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Work, Care, Family Life, and More: The Layered Framings of Swedish Foster Care

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Abstract

Being a foster parent is not a profession and does not provide a salary—a placed child is supposed to be given a life in a regular family. However, foster parents receive fees and reimbursements, and they may be offered supervision and professional training. Researchers often emphasize the mixed nature of foster care, balancing between work and family, but it is less common to examine how foster parents themselves analyze their position. This article uses Erving Goffman's frame analysis to explore how foster parents in Sweden interweave seemingly incongruent frames to organize their experiences. The study is based on qualitative interviews with 40 foster parents, and is part of a project in which social services employees and consulting companies have also been interviewed. Foster parents may indeed frame their mission as work, thereby arguing for the legitimacy of payments and better conditions, but they may simultaneously frame it differently: as family life, as a lifestyle, as care work, as hard work, or as civic engagement. Additionally, placed teenagers with diagnoses and special needs further complicate the picture. The article shows that (a) there are more frames to be handled than formal work vs. family in today's social world of foster care, and (b) when related to everyday life, the frames at issue are not defined as mutually exclusive.

Keywords

care; foster care; money; work

1. Introduction

Living in a family and taking care of the family's children is not a profession, and it may seem unreasonable to get paid for it (Zelizer, 2005, 2011). Salary and remuneration are associated with work outside the home, and there has been a long-standing aversion to considering foster care as a job or paid work. Accentuating

payment is often seen as encouraging the "wrong" motives. This is especially noticeable in the attitudes and word choices of authorities, both today and historically. The Swedish historian Johanna Sköld argues that it was long considered important that "foster care should not bring the foster mother so much money that it would be perceived as a profession" (Sköld, 2006, p. 304, translation by the author). She quotes a statement from a child welfare inspector named Kihlqvist in 1911:

> [It is] rather better that the payment is too low than too high. This is not to reduce the municipality's expenses, but because it initially discourages those who want to take in children for profit. (Sköld, 2006, p. 304, translation by the author)

The idea that monetary interests—"profit"—risk pushing aside other values or motives if fees and compensations do not remain small still lingers today. Today's Swedish social services emphasize that foster care is an "assignment" rather than a job. It is not a question of employment, and there are no occupational pension rights, and many foster parents testify to stingy municipalities with convoluted rules for receiving compensation.

However, when we approach the everyday life of foster care with the help of detailed data, a more varied picture emerges. Living in a foster home and taking care of placed children is seen not only as work or family life but also in a variety of other ways, such as an "assignment," "care," a "lifestyle," "duty," and sometimes even "treatment." Payments and their circumstances then appear as an integral rather than a dominant element, as one of several subordinate or parallel perspectives. In Erving Goffman's words, there are various framings that may be considered (Goffman, 1986).

In this article, I will show how foster parents present and analyze different framings of the care they are engaged in. One framing can sometimes be set against another, but more commonly, there are overlapping, fused, or parallel understandings and contextualizations. A given frame can, for example, be placed within another frame that is placed within a third, and so on, and frames can be layered or laminated (Goffman, 1986, p. 82). In contrast to previous research, I show that there are more frames being managed than merely paid work vs. family in the social world of foster care, and that the frames at issue are not defined as mutually exclusive. Similar to Binder's (2007, p. 549) approach, foster parents demonstrate creativity in their ways of squaring the expectations of their surroundings with their systems of local meaning, personal commitments, and organizational obligations.

2. Previous Research on Childcare, Money, and Payment to Foster Families

Describing the entry of money into a social context in terms of instrumentalization, rationalization, and disenchantment can be traced back to, among others, Georg Simmel, who broadly described how money came to produce and symbolize impersonal relationships and a drastic reduction of complex lifeworlds (Simmel, 1990). Zelizer (1985, 1994, 2005, 2011) has objected to the one-sidedness of this theory, arguing that money can be attributed different meanings. Payments of various kinds are earmarked, according to Zelizer, making it possible to differentiate between, for example, salary and gift, inheritance and contribution, pocket money and bribes. At the same time, Zelizer has implicitly incorporated some of Simmel's (1990) thinking, albeit on a more empirical level. Zelizer argues that money in close relationships is judged in a moral light; it is perceived as contaminating in intimate spheres, that is, among friends and within

families (Zelizer, 2011). Economic and intimate spheres are often considered "hostile worlds," claims Zelizer (2011), which gives rise to particularly sensitive combinations.

Taking care of and providing care for children is one such example. Historically and culturally, children, care, upbringing, and family life have come to be separated from the economy and the market, making the points of contact between these worlds morally charged. Children are expected to be considered "priceless" (Zelizer, 1985), meaning they are certainly not expected to be used for payment or profit. Instrumentalization and impersonal business interests are not expected to go hand in hand with caring for and living with children, as in foster care.

