Social Inclusion
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 11326
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.11326

cogitatio

EDITORIAL

Open Access Journal

Money in Foster Care: Social Issues in Paid Parenthood

Malin Åkerström and Susanne Boethius

Department of Sociology, Lund University, Sweden

Correspondence: Malin Åkerström (malin.akerstrom@soc.lu.se)

Submitted: 10 September 2025 **Published:** 21 October 2025

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue "Money in Foster Care: Social Issues in Paid Parenthood" edited by Malin Åkerström (Lund University) and Susanne Boethius (Lund University), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i526

Abstract

This thematic issue explores the complex and often controversial intersection of foster care and financial compensation. While foster care is often seen as a more inclusive and family-oriented alternative to institutional care, the role of money in caregiving remains morally and socially sensitive. Drawing on sociological theories, particularly Viviana Zelizer's concept of "hostile worlds," the articles examine how economic and intimate spheres are negotiated in the contexts of foster care. Contributions from multiple countries highlight how foster parents, social workers, and policymakers navigate the tension between professionalism and altruism, as well as between love and money. The thematic issue addresses historical shifts in compensation practices, cultural ambivalence toward paid caregiving, and the practical realities of foster families' financial needs. Case studies from Australia, Bulgaria, England, Norway, Romania, South Africa, and Sweden illustrate how foster care is framed as both work and family life, with implications for policy, legal status, and emotional labour. The issue also considers how kinship care complicates traditional boundaries between private and public roles. By analysing how money is discussed, avoided, or justified in foster care, the collection sheds light on broader welfare dilemmas: how to balance moral imperatives with economic constraints. Ultimately, the volume argues that caregiving should not be reduced to either love or money but understood as a hybrid practice where financial support can enable, rather than undermine, authentic care.

Keywords

family; foster care; frames; money; paid parenthood; profession

© 2025 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

Foster care is often described as preferable when a child, for various reasons, can't live with their biological parents, as it offers a more socially inclusive form of care compared to institutional alternatives. It serves as a way to avoid institutionalization and provide a more family-like upbringing and environment. This assumption is supported by findings that show fewer negative outcomes in adulthood (in terms of criminality, social assistance dependency, and educational attainment) for those placed in foster homes as opposed to residential care (Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008). Although foster care is seen as the better alternative, there has been a vivid discussion in many countries whether and, if so, how much reimbursement should be granted to foster parents, although most systems involve some compensation for expenses. There are other "fostering" social systems where money is not involved, as Goody (2007) has shown in his study of family relations in West Africa. When Goody's study was conducted, it was not uncommon for children to be cared for within the larger family. Still money is a sensitive topic, and monetary motives for taking care of children are looked upon as morally questionable.

This sensitivity has been explored by American sociologist Viviana Zelizer, who has shown that money in close relationships is judged in moral terms; money is generally perceived as contaminating within intimate spheres, i.e., among friends, relatives, and families (Zelizer, 2005). She argues that what she calls the economic and intimate spheres are viewed as hostile worlds in relation to each other (Zelizer, 2011). We are warned against doing business with friends or selling things to relatives (Åkerström, 2014). Yet people live connected lives. In many friendships, things are bought and sold, and in every family or household, economic transactions are continuously negotiated and sorted. The issue is rather how money is defined: whether it is seen as compensation, reasonable reimbursement, a gift, or something else (Zelizer, 2011, p. 167). These definitions form the basis for different practices and approaches.

In her book *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Zelizer (1985) describes how the combination of children and money is particularly delicate. In a literature review and policy analysis, Kirton (2013, p. 665) points out that British social services associate payments with concerns about impersonal and mechanical care, which risks attracting "the wrong kind of foster families." Ideally, economic interests should be kept separate from family-based care and support. On the other hand, the need for money must be acknowledged and managed; people have expenses related to their caregiving work, and their commitments often mean they can only work part-time and are not fully available to the labor market. Without fees and reimbursements, child welfare would revert to charity, which contradicts the contemporary welfare model, and the heavy burden of care, primarily carried out by women, would become even heavier (Kirton, 2013). Fees and reimbursements can be seen as a "silent" precondition rather than a motive: we don't do it for the money, but we can't do it without the money (Kirton, 2013, p. 665; cf. Nelson, 2007, p. 21). Questions about money have also proven to be a central but relatively hidden part of caregiving, for example, in how foster parents manage the placed child's finances through pocket money, savings, consumption, etc. (Kirton, 2013, p. 669).

As pointed out by Colton et al. (2008), any consideration of remuneration for foster parents will be "confronted with the professionalism versus altruism dilemma which is characterized by the perceived conflict between moral obligation and financial reward" (p. 877). The discussion of "economy in foster care" is part of a long-lasting debate on professionalization. The conflicting ideals are collected in linguistic terms: Foster parenting is defined along lines of love and long-lasting relationship (Nutt, 2006, p. 36), whereas

foster carer denotes traits like payment, skills, competence, and responsibilities, as traits by established professions (Kirton, 2022; Nutt, 2006).

