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Navigating the Moral Landscape of Foster Care: The Risk of Blame and Suspicion in Paid Parenthood

Katarina Jacobsson

School of Social Work, Lund University, Sweden

Correspondence: Katarina Jacobsson (katarina.jacobsson@soch.lu.se)

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Abstract

Foster care provides a family-like upbringing for children who cannot stay with their biological parents for various reasons. While the practice of paying foster parents is not questioned, the level of the fee and how it is spent (or not spent) are morally charged matters. Foster parents' motives may be questioned by the media, neighbors, or social workers, who may suspect financial gain. Although these payments are essential and may be crucial to the successful recruitment of foster parents (of whom there is a severe shortage), the issue of foster parent remuneration is fraught with sensitivity, suspicion, and blame. This article analyzes the suspicions about money that foster parents encounter or reproduce, ranging from subtle educational comments to explicit blame. Building on the argument of economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer that money is often defined as corrupting in family, kinship, and friendship relationships, the analysis suggests that foster parents learn to navigate, but also reproduce, suspicions about reimbursement through encounters with websites, social workers, and foster parent communities. They avoid answering direct questions about financial compensation but prepare ready-made answers and phrases to prevent potential blame. This study is part of a three-year research project on foster homes and money. The material consists of texts (official and social media) and interviews with foster parents.

Keywords

blame; foster care; foster parents; money; reimbursement; suspicion; Sweden

1. Introduction

Just as finances are fundamental to a family's well-being and way of life, economic compensation for taking in a foster child is often important. In the United States, the recruitment of foster homes appears to be more

successful when fees are higher, and fewer breakdowns occur when foster parents report that their compensation is "adequate" (Neymotin & Hawks, 2024; Pac, 2017). Corresponding studies in Sweden have not been found, although many municipalities, like those worldwide (Colton et al., 2008), testify that it is difficult to recruit foster homes (Pålsson et al., 2023). It is perhaps even difficult to imagine a Swedish study that would explicitly examine the relationship between the size of the economic compensation and the willingness to become a foster home, given the taboo that Höjer (2001) argues prevails in the area. The topic of compensation is delicate and partly shrouded in vagueness, making it challenging for potential Swedish foster parents to determine the level of remuneration (Jacobsson, 2023). Whether or not the issue is still taboo, it can be noted that in Sweden, the recruitment of foster homes is based primarily on non-monetary values, such as the desire to help vulnerable children and to "make a difference." While the majority of actors in this field, both professionals and foster parents, regard remuneration as a given prerequisite for the assignment, there is also the perception that money is an indecent motive for wanting to take in a child (e.g., Hjärpe, 2025). Just as Kirton (2013) points out in an English context, remuneration should be perceived as an implicit condition rather than a motive.

Why is it difficult for foster parents to ask social services questions about financial conditions? The subject itself can raise suspicions of ulterior motives, such as "doing it for the money" rather than for the sake of the child. Prospective foster parents are investigated by social services, including their motives for taking in a foster child. When questions about compensation are perceived as signaling excessive interest in money, it may appear to be the *only* motive. This could result in the rejection of the application to become a foster parent (Colton et al., 2008; Hardesty, 2018).

A widespread belief that economic and intimate spheres are or should be strictly separated makes "paid parenting" a morally troubling category in the same way that adoption can give rise to the equally troubling category of "bought children" (Åkerström, 2014; Zelizer, 1985). Media reports of failed foster care placements where the child has been abused or neglected often contribute to the suspicion that "some do it for the money." For example, an evening newspaper reports on a foster parent couple in Uppsala, Sweden, who were accused of starving a girl, with the prosecutor stating that the couple's motivation for taking in children was money (Göthlin, 2022).

Prospective foster parents who explicitly ask about money are treading on a moral minefield. Together with the fact that there is a great shortage of foster homes in Sweden, it seems urgent to learn more about how interaction around the subject of money constructs and maintains sensitivity on the issue. This analysis aims to examine how foster parents discuss remuneration, given the ever-present risk of being blamed for or suspected of monetary self-interest rather than a desire to care for vulnerable children. Why is the issue of economic compensation for foster parents surrounded by suspicion? How do foster parents express and manage the moral tension of "paid parenting"? How do foster parents go about avoiding suspicions or accusations?

