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Money, Love, and Work: Transcending Dichotomies in Analyses of Foster Care

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Abstract

Most research on engagement in foster care is located within a moral discourse characterized by dichotomies, with the economic aspects of foster care being especially contested. In this article, the following question is discussed: How could the engagement of foster carers in a late modern welfare state be conceptualized and researched? A theoretically inspired and empirically informed analytical model is suggested, constituting foster care as a culturally and historically situated case of care arrangements. An interview study with children and adults in 18 Norwegian foster families has informed the analytical model, and empirical illustrations are drawn from this study. The discussion is mainly at a conceptual level, aiming at challenging dichotomized and decontextualized conceptions of foster care. "Money, love, and work" are interrelated discursive themes and represent a simplified figure of the complex activity that constitutes foster care. They are involved in all care arrangements, parenting, as well as foster care. In the case of the latter, the significance of these themes is negotiated at a political, an institutional, and a cultural level. Further, they are negotiated at the personal and interpersonal level by the children and adults who share their everyday life in foster families, as they make sense of the care practices they are involved in. It is argued that foster care studies should transcend the individual level and include more levels of analysis.

Keywords

conceptualization; context; culture; foster care; meaning making; motivation; parenting; professionalization; project

1. Introduction

When foster carers shape their care practices for a child, this happens in a context of care and relational practices in general in the society they are part of. Contemporary foster care in the Global North, and especially in Scandinavian welfare states, takes place in a social and political context where gender equality and female participation in the workforce are politically supported ideals. Professional care work is mainly carried out by women. Fertility rates are low, children are seen as a scarce resource, and life with children is a cherished value and an individual choice for most adult men and women. Family forms and ways of growing up are more diverse than ever. Reproductive technology has opened up new ways of becoming parents and enabled a greater variety in combinations of kinship/non-kinship and relationships, which also affect the conceptions of biological ties. Such complex societies require high competences, and education is available and chosen by most young people. Children's rights are on the political agenda, and children are increasingly conceived as subjects and individual right holders. Individualized ideals of self-actualization represent challenges for women, men, and children in contemporary society, placing a personal responsibility and a cultural task upon them.

Foster care is an ambiguous and diverse phenomenon, varying across societies and through history (Colton et al., 2008; Colton & Williams, 1997). In this article, I will focus on foster care in organized welfare states, managed by child welfare services when the care for a child is assessed as breaking the norms for adequate childcare. This is often referred to as crisis fostering, contrasted to kinship fostering as a normal way of growing up in some societies, known from anthropological studies (e.g., Goody, 1992; Notermans, 2008). In most countries in the Global North, foster care is the preferred solution for children in public care (Holmes et al., 2018; Konijn et al., 2019). The arguments widely used for prioritizing foster care before residential care are the emotional qualities that family-based arrangements are assumed to offer. Besides, the costs of foster care are considerably lower than those of residential care. Language also constitutes the significance of the positions and practices in foster care. In Norway, the culturally saturated familial terms *foster mother* and *foster father* are used, contrasted to the gender and arrangement-neutral term *foster carer*. Both in the public and in social work practice, as well as in research, foster carers' engagement in the activity is widely addressed within a moral discourse. The element of money, the economics involved in foster care, is an especially contested issue (Hardesty, 2018; Kirton, 2001, 2007, 2022; Roy & Roy, 2024).

1.1. The Discussion on the Professionalization of Foster Care

The discussion of economics is part of a long-lasting debate on professionalization within foster care. Professionalization is often referred to as a trend internationally from the end of the 20th century, and earlier in the Scandinavian countries. The trend is, however, not clear (Kirton, 2022). The concept "professional" is contrasted to "parent" or "volunteer." The concept of *professionalization* is used in different ways, but is mainly defined by traits like payment, skills, competence, and responsibilities, as well as traits of established professions (Kirton, 2022). Kirton (2022) analyzes the anti-professional turn in English foster care after 2018, which implies that foster carers should not be defined as professionals, and that the familial term *foster parent* should be reintroduced and replace the term *foster carer*. Kirton points to the paradox that professionalization, which once represented a solution, is later seen as a threat to the quality of care, as a barrier to loving relationships. Based on an analysis of reports underpinning this policy reform, Kirton (2022) concludes that professionalization of foster care is rhetorically rejected, but professionalization's main traits are preserved (see also Kirton, 2007, for an overview of the debate on professionalization).

