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Bulgarian Foster Parents and Money: Strategies, Identity Work, and Relations With the Child

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Abstract

Recent research indicates that the cost of residential care per child in Central and Eastern Europe is three to five times higher than that of foster care (UNICEF, 2024). Short-term foster care requires an intensive initial investment, but it reduces the number of children staying for longer periods in state care and prevents longer-term family separation. In Bulgaria, where foster care is a relatively new and loosely institutionalised phenomenon, foster parents face not only considerable structural difficulties (insecure financing, low state support, etc.) but also public accusations of using foster care children for their financial benefit. Media and popular opinion frequently describe foster parents as "treating children as ATMs." The negative cultural image of foster parents is reinforced by the widespread distrust in child protection services, which leads to accusations that children are taken away from their biological parents so that they can provide "material" and legitimacy for the existence of foster care. The present article has two interrelated aims: first, to examine the strategies by which foster parents navigate their precarious social situation. Based on in-depth interviews with foster parents, we observe the "identity work" of foster parents, i.e., how they reconstruct their identities in response to negative public messages and institutional constraints. Second, we aim to examine the obstacles foster parents encounter in establishing and sustaining focused, meaningful relationships with the child, and how financial issues may impede this process.

Keywords

Bulgaria; deinstitutionalisation; foster care; identity work; money; structural ambivalence

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1. Introduction

In modern states, foster care has been designed as a tool for providing temporary family care to children deprived of adequate parenting, especially to those suffering from parental neglect and abuse. Historically, foster care developed as a social practice within the broader development of the social protection system and social work in Western Europe and the USA. Following the end of World War II, and under the influence of Bowlby's attachment theory, adoption and foster care became instrumental for the reconstruction of "normal family life" for children deprived of it (Rose, 1999, p. 171). The "discovery" of child abuse as a social problem in the 70s (Pfohl, 1977) and the growing international concern for children's well-being reaffirmed the importance of foster care in the state protection of children (Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014).

Despite the public legitimacy of foster care and its important role in contemporary societies, research, primarily from the USA, indicates that negative views of foster care are pervasive (Font & Gershoff, 2020). Various types of public narratives present foster care as a problem and not as a solution. These include media stories of abuse in foster families and public beliefs that foster care is overused and that it should be avoided by providing support and services to biological families (Font & Gershoff, 2020). Additionally, the stereotype that foster parents are motivated chiefly by financial gain persists in public perceptions of foster care (Leber & LeCroy, 2012).

One of the most common themes in critical public narratives about foster care appears to be its economic dimension. In many countries, there are debates about whether the money invested in foster care could be better used to strengthen biological families (George et al., 2003). Although public scrutiny of foster care expenditure has generated considerable academic research from the perspective of economics (Doyle & Peters, 2007; Oldfield, 2019), theoretical understanding of the interconnections between money and foster care is scarce, as is research on its role in the everyday experiences and identities of foster parents.

This article aims to contribute to the study of foster parenting in two ways: first, by theoretically analysing the causes and consequences of the tension between foster care and money; and second, by presenting a small-scale study of how Bulgarian foster parents navigate the contradictions arising from this tension. The case of Bulgaria provides an interesting example of these contradictions because of the popular notion of foster children as "ATM children" (Trencheva et al., 2015), which represents foster care in a negative and commercialised way. Bulgarian media disseminate both positive and negative messages about foster parenting, yet it is the negative ones that shape the lives of foster parents and prompt their avoidance of publicity (Basheva, 2017).

Our theoretical arguments build on literature that outlines the tensions and ambivalence inherent in the role of the professional foster parent (Järvinen & Luckow, 2020; Wilson & Evetts, 2006), but advance the claim that these tensions stem from structural ambiguity surrounding the construction of foster parents as professionals receiving money for their work. This structural ambiguity arises from the cultural contradiction between care and economy (Zelizer, 1985), and can be traced from the macro-level of legislation, through the meso-level of the cultural representations, to the micro-level of foster parents' identities. We use the case of Bulgarian foster parents to delve deeper into the micro-level of this ambivalence through the concept of identity work.

2. Theoretical Framework

Most research on foster care has been conducted within social work, psychology, and neuroscience (Berens & Nelson, 2015; Doyle & Melville, 2013; van IJzendoorn et al., 2008; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). Both theoretical thinking about foster care and policy-making have been dominated by the assumptions of attachment theory, which place an explicit focus on the nature and quality of the relationships in childcare and obscure its social aspects (Smith et al., 2017). A more recent theoretical perspective critiques and broadens this narrow focus by presenting foster carers not so much as individual agents trying to establish secure attachment bonds with the foster children, but as "upbringers on behalf of society" (Cameron & Moss, 2011, as cited in Cameron et al., 2016) and as "experts" in the everyday life of foster children (Cameron et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2017). Both frameworks, however, tend to avoid the links between foster care and money.

Sociological research on the experience and narratives of foster parents shows that they are organised by what can be called the "love vs. money" dichotomy (Doyle & Melville, 2013). In their study of the motives of foster parents in Australia, Doyle and Melville concluded that foster parents' motivations were a combination of altruistic, conventional, and economic motives with the inherent conflict between "caring attitude and desire to be paid" organising their notions of "good caring" and "right motivation" (Doyle & Melville, 2013, p. 87). Similar results from research in the UK and Portugal confirm the finding that foster parents claim their motives for foster care to be non-economic (Diogo & Branco, 2017; Nutt, 2006).

