

Article

Caring Makes a Family: Understanding Social Representations of Adoption, Foster Care and Child Protection

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Abstract

Adoption and foster care are important forms of family life that challenge traditional understandings of kinship, parenthood, and family relationships. Examining how these family forms are socially represented is essential for understanding public attitudes toward child protection and children's right to grow up in a family environment. This study analysed social representations of adoption, foster care, and child protection among university students and adults from the general population. A qualitative descriptive study was conducted with 182 participants including Social Work students, participants with a Law background, and adults from the general population without a specific academic background in the legal or social sciences. Data were collected using a researcher-administered open-ended questionnaire and analysed using IRaMuTeQ software. Similarity analysis and Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) were used to identify the main discursive structures underlying participants' representations. Social representations frequently emphasised caregiving capacity, emotional stability, and secure relationships when participants discussed family suitability. Biological relatedness also remained present, indicating the coexistence of biological and caregiving-based meanings of family, without implying that one had fully displaced the other. Profile-specific associations were also identified: Social Work students were more strongly associated with discourses concerning parental competence, child development, and protective intervention, whereas adults from the general population were more strongly associated with family diversity, family harm, and the complexities of child protection decisions.

Keywords: social representations; adoption; foster care; child protection; parenthood; lexicometric analysis



Academic Editor: Felice Addeo

Received: 13 July 2026

Revised: 9 October 2026

Accepted: 10 October 2026

Published: 14 October 2026

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1. Introduction

1.1. Family Diversity, Kinship, and Parenthood: Beyond Biological Relatedness

The family is one of the fundamental social institutions supporting individuals' development and well-being throughout the life course. Rather than representing a static social unit, the family has undergone profound social, cultural, and legal transformations that have fostered the consolidation of increasingly diverse family forms [1]. Alongside the traditional two-parent family based on marriage and biological parenthood, contemporary societies include single-parent, same-sex parent, blended, adoptive, and foster families, among other family configurations [2].

These transformations do not reflect a crisis of the family institution but rather its capacity to adapt to changing social realities and evolving life circumstances. A substantial body of evidence consistently demonstrates that children's well-being depends primarily on the quality of family relationships rather than on family structure itself. Research conducted by Golombok [3–5], Patterson [6], Biblarz and Stacey [7], and Farr [8] has shown that parental sensitivity, emotional support, family stability, and the quality of parent–child interactions are more robust predictors of child development than family composition or biological relatedness.

The transformation of family structures has also prompted a reconsideration of traditional understandings of kinship and parenthood. Historically, family membership has been closely associated with biological relatedness, placing biology at the centre of conceptions of motherhood, fatherhood, and family identity. However, contributions from anthropology and sociology have demonstrated that family relationships are also constructed through shared experiences of living together, caregiving, and mutual recognition [9–11].

This perspective has broadened contemporary understandings of parenthood by highlighting care, responsibility, and emotional commitment alongside biological relatedness. Consequently, diverse ways of forming families have gained greater social and legal recognition. Nevertheless, as noted by Jociles Rubio [12] and Nordqvist [13], biological relatedness continues to carry considerable symbolic significance in social conceptions of family, kinship, and parenthood. Thus, rather than indicating the replacement of biological understandings by relational ones, these transformations suggest that different dimensions of family belonging and parenthood may coexist and acquire different meanings across social contexts.

1.2. Child Protection and the Right to Grow Up in a Family

The evolution of child protection systems has been characterised by an increasing incorporation of children's rights and the promotion of their well-being into child protection approaches. This transition gained decisive momentum following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [14], which recognised children and adolescents as rights holders and established the best interests of the child as the guiding principle for all actions affecting them. From this perspective, child protection extends beyond meeting children's basic needs and encompasses the promotion of their holistic development within safe, stable, and emotionally supportive family environments. In this regard, attachment theory has consistently highlighted the fundamental role of caregiving relationships in children's psychological, emotional, and social development [15–17]. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that the quality of children's relationships with their primary caregivers constitutes one of the strongest protective factors for their well-being, adjustment, and healthy development.

At the same time, a rights-based orientation should not be equated with uniformly positive experiences or outcomes of child protection intervention. Critical scholarship has highlighted enduring tensions between protection, family support, surveillance, risk management, and family separation. In particular, risk-averse child protection practices may intensify professional scrutiny of families, contribute to mistrust between parents and services, and, in some circumstances, privilege child-removal responses over sustained family support [18]. These critiques underline the importance of distinguishing the normative aims of child protection systems from the ways in which interventions are experienced by children and birth families and from their actual outcomes in practice [18].

This body of evidence has contributed to a profound transformation of child protection systems by promoting family-based care as the preferred alternative to long-term institutional care whenever possible. Research has frequently associated stable and well-

supported family-based placements with more favourable developmental conditions than prolonged residential care [19–22]. However, placement type alone does not determine children's subsequent outcomes. Children entering foster care or adoption often have histories of adversity, maltreatment, loss, disrupted relationships, and placement instability, and their later adjustment is shaped by the interaction between these previous experiences and the stability, quality, and support available within subsequent caregiving arrangements. Accordingly, adoption and foster care should not be understood as uniformly successful or inherently protective outcomes. A recent systematic review comparing permanency pathways among children and young people with foster care experience found substantial heterogeneity in educational, economic, housing, health, substance-use, and justice-related outcomes [23]. Although adopted young people generally showed more favourable outcomes than some other child-welfare-involved groups, the authors emphasised the potential influence of confounding factors, while stable long-term foster care could also be associated with comparatively positive outcomes [23].

Reunification with birth parents constitutes another important pathway following a period in alternative care and should be considered alongside adoption, foster care, and other permanency arrangements. Research from England has shown that returning to the birth family remains a significant route out of care and that the stability of reunification depends on multiple child, family, placement, and service-related factors [24]. Reunification therefore illustrates the continuing practical and relational significance of birth-family ties within child protection systems. At the same time, reunification should not be assumed to be inherently successful: its outcomes depend on adequate assessment, preparation, family support, and the conditions that led to the child's original entry into care.

However, the legislative preference for family-based care does not imply that residential care has become marginal within the Spanish protection system. Official administrative data for 2024 recorded 19,977 children and adolescents in residential care and 16,486 in family foster care on 31 December, corresponding to approximately 55% and 45%, respectively, of these two forms of care. These figures also vary across Autonomous Communities, reflecting the decentralised organisation of child protection services in Spain [25].

In Spain, Law 26/2015 introduced substantial reforms to the child protection system, establishing the preferential use of family foster care over residential care, particularly for younger children, while also introducing open adoption and reinforcing adopted persons' right to information about their origins [26]. These provisions reflect a legislative preference for stable family-based solutions while recognising the importance of children's previous relationships and family origins [26].

Contemporary child protection frameworks formally position the protection of children's rights and well-being among their central objectives. However, these normative aims do not imply that child protection interventions are uniformly experienced as beneficial or that services consistently achieve these objectives in practice. Within this framework, adoption and foster care play a central role as family-based measures designed to guarantee children's right to grow up in a family environment. Beyond their protective function, both forms of care raise important questions concerning parenthood, belonging, and family identity, making them particularly relevant contexts for understanding how societies construct and interpret family relationships and caregiving.

Accordingly, child protection policies and professional practice have increasingly incorporated the positive parenting approach, which conceptualises parenting as the exercise of parental responsibilities guided by the best interests of the child, emotional warmth, effective communication, and appropriate guidance and boundaries to support children's holistic development. As argued by Rodrigo et al. [27] and Sanders et al. [28], this perspective shifts attention away from family deficits towards strengthening parental

competencies and support resources, thereby promoting caregiving environments that enhance children's well-being and uphold their rights.

Recent regional evidence also illustrates the importance of family-preservation and parenting-support interventions within the Spanish child protection context. For example, a quasi-experimental longitudinal evaluation of the Treatment Programme for Families with Children in Andalusia found improvements in children's quality of life among families receiving the intervention compared with families presenting a similar level of psychosocial risk who did not participate in the programme [29]. Such findings highlight that child protection encompasses not only alternative care measures but also preventive and family-preservation interventions aimed at strengthening caregiving environments.

Within the Spanish context, research on family reunification similarly emphasises the complexity of intervention with birth families and the need to strengthen practices aimed at family preservation and reunification. Studies examining professionals' perspectives have identified both facilitating factors and areas for improvement in the support provided to families of origin, reinforcing the view that child protection should not be understood solely in terms of removal or alternative placement but also in terms of the quality and continuity of support provided to birth families [30].

1.3. Adoption and Foster Care as Alternative Forms of Family Life

Adoption and foster care represent alternative forms of family life that illustrate how kinship and family relationships may be understood through multiple dimensions, including biological relatedness, caregiving, shared everyday life, and emotional commitment. Although both measures originate within child protection systems, their significance extends beyond the legal sphere by demonstrating that family relationships can be established through caregiving, shared everyday life, and emotional commitment, in addition to biological ties [9–11].

Adoption is one of the legal institutions that has undergone the most extensive reforms within the Spanish legal system, reflecting changing social understandings of childhood, family, and parenthood [31]. Adoptive parenthood establishes a permanent legal relationship between the adopted person and the adoptive family. The evolution of adoption has been accompanied by a progressive redefinition of kinship, parenthood, and family relationships, contributing to a broader understanding of the diverse ways in which families are formed [31,32]. Recent research has shown that adoptive identity develops throughout the life course through dynamic processes that integrate family experiences, personal histories, and meanings attached to one's origins [33,34]. Furthermore, several studies have highlighted that searching for one's origins, maintaining contact with the birth family, and developing a sense of belonging constitute important dimensions of identity development for many adopted individuals [35,36].

Similarly, foster care provides a family context in which everyday caregiving plays a central role in the development of meaningful relationships, even in the absence of permanent legal parenthood. In both adoption and foster care, family experiences illustrate that belonging and identity are constructed through complex relational processes in which legal, emotional, social, and biographical dimensions converge [37,38]. This plurality of meanings attached to family has also been documented within foster care systems. The systematic review conducted by Wulleman et al. [39] found that foster families, professionals, and birth families simultaneously endorse conceptions of family based on caregiving, emotional bonds, biological relatedness, and personal choice, without any single perspective completely displacing the others. The continuing relevance of birth-family relationships is also evident in reunification processes. For some children placed in alternative care, returning to live with their birth parents remains a planned route to permanence when circumstances

allow and reunification is considered consistent with the child's welfare. This reinforces the idea that biological belonging and caregiving relationships should not be conceptualised as mutually exclusive or hierarchically ordered dimensions of family life. Rather, their relative significance may vary across children's trajectories and may coexist before, during, and after periods of alternative care.