1.2. Cultural Psychology as a Theoretical Lens

From the position of cultural psychology, foster care is conceived as a historically, socially, and culturally situated arrangement for continual care relations between children and adults, and the activity of foster care, like all care practices, is conceived as *cultural practices* (Haavind, 1987; Hundeide, 2003; Rogoff, 2003; Valsiner, 2000). When foster carers and foster children in a late modern welfare state make sense of the practices and relationships they are involved in, they do it within available discourses, or with available *cultural tools* (Wertsch, 1998). Such processes could be analyzed as personal and interpersonal negotiations of money, love, and work. Within a frame of cultural psychology, women and men engaged in foster care are analyzed as intentional cultural agents (Bruner, 1990), as products and co-authors of culture. A premise is that every reproduction of culture by individuals' actions represents a possible transformation of culture (Hastrup, 1989). That means that the way foster care is carried out simultaneously may change the meaning involved. Thus, research on meaning construction in foster care should be a continual activity.

In the exploration of foster care as a paid activity, the element of "money" should not be studied in isolation. I will argue for broadly contextualized analyses of the meaning of money in foster care, in research, as well as in child welfare policy and practice. The question to be explored and discussed in this article is: *How could the engagement of foster carers in a late modern welfare state be conceptualized and researched?*

Foster care will mainly be addressed at a conceptual and discursive level. I will suggest an empirically informed model for analyzing women's and men's engagement in foster care in a late modern society, conceptualized as *personally constructed and culturally situated projects*. The empirical point of departure is a Norwegian context.

1.3. Foster Care in a Norwegian Context

The Norwegian foster care arrangement could shortly be characterized like this: It is a publicly organized, continuous care arrangement for children. It is paid for and mainly carried out by non-professionals, in private homes, under professional training, supervision, and assistance. The care arrangement does not represent substitute parenting, while the child's birth family, in most cases, is intended to be part of the care system through visiting arrangements. The temporary character of the arrangement is usually a premise for the relationship between the carers and the child (Ulvik, 2007). Norwegian Child Welfare Services are, by many scholars, characterized as child-centered. The dual character of child-centeredness is critically discussed by many (Hennum, 2014; Hennum & Aamodt, 2021; Hollekim et al., 2016).

Norwegian foster families are not considered employees with the legal rights involved in employment. Linguistically, the work aspect of foster care is undercommunicated in the Norwegian foster care arrangement. The payment received by foster carers is not called wages or salary, but "basic support" (*grunnstøtte*). Until 2022, the payment was referred to as "compensation" (*kompensasjon*). For the basic support, foster parents pay normal income taxes. The foster carers also receive reimbursement of expenses, depending on the child's age. When the child moves into the family, normally one of the foster carers is required to stay at home with the child for a period, and lost income is compensated up to a certain level (*frikjøp*). The period of wage compensation could be prolonged, depending on the challenges the care for the child represents (BufDir, 2025).

Even modest, the economic benefits from being involved in foster care in Norway may constitute an alternative or a substitute for family income. This differs from the situation described by Hardesty (2018) and Roy and Roy (2024) from a US context, where foster carers are referred to as volunteers.

2. Research on Engagement in Foster Care

There is a high agreement that children need to experience a sense of belonging and live in an emotionally supportive environment to grow up and thrive. Researchers have applied various conceptual and theoretical models to explore how to meet children's needs for belongingness and emotional support. While many studies on foster care lack an explicit theoretical framework (Ulvik, 2009), attachment theory has been dominating in some fields of foster care research (e.g., Dozier, 2005; Dozier et al., 2013). Attachment theory provides concepts for the adult-child relationship but may not provide conceptual tools for the wider societal and cultural context of foster care (Aamodt & Hennum, 2024).

A specific research theme is foster carers' engagement in the activity. Engagement in foster care is mainly conceptualized as *motivation* or *motivational patterns*. There has been an implicit assumption that there is a relation between motivational patterns and outcome, and researchers have attempted to identify motivational patterns which could predict good or poor outcomes. In early research, the studies had a clinical psychodynamic orientation, and unconscious motives were sought (Börjeson et al., 1976; Glickman, 1957; Wagner, 1962). Likewise, which needs are met by foster care for the foster carers was another research objective within this tradition (Kälvesten, 1974).

Other categorizations are *excluding versus including* foster families (Holman, 1980), *altruistic/child-centered versus self-centered* motivations (Cautley & Aldridge, 1975; Rhodes et al., 2001; Thoburn, 1986), *extrinsic versus intrinsic* motivations (MacGregor et al., 2006; Rodger et al., 2006), and *professional versus altruistic* motivations (Colton et al., 2008).

In a recent interview study in a Danish context, Dalgaard et al. (2025) suggest a typology of foster parents, comprising three ideal-types: *emotional foster parents*, *ambiguous foster parents*, *and professional foster parents*. Khoo and Skoog (2014) conceptualize *role conflicts/dual roles* between *a caring parent substitute* and *a paid professional caregiver*. *Role negotiation* and *incompatible roles* are seen as leading to conflict and stress.

