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Academic Editors
Malin Åkerström (Lund University)
Susanne Boethius (Lund University)

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EDITORIAL

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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)

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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

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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.

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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.

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ARTICLE

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

Oddbjørg Skjær Ulvik

Centre for Senior Citizen Staff, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Correspondence: Oddbjørg Skjær Ulvik (oddbjorg@oslomet.no)

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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

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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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About the Author

Oddbjørg Skjær Ulvik is professor emerita at Oslo Metropolitan University. Her research focuses on children and childhood, parenting, personal and professional child-adult relationships, and professional practices with children. Child welfare is central in her research, more specifically, foster care, children's participation, and professional conversations with children.

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ARTICLE

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Nurses, Foster Mothers, Businesswomen, and Baby-Farmers: Market-Based Infant Care in Pre-WWI Australia

Nell Musgrove

National School of Arts and Humanities, Australian Catholic University, Australia

Correspondence: Nell Musgrove (nell.musgrove@acu.edu.au)

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Abstract

In 19th-century Australia, there were few childcare options for mothers who needed to work. Residential institutions emerged as the colonial society's preferred mode of placing older children, but they did not accommodate those below the age of two or three years. Thus, a private foster care market comprised of women prepared to take payment for nursing infants came to provide an essential service. Although the existence of this foster-mother workforce was widely known, it did not attract significant public debate until the latter decades of the century. This article uses historical newspapers and the records of the government's child welfare department in the Australian Colony of Victoria to trace the discourses invoked in debates about paid motherhood with a particular focus on the period from 1850 to 1915. It argues that by the time public alarm about private arrangements peaked in the 1890s, paid infant placements that were entirely unregulated by the state were almost non-existent, and that by the end of this period, the government and private systems were effectively working as one. Nevertheless, moral panics about so-called baby-farming and infanticide helped entrench an association in social discourse between "mothering" for payment and infant exploitation, and by the early 20th century there was a general suspicion about the motives of people who wanted to be remunerated for their work and expenses as foster parents—a suspicion which lingers in the 21st century.

Keywords

Australia; baby farming; child welfare history; foster care; infant nursing

1. Introduction

In 21st-century Australia, foster care is provided through state, as opposed to federal (national), departments. These child welfare structures are the direct legacies of systems put in place in each Australian colony prior to

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the 1901 Federation of Australia as a nation within the British Commonwealth. While the foster care systems in each state draw on shared discourses about child protection and parenting, they do not form one cohesive system—nor have they ever. Therefore, in order to present a deep study of debates around paid parenthood, this article takes the present-day state of Victoria as its historical case study, tracking the issue across almost a century: from colonisation of the region in the 1830s to World War One (WWI). It argues that debates about paid parenthood were fuelled by moral panics associated with the private foster care market which grew during the second half of the 19th century, and that even as the state's regulation of that market increased, fears about so-called baby farming and infant mortality helped entrench an association in social discourse between "mothering" for payment and infant exploitation. This period of history provides a valuable insight into how Western society navigated some profound changes. Historians of childhood now broadly agree that the mid-to-late 19th century witnessed a transformation in the emotional and social value placed on children, and sociologist Viviana Zelizer, by insisting on the importance of the concept of sentiment in understanding childhood, provided a conceptual intervention that helped historians theorise this transition (Cunningham, 2005; Fass, 2012; Musgrove et al., 2019; Zelizer, 1985). The period examined in this article was also one of shifting approaches to governing perceived social problems, and as key scholars have illustrated, the decades bridging the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a profound growth in tools of governmentality concerned with shaping and controlling the self or individual (Foucault, 1979, 2009; Rose, 1999; Rose et al., 2006). Children, youth, and family life were the targets of many such tools (Donzelot, 1979; Rose, 1999; Yeo, 1996). This article illustrates the uncertainty and anxiety that navigating such change could create. It also demonstrates that the ill ease about paying for parenting examined in other parts of this thematic issue is not unique to the 21st century. Western society has a long history of accepting rhetoric and structures that separate care, intimacy, and tenderness from money, and the persistence of practices that necessitate the blurring of these boundaries produces tensions around the notion of care as work (McCabe & Wanhalla, 2019; Zelizer, 2005).

To examine big-picture social debate and discourse about paid parenting across a relatively broad sweep of time, this article's methodology deploys both traditional historical analysis of government archives (including more than 1,500 records of the government's child welfare department and 365 inquests), and an analysis of digitised historical newspapers. The archival research began by looking for evidence about the evolution of foster care in Victoria through a systematic sampling of the Chief Secretary's Inward Correspondence files which contain, scattered amongst thousands of archival boxes covering a range of government responsibilities, the documentation about the individual and systemic decision-making processes of the government's colonial child welfare system. The people and cases identified through that sampling could then be traced through other archival collections including inquests and police files. Parliamentary documents and departmental reports also provided important data. The work with historical newspapers utilises a technique developed by the author for combining big-data harvesting and analysis with finer-grained qualitative reading of selected articles. As detailed elsewhere (Musgrove, 2020), this involved leveraging the National Library of Australia's digitised historical newspaper archive's OCR-searchable texts to identify articles from newspapers published in Victoria that utilised the terms "baby farming" (and variations as detailed below) and "infanticide" to map the prevalence of these terms over time. This produced a collection of just over 7,600 articles covering the period 1840–1915, and then headlines and the first line of text, harvested into the database along with the publication details of each article, were used to identify those suitable for closer reading. Combined, these research approaches provide insight into both the nature and relative profile of debates about paid parenting, specifically as it related to infants, from colonisation until WWI. The first section of the article examines the period up to 1883, when the private

nursing of infants was largely unregulated, and the second section shows how the gradual regulation of the private system ultimately merged government and non-government foster care, noting that both were profoundly impacted by shifting social attitudes towards paid parenthood across the period.

2. Establishing Child Placement Structures in Colonial Victoria

The history of paid foster care in Victoria begins with colonisation because, prior to that invasion, Aboriginal society did not separate mothers from their children to free their labour for other purposes, and when parents were incapacitated or deceased, rich kinship networks provided other parental figures to undertake the care of children. In the mid-1830s, pastoralists from the British colony of Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) began arriving and setting up sheep runs, constituting the first ongoing colonial occupation of present-day Victoria. A combination of local births and an influx of people from the northern colony of New South Wales raised the non-Aboriginal population to almost 80,000 people by 1850, a sizeable proportion of whom were under the age of 14 (New South Wales Colonial Secretary's Office, 1846; Serle, 1968). The gold rush, which began in mid-1851, boosted the population to more than 500,000 by the end of the decade (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Aboriginal people were not counted in the colonial census, but historical research has shown that as a consequence of savage and systematic violence, colonial land dispossession, and introduced disease, the Aboriginal population of Victoria was devastated to fewer than 2,000 people by the end of the 1850s, having been close to 60,000 prior to colonisation (Ryan, 2010; Smith et al., 2008).

This rapid and violent imposition of a colonial population occurred with little consideration for what became of children whose families could not provide for them, yet colonial society itself produced situations which required non-familial care of children. The socioeconomic structure assumed that families would have a male breadwinner, and a female caregiver. The lack of wider familial supports in a society filled with recent migrants meant that families who lost their male breadwinners through death, incapacitation, or desertion could be thrust into poverty rapidly. Furthermore, the stigmatisation of unmarried mothers meant that there was little interest in helping mothers who had no male breadwinner to begin with, and even less interest in solutions focused on keeping unmarried mothers and their children together (Swain & Howe, 1995). In the total absence of government social relief, and minimal private philanthropy, many women needed to earn an income. The most widely available work for women was live-in domestic service, and few employers allowed mothers to bring children with them (Higman, 2002). There were, therefore, children of all ages who needed care outside the family unit.

Government-run child welfare provisions were slow to emerge, first because of opposition from the colonial government of New South Wales which officially governed the district until 1851, and then because of local opposition to imposing a British Poor Law equivalent. In the late 1840s, some local church groups in Melbourne, the colony's largest city, arranged ad hoc boarding out (foster care) for children, but by the early 1850s it was clear that these foster schemes could not meet demand (Musgrove, 2013). In any case, colonial society viewed residential institutions as the most reliable form of poverty relief, whether that be for children or adults. In Britain, such institutions had been predominantly funded by Poor Law provisions, but rather than any such direct provision of poverty relief, the Victorian government opted to partially support the work of private charities to undertake the work (Musgrove, 2023). During the 1850s and 1860s, religiously based philanthropic organisations opened both Protestant and Catholic orphanages in the colony's largest cities, but they did not have capacity for all the children seeking admission. Generalist relief

institutions took in some of the children who could not find places in orphanages, and others found themselves in the colony's gaols (Musgrove, 2013). Institutions did not provide for very young children—certainly not children still breastfeeding, but even weaned infants required much more intensive care than institutions were equipped to provide. This left a sizeable number of mothers who needed to work but whose children were too young for an institution, and so there was a market demand for infant nursing services.

The informal, and often purposefully concealed, work of paid infant care poses challenges to its historical study, but there are some clear features of both its providers and its consumers in colonial Victoria. Although this article argues that the women who obtained market-based care for their infants did so in the context of few alternatives for survival, it is also important to acknowledge that Aboriginal women in this period almost never had even the limited options available to working-class non-Aboriginal mothers. Aboriginal women's labour was exploited, and they were often forcibly separated from their children, but they were rarely afforded an opportunity for input into how or where their children would be raised. White women were the primary consumers of market-based infant care and, unlike places such as the Antebellum American South, in Victoria they also constituted the majority of women undertaking this care work (West & Knight, 2017). The workforce was also almost entirely working-class women who either accepted positions in wealthier households or took children into their own homes.

Infant nursing services broadly fell into two categories: wet nursing (breastfeeding) and dry nursing. Wet nursing was, by far, the most reliable way of keeping infants alive until artificial feeding methods improved in the early 20th century, thus this service commanded higher rates of pay. This created an employment opportunity for women who were still lactating, but unless they were financially secure enough to have an established home from which they could offer their services, they usually had to place their own infant with a dry nurse to take live-in work with a wealthier family. The fashion amongst wealthier families in Victoria by the mid-19th century was turning against hiring wet nurses unless a mother was unable to supply sufficient breastmilk herself, but relatively high maternal mortality and ill-health meant that there was always work for wet nurses (Thorley, 2021). Dry nursing dominated the private infant nursing market because it was more affordable and because anyone, not only lactating women, could do it. It was risky because of the unreliability of artificial feeding and high infant mortality in general, yet the relatively low social value placed on the types of children typically sent to dry nurses—those of unmarried mothers and children of poor widowed or deserted women—meant that this market operated without significant scrutiny or regulation for several decades (Swain, 2010).

Even the most devoted dry nurses could struggle to keep infants alive. Fresh cow milk was generally considered the gold standard in feeding for dry-nursed infants, but few nurses had their own cow, and without refrigeration or even reliable controls over the quality of milk supply, maintaining a supply could be costly and time-consuming. In addition to feeding and changing infants several times a day, nurses often had to make multiple trips to buy fresh milk. Some were also caring for older children, although typically not ones old enough to help with the work (older children were easier and cheaper for families to place elsewhere, such as with friends or in an institution, and some found that they could take children's care back themselves when they reached roughly school age). Little wonder, then, that some dry nurses used alcohol or medications to sedate infants to keep them sleeping—another risk factor for infant life (Swain, 2005).

As Swain (2010, 2018) has argued, there is no one archetype that captures who dry nurses were or what motivated them, and the research for this article confirms that view. Some women were clearly accepting payment for dry nursing but also hoping the arrangement would become a pseudo-adoption; others took in one child to supplement family income—almost akin to what might be termed a side-hustle in the present day; while others established relationships with midwives and institutions that needed regular placements for babies and took as many as they could manage at a time, sometimes even employing other nurses to assist them. Some children arrived at dry nurses within hours of birth, while others were nursed by their mothers for several months, but in either case babies typically arrived on their own and not in sibling groups. The size of the private market is impossible to quantify because it was covert by nature, but a conservative estimate would be that it involved hundreds of children at any given time, and it probably provided for a larger number of infants and toddlers than did the government-run foster care system for much of the period before the 1890s. By the early 20th century, the number of infants registered with dry nurses was roughly equal to the number of children aged 0–5 within the government system.

Despite a persistent need for dry nursing services, it was perceived as somewhat disreputable because of its association in the public imagination with "illegitimate" children and high infant mortality. Dry nursing multiple infants for payment became known as baby farming from the late 1860s, a term which became connected with the idea that supposed baby farmers would accept money for infants but then murder them by force or neglect rather than spending the money on their care (Homrighaus, 2001; Swain, 2005). Scholars agree that moral panics about so-called baby farming overestimated its extent, but the very notion cast doubt on all dry nursing, and the genuine challenges of keeping dry-nursed infants alive, combined with negative assumptions about the trustworthiness of the kinds of poor women who would be willing to perform such work, tainted many people's views (Hinks, 2022; Swain, 2005).

Nurses, therefore, had a vested interest in keeping their work somewhat clandestine. So too did many of the mothers who sought to conceal the existence of an ex-nuptial child by placing it out. Midwives helped mothers find nurses, and mainstream newspapers were also used to advertise dry nursing services (Swain, 2005, 2018). Such advertisements appeared in Victorian newspapers from the 1850s, their frequency tapering away after formal regulation of dry nursing began in the 1880s. Typical examples from the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s pushed back against stereotypes by emphasising the respectability of the woman, e.g., "A respectable woman wishes a child to dry nurse; references given," and concealed the location and identity of the nurse by listing a doctor or local business as the contact ("Advertising," 1856a). Some more plainly positioned the work as part of wider services, e.g., "Wanted a child to dry nurse, and needlework" ("Advertising," 1856b), and during the 1860s more candid acknowledgements of the financial transaction began to appear: "Wanted, a child, to dry-nurse. Every care taken. Terms moderate" ("Advertising," 1864). Others distanced themselves from the image of the baby farmer who archetypically took in many children at once, while remaining clearly transactional: "Wanted, charge [of] child to dry-nurse. 8s [shillings] weekly. No other children" ("Advertising," 1871). These decades thus contained a space for women to position themselves as businesswomen, of sorts, albeit while actively contesting a discourse that questioned the legitimacy of their work. Such an approach was the more common one within the newspaper advertisements of this period, but there were also examples of women drawing on the discourse of providing a skilled profession by stating that they had "great experience" ("Advertising," 1868), and other instances of women emphasising that the child would "receive motherly care" ("Advertising," 1861)—two approaches to positioning the work which would become more prominent in later decades.

There are scattered examples suggesting that some private foster care accommodated slightly older children (e.g., "Advertising," 1865), but it primarily provided for infants. By the 1860s, it was clear that neither the private market nor the colony's orphanages were accommodating all of the older children in need of support. Concern about growing numbers of children in the colony's gaols, and about visible groups of children on the streets of the cities and larger towns, pressured the government to directly enter child welfare provision. The Neglected and Criminal Children Act (Colony of Victoria, 1864) reflected the government's expectation that its new institutions would be catering to older "wayward" children—those who might now be described as teen and pre-teen—who had either committed a crime or who were living "unruly" or "unsupervised" lives that might be leading them towards a life of crime. Consequently, it established industrial schools and reformatory schools following the model set out by British social reformer Mary Carpenter. However, the Act inadvertently provided a legislative mechanism for parents to essentially force the government to take custody of their children, and the new system was quickly overwhelmed by large numbers of very young children for whom its institutions were entirely unsuitable (Musgrove, 2013). Mothers who feared they would be unable to keep up with payments to nurses, and who therefore worried about what would become of their children, quickly understood that if they could persuade a magistrate to commit their child as neglected, the state would have to retain custody of the child even if maintenance payments ceased (Twomey, 2002). However, not all mothers were prepared to surrender their children to the state, and the private foster care market did not disappear.

The colony's non-government institutions also continued to more than fill their available places. In addition to providing for children without requiring parents to relinquish legal control, non-government institutions were viewed as providing higher quality care, and some parents used the government system as an immediate crisis-aversion strategy while continuing to seek places for their children in non-government institutions (Chief Secretary's Department, 1865). Although this article is primarily interested in following the relationships between government and non-government foster care, it is also worth noting that the 1864 legislation included a provision for the government to pay non-government institutions a fee if they were willing to provide for children placed under the Act. There were some non-government institutions, most notably Catholic ones, which took in "wards of the state" under this provision during the 19th century, but it was not until the post-WWI era that the non-government sector became a major provider of institutional places for the government (Barnard & Twigg, 2004; Musgrove, 2013).

In addition to suddenly being responsible for a significantly larger number of children than it had expected, the government system was forced to solve the problem of keeping infants in its custody alive. The legislation did not allow for children to be placed anywhere except an institution, and so the only apparent solution was to hire wet nurses to care for the infants within institutional walls. Ironically, this contributed to the demand for private dry nursing, since most women who accepted positions as wet nurses within government institutions had living infants of their own who then needed to be placed elsewhere. Women could wet nurse two infants at a time in the government institutions, and thereby make a profit even after paying a dry nurse for their own child (Musgrove, 2013). Colonial society was selectively concerned about infant deaths resulting from this arrangement. In 1869, Adelaide Anne Grant was lambasted in the press and charged with manslaughter (of which she was acquitted) when a child she was wet-nursing at the Melbourne Industrial School died ("Manslaughter," 1869). It was only four years later when another woman, Ellen Davis, was found to be running a dry nursing business out of a "wretched filthy den" that the newspapers even made a passing mention that Grant's own infant had died in Davis's care while Grant was wet nursing at the industrial school ("A specimen of wretchedness," 1873, p. 5). Even then, there was little

sympathy for Grant or her child, but instead a suggestion that the association of Grant and Davis further evidenced each of their poor characters.

Despite mounting criticism in the press about deaths in government institutions, the issue that eventually forced a change in practice was the concern that wet nurses, most of whom were single mothers and therefore seen as morally tainted, were corrupting children in the institutions, particularly the older girls (Musgrove, 2024; Musgrove & Michell, 2018). The department moved wet nursing out of its institutions as early as 1872, although the legislation which formally enabled the placement of children in private homes was not passed until 1874. Somewhat optimistically, the advertisements for women to wet nurse industrial school infants in their own homes, rather than as residential wet nurses, sought married women:

> Wanted, Married Women, lately confined, who have lost their own children, to take and wet-nurse, at their own homes, the neglected infants at the Industrial Schools, Melbourne. Rate of payment, 10s. per week for each child. Apply to Dr. McGauran at the Industrial School…at 2pm to-day. ("Advertising," 1872)

The records about the women who took children into their own homes to wet nurse in the early 1870s are scant, but the change certainly made things more difficult for single mothers. First, the work was more attractive to a wider range of women than the residential work in the industrial schools had been, so the department could be somewhat more selective. Second, women had to have a suitable home into which they could take the children, and many of the single mothers who had taken work in the schools had been willing to accept that work precisely because they could not secure lodging without parting with their child. There were likely single mothers employed as wet nurses in these early years, but they were removed from the public eye and no longer a source of embarrassment for the government. Just like the private nursing market, the government relied on newspaper advertisements, as well as the knowledge of local midwives and philanthropic ladies who knew the women prepared to take on the work, to staff its new wet nursing scheme.