The formation of an adoptive or foster family does not, however, eliminate the effects of children's previous experiences or guarantee placement stability. Adoptive and foster families may face substantial relational, behavioural, developmental, and support needs, particularly when children have experienced early adversity, maltreatment, repeated separations, or multiple previous placements. In a recent qualitative study of adoptive parents who had experienced adoption disruption in England and Wales, Parker et al. documented the significant challenges associated with parenting children affected by developmental trauma and highlighted the need for sustained and appropriately specialised post-adoption support [40]. These findings reinforce the importance of understanding adoption and foster care not simply as placement outcomes, but as ongoing relational processes that may require long-term professional and therapeutic support [40].

Despite the social and legislative changes that have taken place over recent decades, discourses and beliefs continue to distinguish between family relationships perceived as "natural" and those established through caregiving and lived relational experiences. These conceptions shape the ways in which adoption, foster care, and the role of birth families are understood and interpreted. Consequently, adoption and foster care provide particularly valuable contexts for examining how people socially construct meanings of family, kinship, and parenthood. Exploring the meanings associated with these family forms offers valuable insights into the beliefs, values, and social representations that continue to shape contemporary understandings of childhood, parenting, and child protection.

1.4. Theoretical Framework: Social Representations of Adoption, Foster Care, and Child Protection

The transformation of family structures, the evolution of child protection systems, and advances in research on child development and well-being have contributed to broader recognition of diverse forms of parenthood and family relationships. However, social and legislative changes are not always accompanied by equivalent shifts in the beliefs, values, and meanings that people attribute to these realities. Consequently, understanding how adoption, foster care, and child protection are perceived requires examining the shared systems of knowledge that shape public perceptions, attitudes, and interpretations of these phenomena.

The Theory of Social Representations provides one of the most influential conceptual frameworks for understanding how individuals and groups make sense of socially significant phenomena. Moscovici [41] defined social representations as socially elaborated and shared forms of knowledge that enable people to interpret reality, communicate with others, and guide their behaviour. Building on this perspective, Jodelet [42,43] argued that social representations function as forms of practical knowledge through which individuals and social groups attribute meaning to complex aspects of everyday life. Rather than simply reflecting reality, social representations actively contribute to its construction. They organise available information, provide explanatory frameworks for understanding social phenomena, and generate shared systems of interpretation that influence attitudes, behaviours, and social practices. In this way, social representations shape understandings of what constitutes a legitimate family, the characteristics associated with positive parenthood, and the meanings attributed to different forms of family relationships and belonging.

Abric [44] proposed that social representations may be organised around a central core comprising relatively stable and widely shared meanings, together with more context-

sensitive peripheral elements. This structural perspective provides a useful conceptual framework for considering how different meanings may vary in salience and stability within social representations. However, the lexicometric procedures employed in the present study were not designed to identify the central core and peripheral system in the strict sense proposed by the structural approach [45]. Accordingly, the position and connectivity of lexical items in the similarity networks are interpreted descriptively as patterns of co-occurrence and lexical organisation, rather than as direct empirical evidence of core or peripheral representational status.

Within the present study, Social Representations Theory provides the conceptual framework for examining how socially shared meanings concerning family, parenthood, adoption, foster care, and child protection are constructed and articulated. Consistent with this perspective, the study focuses on shared systems of meaning rather than on predefined individual attitude scores. The open-ended questionnaire was used to elicit participants' own formulations concerning family suitability, caregiving, biological relatedness, family diversity, and child protection. At the analytical level, the theory guided the interpretation of recurrent lexical co-occurrences and DHC classes as corpus-level patterns of socially shared meaning. However, as noted above, the lexicometric procedures were not used to infer a formal central-core/peripheral structure in the strict sense of Abric's structural model.

1.5. Research Gap and Study Objectives

The literature reviewed above shows that considerable research has examined family diversity, adoptive identity, foster care, children's developmental outcomes, birth-family contact, and child protection intervention. It also indicates broad agreement that caregiving quality, relational stability, and emotional support are important dimensions of children's well-being, while biological belonging, family origins, and birth-family relationships continue to retain social and personal significance. At the same time, the reviewed literature also reveals important tensions concerning placement stability, reunification, the outcomes of alternative care, and the ways in which different forms of family belonging are understood. Within this body of literature, comparatively less attention has been given to how these different dimensions are articulated together as shared social representations of adoption, foster care, and child protection across heterogeneous social groups.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the shared lexical and discursive patterns through which adoption, foster care, biological relatedness, caregiving, family diversity, and child protection are represented within a single analytical framework. In addition to identifying common representational patterns across the corpus, the study also examines whether particular lexical classes are differentially associated with participants' educational and social profiles.

Against this background, the present study aimed to analyse social representations of adoption, foster care, and child protection in a heterogeneous sample using IRaMuTeQ-based lexicometric analysis. More specifically, it sought to identify recurrent lexical and discursive patterns, examine how biological relatedness, caregiving, family diversity, and child protection were articulated, and explore whether particular lexical classes were differentially associated with participant profiles.

Accordingly, the study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1. What recurrent lexical and discursive patterns characterise participants' social representations of adoptive and foster families?

RQ2. What recurrent lexical and discursive patterns characterise participants' representations of children's right to grow up in a family and child protection intervention?

RQ3. How are meanings related to caregiving, biological relatedness, family diversity, protection, and family belonging articulated within these representational fields?

RQ4. Are the identified lexical classes differentially associated with participant profiles, specifically Social Work students, participants with a Law background, and adults from the general population?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

A qualitative descriptive study with a lexicometric analytical approach was conducted to examine social representations of adoption, foster care, and child protection. The study was grounded in the Theory of Social Representations, which conceptualises social representations as socially shared systems of knowledge through which individuals interpret social reality and orient their attitudes and practices [41,46]. Data were generated through a researcher-administered questionnaire composed primarily of open-ended questions. This format was selected to obtain textual responses from a relatively large and heterogeneous sample while allowing participants to express their views in their own words. The analytical aim was therefore to identify recurrent lexical and discursive patterns across the corpus rather than to reconstruct individual narratives through in-depth qualitative interviewing. Although data were collected using a questionnaire format, the study was qualitative in nature because the instrument generated unrestricted textual responses rather than responses to predefined categories, rating scales, or closed-ended items. The structured administration ensured comparability across participants, while the open-ended response format provided the textual material required for corpus-based lexicometric analysis.

Participants' responses were analysed using IRaMuTeQ (Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires), a software package widely used in social representation research and lexicometric analysis.

2.2. Participants

The study included 182 participants from diverse educational and social backgrounds (Table 1). To capture a broad range of perspectives on child protection, adoption, and foster care, the sample comprised 56 undergraduate Social Work students (30.8%), 41 participants with a Law background, including Law students and legal professionals (22.5%), and 85 adults from the general population without a specific academic background in the legal or social sciences (46.7%). Participants were recruited using a non-probability convenience sampling strategy based on accessibility and availability. Social Work participants were undergraduate students recruited from university classes. The Law-background group included both students recruited from the Faculty of Law and individuals already practising in the legal field who were accessible to the research team. Adults from the general population were recruited opportunistically from among available adults outside these academic and professional contexts. The only eligibility criterion was being 18 years of age or older. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no financial or other incentives were provided.

The inclusion of these heterogeneous participant profiles made it possible to examine both shared social representations and potential differences associated with participants' educational and social backgrounds. Social Work students represented future professionals likely to become involved in social and child protection interventions, while participants with a Law background provided perspectives informed to varying degrees by legal education or professional experience. Adults from the general population represented the broader social context within which adoption, foster care, and child protection are socially understood and negotiated.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Total		182	100.0
Gender	Female	123	67.6
	Male	56	30.8
	Not reported	3	1.6
Age	M = 31.1; SD = 9.27; Range: 19–56 years		
Participant profile	Social work students	56	30.8
	Participants with a Law background	41	22.5
	Adults from the general population	85	46.7
Prior personal acquaintance with adoptive families	Yes	80	44.0
	No	102	56.0
Prior personal acquaintance with foster families	Yes	76	41.8
	No	106	58.2

Note. The Social Work group comprised undergraduate Social Work students. The Law-background group included both undergraduate Law students and participants practising professionally in the legal field. Participants classified as adults from the general population had no specific academic background in Social Work or Law.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 56 years ($M = 31.1$, $SD = 9.27$). Participants were not recruited on the basis of direct lived experience of adoption, foster care, or statutory child protection. Although the questionnaire recorded prior personal acquaintance with adoptive or foster families, it did not include a separate item assessing whether respondents themselves had direct lived experience as adopted persons, individuals with foster care experience, foster or adoptive carers, or birth-family members involved in child protection proceedings. Accordingly, the presence and extent of such direct experience cannot be determined from the present dataset.

2.3. Instrument

A researcher-administered structured open-ended questionnaire was developed specifically for this study and comprised two sections. The first section collected sociodemographic information, including participants' sex, age, highest educational qualification, occupation, place of residence, and prior personal acquaintance with adoptive or foster families. This variable referred to personal acquaintance with adoptive or foster families and should not be interpreted as a measure of participants' own lived experience of adoption, foster care, or statutory child protection intervention. Direct lived experience was not assessed as a separate sociodemographic variable.

The second section consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' social representations of adoption, foster care, and child protection. The questionnaire was organised into two thematic domains.

Domain 1. Perceptions of Adoptive and Foster Families

Participants Were Invited to Reflect on the Following Questions:

How Would You Describe the Typical Profile of an Adoptive or Foster Family?

What Are Your Views on Single Individuals or Same-Sex Couples Adopting or Fostering Children?

Do you think that ethnicity or cultural background influences the relationship between adoptive or foster families and the children in their care?

What Do You Believe Motivates Families to Adopt or Become Foster Carers?

Domain 2. Reflections on Children's Right to Grow Up in A Family

Participants Responded to the Following Questions:

Do you believe that every child has the right to grow up in a family? Please explain your answer.

In which situations do you consider it preferable for a child to remain with their birth family, and under what circumstances should an alternative care arrangement be sought?

What is your opinion of the following statement: "An imperfect family is better than a residential care institution"?

The questionnaire was designed as a structured open-ended instrument rather than as an in-depth interview guide. All participants were asked the same questions, formulated in the same general manner, and no predefined response categories were provided. The open-ended format was intended to facilitate spontaneous expression while maintaining sufficient standardisation across participants for subsequent corpus-based lexicometric analysis. No follow-up or probing questions were systematically introduced, as the objective was to obtain comparable textual material across the full sample rather than extended individual narratives.

The open-ended questions were developed following a review of the literature on adoption, foster care, child protection, and social representations, and were designed to encourage participants to provide detailed and reflective responses.

Because the questionnaire was organised around predefined thematic domains, the wording of the questions necessarily provided a thematic frame for participants' responses. Accordingly, the lexical patterns identified in the subsequent analyses should not be interpreted as entirely spontaneous or unprompted representations. Rather, the analyses examine how participants elaborated, qualified, and connected meanings within the thematic issues introduced by the questionnaire. Particular caution is therefore required when lexical items appearing explicitly in a question also emerge as characteristic terms of a lexical class.