The categorizations above are discursive constructions, and they are in various ways normative and dichotomous, with an implicit assumption of contradictions. Furthermore, they may represent an individualizing and static focus in the study of men's and women's engagement in foster care. Overall, an implicit moral discourse has characterized this research field. It may represent a search for unworthy motivations which should justify the exclusion of certain persons from foster care. Social work practice has, however, moved from searching for unconscious, pathological motives to task-oriented approaches, and a pedagogical approach to recruitment and training of foster parents (Triseliotis et al., 2000).

Some more recent studies address inherent dichotomies and provide more dynamic analyses of foster carers' engagement. Hollett et al. (2022) empirically demonstrate the dynamic nature of foster care. Their results transcend the dichotomy of *parent* versus *professional*. The study shows how, over time, "the roles blend and become interconnected" (p. 413). Accordingly, the authors suggest the term *professional parents*. In an

interview study, Schofield et al. (2013) explore how foster carers identify, primarily as a *parent* or primarily as a *carer*, in the frame of role theory. They conclude that instead of being contradictory, roles could be "complementary and mutually rewarding" (p. 53). Some carers were able to "move flexibly between roles and integrate different role identities" (p. 46); some were not.

De Wilde et al. (2019) claim that in-depth perspectives of foster carers are absent in the debates on voluntarism versus professionalism, and that there is limited information on foster carers' motivation. They claim that "the way foster carers negotiate and perceive their parenting role has gotten little attention" (De Wilde et al., 2019, p. 291). In an interview study, they explore how foster carers themselves articulate and frame the nature of their care role, and they aim "to look beyond the seemingly opposing roles inherent in foster parenting" (De Wilde et al., 2019, p. 292). All the participants in the study distance themselves from a professional conception of foster care; simultaneously, they think that competence beyond ordinary parenting skills is required. The authors encourage avoiding "the volunteer versus professionalism paradox" (p. 296).

We see that these studies (De Wilde et al., 2019; Hollett et al., 2022; Schofield et al., 2013) all transcend dichotomies in their empirical findings, in a theoretical frame of role theory. It could, however, be questioned whether role theory is a sufficiently flexible frame for analyzing the complexity inherent in foster care, or whether role theory still invites dichotomized thinking.

Some studies focus especially on the economic aspects of foster care. Roy and Roy (2024) studied whether money motivated prospective foster carers in a US context. Based on responses on Google ads from foster care recruitment campaigns, they differentiated between campaigns mentioning and not mentioning financial intensives. They found no significant difference in response rate. However, residents of low-income towns responded to the ads five times more often than those in high-income towns, irrespective of the payment being mentioned or not. The results may imply that foster care could be supplementary to family income where other modes of earning are limited. Thereby, the results point to foster care as a classed activity.

In her ethnographic study from a US context, Hardesty (2018) explores how social workers engaged in recruiting foster carers are preoccupied with *profiteering motives*. She introduces the concept of *commodification anxiety* when characterizing social workers' conceptions. That means "the fear that sentimental caregiving relationships will be corrupted by money" (p. 95). She argues for contextualized analyses and claims that "a socially just approach to caregiving must abandon the fiction that sentiments and markets operate in separate spheres" (p. 93). In other words, commodification is a phenomenon that is not isolated to foster care.

This short overview calls for analyses of engagement in foster care contextualized in contemporary society, for transcending binaries and for paying attention to the complexity of foster care.

3. Foster Care Analyzed as Personally Constructed and Culturally Situated Projects

About three decades ago, I carried out an interview study with children and adults in 18 foster families in Norway. When analyzing the stories of foster carers and children, the established concepts from foster care literature appeared insufficient for the complex, varied accounts that the foster carers provided, and there

was a need for conceptual development (Ulvik, 2007). While the empirical material shows a context-specific snapshot from the 1990s, the analytical model which was developed may be sufficiently abstracted to cover cultural changes as well as being relevant for foster care in other contexts. I find that there is still a need for models that transcend various dichotomies and that instead allow for the analysis of dynamics, tensions, contradictions, and complexities inherent in contemporary foster care.

3.1. Production of the Empirical Material

Eighteen foster families participated in the study, recruited via public foster care agencies within child welfare services. They were all heterosexual couples, aged 24–56. The majority lived in rural areas with a restricted labor market, and they could be classified as working-class and middle-class families. All were ethnic majority families. The foster carers were interviewed three times within two years, inspired by the life mode interview (Haavind, 1987, 2020). These interviews were grounded in everyday life, and time was the structuring principle for the conversation. The aim was, besides descriptions of practices, to explore the participants' meaning-making, their understanding, and reflections on the practices they are involved in. Everyday life provided an entrance to the participants' meaning construction, how they made sense of their experiences. The foster carers were not asked directly about their motivation or their relationship with the child; however, the descriptions of the process that led to their decision to be a foster carer, and the detailed exploration of the everyday life practices in the foster family, provided rich material for asking analytical questions. This approach contrasts with approaches where foster carers are asked to describe their relationship with the child, or they are asked whether they consider themselves parents or professionals. The adults were interviewed for the first time shortly before the child moved into the foster home, and all arrangements had been made. This interview focused on the process of becoming foster carers, from idea to decision and further to the meeting with the child, as well as future expectations. The later interviews dealt with the foster care practices, the everyday life interactions with the child, and focused on experiences with the child, the foster carers' developmental goals and strategies for the child, relationships, and changes over time (Ulvik, 2018). Twenty-one foster children, varying in age from 4 to 14, were interviewed twice during a period of a year and a half. Altogether, the empirical material consists of around 100 interviews varying in duration from one to three hours (Ulvik, 2007).