In a literature review and policy analysis regarding British social services, Kirton (2013, p. 665) notes that payments to foster families are associated with concerns about impersonal and mechanical care. Emphasizing fees and compensation is assumed to risk attracting the "wrong" kind of families, since economic interests ideally should be kept out of family-based care and support. At the same time, money must be named, earmarked, and managed, in accordance with Zelizer's perspective, within this social world. Foster parents have expenses for their care work and often must reduce their regular wage work to part-time or otherwise refrain from fully participating in the labor market. Without fees and compensations, foster care would revert to charity, which contradicts a modern welfare model, and the heavy workload that primarily falls on caregiving women would remain unpaid.

According to Kirton (2013, p. 665), fees and compensations emerge as a silent prerequisite rather than a motive: "We don't do it for the money, but we can't do it without the money" (Nelson, 2007, p. 21). Smith (1991, p. 179) has shown how the foster parents she studied in Australia were hesitant to be paid for their care, while at the same time stating various reasons why compensation was reasonable and sometimes too low. This ambivalence is also evident in Linderot's (2020) study of Swedish foster care placements.

Kirton (2013) argues that the issue of payment constitutes a central component in the transformation of foster care towards formalized wage labor. Nevertheless, this form of care can be considered liminal, according to Kirton, meaning it is situated between the domains of work and family. The Australian researchers Musgrove and Michell (2018) describe a similar contradictory relationship, as does the Swedish historian Sköld (2006). Nelson (2007) argues that care issues do not have to be perceived as "love *or* money" but rather "love *and* money" (p. 21, emphasis in the original). Fees and compensation can even be seen as enhancing motivation as the care in question receives societal recognition.

This article takes its starting point in this context, but the ambition is also to broaden the analysis. Previous research seems to have been caught in the dichotomy love versus money or family versus work, which provides an oversimplified picture of the complexity in the social world that foster care constitutes.

For example, when Kirton (2022) identifies and examines the current anti-professional turn in English foster care—a policy that thus seems to be distancing itself from the allegedly impersonal and bureaucratic state care of placed children—"family" and "work" are again set against each other, with no additional frames being highlighted and without the everyday coexistence of seemingly contradictory frames being specified empirically. While Kirton (2022, p. 4033) does talk about the risk of simplifying binaries, referring to several studies showing that love and care can very well coexist with (more or less) professional identities

in foster homes, his theorization stops at rather categorical indications. Still, researchers report or suggest that a one-dimensional image of foster care with only two poles does not resonate with the involved actors' experiences.

McDermid et al. (2016) report on a British project—Head, Heart, Hands—that aimed to use a social pedagogic approach to strengthen foster carers, who they say "operate in a unique space between the professional and the personal" (p. 21), but whom the researchers simultaneously attempted to make more professional. However, some of the foster carers apparently knew about the things—including the "proper" emotions—they were supposed to learn before the project itself started:

> It was noted that the foster carers interviewed expressed affection for the children and young people they cared for *prior* to Head, Heart, Hands, and much of what was discussed as part of the Learning and Development courses was not entirely new. (McDermid et al., 2016, p. 149, emphasis in the original)

This, I would argue, suggests that foster parents might define themselves as *somewhat* professional—before and independently of project interventions—while *still* being firmly anchored in their "unprofessional" family life, and probably not seeing any contradictions in this. Foster parents do not seem to regard their position as a professional one, but nor do they appear to be averse to borrowing professional approaches and methods, thereby occasionally approaching a professional position.

Blythe et al. (2013) found that the Australian foster mothers they studied identified themselves as first and foremost mothers, rather than carers, to the long-term foster children in their care, and that they both looked for and needed parental recognition. Wubs et al. (2018, p. 762) argue that their respondents rejected the division between professional distance and parental warmth, although they also identified themselves as professional—and therefore as sometimes somewhat distant—caregivers: "Thus, foster motherhood, according to these women, should not be viewed from a binary perspective of either being a 'distant' professional or a fully invested warm mother figure" (Wubs et al., 2018, p. 762).

While researchers thus acknowledge that experiences can bypass or transcend the binary, the conclusions rarely go any further. Few studies seem to specify the picture beyond the dichotomy that parents routinely seem to discard or complicate, and even fewer seem to approach the phenomenon of how foster care should be understood in a more open-ended way.

A notable exception is a study by Järvinen and Luckow (2020), which explicitly addresses ambivalence in foster care, both in terms of birth parents presenting themselves as exposed and misunderstood (but also critical of the system), and in terms of foster parents presenting themselves as vulnerable, sometimes feeling like clients themselves. Foster parents can "only partly be compared to the professionals," Järvinen and Luckow (2020, p. 838) argue. This is the line of research to which this article attempts to contribute.