1.1. Research on Foster Care and Money

The idea that monetary motives for taking in foster children are indecent can be traced back a long way in the history of foster care. In Australia, for example, there was a certain acceptance of compensation in the 19th century, which began to be questioned in the early 20th century (Musgrove & Michell, 2018). Similarly,

in Sweden at the same time, there was ambivalence about foster parents' motives, as Johanna Sköld (2006) has shown in a historical study on the "foster child industry."

Kirton's (2001, 2022; Kirton et al., 2007) studies on foster care and financial compensation in an English context have, in recent decades, followed the controversial debates on whether foster care should be considered a voluntary or professional activity. From a trend toward increasing professionalization in English foster care, there was a shift in 2018 toward anti-professionalization by the government. Kirton (2022) argues that this policy stance fails to recognize the hybrid nature of work and family.

Some studies have attempted to capture the significance of financial incentives for both recruitment and the likelihood of remaining in the role. This has proven to be quite significant. Pac (2017) points out that both recruitment and the risk of breakdown correlate with the size of the payment: More foster parents are recruited, and fewer breakdowns are reported with higher fees (see also Neymotin & Hawks, 2024). Similarly, Kirton (2001) found that foster parents with challenging children were more likely to stick to the assignment if the payment systems were perceived as adequate and efficient. Colton et al. (2008) point out that it is not enough to look for altruistic motives when recruiting foster families. Rather, they argue that effective payment systems are crucial for motivation and retention. A small Swedish survey of foster parents showed that the majority considered the financial compensation to be too low (Statens offentliga utredningar, 2023, p. 445).

Many professionals believe that foster parents should receive payment for their effort, but this view often comes with strong opinions about how economic issues should be handled. Social workers prefer to approach the topic of compensation as an informational matter rather than a negotiation and do not want parents to bring it up themselves (Hjärpe, 2025). If parents ask about compensation or try to negotiate the fee too early, it can give the impression that they are only in it for the money. Foster parents who have already been recruited have expressed concerns about being viewed as greedy if they bring up the fee with social services (Höjer, 2001). Kinship carers have also expressed reluctance to discuss finances with social services because they do not want to risk losing the child (Linderot, 2020).

1.2. Swedish Family Foster Care

Seventy percent of children taken into care in Sweden end up in family foster care, while the rest end up in residential care. In 2021, approximately 19,000 children were in family foster care (Statens offentliga utredningar, 2023, p. 412). Foster care services are primarily provided by municipal social services, though market actors also play a significant role. Independent foster care agencies account for about 25% of placements, and municipalities often hire them when they are unable to find a suitable match for a particular child (Fridell Lif, 2023). These for-profit agencies recruit foster families and provide professional support and guidance during the placement. Nevertheless, this system is described as a quasi-market because social services are ultimately responsible for children in care, both legally and financially (Forkby & Höjer, 2018).

In Sweden, family foster care is strongly oriented toward enabling children to return to their families of origin (Höjer, 2019). Foster parents are obligated to maintain and facilitate contact with biological parents. Most foster care placements are temporary and end with the child being reunited with their family. Younger children spend an average of just over two years in foster care, while older children spend an average of four and a

half years. For both age groups, the length of time spent in foster care has decreased over the past 15 years (Lindquist, 2023).

Financial support from social services consists of a taxable basic allowance of just over SEK 11,000 (ca. 1,100 euro) per child per month and a supplement to cover the child's living expenses. The basic allowance may vary depending on the severity of the child's problems, but also because families can negotiate the fee. Independent foster care agencies are said to generally offer higher fees.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

The material for this analysis is interpreted in the light of economic sociologist Zelizer's theories on relational work—a concept she uses to explain how people draw boundaries between intimate and economic relationships. Given the culturally shared view that these two spheres should not be conflated (although they are in many areas), people engage in relational work to bridge and enable the mutual coexistence of economy and intimacy (Bandelj, 2020). For example, boundaries are established by relational earmarking of money for different purposes. Money can also be used to earmark relationships. This is why compensating someone in a way that does not align with how the recipient defines the relationship can put it at risk. For example, offering cash as "salary" for a favor performed by a friendly neighbor may undermine the relationship. Promising to return the favor would likely be a more effective way of maintaining it.