The theoretical perspective most used in sociological research on foster parenting is role theory (Dalgaard et al., 2025; Järvinen & Luckow, 2020; Schofield et al., 2013). Several studies within this approach have found that the role of the foster parent is contradictory because they are expected to be "both a skilled professional and a caring parent and attachment figure" (Dalgaard et al., 2025, p. 2). By itself, foster parenting contains "potential for stress within and across these roles at the interface between their work responsibilities and their family relationships" (Schofield et al., 2013, p. 53). Foster parents typically identify themselves somewhere along the parent–caregiver–professional continuum (Dalgaard et al., 2025) and have complex emotions.

These tensions in the role of foster parents are typically seen as resulting from the professionalisation of foster care across many contexts. The discourse of the professional foster parent has permeated the legislation and has led to the reframing of foster care as work (Wilson & Evetts, 2006). This includes not only the growing regulation and surveillance of foster parents and the increasing role of payments and formal qualifications in foster care, but also heightened expectations for expertise and professionalism.

Foster parents occupy a position "at the crossroads of the professional and the private, having to live up to both professional role requirements (neutrality, expertise) and parental role requirements (love, compassion, particularism)" (Järvinen & Luckow, 2020, p. 4). Although family life is presumably private, foster families are public families which are obliged to have regular and intensive contact with biological parents, institutions, and professionals (Cameron et al., 2016). The constraints of the child protection system, which formulates, monitors, and imposes the requirements of foster care, provide a specific background against which foster parents negotiate their complicated parenting role and identity (Riggs, 2015).

While the influence of professionalisation in transforming foster parenting into a "dual role" (Dalgaard et al., 2025) can hardly be denied, we argue that the tensions in the role of foster parents are rooted in the cultural contradictions between money, economy, and markets on the one hand, and love, altruism, and care on the

other—contradictions that lie at the heart of modern societies (Zelizer, 1985). Zelizer (1985) questions the dichotomous thinking about economics and moral values, market systems and cultural values in social sciences, and demonstrates their interrelationship by examining the historical construction of the image of the emotionally priceless yet economically useless child. Part of her argument concerns the social construction of "paid parenting" as an ambivalent occupation because of the "commercial" element in raising a child with primary sentimental value: "Any form of profitable parenting became structurally deviant and therefore morally suspect" (Zelizer, 1985, p. 188).

We can extend Zelizer's ideas by arguing that contemporary foster parenting, which is typically financed by the state, challenges dominant cultural conceptions of "good" childcare because it introduces an economic element into child–parent relations that are normatively constructed as non-economic. The structural ambivalence of foster parenting is aggravated by the fact that it is mostly temporary, whether preceding adoption or reintegration in the biological family. This creates a kind of "double bind" for foster parents: They are expected to provide a family-like atmosphere, yet at the same time, they are discouraged from forming deep attachments because of their transitory role in the lives of children. Therefore, there are "very few cultural ideas of how foster families constitute 'normality' in their everyday lives and relationships" (Cameron et al., 2016, p. 20). The structural ambivalence of foster parenting has specific manifestations in the complex and ambivalent relationships between foster parents and biological parents (Järvinen & Luckow, 2020).

These theoretical considerations lead to the central question of this article: How do the identities of foster parents reflect this structural ambivalence? More specifically, what strategies do foster parents adopt to negotiate their identities within the cognitive, affective, and interpretative constraints of the "paid parenting" position? Following the symbolic interactionist tradition, we view identity as socially constructed in social interaction (Goffman, 1959) and crucial for the sense-making of the individual (Brown, 2015; McMahon, 1995). Contemporary research on identity shows that both professional and personal roles require the so-called *identity work*, a concept which highlights the social processes by which identities are constructed (Faircloth, 2013; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). These processes include both activities and discourses by which pictures of the self are narrated and communicated.

The only study of the identity work of foster parents focuses on the communicative processes and the boundary management strategies behind the creation and sustenance of foster family identity (Miller-Ott, 2017). Although useful in outlining the active role of foster parents in creating various interpretative and communicative strategies, the focus on communication blurs the structural constraints of foster parenting outlined above. In contrast, our study aims to provide a picture of how foster parents deal with the ambiguities and tensions stemming from these structural constraints on the micro-level of everyday life.

3. Foster Care in Bulgaria

Foster care differs significantly across national contexts (Reimer, 2021) and, consequently, eludes narrow and exclusive definitions (George et al., 2003; Reimer, 2021). Foster care practices and policies are also changing, and one of the reasons is the change in the profile and needs of foster children (del Valle & Bravo, 2013; George et al., 2003). Various historical, cultural, and political conditions play a role in the development of foster care systems (del Valle & Bravo, 2013). In Bulgaria, the current foster care system has been influenced mainly by the EU's deinstitutionalisation policies in the former socialist countries.