Removing wet-nursed infants from institutions had been the most pressing issue for the government, but it was just the first move towards restructuring the government system away from institutions. The 1874 amendment of the Neglected and Criminal Children Act made boarding out legal within the government system, and over the next decade the government gradually closed almost all of its institutions so that most children under government guardianship were in foster placements. One factor that limited the transition was the availability of people willing to foster. Historians examining other locations in this period have found a general acceptance of the idea that people prepared to do the work of the state by taking children into their homes should be able to make a modest profit (Abrams, 1998; Engberg, 2005; MacDonald, 1996). The same was true in Australia, although this did not mean that foster care was entirely reduced to a financial transaction; for both practical and philosophical reasons, government officials hoped that women would bond with their foster children and keep them long-term out of affection rather than purely for profit (Evans, 2002; Musgrove & Michell, 2018).

Whatever the government hoped would motivate women to foster, their early efforts to secure a stable supply of foster homes suggests that the women providing those homes were very much concerned with the money they could earn. The first official boarding out payment schedule in Victoria had three tiers:

12/- (shillings) for children under one year (or any child placed with wet-nursing foster mothers), 7/- for children aged three to five, and 5/- for children aged 6 to 14. At first, the Ladies Visiting Association—the group of philanthropic women overseeing the local voluntary Ladies Committees responsible for finding and supervising foster homes for the government—argued that the rate for wet nursing was too low to enable them to attract "suitable persons" (Chief Secretary's Department, 1874, p. 10). However, within a few years, the local Ladies Committees had solidified their recruitment networks, and their concern shifted to the phenomenon of foster mothers returning children when the payments dropped—either when their wet nursing period ended, or when they turned six. The government's first response was to cut the middle rate to set the payment for all weaned children, regardless of age, at 5/-, but women persisted in returning weaned children to obtain new infants for wet nursing.

Debates about how the government should remunerate wet nurses revealed competing understandings of the role. The Ladies Visiting Association argued that the rates for wet-nursed and weaned children should be brought closer together, to 10/- and 7/-, to encourage foster mothers to establish long-term homes for children. The colony's chief medical officer agreed that long-term homes might be ideal but argued that the government relied on having a steady supply of wet nurses, and that the children sent out by the government could be particularly demanding in terms of the care they required: "Many of the infants given out," he wrote, "are miserable sickly children requiring much attention in regard to cleanliness and the nurse's sleep is disturbed at night, and the responsibility is considerable" (Chief Secretary's Department, 1881, pp. 7–8). Wet nurses were in constant demand on the private market, and while those nursing for the government avoided the risk of people missing payments, they also had less choice over which infants they nursed and had to allow oversight of their work by local Ladies Committees. Reliable and generous rates of payment were, the chief medical officer argued, an important tool at the government's disposal for maintaining sufficient numbers of wet nurses. Ultimately, the government followed the views of the chief medical officer, although this appears to have been more due to the overall cost to the department than the acceptance of one philosophical position over another: There were far more weaned children than those requiring wet nursing, and so raising payments for weaned children would have cost far more than the savings made by lowering payments to wet nurses (Chief Secretary's Department, 1881).

Thus, by the early 1880s, the government was running a parallel system that looked very much like the private infant nursing networks. The main advantage of the government system for parents was that they did not have to pay for foster care, unless they were judged able to afford it, and they knew that someone would keep providing for their children even if they agreed to payments they were unable to make; the disadvantages were the loss of legal control of their children, and the government's rule against children in foster homes having any visitation with their parents (Musgrove & Michell, 2018). For providers of foster homes, the government system offered more reliable payment but less autonomy than the private market. However, right at this moment, legislation introduced to regulate the private infant-nursing market began to significantly change the independence of people performing that work.

3. Regulating Private Foster Care

The Public Health Amendment Statute was the Colony of Victoria's (1883) first legislative effort to regulate private foster care. Part III required the registration of any person "retaining or receiving for hire or reward…more than one infant, or in the case of twins more than two infants, under the age of two years" if

"maintaining such infants apart from their parents for a longer period than twenty-four hours," required local health boards to maintain such registers (striking off unsatisfactory nurses), and ordered inquests for any infants dying in the custody of registered nurses unless exempted by a medical professional (Colony of Victoria, 1883, pp. 635–637). The legislation was ineffective because it did not require or empower the inspection of either the children themselves or the nurses' homes in which they lived, and the public health authorities were not proactive in their duties. However, the adoption of the principle of legally regulating the private market was a significant development.

Although the 1883 Statute made no mention of illegitimate infants, infanticide, or baby farming, it was a direct response to social anxieties about these perceived social ills that had been building for several decades. Examining the usage of the terms "infanticide" and "baby farming" (including "baby farm," "baby farmer," and all three forms with hyphenation) in Victorian newspapers reveals the shifting nature of social concerns attached to these concepts over time. Trove, the National Library of Australia's mass newspaper digitisation project (https://trove.nla.gov.au/search/advanced/category/newspapers), has made entire runs of historical Australian newspapers available and text-searchable, enabling studies of language usage over time. While there are some newspapers known to have existed which are not included in the database, for the period covered in this article, most of Victoria's major newspapers are available. The earliest Victorian newspaper in the database is from 1838, and the total number of articles (across all topics) for that year was just 236. By 1840, the year the term "infanticide" first appeared in the Victorian press, the total number of articles was more than 2,500, and as the population grew, so too did the size of the press. The total number of articles in the press was more than 100,000 articles for the year 1865, topped 500,000 in 1899, and exceeded 1,000,000 by 1914. In assessing press coverage invoking the terms "infanticide" or "baby farm," it is useful to consider the raw numbers of articles using the terms each year, as well as those articles as a percentage of all Victorian newspaper articles on Trove for the year. Figure 1 provides each of these side by side.

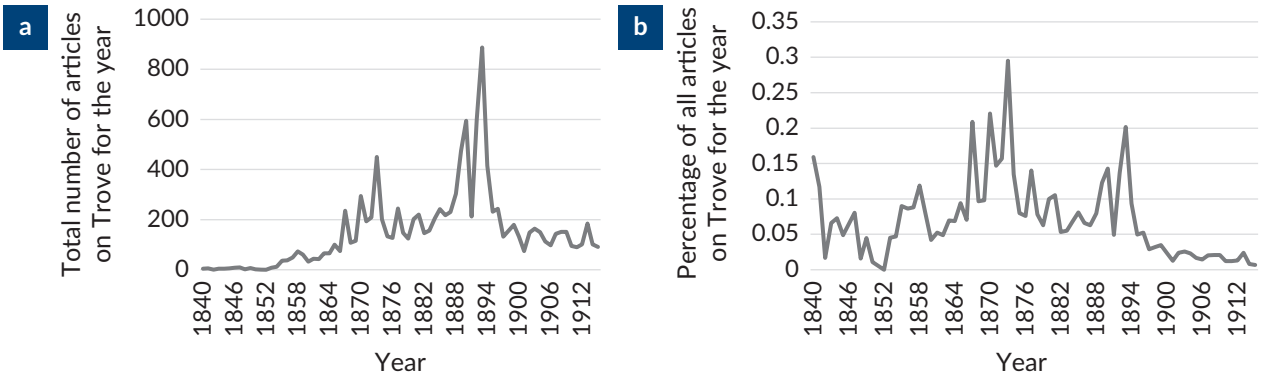

Figure 1. Victorian newspaper articles including the terms infanticide and/or baby-farm for each year (a) number of articles in sample for each year; (b) articles in sample as a percentage of all articles on Trove for the year. Source: Created based on original research by the author using the GLAM Workbench (see also Sherratt, 2024).

The apparently high profile of the issue through the 1840s in Figure 1b is deceptive, given that the relatively high percentage of coverage reflects no more than 10 articles in any year, but it is fair to say that the two graphs read together reflect a level of social concern about infanticide in the 1840s and 1850s. Until the mid-1860s, the newspaper coverage focused on newborns killed or abandoned by their mothers in presumed

attempts to conceal illegitimate births. As early as 1840, the *Port Phillip Herald* declared "that the horrible crime of infanticide is of frequent occurrence in this small town" ("Domestic intelligence," 1840, p. 3). In 1856, another newspaper claimed that there was "scarcely a week" in the colony "without some record of inhumanity perpetrated by mothers in the abandonment or wilful murder of their offspring," and urged for "some stringent measures" to be adopted against the "offences of child dropping and infanticide" ("Melbourne," 1856, p. 2). In 1859, an infant died from apparent starvation and neglect while placed with a wet nurse in Melbourne. A court reporter described the police officer who discovered the dying infant testifying in court:

> [He said that he] found [the nurse] lying drunk on an old mattress. On an old sofa was lying a child, crying piteously. One of its eyes was closed, and the other open. It was wrapped in some filthy clothes, and the smell was horrible. The face of the child was shrivelled and distorted....The child had since died. ("Child murder," 1859, p. 6)

The case itself was reported by several papers, but the coverage ceased when the jury failed to convict the nurse, and press coverage of infanticide remained primarily interested in so-called "child dropping" by mothers.

The number of articles mentioning infanticide, and the size of the Victorian press, grew during the gold rush era of the 1850s and 1860s. By 1865, the overall size of the press means that the percentage of articles using the terms becomes the most meaningful measure for understanding the changing profile of the topic within the press. To illustrate the relative profile of this issue, Figure 2 maps coverage of infanticide and baby farming against coverage of unemployment, a persistently significant social concern, from 1865 through 1915. Aside from a short period in the 1870s, unemployment was a higher priority of the press, but infanticide and baby farming emerge as prominent social issues of the 19th century, including during the economic depression of the 1890s, when coverage of unemployment unsurprisingly spiked.

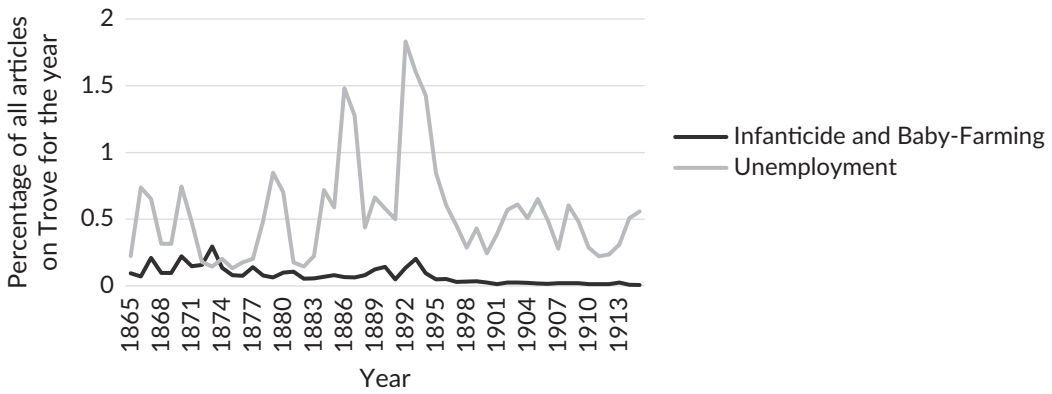

Figure 2. Victorian Newspaper articles including the terms "infanticide" and/or "baby farm" and articles including the term "unemploy*" (which includes "unemployed," "unemployment," "unemployable," etc.) for each year as a percentage of all articles for the year. Created based on original research by the author using the GLAM Workbench (Sherratt, 2024).

Even before the term was coined, the spectre of the baby farmer was invoked in Victorian newspapers. In 1865, in England, Charlotte Winsor was charged and convicted for murdering a child she had agreed to nurse for payment in her home near Torquay, and the case caused a scandal across the British Empire, including Victoria. The Melbourne *Herald* titled Winsor "a professional child-murderess" and alerted readers to the "frightful prevalence of child-murder in the colony," describing it as "proportionately as common and

prevalent in Victoria, as it is in England" ("The prevalence of child murder," 1865, p. 2). As Homrighaus (2001) argues, Winsor played a pivotal role in constructing the image of the baby farmer, yet she was not described as one because the term itself was not coined until 1867 when it appeared in the *British Medical Journal*. The following year, the term was used in the Victorian press. Figure 3 shows the appearance of the term "baby farmer" (and variations as noted above) in the Victorian press on the left, and on the right, the percentage of all articles about infanticide that also used the term "baby farmer." It shows how quickly baby farming became a prominent feature of all press coverage addressing infanticide, and that after 1900, as infant mortality rates began to notably decline, while other coverage of infanticide diminished to negligible levels, discussion of baby farming persisted.

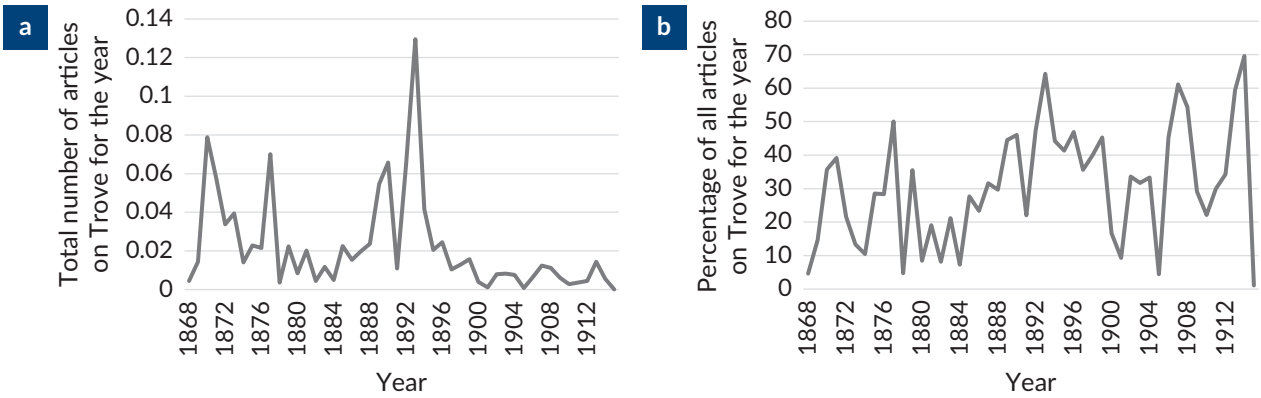

Figure 3. Victorian Newspaper articles (a) including the term "baby farm" for each year as a percentage of all articles for the year; and (b) including the term "baby farm" as a percentage of all articles mentioning infanticide in each year. Created based on original research by the author using the GLAM Workbench (Sherratt, 2024).

During 1868 and 1869, Victorian newspapers began to use the term "baby farmer" in relation to English and French cases, and in January 1870, the *Herald* wrote:

> Has baby-farming become an institution in Victoria? From the account of an inquest held on the death of an infant at Emerald Hill, and from inquiries made elsewhere, proof has been obtained that the practice of baby-farming obtains to a very wide extent in Melbourne. Although this practice here is not attended with the meditated cruelty that is connected with it at home…in the majority of cases the result is the same, for the death of the infant almost always follows its being put out to nurse. ("Has baby-farming become an institution," 1870, p. 2)

Baby farming had been "discovered" in Victoria, and in April the same year the death of an infant placed with a dry nurse in the city of Ballarat scandalised the press (e.g., "An infant starved to death," 1870). Another British case, the conviction and execution of Margaret Waters for baby farming, gained much attention in the Victorian press during the second half of 1870, and throughout the decade concerns about both baby farming and maternal infanticide in the colony remained high. In part, this reflected a colonial tendency to see the local "discovery" of the worst social ills of Europe's large cities as simultaneously horrifying and validating of Melbourne's status as true city of the world, but it was also fuelled by growing concerns during the 1870s that the settler population was not reproducing quickly enough to ensure the long-term security of the colonial society (Musgrove, 2013; Swain, 2005).

In the wake of the Waters case, the United Kingdom introduced the Infant Life Protection Act which required that infant nurses be registered with local authorities and that inquests be held upon the deaths of infants placed with such nurses; Victoria's Central Board of Health urged for the same to be implemented in the colony ("The central board," 1872). The board repeated this recommendation to the government in 1876, but there was no parliamentary action until late 1883, the Public Health Amendment Bill being debated in October that year ("News of the day," 1876; "Parliament," 1883). The wheels of colonial government often moved slowly, but public concern about infant mortality—particularly the revaluing of illegitimate children of the poor in the face of declining birth rates—helped make this a more pressing matter (McCalman et al., 2011; Swain, 2010). The impact of this first attempt at regulating private infant nursing was minimal; local authorities were relatively haphazard in registering nurses, the Statute gave authorities little power for meaningful oversight, breaches of the legislation incurred relatively minor fines, and even when inquests into infant deaths revealed systematic baby farming, establishing grounds for murder trials proved difficult (State Coroner's Office, 1885; "The day's news," 1886).

One noticeable effect of the 1883 Statute was that it stimulated the press's attention on the notion of baby farming, with coverage of the topic increasing significantly during the latter part of the 1880s (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Victorian Newspaper articles including the term "baby farm" for each year as a percentage of all articles for the year, 1880–1890. Created based on original research by the author using the GLAM Workbench (Sherratt, 2024).

The articles of the 1880s leaned heavily on depictions of nurses as either heartless or incompetent, and of mothers as either desperate to hide the shame of an illegitimate birth or vicious conspirators in the disposal of a child—one the mother may not value, but whom society should attempt to save:

> All over the colony unhappy infants…presently drop into premature graves, or die, abandoned to the…cruel hands of the baby farmer, or…are slaughtered by the unhappy mothers whose pride and glory they would be under more fortunate circumstances. We cannot…lighten the burden which the support of a base-born child places upon its unfortunate mother.…But we can do something towards saving the lives of the helpless little beings who are now slaughtered in hundreds.…For these infants would presently become useful citizens, repaying, directly and indirectly, all care and cost of their maintenance. Surely we might have a Foundling Hospital…where the unhappy women who have been

> deserted by their betrayers might find shelter for the children they cannot themselves support. ("The cry of the children," 1889, p. 2)

This passage, which captures many tropes of the decade, also reflects the limits of the solutions most people were prepared to consider. That is, there was much debate about strategies for keeping infants alive while separated from their mothers, but very little interest in the idea of keeping mothers and children together to achieve this. Popular sentiment about the need to punish "fallen" women through separating them from their children remained strong long into the 20th century (Swain & Howe, 1995).