According to Zelizer (2013, p. 296), monetary payments can be organized in three fundamental ways: as compensation, as a right, or as a gift. Each organization defines the nature of the social relationship between the parties. Compensation is about a "direct exchange of values" where the relationship of the parties is marked by contingency, mutual responsibility, and negotiation. Payments, as in "right to a share," give the recipient power and autonomy in relation to the giver. Money as a voluntary gift, on the contrary, indicates arbitrariness and the subordination of the recipient.

It is likely that the foster home economy accommodates all these forms of remuneration. Remuneration is often described as being negotiated, and some foster parents "know their worth" (compensation). Sometimes, extra payments for special expenses are highlighted as entitlements (right). However, foster parents report that they may have been unaware of these entitlements and that social services may withhold such knowledge from them. Expressions such as "being on good terms" with social services rather indicate arbitrariness and a gift relationship, where the recipient is at a disadvantage (gift). At the same time, the relationship between the two parties is not the only one colored by how one views the payments. A child is also involved, and their relationships with both the foster parents and social services are similarly affected. Since the form of payment carries cultural expectations about the nature of the relationship, misclassifications can jeopardize it. For example, receiving a salary for work done in foster care may be perceived as a threat to a long-term emotional relationship with the child.

People often adopt a particular way of talking about sensitive topics when they feel that their actions may be questioned, in order to dispel any suspicions of wrongdoing. These *accounts* aim to bridge the gap between undesirable or questionable behavior and one's own actions (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Even without an explicit accusation, people may account for their behavior, suggesting a shared belief that the behavior in question is wrong. Crime is an example of such an area. "I stole food to feed my children" is an example of justifying

illegal behavior. Similarly, the notion that economic transactions are incompatible with love and care is deeply rooted in modern society. Conflating these two spheres requires elaborate accounts to integrate and perceive money and love as acceptable. The theory of accounts can help us understand why and how foster parents struggle to avoid accusations or suspicions that they are "doing it for the wrong reasons."

3. Methods and Materials

The material on which this article is based was collected within the framework of the project "Pecuniary sensitivity in narratives about foster care" together with Susanne Boethius, David Wästerfors, and Malin Åkerström from the Department of Sociology at Lund University. The material consists of interviews conducted with 40 foster parents, 20 professionals from the municipal social services, and six professionals from independent foster care agencies. In addition to interviews, the material includes documents in the form of websites, social media, training materials, advertisements, and official documents. To a lesser extent, observations of information meetings for prospective and current foster parents were also carried out.

The analysis in this article is based on the systematic selection of three social media posts and a review of websites from 50 Swedish municipalities and independent foster care agencies containing information for prospective foster parents. The analysis also includes the 40 interviews with foster parents conducted between 2022 and 2024. While all project members were interviewed, two accounted for the majority (Malin and Susanne). Most interviews were conducted with one parent, though five included both parents. The interviews mostly took place in the foster home without children present and lasted around one and a half hours.

Foster parents were recruited in various ways. The majority of interviewees were either contacted by social services or got in touch with us themselves. In the former case, some were asked directly by a professional, while others were identified in social services' social forums. In the latter case, an organization for foster families published an article on its website under the heading "Researchers to study foster families from an economic perspective," encouraging anyone interested in participating to contact the project leader directly. A few interviewees were also contacted directly by the researchers after appearing in the media, and a few more were referred by acquaintances of acquaintances. The interviewees came from all over the country, and all interviews were conducted in Swedish.

Because the topic of financial compensation for foster parents is sensitive, we anticipated difficulty recruiting a sufficient number of interviewees. However, contrary to our fears, the interviewees were eager to discuss finances, and we noticed no difference in this regard depending on how they had been recruited. We believe this is because the project addressed the sensitive issue of money from the outset.

4. Analysis

Although the cultural belief that the economic and intimate spheres should be kept separate is widely held (Zelizer, 2011), novices must acquire knowledge about the specific moral landscape for foster parents and learn to navigate it over time. First, I demonstrate how questions about financial compensation are posed and responded to online (see also Jacobsson, 2023). Second, I will analyze how parents express suspicion that others are doing it for the money, as well as how they manage such suspicion directed toward themselves.