3.1. Historical Tradition

Cultural analogues of foster care in Bulgaria can be found in the so-called *hranenichestvo* ("to feed someone") and guardianship/tutelage (Tsaneva et al., 2010). Guardianship is regulated by legal norms, whereas *hranenichestvo* is governed by customary moral norms, which are not mandatory. In the case of *hranenichestvo*, the duty of the foster family was to raise the child—*hraneniche* (literally, "a small child who has been fed")—teach them a trade, and arrange their marriage without providing an inheritance or dowry (Basheva, n.d.). Guardianship was considered a transition from common to written law, since a guardian could be elected (appointed) by a person, a guardianship council, or an institution outside the extended family (Basheva, n.d.).

From the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, the care of children left without parental care—due to socio-economic transformations, numerous wars, and waves of refugees—was assumed primarily by national organisations (such as the women's society Evdokia) and international charitable bodies. In 1936–1938, the first attempt at "foster care" ("placing abandoned children with families" (Basheva, n.d.) was made by the American Middle East Foundation, the Union for the Protection of Children in Bulgaria, the Ministry of the Interior and Public Health, and the Department of Social Welfare at Sofia Municipality. The costs were borne by the state through the Public Assistance Fund and by the American Middle East Foundation. Despite the reported difficulties, this first attempt was considered a success (Angelova, 2005, 2011). With the withdrawal of the American Middle East Foundation from Bulgaria in 1939, this practice was discontinued, and during the socialist period (1944–1989), the only form of public care was institutional (Basheva, n.d.).

3.2. Developments After 1989

Foster care in Bulgaria was re-established at the beginning of the 21st century with the preparation and implementation of the national deinstitutionalisation reform (Kriviradeva, 2014; Nenova & Antonova, 2023; Terziev et al., 2017), as it meets the main goal of this reform: providing individualised, family-like care for children who are temporarily or permanently deprived of parental care. As was the case in Romania (Anghel et al., 2013), the impetus for change came from the EU. During the first decade of the 21st century, foster care was primarily administered by international civil society organisations. However, with the launch of a large-scale national reform for the deinstitutionalisation of childcare in 2010, it gradually became integrated into state policy.

In 2012, the Child Protection Act was amended to include a definition of "foster family" as "two spouses or of a separate individual, with whom a child is placed to be reared pursuant to a contract under Article 27" (Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, 2025).

In 2013, Operation Accept Me was launched, followed by Project Accept Me (2015–2023). Both initiatives were aimed at developing foster care as a service for children aged 0–3, children with disabilities, children who were victims of violence or trafficking, and unaccompanied refugees. They also included measures to improve the quality of foster care through monitoring (Agentsiya za sotsialno podpomagane [ASP], 2015). Foster care was developed in connection with another key goal of deinstitutionalisation: preventing children under the age of three from entering residential care.

Similar to most activities in this reform, foster care was mainly financed by funds of the EU. Following the completion of this financing, foster parents experienced a period of uncertainty related to the sustainability of this service. In 2024, it was decided that foster care would be financed by the Bulgarian state. Since January 2025, the monthly remuneration of foster parents has been increased and is as follows:

- For 1 accommodated child: 150% of the minimum wage (825.99 EUR);
- For 2 accommodated children: 160% of the minimum wage (881.06 EUR);
- For 3 or more accommodated children: 170% of the minimum wage (936.12 EUR).

With the increase of the poverty line (326.2 EUR), the allowance for children placed in foster families has also increased:

- If the child is up to 3 years old, the amount of 1.1 times the poverty line for the respective year (358.82 EUR) is provided.
- If the child is between 3 and 14 years old, the amount of the poverty line (326.2 EUR) is provided.
- If the child is between 14 and 18 years old, the funds cover 1.1 times the poverty line (358.82 EUR). If the child continues to study after reaching the lawful age, but not beyond the age of 20, financial assistance is granted until then.

If the child placed in a foster family has a disability, a supplement is paid to the monthly allowance, which is 30% of the poverty line for the respective year (97.86 EUR). The supplement is provided regardless of the family's income (ASP, 2013).

A major problem is the temporary contract the state enters into with foster parents (ASP, 2013). They receive payment only while there are children placed with them. The contract is civil, which, according to the Bulgarian legislation, deprives them of the right to sick leave and maternity leave, which might be the reason why primarily people over 45–50 years old apply to be foster parents.

3.3. Types of Foster Care

In Europe, different forms of foster care have been identified: kinship, traditional, professional, specialised, crisis foster care, and respite care (Laklija, 2011; Reimer, 2021). The Bulgarian foster care system does not easily fit these types and distinctions. In the Bulgarian legislation, kinship care is not considered foster care because it does not assume a contract between the new parents and the state. There are two types of foster families: voluntary and professional. Voluntary foster families do not receive remuneration and undergo only basic training for foster care (36 hours). Professional foster families receive monthly remuneration; their training programme is specialised and extended by 24 hours compared to the one of voluntary foster families (ASP, 2013). As there are no educational requirements for professional foster parents (ASP, 2013) and the training is relatively short, we can say that the degree of professionalisation of foster care is low. Almost all of the foster families in Bulgaria are professional—as of December 31, 2024, there are 1,721 foster families, and 1,715 of them are professional (ASP, 2025).