3. Goffman's Frame Analysis as Theoretical and Analytical Framework

Goffman (1986) argues that people create different frames to organize their experiences. We are constantly engaged in a kind of social reality agreements that follow their own principles and are often based on the "same" foundation. For example, we can view the same day in a variety of ways. The day can be "Thursday,"

"sick day," "wedding day," "name day," "school's study day," "cinnamon bun day," "a really stressful day," and so on, depending on what actions we are engaged in, what perspectives or moral aspects we apply, and what primary frame we might adjust to fit additional experiences. Typically, it is the existence of social variations that makes frame analysis relevant (Persson, 2019).

In relation to the experience of being a foster parent, Goffman's (1986) frame analysis offers a sensitive and flexible conceptualization. Goffman argues that primary frames are typically projected or implied in an immediate and seamless manner—for example, we directly and unproblematically regard the activities of preschool staff at a preschool as their work—but the relationships become particularly interesting when multiple frames are combined or succeed each other. The activities of preschool staff can be understood as care, play, pedagogy, or even workplace training or internship, such as when an apprentice is being trained in the profession. Those who observe a preschool or analyze its activities usually have no problem handling multiple frames simultaneously. For example, these activities can primarily be regarded as work that simultaneously includes play, pedagogy, care, and learning, or they can primarily be regarded as care that simultaneously constitutes pedagogy, work, internship, etc.

Drastic and unexpected frame combinations are often associated with comedy and playfulness, such as when a person pretends to be someone else by changing their voice, altering their posture, using facial expressions, or imitating someone.

Goffman uses the term "keying" to denote the ways in which people transform an already meaningful activity into something else. For example, when people send play signals to each other and thereby frame what is happening as "pretense" or "play," they strike a tone that is recognizable to those involved. Keying involves "the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by participants to be something quite else" (Goffman, 1986, pp. 43–44).

One quickly understands that not just one frame applies here, but several. A given activity is understood in more than one way, whereby the activity is perceived and handled differently. "Indeed," Goffman (1986, p. 563) writes, "in countless ways and ceaselessly, social life takes up and freezes into itself the understandings we have of it."

Goffman is particularly concerned with playfulness and various kinds of frame games (Goffman, 1986, p. 40–82; see also Klintman, 2025). In relation to foster homes, frame changes or frame shifts are rarely playful or comedic, but the phenomenon of keying is present. When my colleagues and I have listened to foster parents recounting their experiences in our interviews, the parents strike different tones in their stories and descriptions that indicate the frames within which their statements are expected to be interpreted. We as interviewers typically confirm and build upon such keyings, whereby a range of varying framings crystallize in the interactions. Goffman argues that people often juggle multiple frames simultaneously. We can at one moment view the same day as "our wedding day," the next moment as "a Thursday," "your name day," and so on—we can even simultaneously juggle a large number of meanings, relate them to each other, compare them, organize them, and switch between them. Often we start from a basic frame to which we add another layer through subtle shifts in tone.

What has proven to be particularly interesting regarding foster parents is how the crystallization processes appear against the backdrop of the cultural tension between "love" and "money," "family" and "work." As Simmel (1950, pp. 10–11) notes, society may appear to consist of autonomous fields, while in reality, it consists of interactions that are continuously crystallized into such fields. Society is realized in and through sociation.

I argue that Goffman's frame analysis can deconstruct such sociation processes and thereby uncover the everyday and artful handling of more than one understanding of—in this case—foster care. If we, by contrast, get stuck in dichotomous thinking, it becomes difficult to empirically acknowledge the layers in actors' narratives and thereby society as an "event" or ongoing accomplishment, as Simmel (1950, p. 11) describes it.

4. Method and Data

This article is based on parts of the interview material collected in a Swedish research project, Pecuniary Sensitivity in Narratives About Foster Care, during the period 2022–2024. With the goal of exploring actors' attributions of meaning regarding the economic conditions for foster care and the ways in which money is managed, we conducted qualitative interviews with 40 foster parents, 20 employees in public social services, and six private consultants in Swedish foster care. The interviewees were recruited based on the principles of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2002, pp. 689–690), where the central criterion was that they possess personal and contemporaneous experience of either being a foster parent in Sweden or working with this issue. This was combined with snowball sampling (Warren, 2002, p. 87), as we asked previous interviewees to suggest new participants, but we also searched for new persons independently. We have made a particular effort to achieve variation in the material regarding the number of placed children, the age of the children, and both family network-based placements and other placements. This article highlights the interviewees who have children placed in their families and who thus refer to themselves as foster parents.