2.4. Procedure

Recruitment was conducted according to the sampling strategy described above. Social Work students were approached within their university classes, while participants with a Law background were recruited among available students from the Faculty of Law and practising legal professionals. Adults from the general population were recruited on the basis of accessibility and availability. Potential participants received information about the purpose and voluntary nature of the study before deciding whether to participate. No remuneration or other incentive was offered.

Data were collected through researcher-administered open-ended questionnaires. Administration was conducted either face-to-face or by telephone according to participants' availability. In both modalities, the same questionnaire and question sequence were used in order to maintain consistency across participants. The researcher read or presented each question and allowed participants to formulate their responses in their own words; no systematic follow-up probes were introduced. Questionnaire administration lasted approximately 20–30 min, depending on the length of participants' responses.

With participants' consent, oral responses were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions preserved participants' wording and substantive meaning, while identifying information was removed before corpus preparation. The resulting textual material was subsequently reviewed for obvious typographical and transcription errors without altering the meaning of the responses.

For reporting purposes, anonymised participant codes were assigned according to participant profile and sequential position in the dataset: SW01–SW56 for Social Work students, LAW01–LAW41 for participants with a Law background, and GP01–GP85 for adults from the general population. These codes are used solely to attribute illustrative quotations while preserving participants' anonymity.

Before data collection, all participants received detailed information about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the measures implemented to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Ethical procedures included obtaining informed consent, ensuring participants' anonymity and confidentiality, removing any identifying information from the textual material prior to analysis, and storing all data securely. All procedures complied with relevant institutional and professional ethical guidelines and were conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki [47], and approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria with reference number CEIH-2024-09.

Following data collection, participants' responses were reviewed and compiled into a single text corpus for analysis. Data preparation involved correcting obvious typographical and spelling errors, standardising linguistic formats, and removing elements that could interfere with the lexicometric analysis while preserving the original meaning of participants' responses.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using IRaMuTeQ (version 0.7 alpha 2), a software package based on the R statistical environment that enables multidimensional analyses of textual data through lexicometric techniques [48].

The final text corpus comprised 182 texts, 4321 text segments, 94,492 word occurrences, 5068 distinct word forms, and 2349 hapax legomena (words occurring only once in the corpus). These indicators reflect the lexical richness and discursive diversity of the material analysed.

A combination of complementary analytical procedures was employed. First, a similarity analysis was conducted to examine the semantic relationships among the most relevant lexical units in the corpus, thereby identifying the underlying structure of participants' discourses. Second, a Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) was performed following the Reinert method [49] to identify homogeneous lexical classes and the latent thematic structures underlying the textual data. Given that not all text segments were retained in the DHC, the lexical classes were not interpreted in isolation. The DHC findings were therefore considered alongside the similarity analysis and the qualitative examination of the original responses. The DHC was therefore used as one complementary source of evidence for identifying recurrent lexical patterns rather than as a standalone representation of the complete corpus.

The analytical pathway therefore proceeded from participants' complete textual responses to text segmentation and lexical analysis, followed by the statistical identification of DHC classes based on patterns of vocabulary distribution across text segments. The interpretation of each class was subsequently based on the lexical items most strongly associated with that class, their chi-square values, and examination of the original text segments with the strongest class associations. Descriptive class labels were assigned by the researchers after reviewing these converging sources of information. Accordingly, the study

did not employ a conventional manual thematic coding procedure in which predefined codes are progressively grouped into categories and themes; rather, the lexical classes were generated statistically by IRaMuTeQ and subsequently interpreted in their original textual context.

Similarity analysis was used to map lexical co-occurrence relationships and to identify highly connected terms within each thematic subcorpus. The connectivity or graphical position of a lexical item was not treated as a direct test of the central-core/peripheral-system model proposed by Abric [44]. Likewise, DHC classes were interpreted as recurrent lexical and discursive patterns within the corpus rather than as direct indicators of theoretically predefined representational structures.

Participant profile was incorporated into each DHC as an illustrative metadata variable to explore whether lexical classes showed differential corpus-level associations with the three participant profiles: Social Work students ($n = 56$), participants with a Law background ($n = 41$), and adults from the general population ($n = 85$). Because the profile variable was attached to each participant's initial text, all text segments derived from that text inherited the corresponding profile label. Consequently, the chi-square tests relating profile modalities to DHC classes used classified text segments, rather than individual participants, as the counting unit. For each profile modality and lexical class, IRaMuTeQ assessed whether text segments carrying that modality were overrepresented in the class relative to the remaining classified segments. These tests had one degree of freedom ($df = 1$). The reported p -values are nominal, unadjusted p -values; no correction for multiple comparisons was applied. Accordingly, these profile-class associations were treated as exploratory corpus-level indicators of lexical overrepresentation and should not be interpreted as participant-level inferential comparisons. Associations close to the conventional $p = 0.05$ threshold were considered tentative and interpreted with particular caution. The IRaMuTeQ output used for these analyses did not provide a separate standardised effect-size estimate; therefore, effect sizes were not derived post hoc.

This procedure enabled the identification of both shared representational structures and profile-specific patterns within each thematic subcorpus.

Similarity analyses were retained at the full-sample level because their purpose was to characterise the shared semantic organisation of each thematic subcorpus, whereas between-profile differentiation was specifically examined through the illustrative variables included in the DHC.

The interpretation of the findings combined the statistical indicators generated by IRaMuTeQ—including word frequencies, chi-square (χ^2) values, lexical co-occurrences, and the distribution of text segments across classes—with a qualitative examination of the original text segments most strongly associated with each lexical class. The automated outputs were therefore not interpreted independently of their textual context. Representative segments were examined to determine whether the lexical patterns identified by the software corresponded to coherent meanings within participants' responses.

Given the structured nature of the open-ended questionnaire, the purpose of the analysis was not to produce an in-depth thematic reconstruction of individual experiences, as would be expected from semi-structured or narrative interviews. Rather, IRaMuTeQ was used to identify recurrent lexical structures and shared patterns of meaning across a comparatively large textual corpus. Consequently, the lexical classes and similarity networks were interpreted as corpus-level discursive patterns and not as exhaustive representations of the complexity of individual participants' experiences.

During interpretation, lexical items that reproduced wording explicitly contained in the questionnaire prompts were distinguished from lexical content introduced by participants themselves. Prompt-derived terms were not treated as independent evidence of

spontaneous representational salience. Instead, interpretation focused on the relationships among lexical items, the participant-generated vocabulary surrounding the prompted terms, and the meaning expressed in the original text segments.

2.6. Trustworthiness and Methodological Rigour

Trustworthiness was addressed in accordance with the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability commonly applied in qualitative research [50]. Given the corpus-based lexicometric design of the study, these criteria were operationalised through procedures appropriate to the nature of the data and analytical approach rather than through strategies typically used in in-depth interview studies, such as member checking or prolonged engagement.

Credibility was supported through the use of complementary analytical procedures. Similarity analysis and Descending Hierarchical Classification were interpreted jointly, and the resulting lexical patterns were systematically examined against the original text segments from which they were derived. Representative excerpts were used to verify that the statistical associations identified by IRaMuTeQ corresponded to coherent meanings within participants' responses. In addition, oral responses were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, reducing the risk of relying on researchers' retrospective summaries of participants' accounts.

Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the study context, participant profiles, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, questionnaire content, and analytical approach. The study does not claim statistical representativeness or generalisability; rather, this contextual information is provided to enable readers to assess the potential relevance of the findings to comparable populations and settings.

Dependability was supported through procedural standardisation and transparency. All participants responded to the same structured open-ended questionnaire, using the same question sequence, and no systematic follow-up probes were introduced. Corpus preparation procedures, the version of IRaMuTeQ used, the analytical techniques applied, the criteria for interpreting lexical classes, and the use of participant profile as an illustrative variable are described explicitly to facilitate methodological transparency and reproducibility.

Confirmability was strengthened by grounding interpretations in both the statistical outputs generated by IRaMuTeQ and the original participant responses. Lexical classes were not interpreted solely on the basis of automated output; their meaning was examined in relation to representative text segments, and anonymised participant codes were provided for illustrative quotations to ensure traceability between interpretations and source material. Prompt-derived lexical items were also distinguished from participant-generated vocabulary in order to reduce the risk of attributing researcher-provided wording to participants' spontaneous representations.

Researcher influence remains relevant because decisions concerning corpus preparation, class naming, and interpretation necessarily involve judgement. To make this interpretive role transparent, the study distinguishes automated lexicometric outputs from the subsequent qualitative interpretation conducted by the researchers and avoids treating lexical connectivity or class structure as direct evidence of theoretically predefined representational structures. No formal member checking or independent qualitative coding was undertaken, which should be considered when evaluating the interpretive scope of the findings.

3. Results

3.1. Social Representations of Adoptive and Foster Families

Because the study employed a corpus-based lexicometric approach rather than conventional manual thematic coding, the classes reported below correspond to statistically derived lexical groupings. Their descriptive labels were assigned after examination of the characteristic vocabulary, statistical associations, and representative original text segments within each class.

3.1.1. Similarity Analysis of the Adoptive and Foster Families Subcorpus

The similarity analysis showed that family was the most highly connected lexical node in the adoption and foster care subcorpus (Figure 1). The network displayed recurrent co-occurrences linking family with child and parent, together with additional connections involving biological relatedness, family diversity, cultural diversity, adoption, and foster care. These relationships describe the lexical organisation of participants' discourse and the terms that most frequently appeared in interconnected semantic contexts.