According to the current Bulgarian legislation, foster care may be short-term (up to one year), long-term (over one year), substitute (provided for a short or recurring period, aiming at supporting caregivers or the child), or emergency (to protect the life and health of children, or for a new-born child).

3.4. Foster Care and Other Forms of Out-of-Home Care

Between 2007 and 2017, the number of children in foster care increased by over 200% (Opening Doors for Europe's Children, 2018). Still, in 2017, from the 10,000 children in out-of-home care, there were 2,320 children in foster care, 5,283 children in kinship care, and 3,059 children in residential care (Opening Doors for Europe's Children, 2018). In 2023, half of the children raised outside the biological family are in kinship care, only 1,515 (18%) are in foster care, and the remaining children are in residential care. In terms of the high share of children in kinship care, Bulgaria stands near other European countries like Romania and Italy, which, according to the data provided by del Valle and Bravo (2013), have a share of 40% and 44% of kinship foster care, respectively. While there may be social and cultural factors behind the high share of kinship care, the main reasons probably lie in the Bulgarian legislation. According to this legislation, kinship care should be preferred by the state authorities over foster care and does not assume contractual arrangements.

In 2024, according to official data of the ASP, the total number of children in foster care was 1,483 (ASP, 2025). For the same year, the total number of children placed in residential care was 3,283 (ASP, 2025). Based on official data (ASP, 2022, 2023, 2024) on the number of children in residential and foster care, it is difficult to track the changes in these numbers, as ASP reports for the period 2021–2023 only mention the number of places (but not the number of people placed) in residential care for children and adults in total. Regarding foster care, the data are more precise. In 2023, there were 671 new cases of foster care and a total of 1,515 children in foster families (ASP, 2025). In 2022, there were 683 children, in 2021, 632, in 2020, 698, and in 2019, 1,129 children. (These data were provided to the Know-How Centre for Alternative Care for Children at the New Bulgarian University, in response to a Request for Access to Public Information, received by the ASP with entry No. 92-00-0149/30.05.2024, concerning a study of the reasons for the separation of children from their families in Bulgaria.) Hence, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of children in foster care decreased approximately two times, and over the last four years, it has gradually increased without reaching pre-pandemic levels.

The only foster parent organisation is the National Foster Care Association (NFCA), established in 2009 by foster parents and specialists in the field. Currently, it has more than 800 foster parents as members. According to NFCA data:

- Each year, nearly 500 foster families have no children placed, which means that they receive no payment and cannot take on full-time employment while waiting for a new child to be placed.
- Nearly 70% of children leaving foster care are adopted.
- One in two foster parents is over 55 years of age.

The total number of new foster families approved in 2024 was 110. For comparison, 52 new professional foster families were approved in 2023 (ASP, 2025). The almost twofold increase likely reflects the improved financial and legal conditions provided by the state.

As noted above, our study aims to provide a picture of how foster parents in Bulgaria navigate the ambiguities and tensions arising from the structural constraints in everyday life. Thus, the research questions the study seeks to answer are: How do foster parents construct their identities? How do financial aspects of foster care

affect the identity of foster parents and their relations with children? How do the attitudes of family, friends, social workers, and society affect the identity of foster parents?

4. Methodology

To explore how the financial arrangements of foster parents shape their experiences and identity work, small-scale qualitative research was conducted. A semi-structured questionnaire for in-depth interviews (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Legard et al., 2003) was designed with questions directed at the following areas of foster parents' lives: identity and motivation for foster parenting, sources of difficulties and satisfaction as foster parents, financial aspects and their impact on relationships with foster children, attitudes towards foster parenting and reasons for them. All participants were asked the same questions. Data from the transcribed interviews were subjected to reflective thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) based on the main areas of research interest identified in the questionnaire and aimed at providing a coherent interpretation of the data.

4.1. Participants

In February–March 2025, eight individual interviews with foster parents and three group discussions with foster families (both husband and wife participated) were conducted online because the participants represented almost all regions of Bulgaria. To better understand the role of the NFCA in supporting foster parents, another interview with an expert was also conducted. It covered the same topics. All participants are of Bulgarian origin, and most of them have a university education. Only one of the families has been fostering for 1 year; the remaining participants have been foster parents/families for at least 10 years. Three of the participants are aged 40–50, 10 participants are aged 50–60, and two are over 60. Seven of the interviewed foster parents are occupied only as foster parents. Typically, in foster families, the woman works only as a foster parent, and the man has another job. The participants were recruited with the assistance of the NFCA. All contacted foster parents responded positively. Participants shared similar experiences, and the saturation of confirmatory data is one of the reasons for the limited number of participants.

5. Results

The authors, individually and then in discussions, deduced from the data four main themes (Braun et al., 2019), which follow the areas and research questions of the semi-structured questionnaire. The analysis reflects the diversity of meanings and relates the results to theoretical frameworks related to identity (Goffman, 1959; McMahon, 1995) and intergroup relations (Wacquant, 2008).