Foster care placements are a well-researched subject among international scholars, but the social-psychological and moral meanings attributed to money and economics in foster care placements have rarely been the focus. It may depend on the sensitivity of the subject, as Höjer (2001, p. 36) already wrote 25 years ago that "the lack of research findings on the issue of compensation may be due to the fact that this topic is more or less taboo." We therefore believe that this collection of articles, taking the issue of money seriously, is needed. The meaning of money touches several parties in the field of foster homes: foster children, their biological parents, siblings, foster parents, and social workers. This thematic issue is, thus, meant to shed light on topics related to foster care with pecuniary considerations, aiming at illuminating the different meanings of money in foster care practice. Foster care seems to occupy a liminal position between "work" and "family," which constitutes a problem as well as a resource for actors in this field.

2. Contributions

In this thematic issue, 14 articles are included that explore the complex and often controversial intersection of foster care and financial compensation.

The history of foster care clearly maps parts of how we arrived in the present day, in terms of foster care skepticism, reimbursement and legal protections.

Nell Musgrove writes about how the private foster care market in 19th century Australia, which comprised of women prepared to take payment for nursing infants, was an essential service for women who needed to work. By following newspaper reporting and official archives from 1850 to 1915, she shows how scandals of maltreatment of children led to a moral panic associated with the private foster care market. Even as state regulations of that market increased, fears about "baby farming" and infant mortality helped entrench an association in social discourse between "mothering" for payment and infant exploitation.

Ann-Sofie Bergman explores the changes in economic compensation for foster parents in Sweden during the twentieth century. Early in the twentieth century, compensation was higher for younger children and lower for older children, who could be used for work. Radical changes took place that affected the payment system. In the 1970s, the boards instead paid the greatest compensation to foster parents who took care of teenagers. The article analyses explanations for these changes—changing perceptions of childhood, changes in which children were placed in care, an increasing urbanization, and women's transition to paid employment.

Two articles are concerned with arguing against the dichotomous characterization of foster care as either family or work, love or money.

David Wästerfors draws on Goffman's (1974/1986) frame analyses to show how Swedish foster parents use different ways of describing their foster parent engagement. The foster parents had varying ways of framing their role: as work, family life, therapy, and more. According to the foster parents, a foster home cannot be reduced to just a job but is instead part of family life. At the same time, it is demanding in different ways and includes elements of work, care, and treatment. In the foster parents' narratives, it becomes clear that these frameworks overlap or are embedded within one another.

Oddbjørg Skjær Ulvik constructs a theoretical model challenging dichotomized conceptions of foster care. Money, love, and work, the author states, are interrelated discursive themes, constituting foster care as a culturally and historically situated case of care arrangements. The author notes that role theory has been used to show that fostering is ambiguous and not dichotomous, but she claims that one has to add cultural values, implying different self-constructions and life projects. She illustrates, through her Norwegian interviews, that these can change: Foster parents who wanted a warm, familial relationship may meet a child who wants to keep her distance, while others planning to take a more professional stance are met with a child who wants a close emotional bond.

The sensitivity of payment for taking care of children in one's home is a topic in several articles.

Katarina Jacobsson's article concerns blame, criticism, and suspicions regarding the compensation and remuneration given to Swedish foster homes. A foster home that talks too much about money risks being seen as driven by the wrong motives, which leads to the subject being avoided, carefully phrased, or expressed in defensive terms. Foster parents thus want to avoid appearing greedy, and municipalities aim to emphasize the altruistic aspects of the assignment.

In Radostina Borissova Antonova and Gergana Nenova's article, we find that media and popular opinion frequently describe foster parents as "treating children as ATMs." As a response, foster parents develop an identity of saviours, people with a mission as a counterpoint to the often procedure- and rule-based activity of administrators from municipalities and the child protection system.

Borbála Kovács and Ovidiu Oltean's article, from Romania, describes worries about the foster grant system giving a comparatively generous financial compensation, yet weak oversight and monitoring. The system has evolved into quasi-permanent arrangements allowing individual foster carers considerable autonomy over the lives of fostered children. They use a scandal concerning a girl whose adoption was delayed as an illustration when carers become emotionally attached to children and rely on fostering as an economic survival mechanism in lieu of other employment opportunities.

Varying discourses affecting foster families, social policies, and social workers' roles are discussed in three articles.

Renee Thørnblad and Jeanette Skoglund examine two partly contradictory discourses on fostering in Norway. One is the professionalisation of foster care, implying stricter approval processes, training, and increased compensation. The other is a growing emphasis on kinship care, which values stable family ties and continuity. In kinship foster care, foster parents may primarily identify with private life terms and roles, such as grandparent, aunt, or uncle, which may collide with being a paid carer.

Teres Hjärpe contributes with ethnographic insights into how the inherent welfare dilemma of balancing the moral imperative to meet needs with the financial responsibility of allocating limited resources. Particular attention is paid to day-to-day interactions between managers and social workers in child protection. On the one hand, the costs of child protection are presented as a burden on the municipal budget. On the other hand, budget constraints are framed as obstacles to providing good child protection.