In the interviews with the parents—which form the basis for this article—we asked, among other things, about the background to the foster care assignment, the parents' relationship with social services regarding economic issues, comparisons of economic conditions between social services and consultants as well as with other foster homes, everyday finances, and the surrounding community's perceptions of fees and compensation. We aimed at narrative-friendly interviews and therefore allowed the interviewees to speak freely and also choose their own topics, in accordance with traditions of qualitative interview research (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). As described by Roulston and Choi (2018, p. 240), "flexibility on the part of the interviewer to deviate from prior plans" proved to be fruitful, along with improvised follow-up questions to help the interviewees extend their descriptions. As we gained a better understanding of the field, we were able to listen more carefully, ask more precise questions, and became better at capturing significant details, and—hopefully—building a trusting relationship with the participants (Roulston & Choi, 2018, p. 240). The large number of candid and life-related stories we have collected can, I believe, be considered a sign of this.

All interviews were preceded by information about the project's aims and the possibility of terminating the conversation at any time. The project has undergone formal ethical review by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

In addition to the interview material, we have also collected texts and reports on foster care, studied websites and followed media coverage on the issue, followed various accounts on social media related to the area, and made ethnographic fieldnotes during our various visits on training days, theme days, and similar events in different municipalities. This material is not used directly in this article, but it has contributed background knowledge.

In a series of workshops, we have developed various analytical tracks based on the transcribed material. The focus here stems from our interest in the sensitivity of money in foster care and the tensions it creates. On the one hand, monetary motives are not expected to drive the life of a foster parent, but on the other hand, the assignment involves reduced work income and a range of new expenses. In discussions about economic conditions and everyday finances, we noticed that the interviewees rarely relied on a single frame of reference, but rather used several or adjusted ones. An interest in how the interview participants organized their experiences in multilayered ways emerged—for example, no one solely advocated a monetary motive, but neither was anyone entirely dismissive of discussing money—whereby Goffman's theoretical perspective proved useful.

In working on this article, I have used Goffman's frames as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954) to seek out and develop a particular analytical track. Unlike definitive concepts, a sensitizing concept does not involve fixed boundaries or analytical prescriptions. Instead, it provides a form of direction for one's gaze. More framings than those I have found are possible, of course, as are more ways of striking the tone for one frame or another (the keyings). There are plenty of examples of sensitizing concepts being used to effectively develop qualitative research, and they often result in analytical creativity (Bowen, 2019).

5. Keyings and Framings of Foster Care

In what follows, I will present six sections in which different frames are actualized in the empirical material, frames that are both nested within one another and adjusted or keyed in various ways. The result is a composite picture of foster home experiences that transcends dichotomous divisions.

5.1. So Much Fun

Let me start with an example of how the foster care assignment and its associations with remuneration can be placed within the frame of ordinary family life.

Foster mother Sofie spoke matter-of-factly about her demands for a substantial fee in our interview. She knows her rights and appeared to be a tough negotiator in relation to social services. She used the social services term "assignment" but also spoke about "work." At the same time, she described her efforts as a foster mother as being rooted in something more overarching, namely the joy of having a large family. Within this frame, she assigned a certain significance to the money obtained from the municipality, but she clearly communicated that this does not mean that everything she does as a foster mother can be understood from that perspective. Within the frame of "family life," Sofie places the frame of "paid work" as a smaller and non-dominant interpretation.

For example, Sofie has allowed both adult children and their relatives to live in the home for free, even after the foster care assignment has formally ended. A 20-year-old girl (previously placed in Sofie's family) came "home" again and lived with Sofie and her husband for over a year without paying rent after taking a break from her studies, "the same as our biological children." Sofie said:

> We have such a relationship, we are not her mom and dad, absolutely not, but it is, she is our family. She is part of our family. It is quite large nowadays. (laughs)….Sure, you can talk about money and we make sure to get what we think is required, but we also have an assignment that continues even after the money stops coming. That is, for the rest of our lives. It is so much fun too [laughs].

"Sure, you can talk about money and…"—when Sofie dwells on the joy of being able to house the 20-year-old, who "is part of our family," the money is in the background as a fact and a prerequisite, as a substantive paid work frame. But it is not the main or widest frame; the overarching definition is different: "such a relationship," "the rest of our lives," "it is so much fun too." Sofie emphasizes that fees and compensation are significant, but that her assignment and commitment extend beyond that. If we carefully study what she says, it seems that she understands her role as a foster parent as coinciding with family life as a whole. The money, the paid work, is understood as a smaller part of this whole.

Sofie's interpretation of the assignment thus lies closer to a biographical commitment than the social services' interpretation. In the latter, the assignment has a defined form, with a beginning, an end, a specific goal, and a specific amount of payment. In Sofie's version, however, the assignment has no end, and exactly what the money should cover becomes quite diffuse.