5.1. Identity

To understand how financial issues affect the identity work of foster parents, firstly, we will describe all identity meanings mentioned by the participants. All interviewees share a common opinion about foster care: It is a mission, a cause, but not a profession. As one participant stated, "This is work with a cause, with a mission, you save human lives" (woman aged 64, with 11 years' experience as a foster parent).

The various traumatic experiences that children have endured include: "The children are mainly raped, beaten, children used for begging or prostitution, children with severe trauma, and babies who have been abandoned by the maternity hospital" (woman, 52/15). These experiences give foster parents reason to view this "mission" as saving the children: "For me, foster care saves these children, because the children who enter foster care come to us like from a horror movie" (woman, 52/15).

On the one hand, some of the reasons for perceiving foster care as "a mission that saves lives" seem to be the numerous difficulties related to the work of the foster parents and the administrative contradictions of this profession, as well as the ambivalent attitude of the state and society towards the payment for their work:

> There is nothing to hold on to if you are a foster parent—neither the payment is good, nor are you respected, nor do you have benefits, you have no reason, except only the desire to help these children. (woman, 52/15)

On the other hand, foster care is caring work which requires building and constant maintenance of a relationship of trust between the foster parent and the child. The foster children have experienced various mental traumas (such as separation from one or many attachment figures, violence and abuse, including sexual abuse at a very young age, etc.), which lead to severe consequences for the child's overall development (van der Kolk, 2000, 2003) and to difficulties in building relationships in particular. Foster parents face behaviours such as aggression, resistance, theft, daily fluctuations in emotions, difficulty sleeping, and a lack of basic skills and knowledge needed in everyday life, and they must understand the reasons for them and intervene without giving up on the child or becoming abusive, like some of the biological parents. Thus, foster parents define their work as a mission, which reflects the absence of a public conversation in Bulgaria about foster care as a profession.

Typically, the everyday understanding of helping professions (such as teachers, social workers, psychologists, medical doctors, etc.) in terms of "mission" appears when they fulfil their work beyond the framework of administrative formal requirements. Precisely, the emphasis on the emotional and relational side of the role is the main contradiction between foster parents and other specialists in the child protection system (such as social workers/administrators in municipal, educational, social, and medical institutions and services):

> In foster care, I miss the humanity of the people around the foster family. Humanity is the reason these people become foster parents....This means that the system around them, education, local authorities, and kindergarten must be empathetic and humane. (expert, 40)

Furthermore, the perception of foster care as a mission is a coping strategy to deal with the mixed feelings of grief, hope, and joy caused by separation when the child is reintegrated or adopted. The institutions that decide to remove a child from a foster parent lack the understanding that this might be a traumatic and highly emotional process for both the foster parents and the children. Very often, children are removed urgently (as they are usually placed), without the chance to maintain their relationship with the foster parent and without addressing their grief over the loss of significant relationships: "The social worker said, 'What do you care how the child feels, give him to the adoptive parents'" (woman, 64/11).

The narrative of mission merges with the narrative of suffering:

> Sometimes it's truly a huge suffering—dealing with all these emotional states of the children, dealing with state policy, which is nonexistent, with laws, the craziness that happens with the departments and the decisions that are made. (woman, 55/10)

To cope with the grief of separation and the anger directed at social workers who implement decisions that do not align with ethical and professional standards, foster parents rely mainly on supervision (provided primarily by the NFCA) and on a defence mechanism to reframe their pain as part of the mission to help children: "I think that these are superhumans and I state this quite responsibly, because to become attached and separate in the best way for the child, abandoning yourself, without any support in this separation process, is very destructive" (expert, 40).

The children's background affects foster parents' identity in various ways as well. Similarly to residential care, in foster care, the largest share of children are of Roma origin. Usually, these children have faced discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion (most often even from their own communities), and have a lot of difficulties in adapting to family life and other social environments. One of the most serious problems, which the participants share, is children's fear and shame of being recognised among their peers at school and in the community as foster children:

> I have never been ashamed. For the children, it is different. There is a big problem with them. It is very difficult for them to accept that, for example, when starting school, they are like everyone else. She [the foster child] said, "I don't want you to say that you are my foster mother." And I had to lie and say I was her mother. (woman, 60/20)

The children's shame about their status as being without parental care challenges the identity of the foster parents, particularly in how they present themselves while trying not to further deepen the children's trauma. Hence, the identity of the foster parents is also related to the extent to which the foster children accept their status as children without parental care.

5.2. Motivation

Another aspect of the identity of a foster parent is the motivation to be a foster parent. The feeling of "a mission that saves lives" is part of the motivation to become and remain a foster parent for all interviewees.

Three additional reasons for choosing the role of foster parent stand out in the interviews. The first reason is the "empty nest" syndrome. The growth of one's own children is a reason shared by 11 participants for applying to be foster parents:

> When my children grew up, I was left alone. I already had another partner. The noise in the house, scolding someone, preparing breakfast, and dinner, I missed that a lot, and I shared this longing with my partner. He agreed, and we submitted the documents. (woman, 55/10)

Two of the women interviewed shared previous experiences with children from institutions as a motive for helping such children later in life. In one of these two cases the decision to become a foster parent came after the family had prolonged and regular contacts with a child from the nearby institution:

> V [the child from the institution] especially motivated me to be a foster parent. This contact that we had with her since she was little, seeing what she had been through and coming to us, she didn't know what to do with a piece of meat, for example. She had never seen a whole piece of meat. A chicken leg or some piece that wasn't ground up and mixed up like porridge. How she screamed in the bathroom from bathing, then she explained to me that they were bathed in cold water there [in the institution]. (woman, 60/20)

The conditions of institutional care have also been identified as a motivating factor for foster parents in previous research (Basheva, 2017).