The paradox in foster care, noted by Ingrid Höjer and Inger Oterholm, lies in the tension between the professional perspective, where remuneration is provided for the care given, and the "familial" perspective, where care involves close family relationships. Their article aims to explore foster carers' understanding of their responsibilities regarding young people's financial support after leaving care. Their interviewees, foster parents from Sweden and Norway, continued to support young people even when the remuneration for the fostering assignment was uncertain or had ended, which pointed to the "close family"-dimension of foster care.

Foster care and foster grants, as well as the laws surrounding foster care, are organised in different ways, which is discussed in two articles.

Foster care in Sweden is municipally managed, but recruitment and support may involve public inter-municipal organizations. Veronica Hällqvist and Johanna Sköld's study draws on foster parents' and social workers' experiences. Foster parents often report feeling abandoned after forming bonds during the assessment phase, only to be "handed over" to more unsupportive local authorities. Social workers, on the other hand, sometimes perceived the inter-municipal organizations as siding with foster carers in financial matters. While these intermediaries can offer valuable support, their role may also create tensions.

In recent decades, another new type of organization, independent foster care agencies, has emerged in Sweden, as well as in other countries. These private organizations operate outside the public sector, marking a significant shift in how foster care is provided. In their article, Evelina Fridell Lif, Tommy Lundström, David Pålsson, Marie Sallnäs, and Emelie Shanks analyze the position of these private organizations in the Swedish foster care market; as for-profit entities, they represent a form of radicalization of the "love or money" dichotomy that has been a recurring theme in the foster care field.

Many countries face challenges in recruiting a sufficient number of foster homes. Sipho Sibanda discusses how the increasing number of children in need of foster care in South Africa has led to an overwhelmed system, with social workers now facing extremely heavy workloads. In her qualitative desktop review of existing studies, she examines the challenges within the foster grant system, including both underlying causes and current issues. The use of funds from foster care grants and their role in providing income support to families and children are also highlighted.

Mairin Macleod notes that there is a duality in the role of the foster carer: They are expected to be both parents and workers for the fostering service provider, yet in England, they are legally recognised as neither. She considers how a litigious foster carer might seek to recover an underpayment to their fee and/or allowance through the employment tribunal. Application of the law of unlawful deductions to wages provides a useful paradigm for reconciling the tension of the dual role of the foster carer, as a worker undertaking the work of parenting.

3. Conclusion

The collection of articles in this thematic issue includes contributions from several different countries covering both historical and contemporary data. The issue illustrates how foster care policies grapple with ambivalences as to whether fostering should be seen as work or an act of love. The difficulties stem from a moral stance;

money in close relationships is perceived as contaminating in intimate spheres, that is, among friends and within families (Zelizer, 2011). A contemporary child is expected to be considered "priceless" (Zelizer, 1985), meaning it is not expected to be used for payment or profit.

While there is growing recognition of the need for fair compensation, many systems still struggle to reconcile this with the moral and emotional dimensions of caregiving. Foster parents themselves may not have this dichotomous view; taking care of placed children may not be seen as work or family life, but also in a variety of other ways, such as an "assignment," "care," "lifestyle," "duty," and sometimes even "treatment." Payments and their circumstances then appear as something integrated rather than dominant, as one of several subordinate or parallel perspectives.

Funding

Forte, the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (2021–00122).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Åkerström, M. (2014). *Suspicious gifts: Bribery, morality and professional gifts*. Routledge.

Colton, M., Roberts, S., & Williams, M. (2008). The recruitment and retention of family foster-carers: An international and cross-cultural analysis. *British Journal of Social Work*, *38*(5), 865–884.

Goffman, E. (1986). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Northeastern University Press. (Original work published 1974)

Goody, E. N. (2007). *Parenthood and social reproduction: Fostering and occuptional roles in West Africa*. Cambridge University Press.

Höjer, I. (2001). *Fosterfamiljens inre liv* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Gothenburg.

Kirton, D. (2013). What is work? Insights from the evolution of state foster care. *Work, Employment and Society*, *27*(4), 658–673.

Kirton, D. (2022). Exploring the anti-professional turn in English foster care. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *52*(7), 4021–4039.

Nelson, J. A. (2007). Economics for humans: Conscience, care, and commerce? *Challenge*, *50*(4), 17–25.

Nutt, L. (2006). *The lives of foster carers: Private sacrifices, public restrictions*. Routledge.

Vinnerljung, B., & Sallnäs, M. (2008). Into adulthood: A follow-up study of 718 young people who were placed in out-of-home care during their teens. *Child & Family Social Work*, *13*(2), 144–155.

Zelizer, V. A. (1985). *Pricing the priceless child: The changing value of children*. Princeton University Press.

Zelizer, V. A. (2005). *The purchase of intimacy*. Princeton University Press.

Zelizer, V. A. (2011). *Economic lives: How culture shapes the economy*. Princeton University Press.

About the Authors

Malin Åkerström is professor emerita of sociology at Lund University in Sweden.

Susanne Boethius is an associate professor of sociology and works as a researcher at the Department of Sociology at Lund University in Sweden.