Finally, I will address the most sensitive issue: the fear that the child will think the foster parent is only in it for the money.

4.1. Moral Monitoring Online

There is a general shortage of foster homes in Sweden (Forkby & Höjer, 2018; Pålsson et al., 2023), and almost all municipalities have websites with information on where to turn if you are interested in becoming a foster home. Alongside a range of other issues, it seems reasonable to assume that finances play a fairly significant role in the decision to become a foster carer. How will our everyday finances be affected? Will I be able to work as much? Will we need a bigger car? Will we have to change our eating and living habits? However, information on finances is rather scarce on municipal websites, or is not prominent, being placed at the back of a question-and-answer list. Some municipalities' websites do not provide any information about financial conditions, and I have not found any websites that mention specific amounts. In other words, it is quite difficult to get clarity on the size of the fee (Jacobsson, 2023). The very question of remuneration can also be disqualifying in itself: prospective foster parents who are deemed to put financial motives first are considered unsuitable. A social worker said in an interview that she "weeds out" applicants if she suspects that financial reasons are their primary motivation for becoming foster parents.

The risk of appearing greedy when discussing compensation with social services or consulting companies probably contributes to financial issues being discussed on social media. This avoids the risk of being perceived as too money-hungry by the relevant authorities. For those who are not well-versed in the topic, social media can provide an unofficial idea of how much money is involved in taking in a child. There are a number of specialized forums (or divisions in general forums) for foster parents (e.g., Familjehemmet.se; Familjeliv.se). Even in backstage contexts, suspicions that someone is "doing it for the money" can easily arise, prompting a condemning or lecturing response.

A strategic selection of three examples (translated to English), in three different threads, from one online Swedish forum about foster care is used to illustrate the moral intensity surrounding financial compensation for foster care. All three social media posters asked about the financial compensation that comes with being a foster parent, but they framed the topic in radically different ways. This generated responses that differed in both content and number. These examples are revealing because they expose the community's cultural codes for discussing financial compensation.

In the first example, the poster assumes that one earns "quite good money" and wants to know if it is difficult to become a foster parent. Although the poster does not explicitly ask about earnings, the clear link between foster children and money triggered a wave of judgmental responses. First, the original post:

> *Difficult to become a foster home? Need money!*
>
> I have heard from friends and acquaintances who have taken in children themselves and been foster parents that they earn quite good money from it. I am, therefore, very interested in becoming a foster parent because our economy is sinking like a ship filled with holes! Is it difficult to become a foster parent? What is required? (197 responses received)

The vast majority of comments were received on the day the question was posted, and it was clear that many commentators were provoked by it. One of the more candid responses read as follows:

> Are you retarded, or what? Are you going to place a vulnerable child in a family that can't manage its finances? Hopefully, the social services still have someone competent who can reject your foster home application. (Response no. 2 of 197)

Most responses ridicule and question the poster's suitability to become a foster parent, based on her obvious motive of making money by becoming a foster parent. In the second example, the poster frames the question in terms of livelihood, which generates a series of reproachful answers. A shortened version of the post:

> *Can you make a living from family foster care?*
>
> Then I wonder if you can make a living just being a foster carer or if you have to work or study or something at the same time? I've always wanted to work with children, but my studies are going very poorly. Not because I'm stupid, but because I just don't have any motivation to study. So, if it were possible to become a foster carer and have it as a job and a main source of income, I think that would be great. (91 responses received)

"Is it for the money or for the children?" someone asks quickly. The following answers continue in the same vein, asking, "What is the highest priority?" Someone explains the mission and concludes:

> So it's not something you can make a living from at all, being a foster carer is not a job, it's a privilege because you want to make these children's lives better. (Response no. 4 of 91)

When her motive is questioned, the original poster repeatedly states that she does not want to become a foster parent for the money. She points out that she has read up on what it means to be a foster parent, but she has not found any information on the allowance amount. Only in answer no. 27 does anyone mention an amount between SEK 5,000 and SEK 15,000 (≈€500–1500) plus an expense allowance. Nearly 100 other replies are critical assessments of whether the original poster is ready to take in a child (often urging her to wait a few years).