While for big cities the remuneration is not attractive, for small towns, where unemployment is higher and the wages are accordingly lower, foster care is an acceptable option. Income as a foster parent is an initial motive for two participants, but in combination with other motives, such as loneliness: "It's quite selfish, but I'll tell you. I was unemployed, the children had left home. I was in a very unpleasant state, something like depression. I was lonely" (woman, 64/11).

5.3. The Role of Finance

The identity associated with the mission reflects the difficulty for foster parents to demand decent financial compensation for their work:

> For many years, the foster parents tried not to talk about finances at all; it was literally a taboo topic, because for many years, both social workers, society, and biological parents have accused us of being the bad guys in this movie, and everyone accuses us of doing it for money. For this reason, we constantly suppressed ourselves, we wanted to show society that this is not the most important thing for us and that this is not the motive to become foster parents. (woman, 52/15)

However, on the other hand, the specifics of this work make it problematic to determine how they can be compensated financially:

> If I have to do this for money, I will never do it—there is no money to compensate for the nerves, the care, the emotional support, the shared grief, the fact that they use you as a fuse in their most difficult moments, because you are the only one who can bear the blows. (foster family for 1 year)

As mentioned above, the foster care payment is not a primary motivation for any of the participants. Moreover, the contractual and financial terms are not even of interest to younger families:

> Foster parents are over 45 years old, and there are very few younger ones. While we are on civil contracts and we do not have social security, young people will not want to do this, because young people are about to have a family, to have children. They do not have the right to use sick leave or go

on maternity leave because the civil contract does not allow it. Who will ruin their life for 1,300 BGN (664.68 EUR), because we work 24/7, 365 days a year!? (woman, 55/10)

However, the conditions are not adequate for elderly people either, because the civil contract guarantees neither income stability nor basic labour rights:

> When foster parents are sick with oncological diseases, they hide and are treated secretly, because if they say they are sick, the children are removed immediately—they say the children are at risk. In a normal family, if someone gets sick, the child is not at risk, but if I get sick, the child is at risk. They take your child, you have no payment. (woman, 52/15)

Another consequence of the current financial conditions affecting the most vulnerable children is that payment stimulates foster parents only from small settlements to take in children with disabilities. But in small settlements, there is a lack of appropriate infrastructure and specialists/services for raising children with disabilities:

> They insist on having foster parents for children with disabilities. It is very difficult, because in our city we do not have services that would support such parents...it is related to rehabilitation, to doctors. We have to travel to Sofia, which is 200 km away. (woman, 60/20)

The lack of sufficient motivating remuneration to cover the additional costs for children with disabilities is one of the most important reasons for many foster families to refuse to care for them.

Regarding the amount given for the children's allowance, all participants confirm that it is insufficient, especially for children over 6 years and for adolescents. Foster parents invest their own funds in books, clothes, medicine, activities to develop the children's talents, and travel:

> We provide additional funding to take the child to the sea, to the mountains, to have a birthday party, and to buy strollers, which are already very expensive. (woman, 56/9)

> We found out that the little girl has problems with her eyes—360 leva (184.07 EUR) just for the glasses. I asked about this kind of assistance, but the social institutions refused me. And how—should I not pay for them? And what about extracurricular activities, the fees for them? "Well, that's your decision, you choose it," they answer me. (woman, 57/11)

A significant share of the children need additional psychiatric or psychotherapeutic support, for which the foster parents also mostly pay with their own funds, including regular travel expenses to larger cities where these specialists work: "The care is enormous—psychiatrists, psychologists, books.... Who covers these expenses?—us. Travel, food, car repairs" (foster family for 1 year).

Almost all interviewees claim that money does not affect their relationships with the children. Only one family with two adolescents living with them for one year shared that money plays a key role in these relationships because, through conversations about money, the children test whether the foster parents can be trusted or not:

> Absolutely everything goes through the topic of money. My biological children have never shown any interest in money, and they have no problem going out without money to see a friend. But for them [the foster children], it is a matter of life and death. And I asked a clinical psychologist about this: When you have been rejected, kicked out, emotionally abused so many times, the monetary unit is the only safe thing that they can hold on to and makes them feel grounded. This is their stability, their foundation. For other children, it is the family. One of the few things they can control. At first, they were worried that we did it only for the money and that we would freeload off them, which they considered another betrayal. But I have said more than once that it is not a problem to give up this money—it is difficult to live without this money, and they know it, because we lived without this money for one year. And if they suspect that we have some different intentions, we can refuse these funds at any time. But we will have to live much more modestly. (foster family for 1 year)

When a child is placed at an early age, and a trusting relationship with the foster parent is established at an early age, parent–child relationships related to finances develop naturally and do not carry any other meaning (e.g., testing the parent's attitude towards the placed child). However, when children are placed at a later age, having already experienced multiple placements and abuse, then financial relationships take on a different meaning, and professional support is needed for parents to understand and manage this process.