5.2. A Way of Life—With Work Bubbles

The fact that the assignment frame can be placed within the family frame and that the two sometimes merge could also be noted when interviewed parents spoke about periods without placements. Some families seem so accustomed to taking care of placed children that family life does not feel complete when the placements cease. As the interviewees described it, this is not just about the absence of fees but about a truncated family feeling: A bed is empty, a place at the dinner table is vacant.

Foster father Niklas said that placements "become a way of life," "you get a bit addicted." He goes on:

> Niklas: If you are empty for a period, it feels really strange.
>
> Interviewer: Yes, yes.
>
> Niklas: Yes, it does.
>
> Interviewer: You mean if you don't have any children with you?
>
> Jenny [Niklas' wife]: Yes.
>
> Niklas: Yes. Yes, it does, it feels empty, it does. And we [Niklas and his wife] can keep ourselves busy with each other anyway; it's not that, but, but it feels like there could have been someone here anyway.

Niklas' choice of words—"if you are empty for a period"—indicates that placed children are defined as belonging to his and Jenny's family, that they are included, and that the parental identity is tied to the placements. Without placements, family life loses some of its content—it becomes strange and empty—as if the frame is no longer fully filled. At the same time, parents like Niklas and Jenny could also use expressions like "job" and "professional," but for delimiting purposes. "And in that way, you can say that it's not the money that drives us," says Niklas, "We want to feel that we can give them something when they come here, you know, and not just gather a bunch of people," "because then it becomes storage."

"Industry," "storage," "money," and "gathering people" are used in a distancing way, as an interpretation of foster care that Niklas and Jenny reject in order to keep family life intact in the version they prefer. The parents resist the "industry frame" asserting itself and expanding, since it would then burst the family frame. Keeping the foster home at the scale they prefer is defined as important.

This does not exclude that an understanding of foster care as a job, even a profession, can be useful even in the small-scale foster home. If the placements become too many or too difficult, such a work frame can be invoked to protect oneself and one's family life. Jenny and Niklas said that in stressful periods, "now we have to be professional." The interview conversation continued like this:

> Jenny: Yes, yes, I say that when something really catastrophic happens, then I jump into my work bubble, then it's my job.
>
> Interviewer: Okay.
>
> Jenny: Because then they don't get to you as much. Because terrible things can happen sometimes, you know…
>
> Niklas: Oh, yes.
>
> Jenny: …there you have to be professional for a while, and the social services don't like it when I say that.

Retreating into one's "work bubble" ("then it's my job"), and reminding each other of a professional approach, contrasts with the social services' preferences, which are about living as usual and not resembling a profession or an institution. Jenny and Niklas imply that as foster parents, you cannot escape the fact that you can be questioned and challenged by the placed children—"so you get hit"—and in such cases, it can help if the assignment is framed "professionally." If that frame is not available, the children risk "getting to you"—getting too close, offending, and hurting.

Niklas and Jenny thus present a multilayered narrative: The talk of "work," "job," and "professional" can be invoked as a protective frame within a wider family frame. That the social services do not like it "when I say that," as Jenny says, becomes a reminder of contrasting frames. In relation to the social services' preferred "assignment" within the frame of ordinary family life, words like "professional" can jar, but if we look at the whole of Niklas and Jenny's account, there is really no contradiction. The "work bubble" is placed within the assignment frame as a smaller and delimited unit, a box within a box. As Niklas and Jenny present it, there is no risk that the bubble will expand and start to dominate, at least not as long as they stay with two children and are not forced to resemble an "industry."

5.3. A Lonely Job, but not "Just a Job"

Several excerpts in our material show that foster parents do not see their assignment as easy. On the contrary, it is described as demanding, strenuous, and tiring, even though it can also be fun and meaningful. Expressions like "work" and "job" can then be used to emphasize the strain and indeed to liken the assignment to any other job, as if the parents want to elevate their status by highlighting the arduousness. One parent, for example, spoke about "a lonely job," "you have lost many friends." Friends want you to join them at football matches or the pub, "but we can't." The parent explained: "They have jobs between 7 and 16, we have jobs 24 hours a day."