3.2. The Analytical Model

From a position of cultural psychology, the ambitions for the analytical model presented here are as follows: It needs to be dynamic and open for change over time, which might not be the case with models based on typologies. Additionally, the model should consider the interactional character of the foster care relationship. It should transcend an individualizing focus on foster carers and their personal characteristics, and it should include a perspective on both children and adults as interactional partners developing everyday practices and negotiating relationships with each other. Traditionally, children are regarded as objects of adults' care practices. The adult parties are responsible for the care, but analytically, it should be possible to explore how children contribute to the evolving relationship, in line with the concept of children's agency. As we will see later, children may in various ways contribute to changes in the foster carers' way of defining their engagement in foster care.

As an alternative to the individualizing concept of *motivation*, I chose the concept *culturally situated and personally constructed project* about the couple's or the individual adult foster carer's involvement in foster care. The term *project* has the lexical definition of an enterprise carefully planned to achieve a particular aim, a proposed or planned undertaking (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008).

As described above, foster care, conceived as parenting or seen as work, is a familiar figure in the foster care literature, mainly conceived as a dichotomy. In the encounter with the empirical material in my study, this approach was unsatisfying. Foster care may be talked about both within the discourse of work and within the discourse of parenting. The significance associated with "work" provides one set of tools for personal meaning making, while "parenting" offers another set. The same project may be expressed within both discourses, while these should not be analytically treated as dichotomies or typologies. Both discourses are available for the foster carers, who may position themselves in various and personal ways. All participants talked about the activity as paid work in various ways. Most of the participants, but not all, talked about the relationship they wanted to have with the foster child as parent-like. One man expressed his imagined relationship as "something between a stepfather and a teacher—a trustworthy adult for a young person."

In my first analytical step, I constructed two main discourses, which did not exclude each other, defined as *Foster care as parenting*, and *Foster care as work*. To also cover projects that were described as "charity" and projects that were described as "something between stepfather and teacher," or other possible and thinkable versions, it was necessary to introduce a higher level of abstraction to do justice to the empirical material. The main discourses were therefore rearticulated to *Foster care as activity* and *Foster care as relationship*. The next step in the analysis was to examine the various ways the participants positioned themselves within the main discourses, what was conceived as compatible, and what was seen as contradictory in each foster carer or couple's project. The couples were interviewed together, which allowed to analyze their projects as both individual and shared. The model is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. The analytical model: Foster carers' culturally situated and personally constructed projects.

Foster care as activity	Foster care as relationship
Content	Relational category and how it is constituted
Effort	Duration of relationship/contract dependence
Required competence	Emotional quality
Possible acknowledgement	Economic aspects
Economic aspects	Exclusivity in relational positions
Self-construction and choice of life mode	Self-construction and choice of life mode

Foster care as activity contains the following discursive themes, which are derived from the empirical material: Content, effort, required competence, possible acknowledgement, economic aspects, self-construction, and choice of life mode. Translated into analytical questions, these are:

> How is the activity conceived and what is the content? Which efforts does the activity comprise, who is responsible for which efforts, and who should carry out the activity? What is conceived as relevant competences for the activity? How do the foster carers assess their own competences according to the requirements? Which options for acknowledgement does the activity offer, and what is perceived as acknowledgement? How are the economic aspects of the activity talked about, and what significance

is ascribed to money? How is the activity related to the foster carers' self-construction and choice of life mode?

Likewise, the main discourse of *Foster care as a relationship* encompasses the discursive themes of relational category and its constitution, duration of the relationship, emotional quality, exclusivity in relational positions, economic aspects, self-construction, and choice of life mode. This gives rise to the following analytical questions:

> Which models of adult-child relationship are drawn on? Which relational categories do the foster carers use in their stories? Should the relationship be parent-like, or take another form? Given a parent-like relationship, what constitutes parenting in the foster carers' meaning-making? What kinds of practices are included or excluded from the actual relational category? What are the temporal perspectives—Do the foster carers imagine a lifelong or a contract-dependent, time-limited relationship with the child? What do the foster carers want from the emotional quality of the relationship to the child, love-based or distanced? And in case it should be love-based, how is love constituted in the foster carers' meaning-making? Is the preferred relational position exclusive? Which consequences are the foster relation assumed to have for the child's other relationships, e.g., could there be two "mums"? In case that a parent-like relationship is the goal, is it thereby an exclusive parenthood, substituting and excluding the birth parents? What significance is the payment of foster care assumed to have for the relationship? How is the kind of relationship the foster carers want to develop with the foster child related to their self-construction and their choice of life mode?