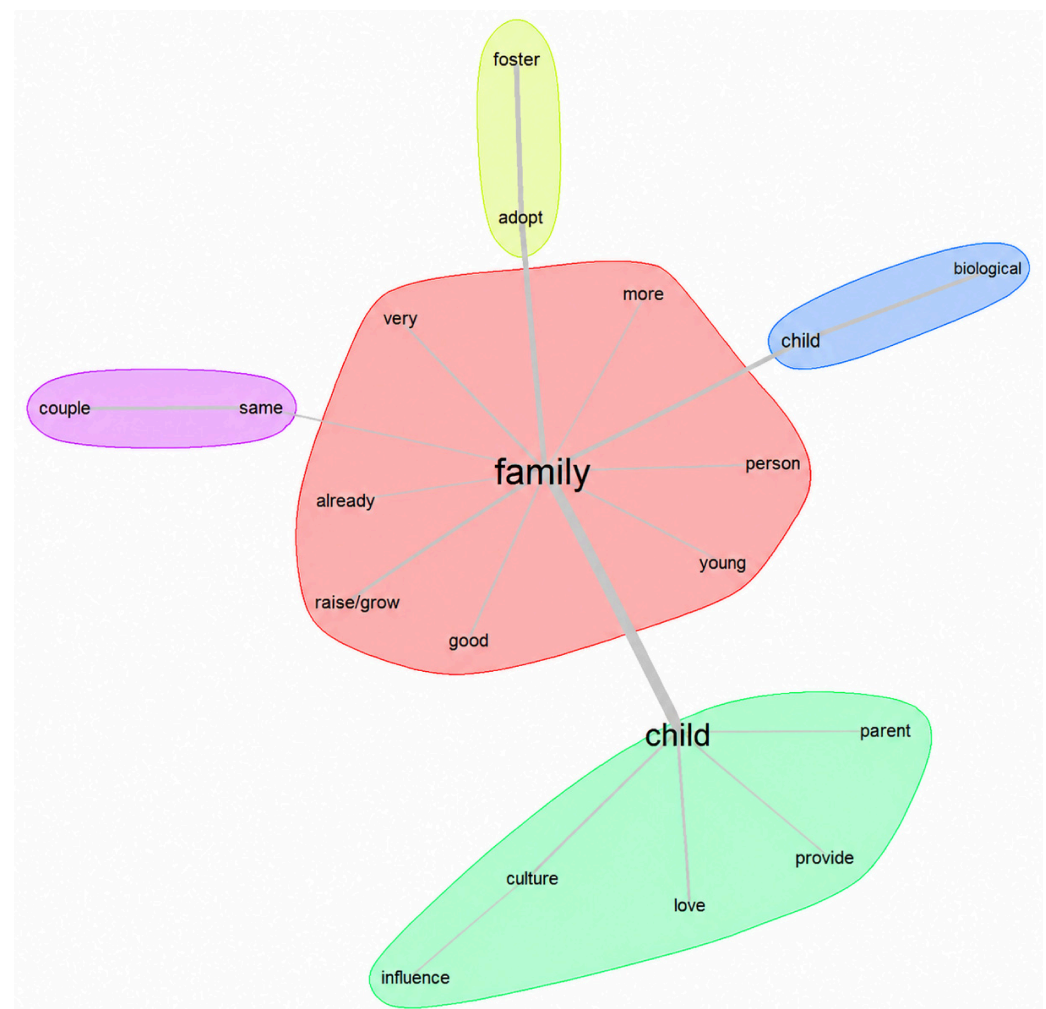


Figure 1. Similarity analysis of the adoptive and foster families subcorpus.

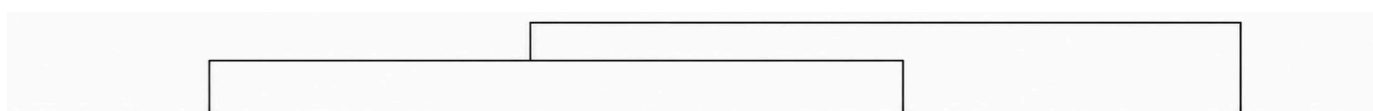
The semantic network revealed four main patterns of lexical association. The first linked the terms family and child, which in turn was connected to parent, highlighting the prominence of child well-being and parental relationships within participants' discourses. The second dimension connected child and biological, indicating that biological relatedness remained a relevant element in participants' representations. The third dimension

associated the terms same and couple, reflecting participants' references to same-sex couples. Finally, the fourth dimension grouped the terms adopt, foster, culture, and couple, suggesting that adoption and foster care were frequently discussed in relation to family diversity, cultural diversity, and different family configurations.

Overall, the similarity network suggests that representations of adoptive and foster families were organised around four main dimensions: respect for cultural diversity, parental capacity to provide care and stability, acceptance of diverse family forms, and motivations for adoption and foster care. Family constituted the most highly connected term in the network, while the surrounding lexical associations reflected recurring references to caregiving, biological relatedness, family diversity, cultural differences, and motivations for adoption and foster care. These findings are interpreted as patterns of lexical co-occurrence rather than as evidence of a hierarchical core-periphery structure.

3.1.2. Descending Hierarchical Classification of the Adoptive and Foster Families Subcorpus

The DHC of the adoption and foster care subcorpus retained 945 of 1453 text segments (65.04%) and yielded four lexical classes (Figure 2): Cultural Diversity and Family Integration (Class 1; 27.0%), Parental Competence and Protective Capacity (Class 2; 28.6%), Equality and Diversity of Family Models (Class 3; 27.0%), and Motivations for Adoption and Foster Care (Class 4; 17.5%).



CLASS 4 Motivations for adoption and foster care 17.5 %		CLASS 3 Equality and diversity of family models 27.0 %		CLASS 2 Parental competence and protective capacity 28.6 %		CLASS 1 Cultural diversity and family integration 27.0 %	
Word	χ^2	Word	χ^2	Word	χ^2	Word	χ^2
adopt	125.24	same	108.71	stability	143.54	culture	269.74
foster	115.09	couple	105.41	provide	139.78	influence	233.40
love	64.21	mother	76.39	safe	97.10	cultural	136.83
child	58.19	equal	75.06	ability	95.94	ethnicity	89.93
help	30.03	gender	72.79	stable	86.05	difference	76.39
share	27.43	right	57.06	emotional	73.47	custom	69.49
decide	24.51	father	55.09	love	66.86	identity	60.72
person	22.08	man	52.47	home	66.64	respect	52.64
need	21.68	woman	49.65	environment	64.11	respecting	45.18
think	21.68	heterosexual	41.24	care	54.70	diversity	38.45
		single	28.55	commitment	52.12		
		requirement	28.55	family	51.23		

Note. χ^2 = chi-square; % = percentage of text segments classified in each class.

Figure 2. Dendrogram of the adoptive and foster families subcorpus.

Class 1. Cultural Diversity and Family Integration

Class 1 was characterised by the lexical items culture ($\chi^2 = 269.74$), influence ($\chi^2 = 233.40$), cultural ($\chi^2 = 136.83$), ethnicity ($\chi^2 = 89.93$), difference ($\chi^2 = 76.39$), cus-

tom ($\chi^2 = 69.49$), identity ($\chi^2 = 60.72$), respect ($\chi^2 = 52.64$), respecting ($\chi^2 = 45.18$), and diversity ($\chi^2 = 38.45$).

The discourses grouped within this class focused on cultural integration and the preservation of children's identity when cultural differences existed between children and their adoptive or foster families. Participants recognised that cultural diversity could influence family relationships, although this influence was generally described in terms of mutual enrichment, intercultural respect, and recognition of children's identity.

Among the most representative text segments were: "It can have an influence, particularly when there are important cultural differences. Families should learn about and respect the child's culture so that the child feels accepted and their identity is strengthened." (SW49; $\chi^2 = 860.53$). "Yes, ethnicity and culture can influence the relationship, especially in intercultural adoptions or foster care placements." (SW56; $\chi^2 = 842.91$).

Some participants also minimised the importance of cultural differences in comparison with emotional relationships: "Love, understanding, and respect are universal regardless of culture or ethnicity." (SW14; $\chi^2 = 740.55$).

Overall, this class reflects representations in which cultural diversity is recognised as an important aspect of adoption and foster care, while emotional relationships and respect for children's identity remain the dominant themes.

Class 2. Parental Competence and Protective Capacity

Class 2 represented the lexical domain most strongly associated with parenting competencies. The words with the highest chi-square values were stability ($\chi^2 = 143.54$), provide ($\chi^2 = 139.78$), safe ($\chi^2 = 97.10$), ability ($\chi^2 = 95.94$), stable ($\chi^2 = 86.05$), emotional ($\chi^2 = 73.47$), love ($\chi^2 = 66.86$), home ($\chi^2 = 66.64$), environment ($\chi^2 = 64.11$), care ($\chi^2 = 54.70$), commitment ($\chi^2 = 52.12$), and family ($\chi^2 = 51.23$).

Participants consistently emphasised families' ability to provide protection, emotional stability, and a safe environment for children's development. Family suitability was primarily evaluated according to caregiving capacities rather than structural, biological, or conventional characteristics.

Representative excerpts included: "What matters is not the family structure but the ability to provide love, stability, care, and a safe environment." (SW29; $\chi^2 = 812.35$). "Family structure does not determine the quality of care provided to a child." (GP26; $\chi^2 = 776.04$). "It is usually a family motivated by the desire to care for a child, emotionally stable, and capable of providing an appropriate environment." (LAW41; $\chi^2 = 668.30$).

These findings indicate that participants primarily associated family suitability with functional parenting and the ability to meet children's emotional and developmental needs.

Class 3. Equality and Diversity of Family Forms

Class 3 comprised discourses concerning family composition, sexual orientation, and equal rights in access to adoption and foster care. The most representative lexical items were couple ($\chi^2 = 108.71$), mother ($\chi^2 = 105.41$), equal ($\chi^2 = 76.39$), sex ($\chi^2 = 75.06$), right ($\chi^2 = 72.79$), father ($\chi^2 = 57.06$), man ($\chi^2 = 55.09$), woman ($\chi^2 = 52.47$), heterosexual ($\chi^2 = 49.65$), single ($\chi^2 = 41.24$), and requirement ($\chi^2 = 28.55$).

Participants generally expressed favourable attitudes towards diverse family forms and questioned whether sexual orientation or marital status should constitute exclusion criteria for adoption or foster care.

Representative excerpts included: "I don't mind whether it is a same-sex couple or a single person. If they have the resources and the desire to become parents, then they should be able to do so." (GP31; $\chi^2 = 560.39$). "There are single mothers and fathers who want to go through this process, and the same applies to same-sex couples." (SW50; $\chi^2 = 501.85$).

“Same-sex couples are just as capable of raising children as heterosexual couples.” (GP02; $\chi^2 = 451.83$).

Overall, this class reflects generally favourable attitudes towards diverse family configurations and a recurrent emphasis on equality and non-discrimination in access to adoption and foster care.

Class 4. Motivations for Adoption and Foster Care

Class 4 was organised around the lexical items adopt ($\chi^2 = 125.24$), foster ($\chi^2 = 115.09$), love ($\chi^2 = 64.21$), child ($\chi^2 = 58.19$), help ($\chi^2 = 30.03$), share ($\chi^2 = 27.43$), decide ($\chi^2 = 24.51$), person ($\chi^2 = 22.08$), need ($\chi^2 = 21.68$), and think ($\chi^2 = 21.68$).

Participants referred to a combination of altruistic motivations, aspirations to parenthood, and concern for children experiencing vulnerable circumstances.

Representative excerpts included: “If you know a child who is living in a highly vulnerable situation, you may want to foster or adopt them.” (GP19; $\chi^2 = 426.74$). “Some people simply want to foster or adopt a child because they genuinely want to help.” (SW05; $\chi^2 = 414.22$). “Many families decide to adopt or foster because they cannot have biological children of their own.” (SW13; $\chi^2 = 413.94$).

Overall, adoption and foster care were represented as deliberate decisions associated both with the desire to build a family and with a commitment to supporting and protecting children in vulnerable situations.