The Royal Commission on Charitable Institutions (Colony of Victoria, 1890–1891) inquired into the desirability of establishing a foundling hospital in Victoria. Most witnesses consulted on this either supported it because it would save infant lives or opposed it because it would encourage "immorality" by making it too easy for mothers to "unburden themselves" of illegitimate children. However, some leading figures working at the coalface of infant deaths and child welfare in the colony advocated a different approach. When asked whether he opposed a foundling hospital, former City Coroner Dr Richard Youl replied, "Yes, on the ground it is a baby farm. The children will live a little longer; they will have spasms and pains for six months instead of six weeks, but the result is just the same" (Colony of Victoria, 1890–1891, p. 313). Youl argued that being fed on its own mother's milk was the best way to keep any child alive, and that providing places for mothers to nurse their own infants not only saved lives but helped prevent children becoming a cost to the state in the longer-term because mothers bonded with their children and became more determined to remain united with them. Others, including Selina Sutherland, prominent child rescue figure, and George Guillaume, head of the government's child welfare department, agreed, and added that providing for mothers to nurse their infants would awaken "the best part of their nature" and help prevent them becoming "ready prey to a new temptation" (Colony of Victoria, 1890–1891, pp. 536, 587). Indeed, Guillaume had pushed for the government to approve funds for boarding some young mothers in homes with their infants in the 1880s, a scheme which had grown modestly over time but which sat uncomfortably with public understandings of both the causes of illegitimacy and the purposes of welfare provision (Musgrove & Michell, 2018). Ultimately, the government opted for the more popular route of tighter regulation of infant care.

The Infant Life Protection Act 1890 transferred oversight of private infant nursing from local health boards to the police, clarified some language pertaining to who fell under the scope of the Act, and removed the capacity for a medical officer to exempt a privately-nursed infant's death from inquest. The Act formally came into effect in January 1891, but the regulations which provided the details for registration and the guidelines for inspection were not released until January 1893, making this the effective start date of the new legislation (Harris, 2010; Victoria Police, 1893). Victoria's most infamous baby farming case, which ended in the conviction (1893) and execution (1894) of Frances Knorr, combined with the increased number of inquests under the new Act (many of which were reported by the press), fuelled public anxiety about the private nursing of children. This was reflected not only by the clear spike in press coverage (see Figure 3) but also in the increasing prevalence of people reporting their neighbours to police for suspected unregistered private nursing—a phenomenon which continued into the early 1900s (e.g., Victoria Police, 1904, 1905). The volume of work this generated for the police proved immense. The Infant Life Protection Act 1907 transferred registration and inspection of private infant nurses to the government's child welfare department and required that all private placements be approved and paid for via the department.

The 1907 Act brought private and government-run foster care even closer together and created a pathway for children to move seamlessly between the two. The new legislation included a provision for making privately nursed children wards of the state if a nurse stopped receiving payments. Often, nurses were happy to keep the children on and simply switch to being paid the government-approved rate (which was guaranteed even if it were lower than the price they had privately negotiated). Thus, both nurses and children could move from the private to the government system with but the stroke of a pen, as happened frequently from early in 1908 when the Act came into force. Harold L. was born in 1908, and his mother, who was not married to his father, placed him with a private nurse very shortly after his birth so that she could take a live-in domestic service position. Harold's father agreed to pay the nurse and apparently kept up the payments for several years. However, by mid-1912, he had fallen into arrears, and Harold was made a ward of the state. Harold remained with the same nurse, and likely knew nothing of the legally significant change in his status (Chief Secretary's Department, 1912; Department for Neglected Children, 1908). This was part of a wider trend, and the department's Annual Reports also show that children moved back the other way: Parents resumed payments and regained legal control of their children in roughly equal numbers to those being made wards of the state through this process.

Harold L.'s story is also interesting because it illustrates an example that sits comfortably neither in the notion of nurses as professionals, nor as motherly figures motivated purely by love, yet by the late 19th century, these were the two discourses available to women seeking to position their paid care of children as legitimate. The nurse had initially made a private arrangement for payment, and when the money stopped arriving, she sought continued payment from the government. However, in 1922, as Harold approached the age at which the government would have removed him from his foster home to send him to a work placement, the nurse applied to have him released into her custody without payment—a request which was granted (Chief Secretary's Department, 1912). This suggests that despite seeking payment in return for providing a foster home, she had also been invested in Harold and was unwilling to part with him.

As Swain (2010, 2018) has shown, the reasons for which women acted as infant nurses were complex, and even in individual cases the lines between nursing for profit and using it as a form of de facto adoption (there was no legal adoption in Victoria until 1928) could be blurred. Usually, women could navigate their available choices within the private and government foster care systems without having to explain how they understood the nature of the care they provided. However, when nurses were called before an inquest into the death of a child in their care, they could feel compelled to defend the quality of the care they had provided. A sample of 365 Infant Life Protection inquests suggests that between the mid-1890s and the mid-1910s, the space for paid nurses to deploy motherly love or motherly knowledge as a way of justifying why they should not be held responsible for the child's death diminished. In the 1890s, women might explain the actions they took when a child fell ill as having been based on experience gained through mothering children of their own (e.g., State Coroner's Office, 1898b), or position accepting money as the first step towards family formation—some even pointing to having older "adopted" children obtained through the same process (e.g., State Coroner's Office, 1898a). By the 1900s, women were more likely to emphasise how long they had been successfully working as a registered nurse, to describe their actions in more distanced and clinical terms, and to emphasise their regular provision of nursing services to registered maternity homes for unmarried mothers (State Coroner's Office, 1900, 1902, 1905, 1906). Those who could distance their willingness to care for children from payment might do so by explaining that they had made no "complaint about not being paid" nor made any move to have the child moved into the government system (State Coroner's Office, 1913).

This shift away from a comfort in conflating payment with mothering aligns with the emotional revaluing of the child that took place across the late-19th and early-20th centuries, and reflects how this prompted a social distinction to emerge between the kinds of "care" a mother-like figure might provide and the more professionalised style of infant nursing that one might rightly expect to be paid for. There was, perhaps, also more public space for women who were somewhat transactional about payment for their work during the 1890s economic depression, which caused notable poverty and unemployment for much of the decade. There are rarely single explanatory factors for why social perceptions change, but a shift in views about paid parenting is clear. This also influenced the government's rhetoric about payments to foster mothers for wards of the state, and even though a series of men who led the department asked the government to increase foster payments to help them attract enough placements, the government's position was that they would secure a better quality of home if they offered less financial incentive. As had been the case in the 19th century, the government's refusal to increase funding was at least partly shrewd cost-cutting, but a repetition in public forums of the idea that good foster parents would have no concern for the money they received indicates the growing social traction of this attitude to paid parenting (Musgrove & Michell, 2018).

4. Conclusion

This article has traced the practice of paid infant nursing through both structural and discursive lenses across almost a century. It has illustrated that the social structures which created the need for mothers to separate from their infants created a demand for nursing services that was ultimately met through a combination of government-run and private placements. Increasing social value placed on infant life, particularly white infant life, combined with moral panics about so-called baby farmers, meant that, over time, tolerance for an entirely unregulated infant nursing market evaporated, and during the 1890s and 1900s the role of the state in the care of all infants separated from their mothers increased steadily. In a society that had little interest in supporting families to stay together, this became a costly approach, and by the end of WWI the government-run foster care system was so large that increasing foster payments to keep up with the cost of living was impossible. The number of available foster homes dropped away in the following years as decreasing numbers of families could or would operate at a growing cost to themselves. This led to the almost total collapse of government foster care. The demand for infant placements also dropped away after WWI. Employment options for women were expanding so that more could avoid live-in work, other day-based childcare options were gradually becoming available, and government social welfare also (slowly) grew. The details of those developments are beyond the scope of this article, but they help explain why fewer women needed full-time infant nursing. So too, across the period examined here, the work became less attractive to providers. As society became more deeply invested in the survival of children placed with private nurses, it also committed to more stringent regulation of private foster care. This led to an intertwining of the private and public foster care systems, and while this offered a greater certainty that payments would be received, it also required greater intrusion into the nurses' homes.

The article also illustrated that while there were observable discursive shifts in social debate about paid infant nursing, the concerns of public debate were often out of step with the reality of the practice. "Discovering" baby farming in Victoria captured the public imagination in good part because locating such "evil" as had been found in the great cities of the world alleviated fears that the colony might just be an insignificant backwater. Furthermore, by the time the moral panic about baby farming reached its peak in the 1890s, the effective regulation of private nursing had all but ended the practice in its true sense of intentional and systematic

child murder. Nevertheless, the stigma that had attached to private nursing by the late 19th century because of moral panics about infanticide and baby farming endured. Indeed, long after WWI, when privately paid fostering had shrunk to a negligible size, the press continued to invoke the spectre of the baby farmer. In tracing changes in social attitudes across such long periods of time, it is impossible to quantify the impact of single factors or ideas, but there is little doubt that this period was central in enshrining social suspicion about the idea of paid parenthood and, as other articles in this thematic issue illustrate, many of the stigmas about paying for foster care have proven sticky in the public imagination—not only in Australia, but across the globe.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author

Nell Musgrove is a professor of history at Australian Catholic University in Melbourne. Her research examines the history of child welfare systems, and the intersections of class, gender, race, and age in colonial carceral institutions.

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ARTICLE

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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

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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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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).

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ARTICLE

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Foster Care on the Market: Swedish Independent Foster Care Agencies in an International Context

Evelina Fridell Lif, Tommy Lundström, David Pålsson, Marie Sallnäs, and Emelie Shanks

Department of Social Work, Stockholm University, Sweden

Correspondence: Marie Sallnäs (marie.sallnas@socarb.su.se)

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Abstract

In recent decades, a new type of organisation—independent foster care agencies (IFAs)—has emerged in Sweden and other countries. These organisations operate outside the public sector, marking a significant shift in how foster care is provided. The presence of IFAs signifies the establishment of a foster care market, where responsibilities once managed by child welfare authorities are now outsourced. In this article, the position of IFAs in the Swedish foster care market is analysed. IFAs are viewed as intermediaries facilitating the provision of foster homes and often providing support to foster families. As IFAs primarily operate as for-profit entities, they are analysed within the context of market dynamics and financial considerations in child welfare. The study is based on data from the state inspectorate, including a register of IFAs, framework agreements outlining the requirements for IFAs, and a national survey on IFAs, which includes social workers' assessments of quality and costs. In Sweden, there were around 400 IFAs in 2024, ranging from large care corporations to small companies, frequently used by child welfare services. As for the services provided by IFAs, professionals hold mixed views, with some questioning their value for money. IFAs are an international phenomenon, and they have faced criticism for generating large profits from foster care services. The entrance of IFAs represents a form of radicalisation of the "love or money" dichotomy that has been a recurring theme in the foster care field.

Keywords

child welfare; foster care; independent foster care agencies; privatization

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1. Introduction

Foster care is the primary intervention utilised by Swedish municipal child welfare authorities when children require placement outside their homes. The prioritisation of foster care over residential alternatives has long been embedded in Swedish legislation and operational practices. However, the recruitment of foster carers remains a significant challenge in many Swedish municipalities, resulting in a shortage of suitable homes and complicating the process of matching children who require temporary or long-term care with appropriate families (Pålsson et al., 2022). In the early 1990s, a new type of organisation emerged in Sweden: independent foster care agencies (IFAs). Operating outside the public sector, mostly as for-profit companies, IFAs offer child welfare authorities the option to purchase placements in foster families contracted by these agencies. These placements often include additional support services for foster carers. The emergence of IFAs reflects a broader trend of privatisation and marketisation in out-of-home care—particularly residential care—observed in Sweden and beyond (Sen et al., 2024; Shanks et al., 2021).

IFAs have become established in several countries, including the USA (Huggins-Hoyt et al., 2019), the UK (Begg, 2011; Sellick, 2014), Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021; Barber, 2001), and Norway (Begg, 2011). In Sweden, IFAs play a significant role in the foster care system. Compared to England, which has around 300 IFAs (Ofsted, 2024a), the approximately 400 IFAs in Sweden in 2024 represent a high number, especially considering Sweden's much smaller population. A study by Fridell Lif (2023) indicates that around 90% of Swedish child welfare authorities have engagements with IFAs. Nationally, it is estimated that around 25% of children in foster care are placed in homes facilitated by these agencies. This marks a pivotal shift in child welfare practices, allowing authorities to procure foster family placements and supplementary services from IFAs rather than managing these tasks internally. However, unlike in the USA and England, Swedish child welfare authorities retain the formal responsibility for investigating and supervising foster carers, even when these carers are recruited through external agencies (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2017; Ofsted, 2024b). The extent to which this responsibility is upheld in practice, however, remains a matter of debate.

The emergence of IFAs in foster care raises a host of fundamental questions and tensions frequently debated within the field of social work. While foster care is often perceived as a non-professional endeavour, driven by altruism rather than substantial economic incentives, the reimbursement of foster carers has long been a contentious issue (Söderlind & Sköld, 2018). Historically, various intermediaries with differing financial motivations have been involved in foster care provision. In this article, we analyse IFAs as intermediaries that function as brokers (see below). Operating primarily as for-profit entities, IFAs are inherently influenced by market logics. These dynamics underscore the importance of examining how market forces and pecuniary considerations impact child welfare, particularly in the context of foster care. The prominence of for-profit companies in the field has added a new layer of complexity. As we will demonstrate, utilising IFA services is costly, and the question of whether child welfare authorities receive "value for money" has been widely discussed. This issue has been explored in various forums, including a recent state investigation (Swedish Government Official Report, 2023).

The establishment of IFAs also highlights a tension between the traditional conception of foster care as a layperson's service and the growing demands placed on foster homes to care for children with diverse and often extensive support needs. Some homes facilitated by IFAs have become semi-professionalised, with

foster care serving as a full-time or part-time occupation, warranting additional compensation for carers. Moreover, the use of foster homes through intermediaries like IFAs introduces new and often multifaceted responsibilities for child welfare authorities. These include procuring placements, evaluating and monitoring the quality of outsourced foster homes, and overseeing the additional support services that IFAs may provide to foster carers (cf. Fridell Lif, 2025). Yet, it is important to note that overseeing the quality of foster homes and providing support to carers are essential tasks, even when homes are recruited directly by the authorities. Naturally, these activities incur costs for child welfare. It should also be remembered that, formally, these responsibilities remain with child welfare even when IFAs are contracted. An important point of departure in this study is that an extra layer of complexity has been added by the use of IFAs.

In sum, the emergence of IFAs underscores the multifaceted nature of foster care as a welfare service, in which economic considerations have always been present but have now become more prominent, complex, and subject to debate.

In this article, we analyse the Swedish IFA field, situating it within an international context and a growing body of critical discussion on the marketisation of child welfare (Lundström et al., 2020; Sen et al., 2024), including critiques of IFAs for failing to deliver value for money and increasing costs within child welfare (Davies, 2018). While research on IFAs in Sweden remains limited (however, see Fridell Lif, 2023, 2025), the phenomenon has received greater attention internationally, particularly in the UK (Davies, 2018; Sen et al., 2024). Despite IFAs' significant role as intermediaries and the controversies surrounding them, substantial knowledge gaps persist regarding this segment of the child welfare field. Unlike research in other areas, such as residential care, there is a notable lack of Swedish studies examining the composition and characteristics of IFAs, and the broader significance of economic factors. Additionally, limited research exists on the reasons for their use and the effectiveness of state audit measures.

The overarching aim of this study is to analyse the role of IFAs within the Swedish foster care market and their impact on child welfare authorities. Analytically, we draw on concepts from economics—such as quasi-markets, brokers, transaction costs, and credence goods—to examine the foster care market's development and the public control mechanisms implemented to govern it. Given the limited systematic knowledge about IFAs in Sweden, we have drawn on multiple data sources to provide a broad understanding of the role of this type of organisation. These sources include public registers and documents, as well as a national survey completed by child welfare representatives about their recruitment and use of foster homes.

The research questions are:

- What is the development and current position of IFAs in the foster care market, and how is the market structured regarding different types of agencies?
- What issues and considerations arise in relation to child welfare costs, agency profits, and transaction costs when IFAs are used?
- How are IFAs regulated regarding licensing and procurement requirements, and what implications might these regulations have for the quality of foster care?
- How do child welfare authorities perceive the role of IFAs in the foster care market, particularly in terms of the quality of services in relation to their costs?

2. Background, Previous Research, and Analytical Framework

2.1. The Swedish Context

In Swedish child welfare, municipal services are legally required to provide foster homes to children in need, as well as to negotiate agreements with foster carers regarding their responsibilities. This process begins with recruiting families deemed suitable to care for children. Subsequently, the Social Services Act, which regulates child welfare, stipulates that child welfare authorities monitor and evaluate the well-being of children in foster homes and ensure that foster carers receive adequate support. Traditionally, child welfare professionals have managed each stage of this process, maintaining direct communication with prospective and current foster carers.

A key factor in the rise and expansion of IFAs is the blurred boundary between the public authority exercised by child welfare services and the activities carried out by IFAs. While child welfare authorities are allowed to engage external actors—for example, to gather information before approving foster homes—delegating public authority functions, such as formally investigating and approving a foster home, is prohibited (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2017; Shanks, 2022). In practice, however, there have been indications that child welfare authorities sometimes circumvent the requirement to conduct their own investigations, basing approval decisions solely on information collected and evaluated by IFAs (Health and Social Care Inspectorate [IVO], 2017).

Thus, while child welfare services formally remain responsible for recruiting, investigating, and supporting foster homes, the growing use of IFAs has created a significant grey area. Given the scarcity of foster homes and limited resources for recruitment, particularly for children with complex needs, the services provided by IFAs are often a practical option for child welfare authorities.

Although this article focuses on foster care, substantial research exists on marketisation and its impact in adjacent fields in Sweden, such as elderly care, childcare, and the school system (Gustafsson et al., 2016; Szebehely, 2018), as well as broader international studies of the social service sector (see, for example, Brogaard & Helby Petersen, 2021; Meagher et al., 2022).

2.2. The International Context, Research, and Critical Voices

As mentioned earlier, IFAs have become an integral part of foster care systems in many parts of the Global North. While their prevalence varies geographically, they play a significant role in, for example, England. According to Ofsted, IFAs are now deeply embedded in the English foster care system: there are over 300 IFAs, which account for 43% of mainstream fostering households, with a concentration among the largest providers (Ofsted, 2024a). The introduction of IFAs in England dates back to the 1990s, initially as a means of providing placements in emergency situations. However, over time, they have evolved into regular service providers. This shift was driven by governmental policies focused on austerity measures and an emphasis on value for money (Sellick, 2011).