The third poster managed to produce a more successful post by framing the question in terms of economic loss. Rather than starting with the idea that the allowance should add something, the poster begins with the idea that it might be too costly to bring someone else's child into the family. The poster occupies a lot of space to present herself as a serious and responsible prospective foster parent:

> *Foster home, can you afford it?*
>
> First, I want to clarify, I DO NOT IN ANY WAY WANT TO MAKE MONEY ON THIS. I know many here can twist and turn things. When I was younger, I became friends with several people who couldn't stay at home with their parents for various reasons. Some lived in foster care, and others in various types of residential care. I also had children when I worked at a preschool who lived in foster care.

> I myself grew up in a home with one sibling and both my parents. We had a good upbringing, went on vacations, always had food on the table, and clean clothes.
>
> Ever since I witnessed how my friends grew up, I have dreamed of becoming a foster parent. I want to provide children with the stable foundation and loving home that everyone deserves. It's what I had myself. My partner and I share this dream; he has two children from a previous relationship. I don't have any children of my own.
>
> We both have full-time jobs in the healthcare sector. So they're not high-paying jobs. But to my question, I know that you get some kind of compensation for this. But is it enough? I mean, everyone knows that children cost money. I'm afraid that I won't be able to give the child/children what they need. I want to be able to give the child everything they need, let them participate in leisure activities, and so on. Now I don't mean that nothing from our own pockets should go to the child. That's a given when you take on a child and they become part of the family.
>
> Please, I am not good at expressing myself in writing. Don't try to turn this into a way to make money, it's absolutely not that! I just want to know if it will be enough to give the child what it needs. And if anyone knows, would I, as a foster parent, be allowed to open a savings or trust account in the child's name for the future? (14 responses received)

The poster seems aware of the morally charged discussion about compensation, as if crossing a minefield with a map in hand. Right from the start, a negative declaration about motives is presented in all caps. This is followed by a narrative suggesting that the poster has indirect experience with family foster homes through other children, that she comes from a stable home environment, and has dreamed of becoming a foster parent, a dream she shares with her partner. The dream is primarily about providing a stable and loving home for a child in need. Only after this long introduction is the question of financial compensation presented. Like the title of the post, the question is framed in a way that indicates anything but financial gain. Is the compensation enough to provide the child with everything they need? In addition to this morally impeccable framing, the poster emphasizes that the couple should spend part of their income on the child. Furthermore, she demonstrates a commitment to saving money for the child. The first response comes quickly and is exceptionally informative:

> You get what the child costs based on age, etc, according to guidelines, usually between 5,000 and 7,000 [SEK]. In addition to this, you get a fee/salary for taking on the assignment. My family foster homes are anywhere between 8,000 and 18,000 [SEK]. If, for example, the assignment requires you to reduce your working hours or stop working altogether, all that affects the compensation. (Answer no. 1 of 14)

The poster has navigated the minefield with precision and voilà: The answer comes without either condemnation or lectures. With a long background and a series of more or less explicit accounts, the poster has defused the biggest mines, making it clear that we are dealing with pure motives (Scott & Lyman, 1968). The previous two posters were less successful in this respect.

Based on the examples above, we can conclude that moral tension is present regardless of how the question is posed. This tension can be seen when posters anticipate and address moral objections themselves, as in

the last example, or when a swarm of outraged responses follows a suspicious framing of the question. The first two examples were perceived this way, prompting indignant responses and reproachful comments about the motives of the posters. In the third case, raising the question of motives seems almost superfluous. The poster had already made this clear in a long statement. Table 1 lists a summary of the moral intensity aroused depending on how the question is framed.

Table 1. Number and character of responses to social media posts.