The discursive theme of self-construction and choice of life mode is part of both main discourses, because both activity and relationships are assumed to be interwoven with and relevant for adult men and women's life projects and self-construction in a late modern society. In the personally constructed projects, there will be an interdependent but not predictable relation between the discursive themes. While financial issues may intersect with both foster care as activity and as relationship, the discursive theme economic aspects is part of both discourses. To illustrate the model, I will present one couple's project in more detail, and simultaneously, I will demonstrate the variety of projects.

3.3. Required Competence for Foster Care

Eileen and Edward are a couple in their forties. They have three children. Only the youngest still lives at home. Edward is a bookkeeper in a firm, and Eileen has a part-time job in a shop. They feel it as an acknowledgement when some friends suggest that they should become foster parents. Edward finds it great to help a child in need. Eileen doubts her own qualifications as a foster mother. Edward does not assess his own qualifications but engages in Eileen's reflections. Her competence as a mother, which she does not doubt, is, in her opinion, not sufficient. It should be some kind of professional competence, "something like a pedagogue." She wants acknowledgement for "working with children," not for her mothering. Acknowledgement she can get from professionals, like kindergarten staff, and Child Welfare Services is appreciated. After meeting other foster parents at a course, she concludes that foster care is something she is capable of doing.

"Housewife" or "staying at home" are not relevant cultural tools for Eileen. For her, foster care is an activity that requires competence and which offers possible acknowledgement. She is part of a society where care

work is carried out by professionals, mainly women. The professional care worker is thereby a relevant cultural tool. She positions herself as a foster carer within the discourse of activity in the sense of "qualification" and "competence." Locating the requirements of competence in a professional perspective does not imply that she wants an emotionally limited relationship with the foster child. Within the discourse of relationship, she positions herself within a maternal discourse, which also requires certain competences. "She [referring to the foster child] has to be part of my heart," she says. A required competence is the ability to love. She expects, however, that it will be difficult for a child to "let a new mother in." Eileen sees that as her responsibility. The quality of love is, by many of the participants, seen as being a result of the daily care for a child. Eileen sees, however, the ability for love as a personal characteristic, which should be tested and confirmed. That love is required, is not accounted for by a wish for the foster child to be her own child. Rather, it is part of the professional requirements she poses to the quality of care. Emotionality is at the forefront in the description of the relationship, which is compared to and measured against emotional experiences with her own children.

3.4. Emotional Parental Preparedness

Eileen talks within a maternal discourse when she describes her experiences of a cancelled first meeting with the child. She compares it to an abortion. She had already established a room in her heart, she says, for a child she has not met. Like many female foster carers in this study, Eileen uses metaphors from pregnancy and birth to describe relationships with the foster child. This phenomenon could be conceptualized as *emotional parental preparedness*. They use biological motherhood as a cultural tool for constructing their relationship with the child.

3.5. A Love-Based, Parent-Like, and Lifelong Relationship

Eileen and her husband hope that the relationship with the child will be lifelong, independent of the contract with the Child Welfare Services. This depends, however, in their view, on the child's feeling of belonging. The orientation towards a love-based parent-like relationship does not imply an exclusive relationship. This is expressed by Eileen and Edward suggesting to the foster child that she should use their first names, because she already has a mum and dad. They try to normalize the relationship to the birth parents by including them in their social network and doing activities together. For them, their foster care includes building parental competence and self-esteem in the birth parents. But when they worry for the child's safety in the birth parents' neighborhood, they have the visitation arrangement changed by the Child Welfare Services, because they "know the child." Thereby, they prioritize the practice of parenthood by taking responsibility for the continual care of the child. This further underlines a parent-like position.

3.6. Privileged Job, Self-Construction, and Choice of Life Mode

Like the other participants, Eileen and Edward talk about their foster parenting as paid work. As work, foster care is preferred for its *content*. "We prefer to work with kids before numbers," Edward says. Analyzed as *effort*, it is a job for Eileen. She quits her part-time job in a shop and becomes a full-time foster carer. Edward's contribution is mainly the bureaucratic aspects of foster care, financial matters, and contact with Child Welfare Services and the foster home association. He is satisfied with his job, and he finds that foster parenting adds value to life. Like most couples in the study, their foster care project is asymmetrical but still shared. This gendered way of organizing life is typical for the participating couples, and is a recognizable feature of the

society in which they live. In most families, the woman takes the main responsibility for the foster care. Most of the female participants were employed before they entered foster care, and more than half of them chose foster care as an alternative to paid work. For Eileen, foster care was chosen for many reasons. Foster care is an arrangement that allows her to stay at home, and thereby also to better care for her own daughter and family. Her girlfriends argue that she has lost the freedom she otherwise would have had when her children grow up. But when she compares her job to their stressful and unsafe jobs, she feels privileged. She has made her choice based on personal interest, in line with her preferences. Her interest in working with children gradually became clear to her.