5.4. Attitudes Towards Foster Parents

The participants in the study agree that they find support and a positive attitude mainly from family members and friends.

Only two participants shared a supportive and understanding attitude from social institutions, while the rest have repeatedly encountered misunderstanding, negativity, control, and shifting responsibility to them for the care of the children:

> Social services were the first to start speaking out against foster parents. They started comparing their salaries with ours. They started saying, "Here are some grandmothers who watch Turkish series all day and get another pension." (woman, 52/15)

The fact that attitudes towards foster care and foster parents vary and depend on the people working in the different institutions and services represents a lack of standards for quality of care that are the same for all systems—health, social, and educational. The lack of understanding of the complexity and specifics of foster care—manifested in the "administrative, formal control" exercised by social institutions (expert, 40), together with insufficient support from educational and health institutions—creates among foster parents a sense of "working in a hostile environment" (expert, 40), marked by growing isolation and rejection.

These are reasons for more and more foster parents to encapsulate in a community with increasingly rigid boundaries and growing intragroup solidarity as a substitute for adequate external treatment and support. The encapsulation of foster parents is also facilitated by attitudes in society, which are mostly negative. At the beginning of the establishment of foster care in the first decade of the 21st century, the attitude towards foster parents was positive. A transformation began in the middle of the second decade, when the criteria for approving foster parents changed: "In 2015–2016, foster parents were recruited at any cost, which greatly

worsened the quality of foster care" (expert, 40). Responsibility for foster care was transferred entirely to state institutions as part of the deinstitutionalisation policy, and the first significant movements against the influence of European policies on the family began to emerge:

> This is a consequence of this disinformation campaign, along with the Strategy for the Child, 2018. The "ATM children"—a media label that appeared in the *24 Hours* newspaper, which had published extremely positive stories about what I call "gypsy foster families. The story was extremely positive, but they quoted a neighbour who had said that they were called "ATM children" there because they [foster parents] went to withdraw money from ATMs. This media language has remained. (expert, 40)

This is an example of how a relatively neutral expression became infused with negative meanings, reflecting not only the contradiction between economic motive and care, but also the public anxieties around the child protection policies of the state (Nenova et al., 2024).

These media representations and the transformations in the social context listed above reinforce negative attitudes towards foster parents. However, there is no such attitude towards the social workers and the caregivers working in the Small Home Centres (SHCs)—the new community-based residential services for children without parental care. The main reasons for this difference are found in the common understanding of "job" and of foster parenting as a voluntary, non-paid commitment:

> Because there he, the social worker in the Small Home Centre, works. And for us it looks different—you work at home. It seems that you do not work. When you stay at home, you do not work. (woman, 53/11)

Foster care integrates children isolated in institutions and ghettos into society and makes them "visible"— they become part of the daily lives of individuals, neighbors, classmates, and thus bring to light and remind of problems such as poverty, violence, isolation, suffering, and diversity that society has isolated in various institutions, in which the state is responsible for their resolution and control (Angelov, 2020; Marcuse, 1997; Wacquant, 2008):

> When there were homes [expression for the old institutions], no one cared who raped whom, who beat whom, who prostituted. (woman, 52/15)

Negative attitudes among general population in Bulgaria are strongest towards the Roma community and are often associated with emotions such as fear, rejection, even disgust (Tomova et al., 2020). As participants shared, almost all foster children are from the Roma community. By projecting these emotions that Roma children evoke in most Bulgarians onto the foster parents, the foster parents begin to bear some of the negative attitudes directed at their foster children—those who are invisible to society. While the Small Home Centres are associated with state responsibility and those working in them control the children placed in them, the foster parents bring the children to the same environments where children of the Bulgarian majority play and live:

> I haven't thought about this issue, but most likely because you can't see it behind the walls. And we are on the playground, in school, in the kindergarten, everywhere in society. Again, we come to the state, to politics—everybody tries in every possible way to hide these children....Because, you must

admit, their relatives don't want them, the state doesn't want them, the kindergarten doesn't want them. Other parents drag their children out of the playground—come here, you won't swing, you won't skate, because look at how black he is, look at him, he's a Roma. (woman, 55/10)

This explanation is also confirmed by the pressure from the social system to cover up problems—some participants feel helpless and pressed by the social workers not to share difficulties in the communication with the biological parents: "We have no right to say that after meeting with biological parents, the child is wetting himself [leaking urine involuntarily]" (woman, 52/15).

The encapsulation of the foster parent community further fuels the perception of foster care as a mission, but also leads to the inability to share experiences with people and professionals outside the community: "Group meetings for discussions, they are led by outsiders, there you have to be careful about what you say, because you don't know who the social worker is and what they will say that you said" (man, 43/1).

