reshaped these views. Learning that most foster children have endured multiple traumas helped parents adopt a more patient, informed, and emotionally resilient approach to caregiving. This aligns with international findings that trauma-informed preparation enhances placement stability and caregiver well-being (Sebba et al., 2015).

Conclusions

Foster care in Albania remains an emerging field shaped by strong moral conviction, limited institutional capacity, and persistent cultural barriers. Foster parents demonstrate deep

emotional and spiritual commitment, viewing caregiving as an act of love and compassion that redefines family beyond biological ties.

Cultural beliefs about blood relations and lingering stigma still hinder the acceptance of fostering, underscoring the need for sustained public awareness alongside legal reform. Families' expectations of state support revealed both mistrust and hope for a more transparent, family-centered system.

Pre-placement training helped parents confront children's trauma and adjust expectations, strengthening their resilience and empathy. Despite systemic challenges, the determination of foster families offers hope for reform, showing that family is built through compassion as much as through lineage. Support from communities and faith networks further sustains their long-term commitment to fostering.

Theoretically, the findings enrich theoretical understandings of motivation in caregiving by linking emotional and spiritual motives to broader social contexts. They support the view that altruism in foster care is rooted in personal conviction and shaped by cultural norms. This perspective expands existing models of caregiving motivation by illustrating how individual faith and collective cultural values intersect to shape decisions about fostering in societies transitioning from institutional to family-based care systems. Furthermore, the findings suggest that motivation in foster care cannot be understood in isolation from the socio-economic and institutional realities that families navigate, indicating that caregiving decisions emerge at the intersection of personal meaning-making and structural constraints.

Practically, the findings suggest that Albania's foster care system requires strengthened institutional accountability and consistent financial and professional support. Training programs should integrate trauma-informed and resilience-based approaches while emphasizing realistic expectations. Developing structured peer-support networks for foster parents would also help prevent burnout and reinforce families' long-term engagement with the system. Community sensitization campaigns, led jointly by the government, faith institutions, and civil society, could reduce stigma and enhance continuity, trust, and family retention within the system. Additionally, clearer coordination among local child-protection units, social workers, and service providers could improve case management and ensure more timely, reliable support for foster families.

This study's qualitative design and small, context-specific sample limit the generalizability of its findings. The results reflect the experiences and perspectives of currently active foster parents, without capturing the views of those who declined or discontinued fostering. Despite this limitation, the study offers valuable qualitative insights into an understudied group within Albania's evolving child-protection framework. Future research should prioritize including the voices of foster children to better understand their emotional experiences, sense of belonging, and adaptation within foster families. Comparative or longitudinal studies could further examine how these dynamics evolve as Albania's foster care system continues to develop.

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