Taken together, the four lexical classes indicate that participants’ social representations of adoptive and foster families were organised around four complementary dimensions: cultural diversity and integration, parental competence and protective capacity, acceptance of diverse family forms, and motivations for adoption and foster care.

Across the four classes, caregiving, emotional relationships, family diversity, and children’s needs were recurrent themes, while biological relatedness and family structure were also present in participants’ discourse.

The correspondence between some lexical classes and the thematic content of the questionnaire should be noted. Questions concerning cultural background, family composition, and motivations for adoption or foster care explicitly introduced these domains into participants’ discourse. Accordingly, the emergence of lexical classes related to these topics cannot be interpreted as evidence that these themes would necessarily have arisen spontaneously in an unrestricted discourse. The contribution of the DHC lies instead in identifying the vocabulary, associations, evaluative positions, and patterns of meaning through which participants elaborated the predefined thematic domains.

3.1.3. Associations Between Lexical Classes and Participant Profile

The inclusion of participant profile as an illustrative variable identified exploratory corpus-level differences in the distribution of classified text segments across lexical classes. Text segments carrying the Social Work profile were overrepresented in Class 2, Parental Competence and Protective Capacity ($\chi^2(1) = 19.657$, unadjusted $p < 0.001$), indicating a comparatively greater presence of discourse centred on caregiving capacity, emotional stability, and the protective competencies associated with parenthood.

Text segments carrying the general-population profile were overrepresented in Class 3, Equality and Diversity of Family Forms ($\chi^2(1) = 16.779$, unadjusted $p < 0.001$). A weaker nominal association was also observed with Class 4, Motivations for Adoption and Foster Care ($\chi^2(1) = 3.849$, unadjusted $p = 0.0498$). Given the exploratory nature of these analyses, the use of text segments as the counting unit, and the absence of adjustment for multiple comparisons, this near-threshold association is considered tentative and should not be interpreted as robust evidence of a participant-level group difference. No positive class-specific association was identified for the Law profile at the nominal $p < 0.05$ level.

These findings therefore describe differences in corpus-level lexical overrepresentation across profile-labelled text segments rather than inferential differences between participants as independent observational units.

Following the analysis of representations concerning adoptive and foster families, the second subcorpus was examined to explore participants' discourses regarding children's right to grow up in a family and the perceived limits of child protection interventions.

3.2. Social Representations of Children's Right to Grow Up in a Family and Child Protection Intervention

3.2.1. Similarity Analysis of the Children's Right to Grow Up in a Family Subcorpus

The similarity analysis revealed a semantic network in which family was the most highly connected lexical node (Figure 3). The strongest lexical association was observed between family and child, indicating that these terms frequently occurred within the same discursive contexts. Child was also directly connected to grow, while other recurrent terms included right, environment, good, young, and situation. Together, these connections show that references to family, childhood, development, and children's rights were closely interrelated within the corpus.

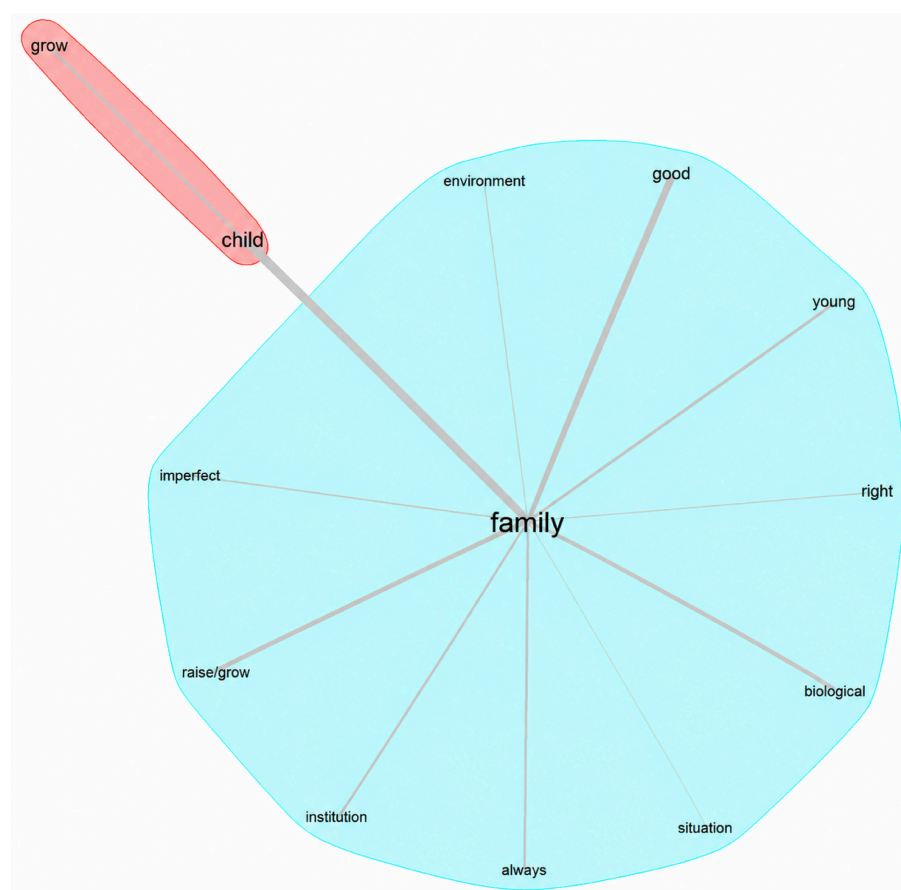


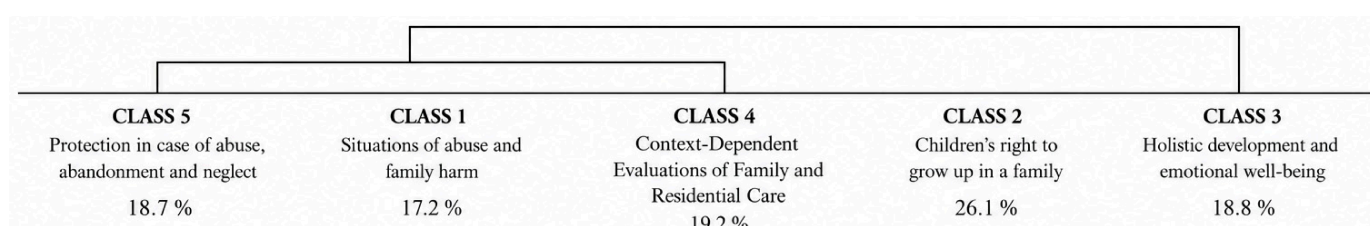
Figure 3. Similarity analysis of the subcorpus on children's right to grow up in a family.

The term biological was directly connected to family, indicating that biological relatedness remained part of the lexical field through which participants discussed family life. However, this term displayed fewer connections within the network than highly recurrent terms such as family and child. This difference is interpreted descriptively in terms of lexical connectivity and should not be taken as evidence that biological relatedness constitutes a theoretically peripheral component of the social representation.

The terms institution and imperfect were also present within the network and reflected participants' discussion of residential care and the complexity of comparing family environments with institutional alternatives. Their presence indicates that alternative forms of care and the limitations of family environments were incorporated into participants' discourse, although no theoretical hierarchy is inferred from their graphical position.

3.2.2. Descending Hierarchical Classification of the Children's Right to Grow Up in a Family Subcorpus

The DHC of the children's right to grow up in a family subcorpus retained 850 of 1238 text segments (68.66%) and yielded five lexical classes (Figure 4): Situations of Abuse and Family Harm (Class 1; 17.2%), Children's Right to Grow Up in a Family (Class 2; 26.1%), Holistic Development and Emotional Well-Being (Class 3; 18.8%), Context-Dependent Evaluations of Family and Residential Care (Class 4; 19.2%), and Protection from Abuse, Abandonment, and Neglect (Class 5; 18.7%).



CLASS 5 Protection in case of abuse, abandonment and neglect 18.7 %		CLASS 1 Situations of abuse and family harm 17.2 %		CLASS 4 Context-Dependent Evaluations of Family and Residential Care 19.2 %		CLASS 2 Children's right to grow up in a family 26.1 %		CLASS 3 Holistic development and emotional well-being 18.8 %	
Word	χ^2	Word	χ^2	Word	χ^2	Word	χ^2	Word	χ^2
alternative	296.14	go	113.59	imperfect	185.08	right	183.75	development	151.37
seek	272.13	say	54.08	institution	161.10	grow	102.69	emotional	112.77
abuse	249.22	mother	52.13	better	129.54	happy	31.53	stability	87.42
abandonment	171.37	do	45.52	depend	126.83	childhood	31.20	social	80.79
risk	116.77	bad	42.36	foster	112.04	person	29.88	affective	76.53
severe	115.02	son	40.21	talk	81.22	feel	27.99	affect	75.06
adoption	90.99	father	38.75	perfect	78.47	supposed	26.02	bond	56.43
neglect	84.46	day	32.47	imperfection	67.33	raise/grow	23.45	receive	52.11
need	70.31	there	28.66	a lot	60.11	live	22.18	fundamental	50.22
foster care	66.84	come	25.14	family	58.23	care	21.14	essential	46.27
incapacity	63.21	hit	23.41	phrase	54.77	basis	18.97	provide	42.83
provide	55.72	end	21.63	last	49.82	life	18.24	stable	41.36
well-being	54.28	finish	20.18	condition	47.31	future	16.97	security	40.29
exist	50.16	here	19.47	issue	43.16	society	16.32	provide (for)	38.52
violence	48.73	understand	18.06	level	40.27	healthy	15.43	institution	36.41
situation	46.27	sometimes	17.32	imperfects	38.52	deserve	14.08	environment	35.19
mistreatment	45.31	tell	16.28	so	36.41	child	13.35	offer	32.78
				consider	35.19	positive	12.68		
						want	12.24		

Note. χ^2 = chi-square; % = percentage of text segments classified in each class.

Figure 4. Dendrogram of the subcorpus on children's right to grow up in a family.

Class 1. Situations of Abuse and Family Harm

Class 1 was characterised by the lexical items go ($\chi^2 = 113.59$), say ($\chi^2 = 54.08$), mother ($\chi^2 = 52.13$), do ($\chi^2 = 45.52$), bad ($\chi^2 = 42.36$), child, and father.

The discourses grouped within this class described family situations involving behaviours considered harmful to children and reflections on inadequate parenting practices. Participants questioned the assumption that biological parenthood alone guarantees appropriate child-rearing and instead emphasised the responsibilities associated with the parental role.

Representative excerpts included: “Being a mother or a father involves much more than a legal status.” (GP07; $\chi^2 = 252.72$).

“No one taught those parents how to raise a child. However imperfect they may be, they will still be parents.” (GP17; $\chi^2 = 246.35$).

Overall, this class reflects representations in which parenthood is primarily associated with the ability to provide care and protection rather than with biological or legal status alone.