In recent years, critics in both public discourse and the social work profession have raised concerns in several countries about the efficacy of IFAs and their growing presence in the foster care market. In Australia, as

early as the beginning of the 2000s, IFAs were accused of contributing to the "demise of foster care" (Barber, 2001). In England, more recent criticisms posit that the rise of IFAs and their expanding market share has not led to improved foster care quality or better value for money. Instead, many IFAs, including those owned by private equity investors, are accused by the media and social work organisations of generating substantial profits, while local authorities face rising costs for providing foster care to vulnerable children (Davies, 2018; Samms, 2021).

In a recent article, Sen et al. (2024) critically examine the marketisation of out-of-home care, focusing primarily on the role of for-profit providers in residential care, but also addressing IFAs. The article mainly discusses the situation in the UK while situating it within the broader context of the Global North. The authors highlight a growing trend toward an increasing share of operations being conducted by for-profit companies, including the rising involvement of large for-profit entities. Additionally, they note the lack of research demonstrating that for-profit operations lead to improved quality. Sen et al. (2024, p. 284) argue that "available evidence tends to suggest that, if anything, the increased prevalence of for-profit residential child care providers has had an overall negative, rather than positive, effect."

3. Analytical Framework: IFAs as Brokers, Transactional Costs, and Credence Goods

Historically, the foster care system has functioned as a type of market in which child welfare authorities purchase services from providers, typically "ordinary" families. However, as will be demonstrated, the emergence of IFAs has gradually altered the dynamics of this market. In Sweden today, as in many other countries, foster care is bought and sold in what can be described as a quasi-market (Bartlett & Le Grand, 1993). Key characteristics of such quasi-markets, which distinguish them from conventional markets, include public authorities acting as customers, purchasing care services, and a range of both public and private providers serving as suppliers of these services. In this article, we employ the concepts of brokers, transaction costs, and credence goods to analyse the role of IFAs in this market.

The concept of a broker is applied across various contexts, such as real estate brokers, knowledge brokers, and within social work. For example, social workers may act as brokers when they facilitate the provision of external services to clients. A search for terms like "broker," "brokerage," and "social work" reveals several references that highlight this role as a key aspect of everyday social work (e.g., Anastas, 2014; Craig & Muskat, 2013; Scourfield, 2010). As for IFAs, they function as brokers by facilitating and setting the price for the exchange of foster homes with child welfare authorities. In this regard, IFAs resemble real estate brokers who connect buyers and sellers and mediate the terms of contracts.

A notable distinction between real estate brokers and IFAs is that the former typically exit the transaction once the contract is signed. In contrast, contracts with IFAs often involve an extended relationship, including various support services provided to child welfare authorities and/or foster homes throughout the duration of the child's placement in care. If we categorise IFAs using the term broker, their role involves facilitating the exchange of a specific service (foster homes) and, in most cases, providing support to foster families during the placement. In both cases, IFAs take over parts of the child welfare authorities' role, but as mentioned above, without assuming formal responsibility, at least in Sweden. We believe that using the term broker highlights the fact that IFAs are, in most cases, business-oriented operations, while also reminding us that this type of intermediary is, in principle, not necessary as child welfare authorities can manage these functions through

direct contact with foster homes, and hence without IFAs. Indeed, this was the dominant practice in foster care prior to the 1990s, both in Sweden and other countries.

Further, and important for our analysis, is the rise of quasi-markets, which has highlighted the role of public authorities as purchasers and quality controllers. In quasi-market theory, for the market to function effectively, buyers must have access to various types of information about service providers. This requirement necessitates the implementation of regulation and control systems, such as licensing, inspections, and procurement processes, to ensure that providers meet specific quality standards. In economic theory, the costs incurred to obtain the relevant information and to operate these control mechanisms are referred to as transaction costs (Bartlett & Le Grand, 1993). However, research suggests that control activities often face difficulties in effectively auditing the quality of welfare services. One key challenge is that the quality of such services is typically multidimensional and difficult to measure using contracts or quality indicators. These services are often characterised as credence goods, meaning the seller possesses more knowledge about the service's content than the buyer. In the case at hand, this information asymmetry might allow IFAs to overstate or understate the needs of the foster family or the quality of their services in order to secure contracts or higher payments. Consequently, buyers must rely on trust in the providers in order to supplement the information obtained through control activities (Darby & Karni, 1973; Lindqvist, 2008). However, previous studies on privatised residential care in Sweden suggest that procurement, licensing, and inspections have not had a substantial impact on service quality (Höjer & Forkby, 2011; Pålsson, 2018).

4. Method and Data

We have used different forms of available data and research to piece together an overarching picture of IFAs' role in the foster care field. This includes examining their establishment, economics, regulatory frameworks, and potential implications for child welfare practice.

To analyse the distribution and composition of IFAs within the market, we draw on the national register of licensed IFAs in Sweden. For economic aspects, we rely on a government report and previous research, while licensing and framework documents are examined to discuss the regulations and monitoring of IFAs with respect to quality of care. Additionally, we analyse survey responses from a national study that explores how child welfare social workers assess the quality and costs of the IFAs they engage with.

4.1. Data From IVO Register

In accordance with regulations (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2018), all units offering independent foster care services are required to obtain a license from the IVO to operate. Licenses are granted on unit level, meaning that organisations owning several units must have a license for each unit. We requested lists of units from the inspectorate for each year from 2021 to 2024. These lists include basic information about the type of organisation owning the registered units, e.g., whether it is a private company, a non-profit organisation, or run by the public sector. Information about the size of the organisations and other details was manually gathered from IFA websites and company information databases. Furthermore, we complemented the information provided by the Inspectorate with licensing documents, i.e., templates to be filled in by applicants, to analyse the specific requirements for obtaining an IFA license in Sweden.

4.2. Data From a Government Report and Former Research

Some data about the economics of IFAs are presented in a recent government report about both residential and foster care in Sweden (Swedish Government Official Report, 2023). Since we have found no systematic information available on profits within the IFA field, we draw on data from the adjacent field of residential care (Lundström & Sallnäs, 2019). While this is not an ideal solution, it is worth noting that many IFAs are part of companies that also operate residential care, highlighting the close connection between these two forms of care.

4.3. Data From Procurements and Framework Agreements

In addition to the quality requirements established during licensing, quality monitoring is also conducted through procurement. This is often facilitated via framework agreements—arrangements between one or more municipalities and one or more suppliers. These agreements aim to define the terms and conditions governing the awarding of contracts at a later stage (for instance price per "bed" and type of additional service). A national framework agreement has been arranged through the central purchasing body ADDA, a company owned by Swedish municipal and regional authorities. In this article, we have analysed the procurement document for this framework agreement which consists of a 118-page document that specifies the requirements, criteria, and conditions for suppliers to submit bids or proposals.

4.4. Data From a National Survey Targeting Child Welfare Authorities

A national survey was undertaken in 2020 concerning the child welfare authorities' use of, and perspective on, IFAs. This was done in part to address the lack of knowledge regarding the dual roles of the authorities as both purchasers of foster care services, as well as ultimate guarantors of the sufficiency and quality of these services. The survey questionnaire was answered by social work professionals and managers in the Swedish municipalities (see Fridell Lif, 2023, for a more comprehensive presentation of the survey methodology). In this article, we use this survey to present data on child welfare representatives' experiences of IFAs regarding the quality of their services. The response rate of the survey was approximately 85%, but a substantial group of respondents also used open answers option (n = 185–205, depending on the question). The latter does not allow for general conclusions but provides examples of the child welfare authorities' expectations and experiences of IFAs and the foster care market.

5. Results

5.1. IFAs on the Market: Development and Composition

The use of intermediaries in foster care is not a recent development; such brokerage functions have existed previously in Sweden (Söderlind & Sköld, 2018). However, the modern precursor to independent IFAs is often traced to the "family care units" established in the 1980s within the field of substance abuse (Swedish Government Official Report, 2014). These units were tasked with recruiting and supporting foster homes for adults with substance use problems (Government of Sweden, 1982). Government reports from the time emphasised that these family care units should ideally be locally based and organised by social welfare boards or non-profit organisations (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1981).

Over time, similar initiatives were developed for children and youth, marking the emergence of an independent foster care market. Government reports provide insight into this development. In 1994, there were only "a small number" of units targeting children in Sweden (Swedish Government Official Report, 1994, p. 147). However, the market expanded, with an increasing presence of for-profit companies. By the early 2000s, approximately 10–15 organisations were offering independent foster care services; this number grew to around 70 by 2008 (Swedish Government Official Report, 2009) and approximately 100 by 2014 (Swedish Government Official Report, 2014).

In 2024, there were nearly 400 IFA units listed in the official register. Expanding the timeframe, as illustrated in Table 1, almost 500 units held a license at some point between 2021 and 2024. Analysing the ownership of IFA units, Table 1 indicates that 95% of the units are owned by for-profit companies, with the majority operating as small and micro-businesses. Approximately one in five (18%) is owned by large or mid-sized companies. The share of non-profit and municipally owned units remains small, at 5% and 1%, respectively. Over the investigated period, the market shares of these organisational types have remained relatively stable. However, there appears to be a slight increase in micro-businesses, from 45% in 2021 to 52% in 2024, possibly at the expense of small and large companies (data not shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Organisations that have upheld licenses for at least one of the years 2021–2024 $n = 499$).

	Percent of units
Ownership of units that have upheld a license for at least one of the years 2021–2024	
For profit	*95*
Micro-business (< 10 employees)	51
Small business (10–50 employees)	26
Large business (> 251 employees)	12
Mid-size business (51–250 employees)	6
Non-profit	*5*
Public sector	*1*
Exited market 2021–2024	*23*
Entered market 2021–2024	*27*
Represented in the national framework: ADDA	*40*

The total number of IFAs has remained relatively stable between 2021 and 2024, with 363 units in 2021 and 387 in 2024. However, this stability in total numbers does not reflect continuity in the specific units operating during this period. As shown in Table 1, the market is characterised by significant turbulence, with units frequently entering and exiting. Of the 499 units licensed at least once during the four-year period, only about half maintained their license throughout. Over this timeframe, 27% of units ($n = 43–48$) entered the market, while 23% ($n = 26–53$) exited. This turnover is not primarily due to license revocations but rather reflects the voluntary exit and entry of organisations.

Of the units licensed during at least one of the investigated years, 40% ($n = 189$) are included in the national framework agreement managed by ADDA. This agreement allows child welfare authorities to procure services from these units. However, use of the national framework agreement is optional, and some authorities organise their own procurement processes, which helps explain why a significant percentage of

units operate outside the agreement. Participation in the national framework agreement appears to be associated with greater market stability. While only about half of all licensed units retained their license throughout the four years, approximately 70% of units represented in the national framework agreement retained their licenses during this period.

Based on information presented on websites, it is common for IFAs to be part of companies offering additional services, such as residential care and different types of open care. According to earlier research, many companies in the child welfare sector initially offered residential care before expanding their services to include foster home brokering and other related offerings. In market terms, this strategy can be understood as a form of product differentiation aimed at attracting a wider range of customers or creating a competitive advantage. Some of the larger companies in this sector have been characterised as care corporations, with foster care services being one among several products offered (Lundström et al., 2020).

In sum, the data on the IFA market reveal a field that has undergone significant changes over recent decades. What was once a responsibility managed directly by child welfare authorities has largely transformed into a market-driven system, with the recruitment and support of foster families now frequently facilitated by IFAs acting as brokers. The IFA market is marked by notable turnover, driven primarily by competitive dynamics as companies enter and exit. In an ideal market, competition would ensure that only the most competent providers remain, with less capable actors naturally phased out. However, in a quasi-market, various imperfections may impede this process (Lindqvist, 2008). For instance, information asymmetry means child welfare authorities often lack a clear understanding of how effectively services are being delivered. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that the service's ultimate beneficiary—the child—is not the direct purchaser, creating a disconnect between service quality and procurement decisions. The typical characteristics of credence goods, including restricted access to reliable information combined with limited consumer choice, suggest that the market does not necessarily retain the most capable IFAs. For child welfare authorities, the constantly changing pool of providers contributes to an ever-shifting market, which is likely challenging to navigate. While the national framework agreement (or a local equivalent) may offer some guidance in navigating the market, it does not significantly alleviate the difficulties posed by the information asymmetry inherent in procuring credence goods. This asymmetry means that authorities may still struggle to accurately assess the quality of services provided.

5.2. The Economics of IFAs

It is highly challenging to gain a clear understanding of the costs associated with foster care provided by brokers such as IFAs. However, a public inquiry has noted that the daily cost of using IFAs is more than twice as high as the cost of foster homes directly recruited by child welfare authorities (Swedish Government Official Report, 2023, p. 220). Nevertheless, it is emphasised that the quality of the foster homes and the complexity of the issues faced by the children may vary between foster homes recruited in-house and those provided by IFAs. It is also noted that semi-professionalised homes provided by IFAs may often receive extensive support and supervision from the agency (Swedish Government Official Report, 2023).

The public inquiry further observes that the position of IFAs as brokers results in child welfare authorities "too often lacking sufficient control over both the quality of foster care and how the money they pay for it is used" (Swedish Government Official Report, 2023, p. 522). Consequently, it is impossible to determine what

proportion of the payment made by child welfare authorities to IFAs is directed to foster homes, how much is allocated to support during placement, or what is spent on other types of transaction costs. Furthermore, the level of profits remains unclear. The investigators' critique of the functioning of this market is, therefore, a concern. One of the proposals put forward is that reimbursement for being a foster home should be paid directly to the carers, rather than being channelled through IFAs (Swedish Government Official Report, 2023, p. 521). Whether this proposal will be implemented remains uncertain.

It is not possible, based on currently available statistics, to make definitive statements about profit margins within the IFA field. However, in the case of residential care, such an analysis is feasible. As noted, many organisations that offer foster care services also operate other types of services, often including residential care. Previous studies have shown that profit margins for residential care are high—around 20% on invested capital—compared to other welfare services (Lundström & Sallnäs, 2019). Obviously, it cannot be concluded that the profit levels of IFAs align with those in residential care. However, as both services broadly cater to the same target group and share similarities as credence goods, it cannot be ruled out that they are also comparable in economic terms. This underscores the clear lack of knowledge regarding the pecuniary aspects of this segment of child welfare.

5.3. Licensing and Procurement Requirements of IFAs

For an extended period, the market for IFAs remained entirely unregulated. Licensing of IFAs was an issue of debate for many years (Swedish Government Official Report, 1994, 2005). In 2017, however, a licensing requirement for IFAs was introduced, with the rationale that this could improve the safety and quality of care for children in placement (Government of Sweden, 2017). As a result, all private organisations that recruit and support foster families are now required to be licensed by the National Inspectorate (IVO).

However, in practice, the licensing requirements are relatively minimal. To be granted a license, the staff must have "relevant higher education and experience for these tasks" as well as "personal suitability." The establishment must also be sufficiently staffed to provide adequate support (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2018). The licensing process does not involve any in-person meetings between IVO and the applicant; the procedure is based solely on completed application forms and supporting documentation. There are no regular inspections of the IFAs, nor is there any evaluation of whether the prices for IFA services are reasonable. Overall, the pricing of this type of credence good is left to the market and its actors.

In the procurement process, child welfare authorities specify their demands for IFAs. The procurement documents handled by ADDA provide insight into the responsibilities and expectations regarding the content and execution of services placed on IFAs by the child welfare authorities. For example, providers must ensure compliance with relevant laws and guidelines, offer support and education to foster families, provide children with opportunities to have input into their care, and uphold human rights. Moreover, IFAs are required to refrain from using harmful methods, ensure that qualified staff are hired and receive ongoing training, and establish robust reporting and documentation procedures. They must also offer 24/7 telephone support to foster families and provide regular on-site guidance. The evaluation process for foster families conducted by IFAs is expected to ensure that recruited families are well-informed about the needs of the target groups and that they provide appropriate living conditions, meeting nutritional and safety standards. Additional requirements include IFAs' policies on substance use, as well as the children's rights to healthcare and education.

Some IFAs offer foster care with enhanced support for the placed child. These units are required to have more intensive support structures in place. For IFAs offering emergency placements, there are additional requirements related to availability, experience, and crisis management.

All in all, the procurement documents contain a more detailed list of demands than the licensing documents. However, similar to the licensing procedure, the procurement process is not based on in-person meetings or site visits. As noted earlier, effective control of a quasi-market necessitates regulatory activities, with licensing and procurement processes being crucial components. In the case of the IFA market, licensing was introduced late, and when implemented, it can, as demonstrated, be described as lenient. This leniency has resulted in a relatively low threshold for market entry, potentially contributing to the market turbulence discussed above. While the requirements outlined in the ADDA procurement documents are more detailed than those for obtaining a license, both licensing and procurement processes remain paper-based exercises, lacking precise standards for care. This approach allows considerable flexibility in responses. Addressing the information asymmetry inherent in procuring and licensing credence goods through such control activities is challenging, and economic incentives may encourage IFAs to misrepresent the nature of their services (cf. Forder et al., 1996; Lindqvist, 2014). Unlike residential care, IFAs are not subject to regular inspections, which further complicates the verification of whether they meet the outlined requirements in practice. Overall, the quality controls in this field include fewer conditions than those required for residential care, which itself has been described as a system that does not regulate care in a substantial sense (cf. Pålsson & Shanks, 2021).

5.4. How Is the Quality of IFAs Perceived by Child Welfare?

In the national survey conducted in 2020, child welfare authorities were asked to indicate the top three reasons for using IFAs. The majority (75%) cited recruitment problems, while approximately a third of respondents pointed to the enhanced support provided to foster carers. Open-ended responses regarding the reasons for using IFAs (n = 205) are illustrated in the following quote: "We place through IFAs when we do not find our own foster homes, or when the child's needs demand special care." Additionally, some child welfare units use IFAs to secure urgent placements and around-the-clock services for foster carers. IFAs are also perceived by some as offering more frequent contact or support for foster carers, especially when the foster home is geographically distant. Several respondents reported using IFAs as an alternative to residential care for children with complex needs (e.g., those with substance use or those subjected to honour-related violence).

Regarding the quality of foster homes provided by IFAs and the support offered to carers, the overall picture is mixed. The majority of the respondents rated the quality as being in the middle of the scale, and few reported very low or very high quality. In the open-ended responses (n = 185–187) concerning quality, the most prominent message is variation: "Very varied. Sometimes we are given suggestions of foster homes that we can immediately see are inappropriate, and we do not understand why the company is using that foster home." Variations in quality are linked to both different agencies and individual staff members. Some respondents raised concerns specifically about for-profit IFAs: "There are large differences between companies; some are serious, while others are primarily focused on making money." Several respondents noted that the homes provided by IFAs were of no higher quality than those they could recruit in-house. Additionally, a number of respondents remarked that IFAs had offered foster homes previously rejected by child welfare authorities.