Question	Number of responses	The main character of responses
Difficult to become a foster carer? Need money!	197	Condemnation
Can you make a living from family foster care?	91	Reprimanding
Foster home, can you afford it?	14	Factual

Thus, it seems that a great deal of discursive work is necessary to obtain factual, informative answers about financial compensation for foster parents. The first two questions frame remuneration as compensation, a direct exchange of values (Zelizer, 2013). The third question opens up the possibility of interpreting the reimbursement as a right: "Are you entitled to receive compensation for at least some of the actual costs incurred?" Above all, however, the third poster clarifies that the relationship with the child is longed-for, loving, and long-term. When the allowance is presented as income, the motive to care for a child is called into question, and the relationship with the child appears unloving and temporary—tied only to money. This arouses indignation of a higher moral intensity than when the issue is framed in terms of reasonable nonprofit reimbursement.

4.2. Reproducing Suspicion: "Some May Do It for the Money, But I Won't"

Although the general consensus is that foster care providers should be rewarded (Hjärpe, 2025), vigilance is maintained to identify any inappropriate attitudes toward compensation. When foster parents themselves express suspicion or blame towards other foster parents, it is at the same time a way to account for their own good intentions. In an interview with foster parent Molly, she recounts a social media post that upset her. She tells about a foster family who did not receive any extra compensation for taking their foster child on vacation to Thailand, and the consideration that they might travel without the foster child. Molly thinks it's obvious that you save money for a vacation to include your foster child. She compares the situation to her own:

> Molly: I didn't even ask [social services for financial support]. Well, we've been away, we've been to Greece twice, but it's not something I'm even thinking about—not bringing [the child]….I just said: "Are you kidding me now, or what?" That's what I wrote as a comment: "Are you for real, or what? You can't leave a child at home, for heaven's sake!"
>
> Interviewer: Eww!
>
> Molly: Then I think you're doing it for all the wrong reasons.

According to the idea that financial gain is incompatible with love and care, the accusation of doing it for the money seems to be all-pervasive. But not showing any desire to "invest" one's own money in the foster child

can also be interpreted as heartlessness and stinginess, as in Molly's account above. Although direct accusations from friends, acquaintances, or social services seem rare, there is always the risk of raising suspicions. "It's a bit shameful to talk about money," says Ilse, for example. Foster parents seem to guard a boundary of decency among themselves that can also lead to self-examination. Maja says, "We also shame each other," referring to social forums for foster parents:

> We also shame each other. It's ugly to talk about money because we don't want to appear as if money is important. But, to be honest, few would do this if money weren't a compensation, because it takes up so much of one's life, and no one outside of it talks about it, but we are left with this shame ourselves….And it's up to me to either cover it up, ignore it, pretend that it's not happening, or find a way to phrase it that I can live with. Because it also means that I have to question myself all the time. Am I doing this for the money?

Thus, the question of whether money is the driving force is not only relevant during the application process for prospective foster homes but also throughout the foster care experience. For example, it can be raised on an ongoing basis in everyday interactions with social services, such as when foster parents apply for additional payments. In these situations, foster parents share stories about times when they were denied compensation and felt as if their motives were being questioned.

4.3. Managing Suspicion: Avoidance and Ready-Made Answers

Although few people report direct allegations or questions about the remuneration, the feeling of being questioned is easily sensed. Foster parent Wilma says, "I have a sense of what others might think." Maja notes that there is no need for an explicit accusation because the sense of questioning is always present: "It's in me," she says. Therefore, it may be wise to consider how to avoid answering questions about the amount of compensation:

> But there have seldom been situations where I've had to sort of explain what I get, but it's in me. I'm clever when I'm asked questions, I'm extremely clever at avoiding them. I can answer a bit like a politician about something else or so, because I don't want a straight question to come up that I feel I have to answer: "How much do you get per month?"

What is the best way to respond when someone explicitly asks how much you are paid for being a foster parent? Tessan, another foster parent, usually avoids discussing the fee for several reasons. First, she wants to avoid attracting people to the assignment for the sake of money. She also wants to avoid the risk of someone who is poorly informed concluding that it is a well-paid assignment. She explains:

> I don't usually, well, I don't usually say how big the fee is, because, I mean, for someone who's not familiar with it, they might think that, like, "God, you get *that* much money just for taking care of a child."

When the interviewer continues to ask about people's curiosity, Tessan provides a more detailed explanation of how she responds to questions about fees and compensation, including what she typically says and why. She likes the concept of "fee" and believes listeners should interpret it as "small compensation for a good cause."