In such sequences, the framing of "work" and "job" can function as a recognizable way of highlighting one's efforts and troubles. Even if the foster parents do not claim to have a profession and a workplace within the frame of the foster care assignment, they emphasize their efforts and sacrifices (cf. Wubs et al., 2018, p. 762: "Although they deem fostering to be work, they seem to primarily identify as parents, not as carers"). If this hard-work frame were not available, it would be difficult for the parents to assert their rights, and not only in monetary terms. The talk of "work" and "job" is indeed tied to the demands for reasonable fees and "reward for effort," so to speak, but it also carries a moral significance. Foster care is demanding work, whatever it is called, and they want to be respected for it. Friends can go home from their jobs, but a foster parent cannot. In this context, holidays and vacations are a powerful symbol of a work framing that foster parents cannot claim. If that were to happen, the work frame could expand and come to dominate in a way that the interviewees consider inappropriate. At a foster home meeting that we followed, a parent—here called Krister—talked about a placed child in another family who was not allowed to join the family's vacations:

> We sit at the coffee table and chat about different municipalities and consultant companies in foster care. "But there was a parent…" says Krister, "I was a discussion leader there once…he said that they went on vacations themselves without the foster children. I said to him: 'Do you really fit as foster parents?'"
>
> Someone else at the table interjects: "But who took care of the child then?" (when the rest of the family was away on vacation). "Don't know," says Krister, "social services probably had to do it."
>
> Another foster parent at the table says something about some parents only being interested in money. Another nods and adds: "Some do it just as a job."

During this foster home meeting, expressions like "job" and "work" were not unfamiliar in descriptions of the foster parents' own situation, but they were used to emphasize the demanding role of being a foster parent and the burdensome scope of the assignment. Letting the work frame become so extensive, dominant, and formally specific that the parent starts to request vacations is going too far, as the parents see it. The work frame risks bursting the family life frame and reducing the placed children to a source of income.

Another social worker resisted the job designation and did not want to "go the employment route," as the interviewer put it, because this does not align with taking care of a child: "I think it is unfair to the children." The social worker rhetorically identified with the children when she added: "It cannot be that…that I…'it's my job to have you.'"

If we compare "job" in the expressions "just as a job" and "a lonely job," we can identify different keyings. The wordings, the contextualizations, and the discursive usages indicate that the parents congregate around the notion that foster care is demanding—in this sense, it *is* defined as a job (arduous and strenuous)—but *not* around the notion that it could *exclusively* be a job, much less an ordinary and formal one. That absence of vacations and holidays is taken as a sign of this. The expression "just a job" implies a kind of carelessness, like having a job you go to without really caring about anything more than your salary.

Thus, even in situations where foster parents do use the frame of "job" or "work" to organize their experiences, it is not equivalent to the more formal and rights-oriented job framing of the social services and others.

5.4. From One Job to Another

A kind of implicit care and treatment frame can sometimes be glimpsed in parents' talk about their days, especially in relation to children with disabilities, psychosocial difficulties, and criminal experiences. Such a framing can be quite close to the work frame because it indicates that a usual family approach to the children is not sufficient—many placed children require a more thoughtful approach and, in addition, a lot of work with healthcare contacts—and the framing also gives parents the chance to highlight the laboriousness of their situation without alluding to "storage" or "industry." The care work is motivated and grounded in the children—they require a kind of treating parent, the parents imply, at least sometimes, and this should be properly compensated.

Foster father Samuel, for instance, said, "I don't do this for the money, but…":

> Samuel: …I need to, I still want to have, I mean, in the grand scheme of things, even when you have full compensation, if, if you see it as a job, which it is, I have my regular job during the day [Samuel is referring to his employment], then I go home and have the next job here [as a foster parent]. And, and why I say it's a job, yes, because it's children with trauma, diagnoses, experiences, you know, so it's, I go from one job to another. Then it's an underpaid job if you think about it, and then everything you do, you visit the dentist…
>
> Interviewer: Exactly.
>
> Samuel: …they have been extra at the dentist and they have been at the First Line [i.e., Swedish public help for children and young people with mental health issues] and it's, like, Skolfam meetings [a public Swedish project to handle school problems], you know, it's a lot of time you plow into it all the time, so it's generally an underpaid job.

When Samuel hints at a "care and treatment work" frame, he does not claim to be a professional therapist, but the talk about the time he "plows into" healthcare contacts and the children's "trauma, diagnoses, experiences" makes the image of the children come close to one of difficult clients. Samuel keys his foster care assignment as heavy care work, which consequently gives the placed children an identity as care recipients. That Samuel can so explicitly argue for higher fees is linked to this frame. Without it, he would risk appearing greedy and cynical, not unlike parents who demand vacations and whom people prefer to distance themselves from. Instead, Samuel appears understanding, concerned, and engaged. If he had only said that he "goes from one

job to another" and that his foster care assignment is "underpaid," he would have landed in a colder work frame. "Care" is keying the work frame differently.

Interpreting foster care as a job can thus appear justified as long as the job's content is specified and tied to the placed children and their personal needs. Based on Samuel's description, it seems far from easy to go "from one job to another" without a break in between, so he does not risk being blamed for "wanting to take the children for profit's sake," to reconnect to the historical formulation from 1911 in Sköld's (2006, p. 304) study.