Some respondents argued that the costs associated with using IFAs were not justified by the quality of services: "Unfortunately, low quality at a high cost." Furthermore, regarding economic conditions, respondents suggested that IFAs may compete with child welfare authorities for foster carers by offering higher reimbursement rates. This is believed to be a key factor influencing foster carers' decisions to contract with IFAs: "The companies offer much higher salaries than we do, who follow [central guidelines]." Additionally, child welfare representatives noted that using IFAs can impact services by limiting transparency and communication with foster homes: "Dialogue and transparency become more limited from the perspective of our supervising social workers, who would normally supervise, guide, and train the foster homes."

In conclusion, from the child welfare authority's perspective, IFAs can provide foster homes and address gaps in services, such as offering around-the-clock support, urgent placement options, and sufficient, geographically accessible assistance. Regarding the quality of IFA services, it is described as highly variable, with an unclear correlation between quality and costs (see also Fridell Lif, 2025).

6. Summary and Discussion

In Sweden during the 2020s, IFAs have rapidly emerged as a significant actor in a market that has become increasingly complex and difficult to navigate, and that is subject to various forms of regulation. Contributing to this complexity is the diversity of IFAs operating in the field. These range from large companies offering a wide array of welfare services, often including residential care, to small enterprises managing only a handful of foster homes within their portfolios.

Traditionally, foster care has been viewed as an activity in which "ordinary" families provide their services—taking a child into their home—to the child welfare authorities. The pecuniary aspect has long been a sensitive issue in this context, often framed as a dichotomy: "love or money." In other words, are foster parents taking on this role for the sake of the children, or is it for financial gain? (Colton et al., 2008). That said, the foster care system can be seen as a market where sellers (foster parents) have long offered their services to buyers (child welfare authorities) and negotiated the price for welcoming a child in need into their home.

The entrance of IFAs in the field represents a form of radicalisation of the "love or money" dichotomy, since they, as private companies, also generate profits from foster care services. We have chosen to use the term brokers to analyse IFAs. In doing so, we aim to highlight the fact that the fundamental role of IFAs is to facilitate connections between child welfare authorities and potential foster families in a market where foster care is a limited resource. The costs generated by the use of IFAs for child welfare authorities are related to: (1) expenses for establishing the connection and drafting the contract; (2) compensation to the foster family; (3) payment for services—often support and guidance during the placement—provided by IFAs to the families and child welfare authorities; and (4) profits to private companies.

When compared to, for example, real estate agents, it is noteworthy that IFAs offer a broader range of services. While real estate agents' services are typically limited to the first (1) and last point (4) above, IFAs' offerings are, in most cases, significantly more extensive. It is also important to emphasise that, in addition to the direct service costs for child welfare authorities, there are also several transaction costs involved when IFAs are utilised. These include advertising expenses incurred by the companies, procurement-related costs affecting both the companies and child welfare, and so forth. In short, the establishment of these companies has not

only contributed to a radicalisation of the market dimension of the foster care field but has also added new types of costs.

One significant transaction cost related to the use of IFAs is monitoring. The services provided by IFAs can be described as credence goods, meaning that they are goods or services whose quality is difficult to evaluate, giving the seller an advantage over the buyer. Over time in Sweden, two main approaches have emerged to address the challenges related to monitoring these types of services: licensing and procurement. Licensing can be seen as a mechanism used by the central government to enforce basic requirements, such as educational qualifications. Procurement processes, on the other hand, allow child welfare authorities or their representatives to formulate specific demands for the services they purchase. It has been suggested previously that procurement and licensing often fail to have a substantial impact on service quality. Nonetheless, they mean additional costs for the state at different levels. Also, ultimately, it is the child welfare authorities who bear responsibility for the difficult-to-assess quality of these credence goods and who are held accountable should problems arise.

It is worth emphasising that assessing the quality of foster care is challenging, regardless of whether it is provided by private actors or by child welfare services (see, for example, IVO, 2017; Swedish Government Official Report, 2025). Furthermore, recruitment costs, such as advertising and personnel resources, are also present within child welfare services, even when recruitment is carried out in-house. Most child welfare authorities (90%) in Sweden utilise IFAs and consequently, but to varying degrees, have to deal with the challenges posed by this new type of organisation. Experience with the services provided by IFAs is mixed. Some authorities report that IFAs deliver services of good quality, particularly in cases involving the placement of children with severe and complex needs. Others, however, highlight variability in the quality of services offered by different IFAs and note a weak correlation between price and quality. A relevant question in this context is—specifically since IFAs fulfil a function that could, in principle, be handled directly by child welfare authorities—to what extent IFAs are adding value to the system and whether this potential value is justifiable in relation to the costs of the service. Nevertheless, it remains an empirically observable reality that IFAs supply foster placements to child welfare authorities, who frequently face challenges in recruiting foster families on their own.

Putting the Swedish IFA field in an international context, one can note that comparable broker services are in place in several countries and that there is a substantial presence of for-profit companies. However, there are differences, particularly regarding the structure of the IFA field and the mandates they hold in relation to child welfare authorities. A critical discussion of the pecuniary aspects and how this kind of market functions has been raised internationally, not least in England.

7. Implications

One concern that we think needs attention is that extensive reliance on IFAs likely leads to the dismantling of in-house resources for recruiting and supporting foster families. On the one hand, this can be seen as a way for child welfare authorities to reduce internal costs. On the other hand, it creates significant dependence on private companies, whose services are often difficult to evaluate and who may exit the market at any point in time.

Due to the shortage of foster homes, child welfare authorities may feel compelled to rely on IFAs for recruitment. Social workers often lack formal training in negotiating prices and evaluating the quality of services, as these are not traditional components of their education and practice. In a marketised system, they may need to balance child welfare concerns with financial considerations—a challenging task requiring new competencies, including financial literacy and contract evaluation skills. At the same time, IFAs can provide added value through broader negotiation opportunities, potentially covering enhanced services such as round-the-clock support and supervision. A specific problem is the lack of transparency in terms of pricing structure. The child welfare authorities are often offered a service at a specific daily rate, without further information on what portion of the price constitutes compensation for the foster family, costs for support to the foster family, the company's profits and so on. On the other hand, a shift back to in-house provision would likely not be feasible without additional investment in staffing and recruitment infrastructure. Furthermore, the implications of such a transition for the quality of and availability of foster care remain uncertain. Meanwhile, the future role of IFAs is difficult to predict, whether their presence will continue to grow, stabilise, or decline, particularly in light of potential regulatory developments within this field.

As for the implications for research, particular attention should be given to the relationship between quality and cost in foster families recruited by different types of agencies, including public child welfare services, non-profit organisations, and both small and large for-profit providers. While our focus has been on the Swedish context, we have observed both similarities and differences in comparison to other countries, for example, regarding the role and mandate of independent fostering agencies (IFAs), the state's monitoring processes, and the structure of the field. Accordingly, comparative studies could offer useful insights into how different systems operate.

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About the Authors

Evelina Fridell Lif is a PhD student in social work at the Department of Social Work, Stockholm University. Her research focuses on child welfare, with particular attention to out-of-home care for children.

Tommy Lundström is a professor in social work at Stockholm University. He does research on child welfare, the marketisation of child welfare, and voluntary organisations in social work.

David Pålsson is an associate professor in social work at the Department of Social Work, Stockholm University. His research focuses on child welfare, including investigative work and child welfare services, with particular attention to out-of-home care for children.

Marie Sallnäs is a professor in social work at Stockholm University. Her research focuses on child welfare, children in out-of-home care, and organisational aspects of the care market.

Emelie Shanks is an associate professor in social work at the Department of Social Work, Stockholm University. Her research has focused on child welfare services, including the organisation and content of residential care, as well as the working conditions, staffing, and leadership within social services.

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ARTICLE

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Foster Carers' Perspective on Financial Issues When Young People Leave Care

Ingrid Höjer [1] and Inger Oterholm [2]

[1] Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
[2] Faculty of Social Studies, VID Specialised University, Norway

Correspondence: Ingrid Höjer (ingrid.hojer@socwork.gu.se)

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Abstract

Foster care can be defined as a professional assignment that emphasises the importance of family-like relationships. The paradox in foster care 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. There is limited knowledge about how foster carers understand their assignment in terms of financial support and future family relationships when young people age out of care. The aim of this article is to explore foster carers' understanding of their responsibilities regarding young people's financial support after leaving care, and how foster carers view their role in relation to child welfare services (CWS) during the aftercare period: 35 foster carers from 27 foster homes in Norway and Sweden were interviewed. All interviewed carers agreed that young people leaving care need support and advice regarding financial matters. Most carers continued to support young people after they exited care—even when the remuneration for the fostering assignment was uncertain or had ended. These efforts were closely linked to familial relationships and family practices within the foster family. However, carers also expressed uncertainty and ambivalence regarding financial support, often due to a lack of assistance from CWS and/or limitations in their own ability to continue supporting the young person. Thus, CWS must take a more active and engaged role in providing financial advice and support to young people as they leave care, as well as continued support to foster carers.

Keywords

financial issues; foster care; young people leaving care

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1. Introduction

Family foster care is situated between the private and public domains. Foster care can also be defined as a professional assignment that emphasises the importance of family-like relationships for children and young people placed in care. These varied perspectives on foster care can imply challenges for both young people and foster carers when the placement comes to an end. What will characterise the relationship between young people and foster carers? Will the young people formerly placed in care still be part of the foster family? Once the reimbursement ends, will they still be included? Will they be supported into adulthood? For young people and foster carers, these can be central, yet complicated, questions.

The question of money is especially pertinent to foster carers' responsibilities when young people age out of care. This is a relevant issue for both young people and foster carers when it comes to the preparation and planning of the post-care period, especially in what concerns the financial support young people receive once they leave their placement in foster care and the collaboration between child welfare services (CWS) and foster carers during the aftercare period. When the foster care placement formally ends—once the young person turns 18—there are differing perceptions of what is included in the fostering assignment in terms of continued financial and social support. It is possible for a young person to age out of care at 18 and remain under the care of their foster carers. However, this must be agreed upon by the young person, the CWS, and the foster carers.

It can be unclear who should provide the support: former foster carers or CWS? Continued support from foster carers may depend on the relationship developed during the placement (MacDonald & Marshall, 2021; Munro et al., 2012). Perspectives on continued support may vary depending on whether the placement lasted for many years—sometimes for most of the young person's childhood—or only for a shorter period. This also raises questions about the fostering assignment and how it is defined by carers, young people, and the CWS. A barrier identified in the provision of extended foster care is the level of financial allowance and support offered to carers (Munro et al., 2024).

In recent decades, the complex living conditions of young care leavers have been well documented. This body of research often presents a problematic picture of young people's transition from care to adulthood, covering areas such as employment, education, health, and social relationships (see, for example, Driscoll, 2019; Keller et al., 2023; Mann-Feder & Goyette, 2019; Mendes & Snow, 2016; OECD, 2022; Stein, 2019). Previous Swedish cohort studies have shown that young people leaving care are more likely to be affected by mental health problems (Sallnäs & Vinnerljung, 2009), suicidal tendencies and premature death (Björkenstam et al., 2013), teenage parenthood (Brännström et al., 2015), and self-sufficiency problems (Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011) compared to their peers. Additionally, qualitative studies give evidence of young people's need for support regarding housing, work, social networks, and personal finance when they leave care (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2009, 2011, 2014). Norwegian studies show the same risk of marginalization. Young people with a care background are less likely to complete upper secondary school and they have a greater risk of becoming unemployed or criminal offenders (see, e.g., Drange et al., 2022; Paulsen et al., 2020). However, previous research also highlights young people's strong motivation to succeed, as well as the importance of support from networks, former carers, and social services (Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2018; Boddy et al., 2019; Gypen et al., 2017). Several studies also underline the benefits of aftercare support (Courtney et al., 2021; Drange & Oterholm, 2025; Okpych & Courtney, 2020; Pedersen et al., 2024).

There is less knowledge about how foster carers understand their assignment in terms of financial support and future family relationships with young people who have left care, as well as their understanding of remuneration during the aftercare period. This article aims to explore foster carers' understanding of their responsibilities regarding young people's financial support after leaving care, and how they view their role in relation to CWS during the aftercare period.

To investigate this, we analysed interviews with foster carers about their experiences and views related to aftercare, guided by the following research questions:

1. In what ways do foster carers prepare and support young people in managing their financial situation after leaving care?
2. How do foster carers understand their continued financial responsibility in relation to perceptions of family and familial ties with the young people?
3. How do foster carers understand their assignment and the need for remuneration during the aftercare period in relation to CWS?

2. Foster Care in Norway and Sweden

In both Norway and Sweden, family foster care has long been the preferred option when children and young people require alternative care. Residential care is intended only for emergency placements and/or for children and young people with severe difficulties. In both countries, foster carers agree with CWS and receive remuneration to cover additional costs. The remuneration is divided into two parts: One portion is intended to cover direct expenses (such as food, clothing, and activities) while the other is a payment that compensates foster carers for the work they perform. This payment is taxable (KS, 2024; Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner, 2024).

In Sweden, the time and effort involved in the assignment determine the amount of the payment. This means that the payment may be increased or decreased during the assignment, depending on the level of involvement required (Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner, 2024). Both in Norway and Sweden, some carers also have agreements that include a salary for taking time off to be full-time foster carers. Although foster care is intended to be a temporary arrangement, many young people live in foster homes for several years and age out of care when they reach adulthood.

In Norway, approximately 12,400 children were placed in out-of-home care (OHC) at the end of 2023. Of these, about 80 percent lived in family foster care, 14 percent in supported housing, and seven percent in residential care (Statistics Norway, n.d.-a, Table 12845). The care order ends when the young person turns 18; however, if they consent and the CWS deem them in need of further support, they are entitled to aftercare (Ministry of Children and Families, 1982, Amendment No. 97, June 18, 2021). In 2023, about 5,500 young people received aftercare support (Statistics Norway, n.d.-b, Table 01353). Aftercare support can continue until the young person turns 25. All types of support from CWS after the age of 18 are referred to as aftercare, including the possibility of remaining in foster care. The most common types of aftercare include financial support, supported housing, and extended foster care (Statistics Norway, n.d.-c, Table 10661).

In Sweden, 25,800 children and young people were placed in OHC in 2023. Of these, around 75 percent were placed in family foster care and 25 percent in residential care. In 2023, 3,761 young people aged 18–20 left placements in care (Socialstyrelsen, 2024). Unlike the situation in Norway, there are no specific regulations guiding the process of leaving care for young people aged 18–21 in Sweden. The placement in care formally ends at 18: the age of majority.

However, most young people remain in care until they have completed upper secondary school, typically at age 19. If the placement was made through a care order, the young person may stay in care until the age of 21. The Social Services Act (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2001, Chapter 5 §1), the Care of Young People Act (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 1990, §21), and the National Board of Health and Welfare (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2019) state that social services should recognise young people's specific needs for support and facilitate their exit from care. In both Norway and Sweden, young care leavers receive different support depending on the policy of the municipality where they live, a fact that creates an unpredictable and unfair situation for young people (Becevic & Höjer, 2024; Paulsen et al., 2020; SoS Barnbyar, 2022). There are no specific aftercare programs in Norway or Sweden (OECD, 2022).

The meaning of extended care varies between countries (van Breda et al., 2020). In both Norway and Sweden, it implies the possibility to remain in foster care after turning 18, although the country policies are different. In Norway, the possibility of continuing to live in a foster home must be discussed (and agreed on) between carers, the young person, and the CWS, if further remuneration for the carers is to be formally arranged. Here, eligibility criteria for extended care include all young people in care under the age of 25, which makes it different, for example, from the Staying Put arrangement in England (see Munro et al., 2012, 2024). Carers in Norway, can thus, play a vital role in the continuation of support, both in shaping aftercare services and in defining their own role when young people leave care.

3. Previous Research

Foster care can be characterised as a kind of "hybrid" form of care: It is performed within a private setting (in the home of the carers), but the assignment is "public" and presupposes oversight from professionals and social services. As noted earlier, foster care straddles the public and private domains, as well as the institutions of the labour market and family (Kirton, 2001). One might say that foster care is a kind of voluntary work, but with professional aspects. The paradox in foster care 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:

> Key to foster care's liminal position is its minimal temporal and spatial separation of domains, with the work of foster care deeply embedded within, and largely delivered through, the medium of the family. (Kirton, 2013, p. 661; see also Sinclair, 2005)

The balance between the professional character of the fostering assignment and the role of being a parent adds further complexity to foster care. Schofield et al. (2012, 2013) found that it was possible for foster carers to move between these roles, as professional carers and as parents. In cases where there was flexibility, being a competent professional foster carer could facilitate the capacity to also be a loving parent; indeed, these two roles enriched each other (Schofield et al., 2012, 2013).

In research related to the foster care assignment, money and remuneration seem to emerge as key challenges (Höjer, 2001; Kirton, 2001, 2013; Ulvik, 2005). Financial issues in foster care are sensitive for both foster carers and young people, touching on a cultural taboo—love and money should not be mixed (Ulvik, 2005). In a report featuring Danish young adults who had been in care, the ambivalence linked to payment for foster carers as part of aftercare is thematised: On one hand, "it is not very nice to know that they get money for inviting you home"; on the other hand, "they got it when you were in care" (Nielsen, 2005, p. 355).

Höjer (2001) and Kirton (2001) found that foster carers often had little information about the remuneration component when they first began fostering. Carers stated that, at the outset, they were more interested in receiving information about the children they were about to care for than about the remuneration. Some found it embarrassing to discuss money with CWS, not wanting social workers to assume that money was their primary motivation for fostering. With more experience, foster carers found it easier to discuss remuneration and believed they deserved to be paid for their work. Still, some carers found it complicated to talk about remuneration with their foster children, fearing that the children might feel they were part of the family only because of the money, not because they were loved (Höjer, 2001; Kirton, 2001).

A study using administrative data on foster care examined the relationship between state-level economic factors and the number of children in foster care. It found that payment increases were associated with higher rates of foster parent recruitment. However, the study concluded that carers were motivated by altruism but were constrained financially. This conclusion was supported by further investigation into housing and employment markets, which showed that higher housing prices were associated with fewer children in foster care, while higher wages and greater female employment were associated with more children in care (Marinescu et al., 2023).

Young care leavers appreciated foster carers who "walked the extra mile" and stayed in touch after a placement ended; this created a feeling of being recognized and "cared for" (Brown et al., 2019). Foster carers have been found to play a significant role in relation to accomplishing education (Jackson & Ajayi, 2013). When young people leave placements in care, they often view advice on budgeting and other financial matters as important. Young care leavers emphasise the need to know how to manage their income, pay bills, and plan for future savings. Good financial advice can make the difference between failure and success in sustaining an independent life. Foster carers were often the ones providing such advice, and this support was valued by young people leaving care (Hiles et al., 2013; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010, 2014).