> Interviewer: What are people asking about, then?
>
> Tessan: They say like this: "Do you get anything for being, well, [a family foster home]?" So, yes, I usually say: "We get a fee." And the good thing about it being called a fee is that you think that a fee is just like, well, but it's like a small, well, but a small compensation for a good cause. Yes, it is. It doesn't sound like it's that much. Then, I usually say that, I don't usually say "living expenses" [omkostnadsersättning], I usually just say: "We get, we get money for food and clothes, of course." That's how I usually put it. Yes, that's how I put it.

Foster parents have a collective interest in preventing the public from believing that their compensation is high and getting the impression that they do it for the money. Without mentioning exact sums, Mymlan has a ready-made answer for those wondering: "I don't think there's a job where you work 12 hours a day for that salary. You work around the clock!" She acknowledges the hard work involved in looking after sometimes unruly children and believes that being paid for it is perfectly reasonable. At the same time, she finds it annoying when people think it is a lot of money. "If you get paid, you're not as good as it seems," says Mymlan. She asks the rhetorical question, "Why should you love your children any less just because you get paid to have them?" Lotta, another foster parent, has also prepared an answer. She simply answers: "You get enough to cover your costs."

Juno explicitly refers to the recommendations shared on social media about how one should answer the question without generating the reaction that it is about a lot of money.

> Juno: Sometimes I've been asked and then I've sort of said that; yes, but, yes, the fee is about half a nanny's salary, it's also like this tip from these forums that, because you should sort of, yes….But instead of saying a sum, that may sound higher than it really is, because you also have to pay taxes on it. Yes. But half a nanny's salary for working 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It does put things into perspective.

The answers are similar in that they are well-prepared and well-thought-out. Two strategies stand out: Avoid specifying actual sums and emphasize the lack of profit. To give perspective, the allowance can be presented as a salary, which must then be said to be a very low salary in relation to the work effort and the long working days. Or it can be presented as a compensation for the costs of the foster child, as in Lotta's answer: "You get enough to cover your costs."

4.4. Protecting the Relationship With the Child

Suspicions of financial gain are unpleasant for foster parents and can be risky in relation to social services (Colton et al., 2008; Höjer, 2001). But it would be even worse if the foster child suspected this (cf. Linderot, 2020). Both the social worker and the foster parents agree that they should try to keep the child from finding out about the financial agreement. Some municipalities point out on their websites that information about compensation is confidential and will not be shared with the foster child or their parents. One social worker says that they separate the fee agreement from the child's file in case the child requests the file when they reach legal adulthood. The social workers believe this protects the child from learning about the fee: "The child should not have to see how much it costs." The risk to be avoided, of course, is for the child to perceive the

foster family's commitment as merely a financial transaction. Several interviewees stated that they did not want to discuss compensation with the children.

Ideally, the child would not know anything about the fee. Liv is the foster parent of a girl whose family she had been unofficially supporting. After a while, the situation worsened, and social services did not want to return the girl to her mother. That's when Liv was officially hired as a foster parent. She says:

> Liv: For example, I don't think our girl even knows that we get, she knows that we get some money from social services, like, which is supposed to cover some of the costs, like, but I don't think she knows that we also get like a salary and I don't want, like, I don't want her to know that—[I: No] because I don't want her to think that it—.
>
> Interviewer: That's why I didn't want there to be any children at home.
>
> Liv: No, exactly. But I think that at some point she'll find out that it's like that, and ask direct questions, like. I don't really know how I would answer them.
>
> Interviewer: How to deal with it?
>
> Liv: No, but I've thought about it, actually, because I don't want her to think like this, "well, that's why I live here," you know. [I: No]. I guess you could explain that she's lived here for so long before without us getting a dime, you know.

We previously discussed Zelizer's (2011) description of how people seek to bridge the dichotomy between financial transactions and intimate relationships, and how they undertake relational work to integrate the two. Above, Liv points out that she initially lived with the girl without compensation to convince her that money was irrelevant to the decision to take her in. Another approach is to give financial compensation a different meaning than "payment for taking care of X." One foster parent couple emphasized that they would never dream of discussing compensation for the boy living with them. He is "one of the family. Period. End of story!" They explicitly state that they do not receive compensation for him. Instead, they say they are compensated for maintaining contact with the boy's biological family.