At the same time, Samuel's somewhat hesitant and circumstantial introduction in the above quote ("I need to, I still want to have, I mean…") indicates that he is approaching something sensitive. He touches on directly demanding better pay but then takes the detour around talking about the children's traumas and diagnoses, as if to circumvent the collision between the "hostile worlds" of intimate and economic worlds (Zelizer, 2011). Within a care and treatment frame, the special care work efforts are defined as being required by the children, not as required by foster parents simply wanting to make money.

5.5. Engaging in Civic Activity

Another way to key the assignment of being a foster parent as different from paid work, but without portraying life in a foster home as free from labor, is to place one's experience in a broader frame and link it to society at large. If the foster care assignment is placed in a landscape of voluntary efforts, social movements, or political struggles, both the unpaid and the demanding aspects can become understandable. Foster care is then interpreted as one form of engagement among others: hard work with a good purpose, but not an actual job.

Foster mother Martina, for example, compared it to the environmental movement and "the political sphere." "We all do our part," she said, "based on what we can." She looked back on earlier periods in her life when she and her husband "couldn't do anything" in society because their own children were small and their parents were sick, "but right now we have the opportunity." The importance of the fee was downplayed and placed in a contrasting and perhaps somewhat trivial frame:

> Martina: If you think of it as part of civil society or if you think of it as your job, there is a very big difference in how you value compensation, so.
>
> Interviewer: Yes, exactly. Now, if I understand you correctly, the fee and compensation are not really that important to you?
>
> Martina: No, not really.

Expressions like "doing something" and "something you do" recurred in our interview with Martina. They strike a tone of solidarity and community effort that cannot be measured in monetary terms. At the same time, this effort is handled as a distinction in relation to others, a kind of spurring emphasis on the importance of stepping up, and also implicitly distancing oneself from those who seem to step up but lack a respectable motive. When Martina used the word "job" for the foster care assignment in the interview, she was asked, "But it's not so much work…that you should compare it to regular employment?" to which she replied, "Not

for us." She continued: "For us, it's more like an engagement." The formulation then became her starting point to key her reasoning about social responsibility and civil society.

In handling different frames, the possibility of not only contrasting frames but also ranking them morally and giving them a certain identificatory weight is included, as in Martina's "for us…." Placing one's assignment within a frame of civil society becomes a way to define where one belongs and who one claims to be.

5.6. Exploited, One Might Say

Based on the interview narratives and descriptions, it seems impossible to pin the foster home down to only one meaning—it is a blend or intersection of several meanings. Let me illustrate this further using our interview with foster mother Ilse. To begin with, Ilse distanced herself from a more bureaucratic understanding of foster homes in which everything is reduced to money. "There are so many foster homes that sit and write down [expenses] all the time and complain," said Ilse, "'oh, I'm going minus, I'm going minus.'" Ilse and her husband did not want that. "We should be a family," she said, "I have never done that with my children." She explained: "They [the placed children] should feel that they are family and belong."

Ilse implies that a money frame disrupts a family feeling of this kind and establishes unwanted dividing lines between biological and placed children. It is not a real family, Ilse argued, if all purchases are recorded and discussed. "We never send in extra receipts," she said. And continued: "We don't talk about finances with the children." Our conversation continued:

> Interviewer: And discussing money and sorting it into categories would disrupt that image [of the family], right?
>
> Ilse: Yes, we don't, we don't do that.

"The image" that Ilse wants to preserve can be understood as the frame of an ordinary family life that can welcome placed children without calculating all expenses and ruining the atmosphere with money talk.

At the same time, Ilse did not mince words when describing her workload and financial situation. She explained that she has requested higher fees but been refused, despite lacking relief and being constantly available for the children: "We get no vacation," "It's 24/7 all year round." The municipalities, Ilse said, claimed that "yes, it's a job, you perform work," but Ilse argued that it really isn't:

> Ilse: And then I say, "No, I don't perform work, I have an extra family." We are a family; this is not work in my eyes, so they can also emphasize that, and then you wish you could have said, "Yes, great, then I can get a raise." But it doesn't work like that, so you feel, what you get for what you do, I would never accept a job …
>
> Interviewer: No.
>
> Ilse: … that required exactly the same, and then, a job, you can go home, you close the door, come home, (sighs), but we can't do that.

As described by Ilse, the municipalities actually propose a work frame for the foster care assignment that—paradoxically—lacks essential parts of what we usually understand as work. There is no talk of raises, despite performance, nor of vacations or substitutes. What remains is only the laboriousness, and in an unlimited form. The idea of a job from which you can never go home and escape from falls on its own absurdity, Ilse argued.