To our knowledge, there is limited research on financial issues related to foster care in general, and even less on such issues in the aftercare context. This study addresses foster carers' experiences and understanding of financial matters during the aftercare period and seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of financial issues in foster care and aftercare.

4. Theoretical Perspectives

The concept of "family" is central when examining the nature of family foster care. Families are expected to foster a sense of belonging and security, as well as provide close and intimate relationships, encouragement, and care (Gillis, 1996; Morgan, 2011). However, for children and young people placed in foster care—and for their carers—the concept of family can be challenged in various ways. The care of children is commonly

perceived as embedded within the family. This perception implies expectations of affective bonds between foster carers and the children and young people in their care. Yet these expectations must be balanced with the formal nature of the assignment, which also involves professional responsibilities and oversight from CWS (Kirton, 2013).

In the past few decades, traditional perspectives on the nuclear family—comprising a mother, father, and children—have been increasingly challenged. The concept of family is now more often understood as a socially constructed relationship, not exclusively based on biological ties (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 1999, 2011). Morgan (2011) highlights the limitations of conventional notions of family structure. Rather than treating family as a fixed category, he emphasises the "doing of family," introducing the more dynamic concept of "family practices." These practices describe what happens in families: everyday activities, negotiations, and caregiving. Family, in this view, is constituted through acts of "doing" rather than by simply "being." This focus on doing contrasts with definitions of family as a structural arrangement or a set of positions, suggesting that family relations are created and sustained through recurrent actions. Thus, everyday practices define what it means to be part of a family and help to maintain those relationships over time (Morgan, 2011).

Family practices can also serve to display and affirm family relationships, both to those within the family and to outsiders (Finch, 2007). Additionally, the concept of family may involve a degree of choice—people may choose who they consider to be family. This notion of "chosen family" can reflect a different kind of commitment than that connected to blood or legal ties (Smart, 2007, 2011). The importance of retaining the concept of family has been underscored in studies of young people who have been in care, while also recognising its diverse forms. Their stories demonstrate that families continue to matter over time (Boddy et al., 2023). The placement of a child in public care reflects the dynamic nature of family, and the transition to adulthood further illustrates how family relationships evolve.

When analysing the interviews with foster carers and their descriptions of how they supported young people as they left care, the concepts of "family practice" and "doing family" seemed to capture the essence of their experiences.

5. Methods

This article stems from a study exploring foster carers' experiences related to aftercare. To gain insight into their experiences, interviews were chosen to provide in-depth and nuanced descriptions of their situations (Mason, 2018). In total, 35 foster carers from 27 foster homes participated in the study. To be eligible, the following criteria were used: foster carers must have cared for at least one young person who had aged out of care; the placement must have lasted for a minimum of one year; and the placement must have ended no more than five years before the interview. To recruit participants for the study, we asked local CWS in Norway and Sweden to help us find eligible carers. In addition, we contacted local private foster care agencies and organisations for foster carers and received permission to use their websites to share information about the study.

In Norway, three foster families were recruited by local CWS. Two additional families were recruited via snowball sampling, where participating foster carers informed others about the study. Eight foster carers contacted the researcher after reading about the study on foster care organisations websites. In total,

18 carers from 13 foster homes were interviewed: 13 women and five men. Most had experience of caring for one foster child, although six had cared for more than one. Altogether, the Norwegian carers had experience with 19 young people aging out of care. The duration of placements ranged from two to 16 years before the young person left care.

In Sweden, seven of the 14 participating foster homes were recruited via local CWS. Two foster homes were recruited through private foster care agencies, and five found information about the study on the websites of foster care organisations. In total, 17 foster carers participated: 14 women and three men. The Swedish sample showed wide variation in fostering experience, ranging from five to 46 years and from one to 109 placements. Eleven of the 14 foster homes had more than 15 years of fostering experience. The high number of placements is partly due to some carers working in emergency foster care. Participants who had many placements were asked to focus on the young people who had most recently left their care. For information about participating foster carers see Table 1.

Table 1. Information concerning participating foster carers.

Number of placements per carer		Years of experience as foster carer	
1	1 (SE) 11 (N)	0–5 years	2(SE) 9 (N)
2–3	3 (SE) 5 (N)	6–10 years	0 (SE) 6 (N)
4–10	3 (SE) 2 (N)	11–15 years	3(SE) 2 (N)
11–20	5 (SE) 0 (N)	16–20 years	5(SE) 1 (N)
21—30	2 (SE) 0 (N)	21–30 years	3(SE) 0 (N)
31 and more	3 (SE) 0 (N)	31 and more years	4 (SE) 0 (N)

See Table 2 for information about the sample and recruitment.

Table 2. Information on the sample.

	Swedish sample	Norwegian sample
Foster families	14	13
Foster carers participating	14 female/3 male Total 17	13 female/5 male Total 18
Recruitment through	7 CWS 2 private foster-care agencies 5 website foster-care association	3 CWS 2 “snowballing” 8 website foster care association

There are notable differences between the Norwegian and Swedish samples in terms of both fostering experience and number of placements. This should be taken into account when analysing the results. However, our analysis revealed few differences attributable to the number of placements or years as foster

carers. The carers' involvement with the children and young people formerly placed in their homes appeared strong, even among those who had fostered many children.

All participating foster carers were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. The project received ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reference number 2019-04365) and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (reference number 238421). Fictitious names are used in the quotes, and to further ensure confidentiality, the country of origin of each carer is not disclosed.

6. Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in a total of 860 pages of transcripts. We used the software NVivo to analyse the interviews. The analysis was conducted separately in Norway and Sweden, although both researchers read all interviews. This was feasible, as Norwegian and Swedish are closely related languages. We used thematic analysis to identify patterns within the transcribed material (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The initial reading focused on identifying broader themes, followed by further discussions to refine more specific categories. NVivo supported this process by allowing us to share the two NVivo files, providing mutual access to both the Norwegian and Swedish data.

For this article, we explored what foster carers said about financial matters, both in terms of how they supported the young person and how they collaborated with CWS. To ensure a systematic approach, we used analytical questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) developed during the initial reading of the material and then systematically applied in the analysis of all interviews (see the research questions presented at the end of Section 1).

In discussing the findings, the concepts of "family practices" and "doing family" (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011; Smart, 2007) were useful in helping to interpret and further investigate the carers' narratives.

7. Limitations

When people agree to share their (sometimes sensitive) experiences with researchers, they are likely to be highly motivated. Therefore, the foster carers who participated in the project may be characterised by strong commitment and a shared sense of continued responsibility for the young people formerly placed in their care and their transition from care to adulthood. This could mean that the information we received came from carers with a particularly positive attitude toward maintaining relationships with young care leavers and a strong commitment to foster care. However, the carers also described varied experiences, including placement breakdowns.

The study does not include the perspectives of young people or child welfare workers, which might have provided alternative viewpoints. Furthermore, as this is a qualitative study involving 35 participants, the findings cannot be generalised to all foster carers in Norway and Sweden. Nonetheless, the results may contribute to insights into what might occur in similar situations, allowing for analytical generalisation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

8. Findings

The findings are presented under the analytical questions we used and relate to the following themes: support from carers in relation to finances; carers' understanding of their own responsibility in financial matters; and how they understand their assignment and need for remuneration in the aftercare period.

8.1. In What Ways Do Foster Carers Prepare and Support Young People in Managing Their Financial Situation After Leaving Care?

The foster carers described various ways they supported young people with financial matters, including both practical guidance and direct financial assistance. They agreed that one of the most important forms of support when young people leave care is to provide them with adequate practical advice and information on how to organise everyday life:

> I: What do you think they need to know when they move out?
>
> FM: They need to learn how to do a budget. And to handle their laundry, plan their shopping, everything you need to know as a grown-up. (Heidi)

Carers specifically emphasised the importance of offering good advice related to financial matters.

> There is a need for support from someone with specialised knowledge in financial matters, who could help them to do a budget, balance their income and expenses. Show them how to use online banking services—such practical things. (Elin)

In many cases, foster carers had made significant efforts to help young people plan for their exit from care. Several noted that a lack of knowledge around financial management could result in serious difficulties for some young people, particularly for those who struggled to estimate their financial assets or develop a basic budget. Many carers shared examples of young people encountering substantial challenges due to insufficient support, a lack of information, and, in some cases, a limited capacity to manage their own lives.

One foster mother described how she and her husband helped their foster son find and move into an apartment. The young man had a history of trauma and ongoing mental health issues, which affected his ability to plan and organise his life. After leaving care, he was unable to manage his finances and ended up losing the apartment because he did not pay his rent. The foster mother explained that she had tried to alert CWS to his difficulties but had received little response. She and her husband had even suggested continuing their involvement as a contact family for the young man, but this arrangement was never put in place:

> Before he moved out, we had discussions with child welfare services where we explained that he needed help with practical issues, such as preparing a budget and paying his bills. But child welfare services showed very little interest. After a while, we found out that he neither paid his rent nor any other bills. Luckily, we had saved some of his money, so he could pay his debts. We negotiated with the landlord, and it was decided that he could hand in his notice himself—otherwise he would have

> been evicted. Child welfare services should have kept us as a contact family. We could have given him pocket money and helped him pay his bills. (Karin)

During the interview, the foster mother expressed her disappointment at the lack of understanding regarding the possible consequences of the young man's problems after he left his foster care placement. He encountered significant difficulties and ended up with debt and a record of default on payments, which the foster mother believed could have been avoided with a better planned transition from care.

When young people leave care, they often have a strong desire to be independent—both from CWS and from their former foster carers. This is a legitimate and entirely understandable wish. However, some young people may find themselves in a difficult situation where their capabilities do not align with this desire for independence, as seen in the following quote:

> When she moved out, she was eager to manage by herself. So, I transferred money once a week, so she could shop for food and cook. After three weeks, she was starving and had a complete breakdown, so obviously, she was not ready. So, we started to talk about how to plan her shopping, to shop when there are special offers in the store, to save leftovers—such things. (Heidi)

Heidi described how she and her foster daughter had agreed that the young woman would independently manage her budget and organise her daily life after leaving care. When this plan failed, they were able to revise it together, and the situation improved. This is an example of continued support from foster carers. It also illustrates the importance of a strong, trusting relationship between carers and young people. The foster mother described a close and supportive bond with the young woman, which made it possible to test whether a higher level of independence was manageable. When it turned out not to be, they could collaboratively develop a new plan to better support the young woman in managing her budget and daily responsibilities.

The interviews also revealed how foster carers provided both practical and financial support to young people leaving care. In the quotation below, Nina described how she and her husband supported their foster son, Niklas, when he moved to another town:

> We rented a van, and Niklas and my husband took all his things to the new town where he was moving. It's a really long way to drive, about 500 kilometres. It was decided that child welfare services would contribute money so he could have some furniture. But when they arrived, there was no money. So they went to IKEA, and we took from our savings and bought furniture for his apartment and filled his refrigerator. My husband said: "I will not leave him here with an empty apartment!" And then Niklas stayed in this apartment for five months and lived on what we had saved for him—it was 30,000 Swedish kronor. (Nina)

Niklas, Nina, and her husband had an agreement with CWS for financial support to purchase furniture. However, when the support failed to materialise, they used their personal savings to furnish his apartment. Without this intervention, Niklas would have faced a challenging start to independent life in a new town. The foster carers saw themselves as responsible for his well-being even after the formal placement had ended. This continued support was part of their way of "doing family." At the time of the interview, two years had passed since the placement ended, but their relationship with Niklas had not ended with the

fostering assignment. He remained in regular contact and spent holidays such as Christmas and Easter with the foster family.

Similarly, Hillevi described how she and her husband helped their foster son obtain a driving licence. As in many other countries, a driving licence is expensive in Sweden. When their foster son needed one to commute to college in another town, Hillevi and her husband used money saved from their fostering allowance to cover the cost of driving lessons. He received his driving licence for 40,000 SEK:

> FM: He had worked during the summer, and he was good at saving his money, so he bought a car.
>
> I: Did you help him get a driving license?
>
> FM: Yes—for 40, 000 Swedish kronor.
>
> I: Did he get that from CWS?
>
> FM: No, we saved our foster care allowance.
>
> I: You saved your allowance to pay for his driving licence?
>
> FM: Yes, we did. He had lived with us for such a long time, it felt like the right thing to do. He was really grateful. And we still pay insurance and taxes for the car [laughs]. (Hillevi)

In the interview, Hillevi said that there had been no planning from CWS when the placement came to an end—it simply ended. The young man stayed with Hillevi and her husband for six months without any remuneration from CWS, until he moved to the town where his college was located.

Many carers expressed that they had deep concern about the young person's situation after leaving care. They described how young people were often left without adequate support and that the challenges connected to aging out of care received too little recognition.

Several carers also discussed situations where a young person received money upon reaching the age of 18, such as an inheritance, a pension from deceased parents, or compensation for adverse childhood experiences which led to severe harm, and the municipality did not help as they should have. When this occurred, carers often found that young people struggled to manage such large sums of money:

> Samuel: Yes, that's one thing, but when you talk about money, I've seen examples of them getting compensation and stuff, have you been through that?
>
> Sara: It's not the right time to get that money.

Another carer shared how their foster son received a pension following his mother's death and felt wealthy, although he did not truly understand the value or limits of the money:

> For the money he has, yes, it's a few hundred thousand, but you're not rich. No, it's a small drop in the ocean. And there's also been a lot of talk about finances! But in the end, it was just like that, in agreement with the child welfare service, even though we couldn't quite stop poking around at it, we couldn't do anything about it. (Fiona)

These examples illustrate how foster carers felt responsible for helping young people manage finances on several levels. However, some carers described how it was difficult—even impossible, at times—to talk with the young person about planning, budgeting, or saving when they received large sums of money at age 18. In some cases, carers recounted how the money was spent entirely on "rubbish" or how peers, friends, girlfriends, or boyfriends took advantage of the young person's sudden status as "wealthy." Although foster carers tried to intervene, they had no formal authority to prevent these outcomes. Several described a strong sense of frustration and powerlessness in such situations.

8.2. How Do Foster Carers Understand Their Continued Financial Responsibility in Relation To Perceptions of Family and Familial Ties With Young People?

When the foster carers described their relationship with the young people after they had left care, they emphasised the importance of continuity in contact and support once the placement ended:

> I have tried to make them feel safe and told them that when they move out, they can always find a meal and a bed in our house. No matter what happens, just come home. A meal and a bed will be here. (Tone)

In describing the support they provided, carers often compared it to how they would have supported their own children. The children and young people placed in their care were perceived as members of the family:

> FM: We try to help him, explain how things work, where and how to apply for child-care benefits [this young man had just become a father], things like that. Like you do for your biological kids.
>
> I: It seems as if you see him as part of your family?
>
> FM: Yes, we do, and so do our children. They were quite young when he moved out, but if someone asks them how many siblings there are in the family, they always include him. (Jenny)

Carers conveyed a strong sense of obligation to treat the foster child in the same way they treated their biological children when those children moved out. Like Jenny, several other foster parents spoke of how their biological children considered the foster child part of the family:

> We had three children of our own when he moved in. He is two years younger than our youngest child. You cannot treat them differently. When our lads moved out, we bought each of them a TV set. So, when Peter moved out, he also got one—like we did with the others. It would feel so wrong to treat them differently. In that respect, financial issues are actually an important theme. (Fiona)

Here, Fiona described how she and her husband had bought a TV set for each of their three biological children when they moved into their own apartments, and she felt it was only right that her foster son received the

same support. He was included in their family practices, where all members of the family were treated equally and were given the same practical and financial support. This reflects the views of many foster carers, who explicitly stated that foster children were part of their family:

> They become a part of the family. If you have a foster child, you have to put them in line with your own children. If you don't do that, you have pushed that child away. (Sara)

This quote illustrates how strongly foster carers felt about the importance of treating foster children in the same way as their biological children.

When a placement in care ends, the remuneration connected to the assignment also ends. The fact that foster carers receive payment for their work can be a sensitive issue—both for the children and young people living in the foster family, and for the carers themselves. In the quotation below, a foster mother described how the biological mother of her foster son was concerned that the carers would lose interest in him once he aged out of care and the remuneration stopped:

> I think his mother was afraid that we wouldn't be committed after the placement was ended, that she thought: "They don't get any money anymore, and then they won't be interested in him." (Jenny)

For this foster mother, remuneration was not a condition for maintaining a relationship with her foster son, which she also explained to his biological mother. The fact that he was considered a member of the family did not change when the placement ended.

Supporting young people formerly placed in care could also be complicated. The foster mother quoted below had three siblings in her care. After leaving care, the eldest lost his job and asked for financial support from his former carers, which they provided. He had previously experienced mental health issues, and the foster carers were concerned for his well-being and did not want him to lose his apartment. However, his siblings were critical both of their brother and of the foster carers' decision to help him:

> I told him that he had to apply for income support from CWS, but CWS told him that it would take three months before he could receive any financial support. And he was afraid he would lose his apartment. So, we supported him for three months, with all expenses—food, rent, electricity. And his two siblings were annoyed, they thought he took advantage of us and just kept in touch because he wanted money. (Eva)

This quote is an example of how family relations within the foster family can be complex and involve differing perspectives among siblings and foster carers. In this case, the foster mother included responsibility for her foster son as part of her family practices, while the other foster children disagreed with this way of "doing family." Eva's reflection also highlights how foster carers sometimes had to step in and take responsibility when support from CWS was unavailable.

8.3. How Do Foster Carers Understand Their Assignment and Need for Remuneration During the Aftercare Period in Relation to CWS?

Foster carers' experiences of their relationships with CWS before, during, and after the young person left care varied in character. Some carers reported receiving adequate support and described their contact with CWS as satisfactory. However, many foster carers gave examples describing a lack of recognition and support from CWS in relation to young people leaving care. Several carers described how a previously positive experience during the placement changed dramatically once the young person aged out of care. Some experienced CWS as unwilling to provide financial support to the young person or to continue remuneration to the carers:

> The CWS said that they wouldn't pay for aftercare. I had to threaten them—I said: "If you remove all financial remuneration, you will have to take on all the responsibility!" I felt awful, having to go into these processes. And now we have the same situation with our youngest foster child. There is a need for a serious discussion about CWS's responsibilities when young people turn 18. When you talk to CWS, they totally agree that care-leavers may not be able to act like adults when they are 18, still they want us to treat them like adults. It's so frustrating! Well, they do agree that she needs aftercare, but this aftercare cannot involve any costs. (Elsa)

In the case described above, the social workers acknowledged the need for aftercare, but were unwilling to recognise or cover the associated costs.