Class 2. Children’s Right to Grow Up in a Family

Class 2 represented the largest lexical class within the corpus and was organised around the words right ($\chi^2 = 183.75$), grow ($\chi^2 = 102.69$), happy ($\chi^2 = 31.53$), childhood ($\chi^2 = 31.20$), person ($\chi^2 = 29.88$), feel ($\chi^2 = 27.99$), and raise/grow ($\chi^2 = 23.45$).

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of ensuring that all children are able to grow up within family environments that promote their well-being and happiness. Family was frequently represented as the primary context for identity formation, emotional security, and personal development.

Representative excerpts included: “Everyone has the right to grow up in a family, to have role models, a home, to feel part of something, and to have a safe place in which to develop their abilities.” (SW26; $\chi^2 = 365.32$). “Every child has the right to grow up in a healthy environment, free from harmful influences, regardless of their family background.” (LAW32; $\chi^2 = 364.32$). “All children should have the right to grow up in a family because socialisation, love, and being surrounded by caring people improve their well-being and healthy development.” (SW09; $\chi^2 = 364.21$).

Overall, this class reflects a widely shared representation of growing up in a family as a fundamental children’s right and an essential condition for healthy development.

As in the first thematic subcorpus, the structure of the second DHC should be interpreted in relation to the questionnaire prompts. Terms referring to children’s right to grow up in a family, alternative care, and the comparison between imperfect families and residential institutions were introduced by the questions themselves. The analysis therefore identifies how participants elaborated and qualified these prompted issues rather than demonstrating that all lexical themes emerged independently of the data collection instrument.

Class 3. Holistic Development and Emotional Well-Being

Class 3 was characterised by the lexical items development ($\chi^2 = 151.37$), emotional ($\chi^2 = 112.77$), stability ($\chi^2 = 87.42$), social ($\chi^2 = 80.79$), affective ($\chi^2 = 76.53$), affection ($\chi^2 = 75.06$), bond ($\chi^2 = 56.43$), and security.

The discourses within this class focused on the protective role of families as contexts for building emotional bonds and meeting children’s emotional needs. Participants consistently associated children’s well-being with stable, secure, and emotionally meaningful relationships.

Representative excerpts included: “Families, regardless of their form, provide affection, guidance, and stability that are essential for children’s emotional and social development.” (GP15; $\chi^2 = 586.01$). “Children receive care, affection, and security, which are essential for their emotional, social, and physical development.” (SW29; $\chi^2 = 573.11$). “Biological, adoptive, and foster families should all provide stable relationships and protection that are fundamental for children’s emotional and social well-being.” (SW56; $\chi^2 = 555.11$). “Families provide affection, identity, stability, and emotional support that are essential for human development.” (LAW20; $\chi^2 = 523.55$).

Overall, this class represents family primarily in terms of its emotional and relational functions, regardless of its structure or composition.

Class 4. Context-Dependent Evaluations of Family and Residential Care

Class 4 was characterised by the lexical items imperfect ($\chi^2 = 185.08$), institution ($\chi^2 = 161.10$), better ($\chi^2 = 129.54$), depend ($\chi^2 = 126.83$), foster ($\chi^2 = 112.04$), discuss, perfect, and imperfection. The first three high-association terms—imperfect, institution, and better—were explicitly contained in the questionnaire statement presented to participants and should therefore be interpreted as prompt-derived lexical content rather than as spontaneously generated salient terms.

The analytically relevant variation within this class concerned how participants responded to and qualified the proposed comparison. The recurrent use of terms such as depend, together with participants' explanations, showed that many respondents resisted an unconditional endorsement of either family care or residential care and instead evaluated the statement according to the severity of family difficulties, the presence of harm or risk, and the specific characteristics of the alternative care setting.

Representative excerpts included: "Regarding the statement 'An institution is better than an imperfect family', I think it depends." (LAW40; $\chi^2 = 760.05$). "It always depends on the individual case, although in general I believe that an imperfect family is better than institutional care." (LAW31; $\chi^2 = 754.06$). "It depends on what is meant by 'imperfect'. If the family is harmful or dangerous, an institution is preferable. If we are talking about ordinary imperfections, then family life is usually the better option." (GP04; $\chi^2 = 698.25$). "I do not think a residential care centre is inherently better or worse than an imperfect family. Everything depends on the specific family and the particular institution involved." (GP75; $\chi^2 = 676.44$).

Accordingly, this class is interpreted not as evidence that "imperfection" or "institution" emerged spontaneously as central representational themes, but as evidence of the conditional reasoning participants used when responding to a researcher-provided comparison between family and residential care.

Class 5. Protection From Abuse, Abandonment, and Neglect

Class 5 displayed the highest χ^2 values within the corpus and was organised around the lexical items alternative ($\chi^2 = 296.14$), seek ($\chi^2 = 272.13$), abuse ($\chi^2 = 249.22$), abandonment ($\chi^2 = 171.37$), risk ($\chi^2 = 116.77$), severe ($\chi^2 = 115.02$), adoption ($\chi^2 = 90.99$), neglect ($\chi^2 = 84.46$), violence, and maltreatment.

This class represented situations considered to justify the removal of children from their family environment when serious conditions of harm or neglect were present. Participants consistently identified abuse, neglect, abandonment, and violence as circumstances warranting intervention by child protection services and the provision of alternative care.

Representative excerpts included: "The child should remain with their birth family as long as there is safety, stability, and caregiving capacity. If there is abuse, abandonment, serious neglect, or a persistent inability to provide care, alternatives such as foster care or adoption should be sought." (GP15; $\chi^2 = 1629.80$). "Whenever possible, the ideal is for the child to remain with their birth family if it can guarantee a safe and stable environment. However, when abuse, abandonment, or serious situations place their well-being at risk, another alternative should be sought to ensure their protection and basic needs." (SW37; $\chi^2 = 1626.55$). "The birth family is very important for the child's identity. However, when there is abandonment, abuse, neglect, or situations that place their well-being at risk, it is better to seek a stable alternative, whether adoption or foster care" (GP74; $\chi^2 = 1533.18$).

Overall, this class reflects broad agreement that children's safety and well-being should take precedence whenever their family environment is unable to provide adequate care.

Taken together, the complementary analyses identified recurrent patterns in participants' discourses concerning adoption, foster care, and child protection. In both subcorpora,

family emerged as the primary context for protection, well-being, and child development. Participants consistently prioritised emotional relationships, caregiving capacity, and family stability over structural characteristics or biological relatedness.

The findings also indicate broad acceptance of family diversity alongside widespread recognition that child protection interventions are justified when family circumstances compromise children's safety and well-being. Consequently, participants' representations combined two complementary perspectives: the family as the preferred environment for child development and the legitimacy of protective measures when children's best interests require alternative forms of care.

3.2.3. Associations Between Lexical Classes and Participant Profile

Exploratory corpus-level associations were also observed in the subcorpus addressing children's right to grow up in a family. Text segments carrying the general-population profile were strongly overrepresented in Class 1, Situations of Abuse and Family Harm ($\chi^2(1) = 79.291$, unadjusted $p < 0.001$). A weaker nominal association was observed with Class 4, Context-Dependent Evaluations of Family and Residential Care ($\chi^2(1) = 4.206$, unadjusted $p = 0.0403$); given its proximity to the conventional 0.05 threshold and the absence of adjustment for multiple comparisons, this finding is treated as tentative.

Text segments carrying the Social Work profile were overrepresented in Class 3, Holistic Development and Emotional Well-Being ($\chi^2(1) = 47.320$, unadjusted $p < 0.001$), and Class 5, Protection From Abuse, Abandonment, and Neglect ($\chi^2(1) = 24.914$, unadjusted $p < 0.001$). No positive class-specific association was identified for the Law profile at the nominal $p < 0.05$ level. These associations describe corpus-level patterns of lexical overrepresentation and should not be interpreted as participant-level group effects.

4. Discussion

The analyses identified recurrent lexical and discursive patterns concerning adoption, foster care, and child protection. Across both thematic subcorpora, family was a highly connected lexical term, while the DHC identified recurrent classes related to caregiving, emotional support, family diversity, children's development, and protection. Taken together, these findings indicate that family constituted an important and recurring reference point in participants' discourse. However, the present analyses do not establish the existence of a stable central core in the strict sense proposed by structural approaches to Social Representations Theory.

The findings can nevertheless be interpreted within the broader framework of Social Representations Theory proposed by Moscovici [41] and developed by Jodelet [42,43], insofar as they reveal recurrent systems of meaning through which participants articulated understandings of family, parenthood, adoption, foster care, and child protection. In this sense, the theoretical framework is used to interpret shared patterns of meaning identified in the corpus rather than to infer a formal core-periphery structure from the lexicometric outputs. This finding is also consistent with the structural perspective advanced by Lo Monaco and Rateau [45], who emphasise the organising function of stable representational structures in shaping social knowledge.

Viewed in relation to the existing literature, the findings both support and extend previous research. They support studies emphasising the importance of caregiving quality, emotional relationships, and family stability for children's development [3–8], while also aligning with research showing the continuing significance of biological belonging and family origins [12,13,39]. The present study extends this literature by examining these meanings simultaneously within a shared representational field and by showing that their relative salience varies across participant profiles. At the same time, the findings

add nuance to any simple opposition between biologically based and caregiving-based understandings of family: both forms of meaning coexisted within participants' discourse, and neither can be interpreted as having completely displaced the other.

An important interpretative consideration concerns the structured nature of the data collection instrument. Several lexical classes correspond to thematic issues explicitly introduced by the questionnaire, including cultural background, family diversity, motivations for adoption and foster care, and the comparison between imperfect family environments and residential care. These classes should therefore not be understood as themes that emerged independently from unrestricted discourse. Rather, their analytical value lies in showing how participants organised, elaborated, and qualified meanings within these predefined domains. The present findings consequently provide evidence about social representations as elicited through specific thematic prompts, rather than about the full range of representations that might emerge spontaneously in an entirely open discursive context.

Accordingly, the representative excerpts presented in the Results should be understood as contextual illustrations of the statistically derived lexical classes rather than as stand-alone evidence of individual narratives or as substitutes for the depth of personal accounts that could be obtained through semi-structured or narrative interviews.

4.1. Participant-Profile Differences in Social Representations

Although the analyses revealed a substantial shared representational field across participants, the incorporation of participant profile as an illustrative variable also identified meaningful differences in the relative salience of specific lexical classes. These findings qualify the interpretation of the representations as entirely homogeneous and suggest that educational and social context contributes to the way adoption, foster care, and child protection are discursively organised.