In her meaning-making, Eileen thus includes foster parenting in her self-construction and life project. The choice is seemingly traditional, but the accounts given are in line with contemporary cultural ideals of self-actualization. According to Giddens (1991), a post-traditional society does not imply that traditions have disappeared; they are, however, no longer taken for granted or unexamined. Living traditionally changes meaning when it is a choice among others. The anthropologist Gullestad (1997) formulated a transformation of cultural ideals in Norway from "being of use" to "finding oneself." Eileen seems to merge these two ideals in her foster care project.

3.7. The Meaning of Money

Eileen feels privileged that she can do what she prefers and even be paid for it. She will not claim anything from the Child Welfare Services; first, she wants to show that she is competent, that she obtains results with the child. But she thinks she deserves the money, even if it is so-called increased remuneration (*forhøyet godtgjørelse*). Eileen underlines that she does not "have to" earn the money. Simultaneously, Eileen is worried about the consequences for the foster care relationship, given that it is a paid activity. "How is it to be someone's job?" she asks. Implicitly, she will have to compensate for that.

For this couple, like for the other participants, the economic aspects are sensitive. This could be derived from accounts given without being asked for. Many participants demonstrate a disinterest in economics, by saying that they have not even asked about the amount they will be paid. Some say that they have considered adopting the child. The participants widely point to money as not being important in their decision to engage in foster care. This could, however, be nuanced during the interview, when the interviewer wondered how money could be of such little importance; for most people, it is essential to have an overview of their finances. It seemed to be necessary to bring in a legitimation of the theme, to open for further reflections. In none of the projects was money the only reason given for engaging in foster care. The participants are aware of the social gaze, that they could be suspected of "doing it for money," which, by all, is seen as illegitimate. A male foster carer refers to foster care as a "poorly paid job."

Terms like "job," "work," "salary," "payment," "money," "effort," and "task" all belong to a work discourse. The least explicit talk about foster care as work is represented by a childless couple who chose foster care as an alternative to adoption. The most explicit talk of foster care as work is the male foster carer who describes foster care as "niche production" that could be combined with farming, and simultaneously the family could "do something positive, which makes sense, and is also paid for." He would not consider taking on the task if the payment was disproportionate. This clear talk is accompanied by reflections on how Child Welfare Services would react to his views, and he finds it embarrassing to say that he wants to be

paid—"To take care of a kid should be more than work, the payment is pushed aside, we are expected to take care of lovely kids."

This man's reflections refer to the cultural conception of love and money as incompatible, which is represented in the professionalization debate, that money corrupts love (Hardesty, 2018; Kirton, 2022).

3.8. Foster Care Relationships and Self-Construction

Parenting as self-constituting practice is emphasized by many scholars (e.g., Barclay et al., 1997). Contemporary foster care seems to provide the same options, as we saw regarding Eileen's project. She chooses the activity for its content and her personal preferences. She aims to develop a love-based, parent-like relationship with the child, and she tests her own ability to love. She also feels responsible for the child's ability to enter a new parent-like relationship with her, to establish mutuality, and she has to compensate for the consequences of foster care being a paid activity. Like Eileen, another foster carer, Sarah, also sees the relationship to her foster child as involved in her self-construction, who she wants to be. But in contrast to Eileen, she makes the child's ability to be part of a mutual relationship a prerequisite for the relationship to endure. When the boy who moves into her family does not "show who he is," when he is too modest and polite, she feels bored. "I am the kind of person, I set high standards for myself and others, I would never remain in a relationship which is only halfway good," Sarah says.

Sarah talks about both her and the foster child as autonomous relational partners. What endangers the relationship is not behavioral problems, but the boy's failing self-representation, which is a cultural task for adults as well as children in contemporary society. Sarah's comments may seem surprising, especially from a child-centered position. But seen in the light of Giddens' (1993) concept, the pure relationship, it makes sense. The pure relationship is a relationship construction that implies an encounter between autonomous individuals, legitimized by mutual satisfaction, not by duties or formalities. According to Giddens, this is a contemporary cultural ideal for relationships between adults. However, Giddens claimed, this construction may also become relevant in relation to children, a trend which might have become more evident since the 1990s. The cultural tasks of "being oneself" may be harder to accomplish for children in public care than for other children, because many of them have not been trained in these abilities. This again makes them underprivileged as relational partners. All participants had some expectations on mutuality in the relationship with the child and were in various ways positioned within what could be characterized as the *discourse of children with competence for mutuality*.