> Lotta: Because that's how we've justified it to ourselves, like, that we, we get money because we must have contact with people we wouldn't have had contact with otherwise.
>
> Svenne: No, it's definitely not a compensation for having him at home with us, it's not, but it's because we need to take the car sometimes and go and meet people.
>
> Lotta: Which you can feel that you would rather not do (laughs).

For foster parents, the overarching risk of being suspected of doing it for the money seems to result in a type of "linguistic work" that is a particular manifestation of Zelizer's (2011) concept of relational work, which is necessary to bridge the distinct spheres of the economy and intimacy. Through discursive efforts, the interviewees reconcile the paradox of the incompatible category of "paid parenting." This may involve

self-examination or anticipation of accusations, resulting in ready-made formulations presented to oneself and others. At the same time, suspicion remains toward some other foster carers who are assumed to be in it for the money. One can compare one's own situation to these and use it as evidence that one's intentions are good and that one is staying on the right side of the decency line.

5. Conclusion

This article addresses the complex and frequently sensitive issues related to financial compensation for foster parents. Although reimbursement appears to be crucial for recruiting and retaining foster parents (Neymotin & Hawks, 2024; Pac, 2017), the topic is fraught with suspicion and moral judgment. Foster parents must navigate a world where they run the risk of having their motives questioned, whether by the media, neighbors, social workers, or other foster parents.

The suspicion surrounding economic compensation for foster parents stems from the deeply rooted cultural notion that money corrupts intimate relationships. Foster parents may face direct accusations on social media and in scandalous portrayals of them being more interested in financial gain than in caring for and loving the child. However, blame and suspicion can also be more subtle and become apparent in how interviewees describe their role as foster parents. These descriptions are rarely straightforward or uncomplicated, and the issue of payments has received a great deal of consideration. Extensive discursive work is required to articulate, justify, and defend such a morally charged and ambiguous phenomenon as paid parenting. The concept itself is an anomaly in that it brings together the economic and intimate spheres.

The suspicion that some people become foster parents for purely instrumental and economic reasons serves as an invisible boundary of decency against which foster parents compare themselves. Professionals and foster parents alike invoke and maintain this boundary in formal assessments and everyday conversations. This analysis suggests that foster parents learn to navigate suspicions of indecency regarding financial compensation through encounters with websites, social workers, and foster parent communities. They develop sophisticated accounts and strategies to manage suspicion that they do it for the money. They either avoid the question of how much they are paid as foster parents or give an answer without figures, emphasizing the effort involved in the work. Furthermore, foster parents struggle with how to explain to the foster child that their stay generates financial compensation. As Zelizer (2011) points out, with the concept of relational work, foster parents actively work to integrate the financial transactions into intimate family relationships to keep this relationship untainted and intact. The technically and morally complex accounts of financial compensation reflect the challenges of merging the economic and intimate spheres.

Given the great need for more foster families, one might expect municipalities and independent foster care agencies to provide more comprehensive information on financial conditions. At the same time, the opportunity to gradually teach the prospective foster parent how to understand the assignment through information meetings or personal conversations ("an assignment—not a job," "a fee—not a salary," etc.) would be lost. Furthermore, motives for taking in a child must be assessed to rule out inappropriate applicants. The fear of encouraging financial motivations or losing the ability to assess motives may contribute to the continuous ambiguity surrounding financial conditions in the foster care system.

Although previous research from other Western countries has indicated sensitivities regarding money in foster care that are similar to those discussed here, it would be valuable to conduct a comparative study that focuses specifically on these issues. A study of this kind could allow for the examination of how cultural and contextual factors influence the way foster parents describe and relate to the social category of paid parenting.

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Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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About the Author

Katarina Jacobsson is professor of social work at Lund University, Sweden. Her current projects deal with documenting practices among human service workers and monetary sensitivity in foster care. Previous books include *Hidden Attractions of Administration* (with M. Åkerström et al., 2021) and the edited volume *Doing Human Service Ethnography* (with J. Gubrium, 2021).