At the corpus level, text segments linked to the Social Work profile were particularly overrepresented in classes concerning parental competence and protective capacity, holistic development, emotional well-being, and situations requiring protective intervention. This association indicates that caregiving competencies, children's developmental needs, vulnerability, and situations requiring protective intervention were comparatively more salient in the discourse of Social Work students. However, the present study did not directly assess the educational or professional processes underlying these differences; consequently, the reasons for these profile-related associations cannot be established from the present data. Nevertheless, this finding extends the analysis beyond the identification of a shared representational field by showing that socially shared meanings may be differentially elaborated according to participants' educational and social positioning.

Text segments linked to the general-population profile, by contrast, were overrepresented in classes concerning equality and diversity of family forms, family harm, and context-dependent evaluations of family and residential care. This pattern suggests that participants outside specialised social work training may organise their representations more strongly around broader social understandings of family diversity, family functioning, and the practical complexities surrounding intervention.

The Law profile did not show a statistically significant positive association with any particular lexical class. This absence of class-specific association should not be interpreted as indicating the absence of a meaningful perspective; rather, it suggests that the lexical contributions of participants with a Law background were distributed across the representational field rather than concentrated within a particular class.

Taken together, these findings suggest the coexistence of a broadly shared representational framework with profile-related variations in thematic emphasis. This distinction is particularly relevant from the perspective of Social Representations Theory, as socially

shared knowledge may retain common organising principles while being differentially elaborated according to participants' social positioning, educational experience, and professional exposure.

From a practical perspective, these profile-related variations suggest that professional training and public communication initiatives may benefit from being tailored to the different emphases through which professional and lay groups understand adoption, foster care, and child protection, while avoiding the assumption that such differences are fixed or causally determined by educational background.

These exploratory corpus-level associations should not be interpreted as evidence of participant-level differences or as causal effects of educational or professional background. In particular, the near-threshold associations observed for Class 4 in both subcorpora are treated as tentative and are not used as the basis for substantive conclusions.

4.2. Caregiving-Based Criteria in Evaluations of Family Suitability

One recurrent pattern identified in participants' discourse was the emphasis placed on caregiving capacity, emotional stability, and secure affective relationships when evaluating family suitability. Both the subcorpus concerning adoptive and foster families (Class 2: Parental Competence and Protective Capacity) and the subcorpus addressing children's right to grow up in a family (Class 3: Holistic Development and Emotional Well-being) consistently identified the ability to provide care, emotional stability, and secure affective relationships as the principal criterion for evaluating family suitability, rather than family structure or biological relatedness.

This finding is consistent with the extensive body of research examining the determinants of children's well-being. Studies conducted by Golombok [3–5], Patterson [6], Biblarz and Stacey [7], and Farr [8] have consistently demonstrated that parental sensitivity, emotional support, and the quality of parent–child interactions are more important predictors of children's development than family structure or composition. Participants' discourses frequently framed parenthood in terms of caregiving, emotional support, and relational quality, while biological and legal dimensions also remained present in the broader corpus. Likewise, the findings are consistent with the work of Carsten [9] and Howell [10,11], who argued that family relationships are constructed not only through biological ties but also through shared experiences of everyday life, care, and mutual recognition. The present findings therefore support previous evidence regarding the importance of relational and caregiving dimensions of family life while extending this literature by showing how these dimensions are articulated within socially shared representations of adoption, foster care, and child protection. Importantly, this extension concerns the organisation of participants' meanings and should not be interpreted as evidence that biological or legal dimensions of family belonging are unimportant.

The predominance of this functional understanding of parenthood has important implications for child protection systems and social work practice with families. If prevailing social representations define family suitability primarily in terms of caregiving capacities rather than biological relatedness or family structure, they may contribute to reducing social prejudice and resistance towards adoptive and foster families while promoting greater social recognition of their protective role. From the perspective of positive parenting, these findings reinforce the importance of interventions aimed at strengthening parenting competencies as a central component of child protection, regardless of the origin or legal nature of family relationships [27,28].

4.3. Biological Relatedness Alongside Caregiving-Based Meanings of Family

Biological relatedness remained present within participants' discourse. In both similarity analyses, the term biological appeared within the semantic networks and was connected to family-related lexical content. At the same time, the DHC classes and representative excerpts frequently emphasised caregiving capacity, emotional stability, protection, and relational commitment when participants discussed family suitability. Taken together, these findings indicate that biological and caregiving-based meanings of family were both present in the corpus, although caregiving and relational themes were particularly recurrent across several lexical classes [12,13].

These findings should not be interpreted as evidence of two clearly differentiated representational systems—one "traditional" and another "contemporary"—nor as demonstrating that biological relatedness occupies a peripheral structural position. Rather, the data indicate the coexistence of different meanings through which participants articulated family relationships [44], including biological belonging, caregiving, emotional bonds, and relational commitment. This interpretation is compatible with Social Representations Theory insofar as socially shared meanings may incorporate multiple and potentially overlapping understandings of the same social object; however, the present lexicometric analyses do not allow the structural status or temporal evolution of these meanings to be established.

The simultaneous presence of biological and caregiving-based meanings is consistent with the systematic review conducted by Wullemans et al. [39], which showed that foster carers, birth families, and social work professionals simultaneously construct family through caregiving, emotional attachment, and biological belonging, without any of these perspectives completely replacing the others. Likewise, the continuing relevance of biological relatedness gains further support from the study by Kaiser et al. [51], who demonstrated that the symbolic position of foster children within their foster families—as reflected in family language and kinship terminology—is influenced by children's age at placement and the type of foster care arrangement. Their findings further showed that many foster families do not consider adoption necessary because they already perceive themselves as a family, illustrating that family relationships in foster care may be negotiated through the interaction of biological belonging and caregiving ties.

Reunification provides an additional illustration of this coexistence. For some children, a period in foster or residential care is followed by a return to their birth parents, making birth-family relationships not only symbolically significant but also central to subsequent care trajectories. Research on reunification in England has shown that returning home remains an important permanency pathway, although the stability of these reunifications varies and is closely related to children's histories, placement experiences, family circumstances, and the support provided before and after return [24]. These findings further caution against interpreting biological relatedness as a residual or progressively disappearing dimension of family life. Instead, biological belonging and caregiving relationships may intersect in different ways across children's individual trajectories.

These findings are particularly relevant in the context of open adoption, introduced into the Spanish child protection system through Law 26/2015. The coexistence of representations centred on both biological relatedness and adoptive caregiving poses important challenges for social workers and child protection professionals, who increasingly support families in negotiating complex family identities characterised by multiple forms of parenthood, belonging, and kinship [34–36].

4.4. Representations of Family Diversity and Equality

Class 3 of the adoptive and foster families subcorpus—Equality and Diversity of Family Forms—reflects a pattern of generally favourable attitudes towards the possibility of single individuals and same-sex couples adopting or fostering children. Participants generally questioned the relevance of sexual orientation or marital status as exclusion criteria for parenthood.

These findings are consistent with the evolution of the Spanish legal framework, which has recognised same-sex marriage and equal adoption rights since 2005 [52], as well as with the extensive body of empirical evidence demonstrating positive developmental outcomes among children raised in same-sex parent families [3,6,8].

Although participants generally expressed favourable attitudes towards diverse family configurations, references to biological relatedness and two-parent family arrangements also remained present, as reflected in lexical items such as heterosexual, couple, and requirement. The findings therefore add nuance to an interpretation of uniformly favourable attitudes towards family diversity by showing that different understandings of family structure and parenthood coexist within the same representational field. This pattern is consistent with Sanner et al. [1], who showed that socially constructed understandings of family may coexist with normative expectations concerning family composition. These generally favourable representations should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously, as the researcher-administered format may have encouraged socially desirable responding, particularly on issues involving sexual orientation, family diversity, and non-discrimination. Consequently, the relative scarcity of explicitly critical or exclusionary positions in the corpus should not be interpreted as evidence that such views are absent from the broader population.

4.5. Child Protection Intervention: Between the Right to Family Life and the Need for Separation

A further finding concerns the conditional way in which participants represented child protection intervention. Classes 2 and 3 of the subcorpus on children's right to grow up in a family reflected participants' strong valuation of family environments as contexts for children's development, whereas Classes 1 and 5 identified circumstances in which participants considered separation from the birth family to be justified, particularly in situations involving abuse, abandonment, or severe neglect.

This dual pattern indicates that participants combined a strong valuation of family life with conditional acceptance of separation when they perceived children's safety or well-being to be seriously compromised [14]. Class 4 is particularly informative regarding the way participants qualified the researcher-provided comparison between an "imperfect family" and residential care. Although the lexical prominence of terms such as imperfect, institution, and better largely reflects the wording of the prompt, participants' repeated use of conditional reasoning—particularly the emphasis on "it depends"—shows that responses were not reducible to simple agreement or disagreement. Instead, participants differentiated between ordinary family difficulties and situations involving harm, risk, or inadequate care.

These findings can be considered alongside research showing that stable and adequately supported family-based placements may offer important developmental advantages compared with prolonged institutional care [19–21]. Nevertheless, outcomes following foster care or adoption are heterogeneous and should not be attributed to placement type alone. Lindner and Hanlon's systematic review [23] showed considerable variation across permanency pathways and outcome domains, while also highlighting methodological limitations in comparing groups whose pre-care experiences and placement histories differ substantially. Thus, the value of family-based care depends not only on the legal or structural form of the placement but also on its stability, the quality of caregiving rela-

tionships, children's previous experiences, and the availability of sustained support. The present findings therefore both support and qualify previous research on family-based care. Viewed through this lens, the conditional reasoning identified in Class 4 should not be interpreted as a simple preference for family-based over residential care. Rather, it suggests that participants' evaluations were sensitive to the quality, safety, stability, and appropriateness of the care environment in each particular case. They support the importance attributed to stable caregiving relationships, but they also show that participants' favourable representations of family-based care cannot be equated with evidence of uniformly favourable placement outcomes. In this respect, the distinction between social representations and empirical evaluations of child protection outcomes is essential.

The Spanish administrative context further qualifies these representations. Although participants frequently valued family environments and family-based care, official data for 2024 show that residential care continues to constitute a substantial component of child protection provision in Spain, with 19,977 children and adolescents in residential care compared with 16,486 in family foster care at the end of the year [25]. Thus, participants' preference for family environments is broadly consistent with the legislative orientation towards family-based care, but it does not directly mirror the current distribution of protection measures. This contrast underlines the importance of distinguishing socially shared representations of desirable care arrangements from the organisational realities of the child protection system.

Importantly, separation from the birth family does not necessarily constitute a permanent endpoint. Where family circumstances improve and children's safety and well-being can be adequately ensured, reunification may form part of the child's subsequent care trajectory. Child protection decision-making may involve not only determining when separation is necessary but also assessing whether and under what conditions family preservation or reunification can safely be supported. Viewed in relation to Classes 1 and 5, these findings suggest that participants tended to identify serious abuse, neglect, abandonment, and persistent risk as thresholds for legitimate protective intervention. This reasoning is broadly consistent with a child protection framework in which separation is considered when children's safety cannot be adequately ensured within the family environment. However, contemporary Spanish child protection policy also emphasises preventive family support, family preservation, and reunification where circumstances permit [29,30]. Accordingly, the participants' support for alternative care in situations of serious harm should not be interpreted as implying that removal is necessarily permanent or that family-of-origin interventions cease once separation occurs.