Some carers described how CWS appeared to lose interest in the young person once the placement ended. Promises of support were not fulfilled, and little attention was paid to the young person's actual situation:

> CWS promised that I could be her contact person—but then they changed social worker and forgot all about it. I'm still not her contact person. I can't afford to go to N-town where she now lives, two times a month and stay at a hotel [without the remuneration for expenses]. CWS should have let me be her contact person, I could have helped her with a lot of things: cleaning, medication, school, meetings. (Nina)

Here, Nina described how her foster daughter was required to leave care when she turned 18—against Nina's advice and the young woman's own wishes. CWS decided that she had to return to the town where she was born and live independently, justifying this by claiming that "everything now worked so well" after two years in the foster home. Both the young woman and Nina found this to be the wrong decision and were devastated by it.

Moreover, Nina was initially told she could act as the young woman's contact person, but this arrangement never materialised. Had she been officially appointed, she could have received remuneration for travel and other related expenses. At the time of the interview, the young woman had changed schools multiple times and had been evicted from her apartment. Nina strongly believed she could have provided vital support, had the official arrangement and financial backing been in place.

This example illustrates how foster carers may be willing and committed to continuing their support but face financial barriers when the placement ends. In this case, the foster mother could not afford to provide

continued support because of the cost of travel. Other carers also described situations in which remuneration was crucial for the possibility of maintaining contact, particularly for carers with low incomes or when the young person had specific needs that required additional expenses (such as skills in sports).

In some cases, foster carers found that the plans made for the young person's care-leaving lacked continuity and were too uncertain to be helpful:

> When she turned 18, they wanted me to sign a contract for three months. I said: "No, it's too unstable, both for me and for her. The contract needs to run for one year, not an hour less!" So, I had a one-year contract. But I wonder if it's really their common practice to have a contract for only three months with 14 days' notice, when the young person turns 18? (Heidi)

In this case, the foster mother was able to convince CWS that her foster daughter needed extended support. However, she had to push back to ensure the continued placement was stable and predictable—something her foster daughter needed.

Although some foster carers did feel recognised by CWS in terms of financial support for young people leaving care, several reported a lack of understanding regarding the importance of continued support:

> For CWS, it's all about the money. So, when kids turn 18, they want them to move out and find their own apartment. Because that's cheaper. (Monica)

The foster mother quoted below summarised a view that many other carers also conveyed during the interviews:

> Well, the ending of the placement is connected to the end of the remuneration from CWS, right? The placement is ended, there will be no more money from CWS. But it's not the end for the foster family. You are attached to children who have been living with you. It doesn't end just because they move out. (Jenny)

The fostering assignment is, in many ways, defined by the remuneration from CWS. However, this does not mean that remuneration defines the family relationships formed with the children and young people in care.

9. Discussion

In our interviews, all carers agreed that young people leaving care need support and advice regarding financial matters. The young people need help managing bills, organising a balanced budget, and receiving practical advice on how to plan their everyday life. This aligns with what young care leavers themselves identify as one of the most important issues when exiting care (Hiles et al., 2013; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010, 2014). Many foster carers also made considerable efforts to prepare young people for leaving care by offering guidance on budgeting, saving, and financial matters.

Our analysis of the interviews provides clear evidence of continued financial support from foster carers to young people after they had left care. Most carers viewed supporting young people in their transition to

adulthood as part of their role as parents. These efforts were closely linked to familial relationships and family practices within the foster family, as described by Morgan (2011). Foster carers believed their family practices should apply equally to all children in the household: This is simply what families do when young people move out of the family home.

Furthermore, many carers stated that all children in the family were entitled to the same level of support, regardless of whether they were biological or foster children. This represents a way of "doing family," in which family actions serve to define and confirm the relationship (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011). Supporting foster children in the same way as biological children was consistently emphasised in our study as a family practice, demonstrating that the young people were seen and treated as part of the family.

Although family-like, foster care has specific characteristics that distinguish foster families from other families. Carers receive remuneration for caring for the child, and this payment ends when the assignment ends, highlighting the public and professional aspects of foster care. Still, we found that remuneration was not what defined the continuation of relationships with young people; those relationships were grounded in family ties. Foster carers were often able to combine the professional and familial aspects of their role, as found in earlier research (Kirton, 2013; Sinclair, 2005). However, financial support from CWS was not insignificant. Not all carers could afford to continue supporting young people without any remuneration. This finding—that remuneration is important for enabling carers to take on the responsibility of fostering—aligns with findings from other studies (Marinescu et al., 2023).

When young people leave their foster family, they may feel a strong desire for independence. They want to organise their own lives, make their own decisions, and become independent from both CWS and their foster carers. As with all young people on the threshold of adulthood, this desire for independence can be difficult to reconcile with their actual capacity to manage everyday life. In the interviews, several carers described how this imbalance could create challenges for the young people. In such situations, strong family relationships between foster carers and young people were crucial. These relationships allowed for re-negotiation and the creation of new plans, making it possible to adjust support in line with the young person's evolving needs.

When children and young people are placed in care, CWS assumes parental responsibility: They act in loco parentis (Pedagno, 2011). If in loco parentis is understood to reflect the full scope of parental expectations, then a continued responsibility when the young person leaves care might also be implied. However, the uncertainty of CWS support after care-leaving—as experienced by several of the carers—means that foster carers often feel they must provide continued support themselves, as they cannot rely on adequate follow-up from CWS. Though many young people do receive support from CWS after turning 18, research points to a situation where, due to high workloads and limited resources, CWS may prioritise younger children over care leavers (Paulsen et al., 2020). It is therefore important to emphasise the value of aftercare support (e.g., Courtney et al., 2021; Drange & Oterholm, 2025).

10. Conclusion

In our study of foster carers' perspectives on financial matters, we found that most carers continued to support young people after they exited care—even when the remuneration for the fostering assignment was uncertain or had ended. The familial perspective, emphasising the young people's needs and the close family

relationships that had developed, became the most important factor for continued support. Foster carers often used their biological children as a model for how to support young people in their transition to adulthood: Former foster children received the same support as biological children. However, carers also expressed uncertainty and ambivalence regarding financial support, often due to a lack of assistance from CWS and/or limitations in their own ability to continue supporting the young person.

In the interviews, foster carers frequently described CWS as lacking recognition of the need for continued financial support and advice for young care leavers. This was sometimes attributed to a reluctance on the part of CWS to spend money after the placement had ended, but also to what appeared to be a lack of awareness regarding the actual situation of young people leaving care and their need for continued support and guidance.

11. Implications for Practice

Financial support and advice for young people leaving care is vital for a successful transition. Foster carers are often willing and prepared to continue providing parental support and maintaining relationships with care leavers. However, the situation becomes complicated when CWS abdicate from their responsibility for care leaving and place the full burden of financial guidance and support on foster carers. Adequate information and advice regarding financial matters can be the deciding factor between a successful and a negative care-leaving experience. Therefore, CWS must take a more active and engaged role in providing financial advice and support to young people as they leave care. A more distinct legislative framework concerning support to young care leavers, as well as remuneration to foster carers, is needed to clarify CWS's responsibilities and obligations. Such a framework would also create a more equal provision of support to young people, regardless of the policies in the municipality in which they live.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Ingrid Höjer is professor emerita in social work at the Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg. Her research is directed towards families and children, with a particular interested in child welfare and out-of-home placements in care.

Inger Oterholm is a professor in social work at the Faculty of Social Studies at VID specialized University in Oslo. Her research is related to child welfare services and in particular leaving care and aftercare services.

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ARTICLE

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The Professionalisation of Foster Care in Norway

Renee Thørnblad and Jeanette Skoglund

RKBU North, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Norway

Correspondence: Jeanette Skoglund (jeanette.skoglund@uit.no)

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Abstract

In Norway, as elsewhere, child welfare services have long prioritised placing children in foster homes over residential care when children cannot live with their parents, to ensure upbringing in family settings. Today, it is also stated in the law that child welfare services must always consider whether anyone in the child's family or close network could be chosen as foster parents. The idea has been that kinship foster care can safeguard the child's cultural identity, continuity in social networks, and family connections. Parallel with the prioritisation of foster care and kinship foster care, foster care has become increasingly professionalised. In the Norwegian context, the possible unintended consequences of increased professionalisation have been minimally addressed. This article aims to contribute to vitalising this discussion about some of the unintended consequences professionalisation may have for safeguarding the values associated with foster care in general, and particularly for kinship foster care. For our discussion, focusing particularly on economic conditions, we draw on both our own and others' research related to foster care. Using concepts from sociological theory on different rationalities or logics as a basis for action, we illustrate and discuss how instrumental rationality and the field logic of child welfare have increasingly influenced the conditions for foster homes.

Keywords

child welfare services; foster care; kinship foster care; payment; professionalisation; reimbursement

1. Introduction

An ongoing professionalisation of foster care has been described in the research literature for more than 25 years. This was, among other things, linked to an acceptance of foster parenting as an alternative career opportunity (Corrick, 1999; Kelly & Gilligan, 2000; Kirton, 2001a). The term professionalisation refers to a process in which an activity based on civil commitment develops towards an occupation or profession

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(Lorentzen & Helleland, 2013, pp. 144–145). Professionalisation is to be understood as both descriptive and normative and as an inherent feature of modern society (Haug, 2013). Examples showing aspects of professionalisation of foster care are: Stricter structures for the approval and monitoring of foster homes, professional training and guidance for foster parents, the strengthening of foster parents' rights and their advocacy organisations, as well as increases in economic compensation and payment. Increased professionalisation must also be viewed in relation to the broader influence of diagnostic and therapeutic perspectives on children's needs (O. J. Madsen, 2020), the commodification of care work, and juridification in society. Dominating ideas about the vulnerability of children in foster care, where foster care is highlighted as a different type of upbringing compared to other families, are also a contributing factor (Skoglund & Thørnblad, 2024).

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 characterised by the perceived conflict between moral obligation and financial reward" (p. 877). With increases in funding for foster care, such tensions become relevant to highlight. Issues that arise include: Should foster care be regarded as voluntary work or paid employment? What value-based foundation should foster care be built upon—altruism or market regulation? Should the foster family model itself on contemporary family life or as an enterprise in the market? Should the role of the foster parent be modelled on that of a parent or a professional practitioner? In discussions about the professionalisation of foster care in the international literature (e.g., Kirton, 2022), kinship foster care has been largely overlooked.

The size of economic transfers and salaries can be said to signify what foster parenting is considered to be in a society and reflects the value of the efforts made by foster families. Particularly when foster parents are released from their regular profession or paid employment, this situation overlaps with, or signals, a transition from foster parenting to professional childcare. A consequence of this is that foster parenting as a form of paid employment moves the foster care institution away from "ordinary" parenting and family life as the ideal or model (Kirton, 2013).

Parallel to the professionalisation of foster care, kinship foster care—i.e., being raised in foster homes with relatives or within an extended network—has become an established measure and a prioritised foster care alternative in many Western countries. The prioritisation of kinship foster care can initially be seen as a movement in the opposite direction to professionalisation, where values and considerations such as safeguarding the child's cultural identity, enduring (emotion-based) family relationships, continuity in social networks, and the biological principle are central.

This raises the question of whether it is desirable or even possible to include kinship foster care in the professionalisation process in the same way as other foster homes. Should, and can, kinship foster care be treated like other foster care arrangements? These questions are particularly relevant in Norway, where professionalisation (and increased funding) are prominent, and where kinship foster care is now incorporated as a measure on an equal footing with other foster homes in terms of regulation and remuneration.

In the Norwegian context, possible unintended consequences of increased professionalisation have been minimally addressed in research and professional-political debates. With this article, we aim to contribute to the discussion about some of the unintended consequences professionalisation may have for safeguarding

the values associated with foster care in general, and particularly for kinship foster care. We point out some possible adverse consequences of the practice of the economic system for foster care.

2. Money as Economic Compensation, Motivation, Symbol, and Negotiation Tool

In international research, various aspects of economic transfers to foster homes are studied and problematised. The significance of economic support (i.e., the size of payments/transfers) for recruitment, quality, and retention of foster homes has been given particular emphasis. From American research, we find studies on the importance of economic incentives for recruiting new foster homes. For example, Doyle and Peters (2007) show in their study from the USA how increased economic support can serve as an incentive for recruiting foster homes. Similar results are found in Duncan and Argys (2007) study, who demonstrate how increased payments also contribute to stability and limit the movement of children from one foster home to another. Regarding the adoption of children in foster care, which has been promoted in the USA for some time, economic support is also shown to have a significant effect on the prevalence of adoption (Hansen, 2007). In Doyle and Melville's (2013) study from Australia, both altruistic and economic motives underpinned foster parents' decision to become foster parents.

In a review from the UK, it is summarised that the level of economic compensation is one of four essential factors in the recruitment of foster homes in the UK (Baginsky et al., 2017). Kirton's (2001a) study showed that, although payment was not a motivating factor at the start, it could sustain foster homes facing challenges with children's behaviour and development. In the Nordic countries, economic conditions also seem to play a role in foster care. In our study of different factors that might affect the retention of foster homes in Norway, economic conditions were a significant factor (Mabille et al., 2025). Similarly, Swedish studies highlight the importance of economic transfers in the recruitment and retention of foster homes (Pålsson et al., 2022; Wiklund & Sallnäs, 2010). When comparing the use of kinship foster care in Denmark and Norway—two comparable countries within the Nordic model—economic transfers appear to be a factor influencing the prevalence of kinship foster care. In Norway, kinship and network foster homes have the same economic conditions as other foster homes, whereas Denmark only compensates for expenses related to the child. In 2021, about 33% of children in care in Norway lived in kinship and network care compared to 13% in Denmark (Rasmussen et al., 2024).

Research highlights, in various ways, how the combination of economic compensation (or remuneration) and foster parenting can either be reconciled or come into conflict, both in terms of values and quality assessments. Hardesty (2018), for example, argues that foster parents' potential economic motivation for fostering cannot serve as a litmus test for the quality of foster care. The fact that foster parents have economic motives does not exclude them from being good foster parents. For instance, Swartz (2004) demonstrated how foster mothers combined altruistic motivation with economic interests. Roman (2016), on the other hand, claims a positive correlation between increased remuneration and higher quality and explicitly argues for the professionalisation of foster care in the USA. She writes from a child welfare context where poverty, racism, and gender discrimination are significant factors. Traditionally, caring for children (like other caregiving work) has been considered to require no special skills—something that, in principle, anyone could manage—hence the traditionally low economic compensation. By instead viewing foster parents as paid workers, she argues that the quality of foster care would improve. Expectations of foster parents could then increase, for example, through training and the development of their skills. According to

Roman (2016), this would benefit children by providing more competent and engaged foster parents and more stable foster homes.

Other studies focus on the symbolic or cultural significance of finances in child welfare across different cultures. In a cross-cultural analysis, Colton et al. (2008) examine trends that pose significant global challenges for foster care and highlight three aspects: foster parents' motivation and capacity, professionalisation versus altruism, and formal criteria for foster homes and kinship foster care. They show, among other things, how different cultural norms influence the recruitment of foster homes. Such norms can, for example, make it easier in certain cultures to recruit relatives rather than non-relatives to care for others' children. Living standards and funding systems in different countries have a significant impact on the recruitment and retention of foster homes, both within and outside kinship networks. Colton et al. (2008) further point out that recruitment will become more difficult in the future if foster parents do not receive appropriate remuneration. Increased funding is directly linked to professionalisation, and they simultaneously highlight that the conflict between professionalisation and altruism represents a real challenge for child welfare. Their proposal appears to be a "para-professional" foster family (Colton et al., 2008, p. 879).

In the Nordic cultural context, studies also show that money has symbolic meanings that can influence relationships within foster families, as well as the collaboration between foster parents and child welfare services. In qualitative studies conducted in the Nordic countries and the UK, it is observed that issues related to money often appear as taboos in foster homes and are a topic that children in foster care are generally shielded from (Jacobsson, 2023; Kirton, 2008; Ulvik, 2003). Jacobsson (2023, pp. 120–124) describes how questions about finances and paid parenting represent a "moral minefield" because, in general perception, the emotional and intimate are kept separate from financial matters. A focus on finances can cast foster parents in a negative light, and potential foster parents' economic motives can disqualify their application to become foster parents. On the other hand, it is reported that in determining economic transfers (e.g., in the form of release from regular work), many foster parents, as contractors, make demands and enter a type of negotiation with child welfare services, which act as the contracting authority (NOU 2018: 18; see Ministry of Children and Families, 2018; Ekhaugen et al., 2018). This might indicate that the morality of money in foster care settings is shifting, and, to a lesser extent, that it remains a moral minefield or taboo. As we will see later, negotiations about release from regular work appear to have increased significantly among Norwegian foster parents in recent decades.

3. Norwegian Context

3.1. Child Welfare Characteristics

The lack of foster homes and the challenges of recruiting and retaining foster parents remain a persistent issue. Throughout the history of modern child welfare, there have been continuous descriptions of crises caused by queues and waiting lists for suitable foster homes. This remains the case today, despite a decline in the number of children requiring care measures. Foster homes in Norway are divided into three categories: emergency foster homes and specialised foster homes, which are state-run, and foster homes within and outside the family or close networks of the child, which are managed by municipalities. Approximately 10% of children in foster care live in emergency or specialised foster homes, while the rest live in foster homes within

or outside kinship or networks (Meld. St. 29 [2023–2024]; see Ministry of Children and Families, 2023–2024). This article focuses on the latter category, with a particular emphasis on kinship foster care.

In Norway, approximately 1% of all children (aged 0–17) are placed outside their parental home by child welfare services. In 2023, 73% of these children were in foster homes, and about 35% of these foster homes were within the child's kinship or network. The remaining children live in care centres or institutions (Statistics Norway, 2024b)—a measure that in past decades has been deliberately reduced in Norway, as in many other countries. Similar to other Nordic countries, child welfare services in Norway are characterised by a child-centric perspective, as well as being family-oriented in their approach (Berrick et al., 2023; Skivenes, 2011).

In cases of care orders, it is legally mandated that persons in the child's kinship and network must always be considered first as potential foster parents (Ministry of Children and Families, 2021). Through a more resource-oriented approach to the child's family and network, the child's closest relations are now to be mobilised in terms of taking on greater responsibility when possible. Family group conferences and other network interventions organised by child welfare services are encouraged to recruit foster homes (Bufdir, 2021).