That Ilse does not accept the work frame of her assignment thus becomes logical—her situation does not resemble work in the conventional sense—but she has no problem emphasizing the *effort* required as a foster mother, the laboriousness. When the foster care secretaries make home visits, "there is so much focus on the child or the family as a whole," so she cannot propose this hard-work-frame, but on the phone, she can emphasize how poorly compensated she is. Still, she quickly gives up and feels "a bit run over or yes…exploited," "exploited, one might say." Ilse continued:

> Ilse: Yes, you can actually say that. That yes, when you also hear "you have chosen this," yes, I chose this, this, and this, but not the other 45 things you have put on me or that have come from outside. I did not choose that.

"The other 45 things…"—Ilse is referring to the plethora of commitments in which several of the interviewees are involved, not just regular visits to the biological family but also contacts with social services, BUP (the Swedish child and adolescent psychiatry service), school, healthcare, the dentist, and so on. The laboriousness consists of adding a fairly unmanageable number of relationships and connections, which altogether key the foster care assignment as being heavy and—to a large extent—unpaid work.

Ilse's presentation thus constitutes a critique of the municipalities' confusing frame (a job, but not fully paid!) and a defense of the family frame, but at the same time, her family frame includes an economy that does not add up and an underpaid labor effort. She argued:

> Ilse: Like now when we talk about finances, you have it in the back of your mind that no, I don't get paid for what I do.

6. Conclusion

Using interview data that highlight how foster parents organize their experiences in oral narratives—how they, in Goffman's (1986) terms, project and juggle different frames, and key the foster parent assignment in various ways, thereby adjusting the frames as they go—a more complex picture of this social world emerges than that suggested by both authorities and previous research.

The result is a multifaceted collection of frames that together become indicative of the hybrid foster home. Different frames serve different functions. Understanding the foster care assignment as work does not necessarily mean demanding better pay. It can function as temporary protection against overly personal relationships and as a flag for recognizing the strain associated with the assignment. It does not have to push aside other frames but can fit within them, as one of several perspectives. However, the work frame can also empower arguments about subordination and exploitation while bordering on or alternating with other frames. Foster parents who define their situation as "family life" or "extended family" can simultaneously emphasize their precarious situation in relation to a frugal municipality.

Foster parents often seem to start from a primary frame in which the task of caring for a placed child is understood as just that—a task, and a demanding one at that. Equally often, they start from a family frame where the family itself (including biological children) is central, and the additional task with its financial compensation is seen as a smaller, integrated element. The parents do not seem inclined to view the fact that they receive fees and reimbursements as a threatening and potentially expanding frame, except in hints that other families might (unfortunately) be influenced by it. Rather, the work frame can be adjusted to emphasize the arduous, strenuous, and demanding nature of the task as compared to "paid work" or "formal work"; parents then speak of a somewhat different interpretation of "work" than a formal job with salary, vacations, and fixed hours. At the same time, the work frame can be invoked and dramatized as a protection for oneself and one's family during particularly stressful periods, but without disrupting the broader and more permanent family frame.

Care work can also be highlighted, which sets a slightly different tone. Now, care-needy children are placed at the center (especially teenagers with diagnoses, drug dependencies, criminal experiences, etc.), and the work required is seen as stemming not from the parents' pursuit of money but from the needs of the placed children. To the extent that parents approach a professional framing, it is not about claiming a profession for its own sake but about legitimizing such a care frame based on what the placed children are considered to need. A work frame can also be adapted to expressions of dissatisfaction and a feeling of being exploited by the municipalities, while the family frame still remains intact.

Thus, Goffman's frame analysis can serve as a fruitful sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2019) in relation to foster care experiences, helping to deconstruct the dichotomy of "family" vs. "work" or "love" vs. "money," and not forcing a multitude of experiences into either the authorities' warnings (and, occasionally, foster parents' warnings, too) about unsuitable parents—the profit-seeking ones—or the research community's warnings about deprofessionalization (Kirton, 2022). Instead of following one or other script or logic, imposed from above, different logics or scripts are combined and merged, juxtaposed and ranked, integrated, and made to fit into one another in ongoing bricolage processes (Binder, 2007, p. 568).

The result of my analysis is less slogan-like and more multidimensional—and thus harder to translate into statements about clear trends—but, I would argue, empirically more credible. Without a sensitive theorization like that offered by Goffman, it is hardly possible to detect and specify these subtle and multi-layered experiences, as they emerge when we listen to foster care parents.

What emerges encompasses an expression and reconstruction of the tension that Zelizer (1985, 2005, 2011), following Simmel, has identified, a tension consisting of the encounter between, on the one hand, money in the form of compensation and fees for an assigned task, and on the other hand, family life, child-rearing, childcare, and a hard-to-formalize biographical commitment. The existence of this cultural tension and its lack of a final form of resolution contribute to making the actors' framing work creative and inventive, varied and unending.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The research data associated with this article are stored at the Department of Sociology, Lund University, Sweden.

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