The two women above represent the range of variation in the study. Worth noting is the culturally situated significance of self-construction in the activity of foster care. In a child-centered culture, the significance of foster care for adult life projects may be overlooked in practice and research.

3.9. Projects Change and Develop

Foster carers adapt and adjust their project in interaction with the child. Maria's foster parents aimed to develop a love-based, parent-like relationship with the child. However, the child resisted, and they interpreted this as meaning she did not want to stay with them. She does "give a hug, but without feelings," and she "does not see when I [the female foster carer] am sad." The lack of mutuality in the relationship is,

however, not seen as a reason for ending the relationship, which it was in the case of Sarah. When it is not possible to establish a parent-like relationship based on mutual emotions, the couple redefines their foster care project in a more professional direction as a "shared project we succeed in, we two, and which makes sense, and it is the best for her." Aspects other than the emotional are emphasized. This flexibility in the foster carers' project may protect the child from another move into a new care arrangement. Another example shows an opposite movement, one towards more emphasis on emotionality. The couple had chosen not to have their own children; they did not want to be "parents" but "trustworthy/supportive adults for a young person who needs it." The girl who moved into their home, however, asked them to be mum and dad, and she addressed their relatives as grandmother and aunt. The adults were flattered by being chosen and preferred, appointed as parents, and were willing to redefine their project and their positions. They accepted the child's initiative. One year later, the male foster carer says that he is no longer a "foster father," now he is "dad." In his meaning construction, there is a distinction between "dad" and "foster father." It should not be assumed that there is a linear relation between relational category and the emotional quality. However, the transition from "foster father" to "dad" may be interpreted as an intensification of the emotionality in the relationship. What makes the foster carers "mum" and "dad" according to their account is the child's initiative, her showing that she needs them, and the daily care practices.

One child negotiates a closer relationship with the foster carers, while the other negotiates a distant relationship and rejects being a child in the family. In both cases, the child's initiative is contrary to the adults' project. Still, the differences do not lead to ending the relationship, but to the adults adapting their projects. This underlines the importance of an analytical model that enables us to see these dynamics.

4. Closing Reflections

Conceptualizing the activity of foster care is not merely of academic interest. The way foster care is talked about will constitute tools for meaning-making for those who live in foster families, i.e., foster carers and children, as well as for social workers, who contribute to the conditions for foster care. What is constructed as contradictory and dichotomous may represent a hindrance for foster carers in constructing their own foster care project in creative ways, and limit their sources of inspiration. In the following, I will add some reflections on the discursive themes "money," "love," and "work" in foster care, in the light of the general debates on professionalization/professionalism, with the aim of transcending dichotomies.

As shown from the empirical examples, dichotomies do not seem to be fruitful for analyses of foster care. The dichotomy between "parent" versus "professional" reduces the ambiguities of both concepts. In psychology, as well as in other disciplines, parenting is widely naturalized, which means that the content of the category is taken for granted (Burman, 2017; Cushman, 1991). In the debate on professionalization of foster care, mainly the emotional aspects of parenting are highlighted, while other aspects like provision, practical care, everyday life structure, and family as a platform for community participation are widely neglected. The assumption that love is a universal trait of parenting does not have historical empirical support (Cunningham, 2020). When figures like parent-carer, parent-professional, and parent-wage-earner are introduced in the foster care literature, the "parent" part is widely seen as unambiguous. Foster care is modelled after parenting/family, which is an institution that is also dynamically changing (Faircloth et al., 2013). In contemporary society, "parent" and "family" are increasingly ambiguous, due to a greater variety in family forms and ways to combine biological kinship and relationships. Such changes will affect the

conditions for foster care. The heteronormative nuclear family, based on biological kinship, loses ground, but still holds its status as hegemonic ideological model. The standards of childcare in the Global North have considerably increased, with some researchers referring to it as *intensive parenting* (Faircloth, 2023). Knowledge of developmental psychology is popularized and available (Burman, 2017; Ulvik & Rønnestad, 2013) and part of *folk psychology* (Bruner, 1990). Increasingly, middle-class parents base their parental practices on knowledge and seek expertise when needed (Hennum, 2016). Thus, in one sense, we could say there is a tendency towards professionalization of parenting in general. Knowledge is normally not considered to corrupt care in general parenting. In the foster care literature, an analytical comparison with contemporary parenting is, however, rare. Changes in general parenting will constitute conditions for foster care and offer new cultural tools for foster carers' meaning-making, which should be taken into consideration in research as well as in practice.