In other words, it becomes a precondition for reproducing a distorted paranoid attitude that outsiders are only hostile to the community. This attitude is sometimes transferred to biological parents, often to adoptive parents, journalists, etc. Negative attitudes reflect the peculiarities of the culture of poverty, which, according to some participants, is characteristic of Bulgarian society. This culture relates to competitiveness and emotions of envy and hostility towards those perceived as having more:

> I will not talk about the folk psychology of the Bulgarian people, who envy those who have more, but don't care when someone is beaten in front of their eyes. (woman, 52/15; woman, 56/9; woman, 54/10; foster family for 1 year)

The encapsulation of foster parents has positive aspects as well. It motivates them to improve working conditions and advocate for professional standards in the quality of care. The NFCA serves as an engine for foster parents to unite, providing a safe space to increase competence and prevent burnout through training, intervision, and supervision. By also assuming syndicate functions, it actively negotiates with stakeholders and institutions to prepare, legalise, and implement professional standards for the quality of care, including financial standards.

6. Discussion

Financial aspects influence and create tensions in many areas of foster care in Bulgaria, including the foster parent–child relationship and the profile and identity of foster parents. In the parent–caregiver–professional continuum (Dalgaard et al., 2025), the foster parents who participated in this study are closer to caregiver identification, while their identity as professionals seems to be still in the process of initial structuring. The ambivalence in the public and professional identity of foster parents stems from the structural ambiguity in Bulgarian legislation, which does not define foster care as a profession.

The identity of foster parents is a complex construct that reflects the difficulties in fulfilling the role of foster parent: unclear status, whether foster parenting is a profession or not; contradictory and mostly negative attitudes towards them and their work; difficulties in dealing with children in vulnerable situations; and lack of sufficient sources of support. The results of the present study show that financial issues affect the

identity of foster parents as "saviours" and people with a mission, but not as specialists who provide specialised social services. Foster parents develop an identity as saviours—people with a mission—in contrast to the often procedure- and rule-based actions of municipal administrators and the child protection system. This identity also reflects how they are perceived by the child protection system—not as equal professionals providing a highly specialised social service, but as unskilled executants.

For foster parents, financial issues reflect the tension described in many of the studies cited above between money, markets, and economic concerns on the one hand, and love, altruism, and care on the other. This conflict underlies the ambivalent attitude towards foster parents, which is positioned at the extremes of admiration, gratitude, and respect on the one hand, and rejection, hostility and hatred on the other. The reasons for this lie both in the culture of poverty and in the understanding that caring for children in difficult life situations should be voluntary, charitable work.

As in many other countries, in Bulgaria, the main topic for critical public narratives around foster care seems to be the economic aspect. According to the participants in the present study, the public opinion is that their only motivation to become a foster parent is the payment. There is no representative study of public attitudes towards foster care in Bulgaria, and official data show that the financial aspects of foster care can motivate mainly elderly people over 50 years of age from small settlements, whose families most often have another source of income to be able to compensate for the costs of raising a foster child, not covered by state financial support. The low wage and the type of contract, which does not cover fundamental employment rights or grant the right to additional work, not only prevent more young families from becoming foster parents but also stop existing foster parents from feeling supported and appreciated. Moreover, they hinder the implementation of foster care for children in the most vulnerable situation—children with disabilities—since the funding does not cover the costs of necessary care for these children, and they are adopted to a very small extent and often stay in the foster family for a long time.

The present study adds another dimension to the reasons for society's negative attitudes towards foster parents, namely their role as mediators between society and marginalised children, often raised in institutions and ghettos, who are frequently subjected to stigmatising and discriminatory practices based on race, ethnicity, economic status, and disability. The negative and discriminatory attitudes towards foster children coming from ethnic minorities, families in poverty, etc., are often projected onto the foster parents who have taken responsibility for the care of these children, removed from situations of enormous risk to their health and life. According to Bulgarian law, the dissemination of information about these children is prohibited. Children, as well as foster parents, do not have the right to make independent decisions (without the consent of the child protection institutions and biological parents), even for public photos celebrating a child's achievement (e.g., in sports or the arts). This significantly complicates the creation of a realistic public image of foster care, and further stimulates the foster parents' feelings of inequality and hostility in the child protection system, leading to encapsulation in the community of foster parents and development of a super-identity of foster care as a mission.

Nevertheless, it is in this community that foster parents are gradually beginning to build their new identity as professionals and actively advocate for professional and ethical standards of quality in the care of children in foster care, which is also resulting in a partial improvement in the financial aspects in 2025.

7. Conclusions

The present study is one of the few on Bulgarian foster care and the first to focus on the relationship between foster parenting and money in a Bulgarian context. A large part of the research on deinstitutionalisation and foster care in Bulgaria could be found in the so-called grey literature—reports by civil society organisations such as Lumos, UNICEF, etc. Scientific publications are few, mainly in the field of ethnography (Angelova, 2005, 2011; Basheva, n.d.; Beshkov, 1984; Tsaneva et al., 2010) and psychology (Nincheva, 2022; Stoyanov & Ivanova, 2014). Given the lack of scientific research on this topic in the Bulgarian context, a logical continuation of the present topic would be to explore the attitudes towards foster parents among general population, professionals from the social, educational, and health sectors, as well as the reasons behind these attitudes. A second research topic could examine the forms of foster parents' activism and the role of the community as a catalyst for professional identity.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing does not apply to this article.

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