Accordingly, the participants' endorsement of protective intervention in situations of serious harm should be understood as a social representation of legitimate intervention rather than as an evaluation of the effectiveness or fairness of child protection systems. This distinction is particularly important because the present study did not include birth families or children with direct care experience as participant groups.

4.6. Implications for Professional Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for social work practice and the development of child protection policies. First, the identification of social representations that are favourable towards family diversity and functional parenthood suggests that current social attitudes may provide a supportive context for promoting adoption and foster care across diverse family structures. These findings highlight the importance of developing recruitment, training, and support strategies for adoptive and foster families that build upon these positive social representations as a valuable resource for strengthening family-based care. Importantly, support should not be limited to recruitment and placement preparation.

The evidence on placement instability and adoption disruption indicates that some adoptive and foster families require sustained, flexible, and developmentally informed support after placement, including access to therapeutic services when appropriate. Recognition of family-based care as a valuable option must therefore be accompanied by recognition of the long-term responsibilities assumed by child protection systems towards children and caregivers after placement.

At the same time, these implications should not be understood as an endorsement of more intensive child protection intervention or family separation. Professional practice should balance children's safety with preventive support, family preservation, meaningful involvement of birth families, and reunification whenever this is safe and consistent with children's needs. A critical understanding of child protection therefore requires attention not only to alternative care arrangements but also to the social, relational, and structural conditions that shape family difficulties and families' interactions with statutory services. Professional practice should also recognise birth families as active stakeholders in child protection processes and, where appropriate, involve them meaningfully in assessment, contact planning, family support, and reunification work.

Second, the continued presence of representations associated with biological relatedness highlights the need for social workers and child protection assessment teams to receive specialised training and practical resources to support the identity development of adopted and foster children. Particular attention should be given to issues related to children's origins, contact with birth families, and the construction of multiple forms of family belonging [35–38]. In this regard, the study by Wright et al. [53] provides important evidence demonstrating that the linguistic patterns used by adoptive parents when referring to birth families—not only the explicit content of their conversations—significantly influence adoptees' satisfaction with the degree of openness in their relationship with their birth family, as well as their expectations and emotional responses towards their birth mother. These findings suggest that professional support in adoption should incorporate communicative and linguistic dimensions as specific areas of intervention rather than focusing exclusively on structural aspects of openness or birth-family contact. Third, participants were recruited in Spain, where the legal framework recognises diverse family forms. Consequently, social representations may differ in other cultural or legal contexts.

Finally, the conditional reasoning identified in Class 4 indicates that participants recognised the complexity of child protection decision-making. This finding highlights the importance of public communication and community engagement that adequately reflects the complexity of situations involving children at risk or in vulnerable circumstances.

Overall, the findings indicate the coexistence of biological and caregiving-based meanings of family, with caregiving and relational themes recurring prominently across the analysed corpus. By revealing how these meanings are socially shared and organised, the present study contributes to a better understanding of the symbolic foundations that underpin attitudes towards adoption, foster care, and child protection. Such knowledge may inform child protection policies, professional practice, and public awareness initiatives aimed at promoting children's right to grow up in safe, stable, and nurturing family environments.

4.7. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, although the sample included participants with diverse backgrounds—including individuals from legal and social science fields (Social Work and Law students) as well as adults without a specific academic background in these areas—it was not repre-

sentative of the general population. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with caution and cannot be readily generalised to other populations or cultural contexts.

Second, the use of a structured open-ended questionnaire offered the advantage of generating comparable textual material across a relatively large and heterogeneous sample while allowing participants to formulate their responses in their own words. However, this format necessarily provides less discursive depth than semi-structured or in-depth qualitative interviews. The absence of systematic follow-up or probing questions may have limited the elaboration, contextualisation, and nuance of some participants' responses. Accordingly, the lexicometric findings should be interpreted as recurrent patterns within the corpus rather than as exhaustive accounts of participants' individual experiences or meanings.

In addition, responses concerning socially sensitive issues such as family diversity, adoption, and child protection may have been affected by social desirability, potentially reducing the expression of more critical, traditional, or ambivalent positions. This possibility is particularly relevant because the questionnaire was administered by a researcher either face-to-face or by telephone. Future research could reduce this potential bias by using anonymous self-administered online questionnaires, less direct questioning strategies, or complementary methods designed to minimise respondents' concerns about social evaluation. These approaches could be combined with corpus-based lexicometric analysis, semi-structured interviews, or other qualitative methods to examine whether different or more ambivalent representational patterns emerge under conditions of greater perceived anonymity.

Although participant-profile associations were examined through illustrative variables in the DHC, the three groups differed in size and composition, and the study was not designed as a matched comparative study. Accordingly, the observed associations should be interpreted as differences in the relative prominence of lexical classes rather than as evidence of fixed or mutually exclusive group-specific representations. Future research using larger and more balanced samples could examine these differences more systematically and assess the potential contribution of additional variables such as age, professional experience, and direct familiarity with adoption or foster care.

One methodological limitation concerns the proportion of text segments retained in the Descending Hierarchical Classification. In the adoption and foster care subcorpus, 65.04% of the text segments were classified, while the classification rate in the children's right to grow up in a family subcorpus was 68.66%. Both values fall below the 70–75% range frequently recommended in applied IRaMuTeQ research. The resulting lexical classes should therefore be interpreted as representing the structure of the classified segments rather than as an exhaustive representation of the entire textual material. To reduce the risk of overinterpretation, the DHC findings were considered in conjunction with the similarity analysis and qualitative examination of representative text excerpts. Future studies should seek to replicate the lexical structure identified here using alternative parameterisations and complementary textual analyses.

Another issue relates to the potential influence of question wording on the lexicometric structure of the corpus. Because the questionnaire introduced specific thematic domains and, in some cases, explicit formulations such as the comparison between an "imperfect family" and a residential care institution, some highly associated lexical items necessarily reproduce researcher-provided vocabulary. Consequently, the resulting lexical classes cannot be interpreted as wholly spontaneous or unprompted representations. To reduce this risk, prompt-derived terms were interpreted in relation to the participant-generated vocabulary and the full textual segments in which they occurred. Future research could complement structured open-ended questionnaires with free-association tasks, less directive prompts,

or in-depth interviews in order to examine which representational elements emerge with minimal researcher framing.

Direct lived experience of adoption, foster care, or statutory child protection was not systematically assessed in the present study. Although participants reported whether they personally knew adoptive or foster families, this information does not establish whether respondents themselves had experience as adopted persons, individuals with foster care experience, adoptive or foster carers, or birth-family members involved in child protection. Consequently, the comparatively positive representations of adoption, foster care, and protective intervention identified in the corpus cannot be assumed to reflect the perspectives of people directly involved in these processes. Because direct lived experience was not systematically assessed, it is also not possible to determine whether the favourable and inclusive representations observed were more characteristic of participants without personal involvement in adoption, foster care, or child protection. Stakeholders with lived experience may articulate different or more complex meanings concerning family belonging, separation, birth-family contact, placement stability, reunification, and interactions with child protection services. Future research should therefore explicitly recruit and distinguish participants with different forms of lived experience, including birth families, adoptive and foster families, and children and young people with care experience.

Finally, although several procedures were used to strengthen methodological trustworthiness, the study did not incorporate member checking or independent qualitative coding. Given the corpus-based lexicometric design, interpretations were instead grounded in the convergence between statistical outputs and the original participant responses. Future studies could incorporate additional researcher triangulation or participant validation where appropriate to the research design.

Future research should also extend this line of inquiry to populations directly involved in child protection systems, including birth families, adoptive and foster families, children and young people with care experience, and professionals working in social work, child protection, and legal services. Including these different perspectives would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how family belonging, caregiving, separation, reunification, and alternative care are understood and experienced across the different actors involved in child protection.

5. Conclusions

This study explored social representations of adoption, foster care, and child protection in a heterogeneous sample of 182 participants using lexicometric analysis with IRaMuTeQ. The complementary analyses identified recurrent lexical and discursive patterns in which family, caregiving, emotional support, children's development, family diversity, and protection constituted prominent themes. These patterns should be understood within the thematic framework established by the questionnaire, which elicited participants' views on specific dimensions of adoption, foster care, and child protection.

One of the recurrent patterns identified across the corpus concerned the importance attributed to caregiving capacity, emotional stability, and secure relationships when participants discussed family suitability and parenthood. Biological relatedness also remained part of participants' discourse, particularly in relation to family origins, belonging, and decisions concerning birth families. The findings therefore suggest the coexistence of biological and caregiving-based meanings of family within the analysed corpus rather than demonstrating a definitive transition from one model of family to another. This coexistence is also consistent with the continuing importance of birth-family relationships across child protection trajectories, including situations in which children are subsequently reunified with their families of origin.

The study also identified generally favourable attitudes towards family diversity, with adoption and foster care being recognised as legitimate forms of family life regardless of family structure or composition. At the same time, participants expressed conditional views regarding child protection, recognising children's right to grow up in a family while also supporting protective intervention when family circumstances compromise children's safety and well-being. Together, these findings highlight a social representation of child protection that balances children's rights, family preservation, and the need for alternative care when required.

From a practical perspective, the findings provide evidence that may support the development of child protection policies and social work interventions that promote family-based care, strengthen parenting competencies, and recognise the diversity of contemporary family forms. At the same time, the continuing symbolic relevance of biological relatedness highlights the importance of equipping professionals with the knowledge and skills required to support identity development, birth-family contact, and the negotiation of multiple forms of family belonging among adopted and foster children.

Future research should further examine the profile-related differences identified in this study using larger and more balanced samples and should extend this line of inquiry to key stakeholders directly involved in child protection systems, including birth families, adoptive and foster families, children and young people with care experience, and professionals involved in assessment and intervention. Particular attention should be paid to how these groups understand family preservation, separation, reunification, birth-family contact, and alternative care, as their perspectives may differ substantially from those identified in the present sample.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, E.C.-A. and S.P.-C.; Methodology, E.C.-A. and P.M.-A.; Software, P.M.-A.; Validation, E.C.-A. and P.M.-A.; Formal analysis, P.M.-A.; Investigation, E.C.-A.; Resources, S.P.-C.; Data curation, P.M.-A.; Writing—original draft, E.C.-A., P.M.-A. and S.P.-C.; Writing—review & editing, E.C.-A., P.M.-A. and S.P.-C.; Visualization, E.C.-A. and P.M.-A.; Supervision, E.C.-A., P.M.-A. and S.P.-C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (protocol code CEIH-2024-09 and 2 July 2024).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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