In a Norwegian context, there has been a discussion on love as a legal right for children in public care. Love was included in the mission statement of the Child Welfare Act, 2018, which has been much debated (Neumann, 2021). This policy change could be characterized as "rediscovery of philanthropy" in social work, where care is a state of mind and unpaid care is the cultural ideal (Villadsen, 2011), or de-professionalization of child welfare work (Neumann, 2021). Neumann (2016, 2021) criticizes that children's legitimate need for love is translated into an emotional requirement for professionals. She distinguishes between allowing love and requesting love. She demonstrates how in the debate, love is talked about as contrary to theoretical knowledge, and points to the paradox that the state simultaneously encourages knowledge-based practices and introduces love as a requirement to professional child welfare workers. Neumann explains de-professionalization by the female dominance in care professions (Neumann, 2021).

Although this debate mainly concerns professional child welfare work, the question posed by Neumann (2021) on whether the state can take control of people's feelings may be likely relevant to the discussion on foster care. Neumann (2016, 2021) prefers the concept of care before the concept of love. While love implies a state of sentiment, the concept of care may also denote practices and is thereby a more "practical" concept for foster care.

Likewise, we can look at the economic element in professionalism, whether money corrupts love in foster care. In general, mixing money and love appears as a cultural taboo. Hardesty (2018) demonstrates how commodification permeates social life and relationships in contemporary society. In foster care, the culturally defined contradiction between love and money may be intensified by the discussion on children as an emotional value for adults (Zelizer, 1994) and children's elevated status in late modern societies (Dupont et al., 2022). Money and love are related in many relational arrangements in society. In foreign adoption and in surrogacy, the situation is the opposite to that of foster care. People pay to get access to a child and to become parents. Marriage and cohabitation also involve complex transactions and economic arrangements. In general parenting, public and private money are involved, without questions being asked about the parents' love for the child. As in general parenting, money could also be regarded as a resource in foster care. Economic scarcity is unlikely to strengthen the relations in foster care and may even be harmful. Financial security may enable foster carers to invest more of their energy in care for the children and to offer them a higher standard of living. The concept introduced by Hardesty (2018), *commodification anxiety*, seems to be relevant as a characterization of the foster care literature. From a position of cultural psychology, the significance of money in foster care is not fixed but continuously negotiated. That may represent an

implication for practice and professional development within Child Welfare Services. Social workers could add to their agenda to explore the meaning of money, both for children and adults, in each foster relation, and make sure that the issue is thematized. They could then suggest alternative conceptions which may be more acceptable to the relational partners. Not addressing the issue of money may harm the relationship. An implication for research is to study how children and adults in foster care make sense of and negotiate the monetary issues. Likewise, the conversations between social workers and foster carers about financial issues should be researched, and new ways of talking about money should be developed.

In Norway, child-centeredness is often held as an ideal for state policy and child welfare practices (Hennum & Aamodt, 2021). Child-centeredness has a dual character when it comes to foster care. While on the one side, children's rights are highlighted, child-centeredness may, on the other side, lead to seeing the child in isolation, to ignoring the adult part of the relationship. A lack of focus on foster carers' self-constructions and life projects may lead to less sustainable care arrangements (Lugg & Ulvik, 2023). Child-centeredness and individualization of children may also lead to overlooking that marginalized and neglected children may lack the capacities to enter into mutual relationships with adults, a relatively new cultural expectation imposed on children (Ulvik, 2018). Lacking cultural competence may lead to further marginalization of children in public care. It is important to take into consideration contemporary conceptions of adult-child relationships and new constructions of a culturally adequate child (Dupont et al., 2022; Ulvik, 2018) when designing foster care arrangements and support systems for foster families.

Foster care is a unique activity by its personal and relational character. But it could certainly be compared to relationally oriented professions like psychotherapists, social workers, and nurses. Unlike those, however, foster care implies exposing one's personality, personal and emotional life, and vulnerabilities on a full-time basis, by sharing everyday life with the child. Choosing foster care as part of choosing a life mode and self-construction seems to be an under-researched theme. In an increasingly individualizing culture, altruism is no longer a cultural ideal; rather, the opposite. The question "What does it mean to me to be a foster carer?" is legitimate and should be taken seriously in research as well as in recruitment campaigns.

Contextualized knowledge about foster carers' engagement is important, not only for preventing "unworthy motivations" but for updated and targeted recruitment procedures of foster carers in a late modern society. I have presented an analytical model for analyzing and rethinking foster care. The model should not be read as a fixed frame. Cultural meanings in activities should be continually explored, and changing cultural contexts should be considered. New empirical exploration may lead to discursive themes being replaced and new themes added. It is an aim that the analytical model presented may serve as a springboard for empirical exploration and conceptual innovation, and inspire further development of culturally sensitive, complexity-sensitive, and contextualized analyses of foster care in the 2020s.

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