In Norway, foster homes within kinship and network are regulated by the same legislation as other foster homes. This includes a standardised number of oversight measures, such as home visits by child welfare services (at least four times per year), supervisory visits with the child (at least four times per year), and documentation requirements. Individuals wishing to become foster parents undergo a process in which their suitability, economic situation, and other factors are assessed, and all are, in principle, required to complete a training programme to prepare for the role of foster parents. All approvals are carried out by public child welfare services, which also have the economic and formal responsibility for the follow-up of foster homes (Ministry of Children and Families, 2021).

3.2. Payment and Reimbursement to Foster Parents

Economic transfers to foster homes are divided into three parts: remuneration for foster parents, expense coverage for the child, and compensation for time off from paid work. The first two are standardised, while compensation/time off from paid work can be subject to negotiations between child welfare services and foster parents. Both public child welfare services and private, non-profit, and commercial actors actively recruit foster parents. The activities of non-profit organisations and commercial actors, as well as their profits, are financed by the public child welfare system. Lack of economic support and restricted economic conditions are key issues in the foster care and kinship foster care literature in most countries (e.g., Hegar & Scannapieco, 2017). Due to high living standards and a generous welfare state, this is less relevant for the Norwegian context today.

All foster parents receive a standard remuneration amount and expense coverage based on the child's age (this is tax-free). Foster parents are entitled to leave from paid work when a child moves into their home (modelled after parental leave). Child welfare services compensate for lost income during the leave period. As of 2025, foster parents earn pension points like other employees. Beyond the regular paid leave period, as mentioned, foster parents can also be compensated for leaving their regular paid work, in Norway known

as *frikjøp*. This reinforcement measure has increased significantly in the past years and is significant in the development of the professionalisation of foster care. Public reports advocate for future standardisation of wage determination for compensation (Ministry of Children and Families, 2018; see also Meld. St. 29 [2023–2024]).

In 2018, 44% of foster parents (40% of these for more than one year) were compensated for leaving their regular work, and the use of compensation was expected to increase (Ekhaugen et al., 2018, p. 7). There is no publicly available data showing the development over time regarding compensation for foster parents. However, in a survey conducted by The Foster Care Association (2024, p. 13), 70.2% (N = 1089) reported that they were fully or partially compensated for leaving their regular paid work. The compensation amount is linked to the profession from which the parent is compensated, rather than to any specific skills required by child welfare services.

The extent and duration of compensation for foster parents leaving work should, according to current regulations, primarily be based on professional assessments of the child's temporary or permanent need for a stay-at-home foster parent (Bufdir, 2025). According to Ekhaugen et al. (2018, p. 62), a problem with this system is that it may exaggerate descriptions of the child's problems, as the specific needs of the child justify the compensation. The scope and duration of compensation thus signal the level of the child's problems and the burden the child represents for the foster family. Another driver of the significant proportion of today's foster parents in Norway being compensated to stay at home is private and commercial actors in the foster care sector, who advertise compensation in their recruitment efforts and pay foster parents higher wages than others (Ministry of Children and Families, 2020, p. 221). The Foster Care Association is also a significant advocate for regulating and increasing foster parents' rights, including their economic conditions.

4. Theoretical Framework

The terms "private" and "public" spheres illustrate the differences in the basis for action, ideals, and norms that typically apply to families and private life in general, as opposed to those that apply in public institutions and (formal) case management. For foster homes in general, and particularly for kinship foster homes, the basis for interaction and decision-making from these different systems can overlap or represent a conflict, creating tension between foster parents and child welfare services.

Ambiguity has emerged in previous studies of foster parents' understanding of roles, where some supported the idea of foster homes as professionalised paid work, while others saw this as the antithesis of family life (e.g., Kirton, 2001b; Triseliotis et al., 2000). Wilson and Evetts (2006, p. 39) describe that kinship foster carers have "been less likely to regard themselves as members of an aspiring professional group."

Examples of how such conflicts can manifest include foster parents wishing to be regarded as colleagues or equal partners in collaboration and expressing dissatisfaction with the hierarchical power dynamics between child welfare services and foster families. On the other hand, in kinship foster care, foster parents may primarily identify with private life terms and roles, such as grandparent, aunt, uncle, and may resist child welfare services' intrusion into family life (Holtan, 2002; Kaiser et al., 2024; Skoglund et al., 2022).

The difference between providing care within a family setting and in an official context can be seen as a contrast between personal care—characterised by its emotional, informal, experience-based, and continuous nature—and professional care—defined by its formal, science-based, and fragmented qualities. Kinship foster care, as a space where the public and private spheres overlap, embodies these conflicting approaches. For foster parents in kinship care, this will often involve a liminal position. Simply put, one could describe this as the distinction between "caring for others" and "caring for each other" (C. Madsen, 2002, p. 11). Schematically, the various bases for action and interaction in the private and public spheres can be presented, for example, as shown in a table by Skoglund et al. (2022; see also Table 1).

Table 1. Personal and professional care: Different rationalities.

	Personal Care: Family	Professional Care: Child welfare
Relationship status	Private	Public/official
Basis of relationships	Affective/emotional	Rational
Duration of relationships	Long-term/life-long	Temporary/time-limited
Reciprocity	Mutual assistance (unpaid)	Unilateral assistance (paid)
Basis of responsibility	Obligation, belonging, regulated by norms	Professional ethical guidelines, regulated by law
Power relations	Symmetric	Asymmetric
Agreements	Unwritten, informal	Written, formal
The position of children	The child in the family/network	The child as an individual, a client
Social control	Informal	Formal
Rationale	Care-oriented	Goal-oriented

Source: Based on Skoglund et al. (2022, p. 58).

In sociological theory, the distinction between the private and public spheres is described in various ways. For instance, Habermas (1985) uses the conceptual pair "lifeworld" and "system." Excessive intervention by public systems into private life is understood here as the "colonisation of the lifeworld." Another conceptual pair is Tönnies' classical ideal types, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (Falk, 2000). These terms highlight how relationships in the private sphere or families are characterised by long-term emotional bonds and tradition-based, collectively oriented activities. This contrasts with market- or trade-based associations, which are marked by individualism, transient relationships, and utility maximisation.

Similarly, Bourdieu (2001) distinguishes between the logic and bases for action within and outside the private life of the families. While the internal symbolic economy related to family life is characterised by gift exchange and altruism (moral obligations), explicit monetary exchanges (profit) define relationships in society outside the family.

A key shared point across these theoretical perspectives is that the bases for action in private and public systems or spheres are primarily founded on different values or logics, including those related to relationships, economics, and exchanges. Monetary transfers, therefore, do not have a "neutral" function that merely contributes to the material living conditions of the families. They also carry symbolic meanings that may influence how relationships and roles within the foster families develop and how the foster families

are perceived by the outside world (e.g., Ulvik, 2003; Zelizer, 2021). In the following, we discuss what this can involve in terms of safeguarding the values associated with foster care in general, and particularly for kinship foster care.

5. Discussion: Unintended Implications of Professionalisation

In this article, we have described some developments related to professionalisation, particularly financial aspects of foster care in Norway, as well as theoretical perspectives that clarify differences in logics and practices within the private and public spheres. We now turn to discuss some of the unintended consequences related to the development of professionalisation, with particular focus on consequences for kinship foster care families.

5.1. Important Qualities May Be Lost

In the lifeworld, which is constituted by language and culture, the child (within the private sphere of the family) is incorporated through shared references, traditions, attitudes, living conditions, etc. (Brekke et al., 2003, p. 77). It is precisely these qualities in familial, emotional, mutual, and enduring relationships that have justified the child welfare prioritisation of foster homes over orphanages/institutions, and particularly the prioritisation of kinship foster care. In contrast, system integration involves the goal-oriented, formal structures, such as those of the legal system, bureaucracy, and market, where money and power are the governing mechanisms. In other words, the lifeworld is removed from its context and subjected to systemic demands and thus colonised (Habermas, 1985). The professionalisation of foster care in general, and kinship foster care in particular, can be seen as an example of such colonisation. As shown, becoming a foster home involves the regulation of family relationships and formalisation of decisions concerning private life. The troubles which arise, according to Andersen (1999, p. 364), can include the instrumentalisation of social interaction, loss of meaning, uncertainty about one's own identity, and weakened trust in public institutions. In a foster care setting, this can manifest in different ways—for example, foster parents and/or children might experience uncertainty regarding the duration of the foster care arrangement, as well as the definition or meaning of their relationship. Children not feeling like part of the family, despite perhaps having lived in a foster home for several years, serves as another example of this (Holtan, 2002; Skoglund et al., 2018).

While kinship foster care families can challenge colonisation, such actions might be problematised within child welfare. For example, research from the Norwegian context shows that kinship foster parents described their own circumventions of formal child welfare decisions—for example, those concerning visitation and contact with the child's parents—as matters of private life rather than a public concern (Holtan, 2002). However, from the perspective of child welfare workers, this becomes an example of kinship foster carers' lack of loyalty towards the child welfare services, which poses a challenge to collaboration (e.g., Mabille et al., 2025). An alternative view is to regard kinship foster parents as having a double role: managing demands from child welfare services, and often from their own children.

Through the concepts of "para-professional," "quasi-professional," or "hybrid," attempts have previously been made to encompass and conceptualise the complexity in the development of the foster care institution (e.g., Colton et al., 2008). The competitive or conflicting dynamics between the foundations of action within the private and public spheres, as well as the gradual increase in professionalisation, still create ambiguities

about what foster care should or can be, presenting challenges on multiple levels. As we have seen, this can apply both at the individual level—for the child in foster care and the foster parents and parents—or between foster parents and representatives of child welfare services. Kirton (2013, p. 670) expresses it as follows:

> With a relative lack of temporal and spatial separation between "work" and "family," this creates what might be termed a "deep hybridity," where both domains come under very close scrutiny and management and where tensions between the two are sharpened.

Because work and family life—the public and the private—cannot be separated or dissolved in this context, we must ask how values associated with private family life can be maintained without undermining the child welfare services guidelines related to the best interests of the child. Increased awareness is needed regarding this dichotomy in the collaboration between foster parents and caseworkers. Discussions about boundaries concerning what issues are family matters and what should be relevant for caseworkers' instructions or involvement are examples of this (e.g., Pålsson, 2024).

5.2. Regulations of Economic Support: Dependence and Possibilities for Negotiations of Families and Children's Needs

A problem with the current system is that some children and their families/relatives are likely kept unnecessarily within a colonising system. In Norway today, 25% of children in foster care remain there for 7 years or more, and 10% for 13 years or more (Meld. St. 29 [2023–2024]). Through our research, we have encountered many who grew up in such long-term placements, who have spent most or all of their upbringing until adulthood with grandparents or other close relatives, or in foster homes outside the child's family. Many of these are well-functioning families where foster parents see themselves as substitute parents or parents rather than foster parents, and children who experience their sense of belonging and family situation as positive; nevertheless, they are still maintained as a measure within the child welfare system. If these long-term foster families wish to exit the child welfare system, the economic consequences would be significant, as it would involve the loss of economic transfers from the child welfare services. With current legislation and practices regarding remuneration and compensation, this could amount to substantial sums for the household.

The economic conditions involved in professionalisation can thus create a relationship of economic dependence on the child welfare system and a motivation to continue as a foster home for as long as possible. Looking at statistics in Norway regarding foster children who are adopted, children over the age of 18 constitute the largest age group of adoptees (Statistics Norway, 2024a). There is reason to believe that economics is one of the significant factors contributing to such adoptions occurring so late (cf. Hansen, 2007). In other words, one can choose to delay formalising an established familial relationship until economic transfers from the child welfare system to the foster family have ceased. An adoption confirms the mutual attachment and means that the child gains the same legal status as biological children within the family. In Norway, however, there are no professional or political guidelines or policies that encourage or facilitate the adoption of children in foster care, nor alternative economic support for the adoption of children in foster care. This may indicate that some children's status as foster children is unnecessarily prolonged, also for economic reasons.

While economic dependence is one challenge, another relates to the possibilities for negotiations related to, for example, compensation for foster parents' time off from paid work. Criteria to legitimise such compensation are based on the extent of the child's problems and specific needs. An exaggerated focus on problems can have serious consequences for the individual child, but can also contribute to the negative categorisation of foster children in general. In turn, this promotes generalised demands for professional expertise and foster parenting as paid work/compensation for leaving paid employment, i.e., the increased professionalisation of foster care. An excessive problem focus on these children has also been addressed in (public) reports (e.g., Ekhaugen et al., 2018; Ministry of Children and Families, 2018; PWC, 2015). Sharply formulated, one might ask what these children "are" in a child welfare context: *a gift*, as children are generally most often regarded, or mostly *a burden* for the foster family.

6. What Should Today's (Kinship)Foster Home Be: Upbringing in a Family or a Professionalised Care Institution?

A positive consequence of the inclusion of relatives in child welfare legislation was that they were recognised as potential caregivers for children who did not have sufficiently functioning parents. The recognition that moving children to new and unfamiliar environments was not always in the child's best interest, and that relatives, despite their flaws and shortcomings, could be a good alternative, allowed grandparents and other close relatives to "keep" a child within the family.

However, it is striking that the unintended consequences of increased professionalisation, which also affect this group of foster homes, are discussed to such a limited extent. As described in international literature (e.g., Kirton, 2013; Wilson & Evetts, 2006), politicians and other gatekeepers in Norway often support the perception of foster care as a form of professional activity, without differentiating or explicitly including or excluding kinship foster homes. This is often in line with interest organisations whose task is to strengthen the position of foster parents as paid workers, for example, through new legal regulations and increased economic transfers.

Even though kinship foster homes are usually based on established mutual emotional and social relationships in private life and shared cultural belonging, the same legislation applies to them as to other foster homes (where relationships between children and foster parents must be established from scratch). Such legal equal treatment of foster homes within and outside the child's family and/or kin, as described, entails the same asymmetrical relationship between child welfare services and families in terms of decisions and control routines, as well as rules for financing. The downside of juridification is a challenge, i.e., that decisions (the regulation of family life) are tied to the fulfilment of child welfare's legal provisions and guidelines rather than other considerations.

In other words, it is likely that common legislation for foster homes and other formal guidelines for child welfare practices will force or stimulate a parallel development, namely, tendencies towards the professionalisation of kinship foster homes as well. In our view, this will contribute to undermining or counteracting the distinctiveness and advantages of kinship foster homes as a family environment for children.

For today's and future foster care, contradictions and conflicts between various competing value systems and logics point to several fundamental questions: How are children in foster care regarded when professional policies are developed—as a benefit or more of a burden for the family? Can foster parents be both parents and paid workers in their relationship with the children they have taken responsibility for? What competency requirements should, in that case, be established for such professional practice? Is it possible or desirable to maintain the nuclear family as the model and ideal for foster families, while more and more frameworks, regulations, and practices are drawn from professional life and the labour market? Is it desirable or possible to shape kinship foster care after the model of traditional foster care? Another question that can be raised is whether it is possible to limit professionalisation processes within the foster care system while still ensuring favourable conditions for children's upbringing in foster homes (cf. Roman, 2016).

Our intention is not to argue against the professionalisation of foster parents where children have significant problems and special needs. However, this is far from the case for all children. Our point is rather that legislation and measures for children who cannot live with their parents should be more differentiated than is currently the case in Norway. This is particularly relevant where children can grow up with their relatives—but also for other children who are placed long-term outside their parental home.

In this article, we have pointed out some unintended and unfortunate consequences of today's semi-professionalised foster homes. For a healthy development of foster homes in the future, research is needed that takes a closer look at these conditions. This also applies to topics that we have not touched on, such as what professionalisation has involved for the case workers' role. Particularly, their management of economic support and its impact on the relationships with the families they are meant to support.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

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

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this work, the second author used chat.uit.no to review the manuscript for spelling, grammar, verb tense, and correct word choice in British English. The author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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About the Authors

Renee Thørnblad is a sociologist and professor at RKBU North at UiT The Arctic University of Norway.

Jeanette Skoglund is a sociologist and associate professor at RKBU North at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. She leads the research project Outcome and Experiences of Foster Care and Nordkin—a research network for kinship and network care researchers in the Nordic countries.

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ARTICLE

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

Radostina Antonova [1] **and Gergana Nenova** [2]

[1] Know-How Centre for Alternative Care for Children, New Bulgarian University, Bulgaria
[2] Sociology Department, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," Bulgaria

Correspondence: Radostina Antonova (radostina@knowhowcentre.org)

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

2. Theoretical Framework

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Foster Care in Bulgaria

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

3.1. Historical Tradition

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

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

3.2. Developments After 1989

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3. Types of Foster Care

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Methodology

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

4.1. Participants

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

5. Results

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

5.1. Identity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The narrative of mission merges with the narrative of suffering:

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

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

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

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

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

5.2. Motivation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.3. The Role of Finance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.4. Attitudes Towards Foster Parents

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Conclusions

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

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Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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

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About the Authors

Radostina Antonova holds a doctorate in sociology and a master's degree in psychology from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." She is a researcher and part-time lecturer at the New Bulgarian University. Her research interests include ethnic minorities and child and youth activism.

Gergana Nenova is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in Bulgaria. Her research interests are in the field of sociology of the family and sociology of gender.

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ARTICLE

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

David Wästerfors

Department of Sociology, Lund University, Sweden

Correspondence: David Wästerfors (david.wasterfors@soc.lu.se)

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Abstract

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

Keywords

care; foster care; money; work

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Method and Data

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Keyings and Framings of Foster Care

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

5.1. So Much Fun

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.2. A Way of Life—With Work Bubbles

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.4. From One Job to Another

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.5. Engaging in Civic Activity

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.6. Exploited, One Might Say

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

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

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About the Author

David Wästerfors is a professor of sociology at the Department of Sociology, Lund University, Sweden. He teaches courses in sociology and criminology. His research often focuses on interactions, institutions, emotions, and social control. He has completed three ethnographic research projects in Swedish detention homes, examining conflicts, schooling, and violence. A related interest is qualitative methodology, demonstrated in the book *Analyze! Crafting Your Data in Qualitative Research*, co-authored with Jens Rennstam and published in 2018. Other research interests include narrative analysis, social psychology, disability studies, and ethnomethodology. Currently, he is involved in two projects: one on Scandinavian volunteer soldiers participating in the war in Ukraine, and another on the role of money and economic conditions in Swedish foster care.

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ARTICLE

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A System Stretched Beyond Its Elastic Limits: The South African Foster Care Grant System

Sipho Sibanda [1,2]

[1] Department of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia, Australia
[2] Department of Sociology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence: Sipho Sibanda (sipho.sibanda@uwa.edu.au)

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Abstract

Foster care placements are temporary care arrangements for children removed from their biological families due to a plethora of reasons. The social worker investigates the circumstances of the child and then compiles a report to the presiding officer of the children's court recommending that a child be placed in foster care. Upon placement in foster care, the foster parent then qualifies to receive a foster care grant on behalf of the child. Foster care grants are meant to assist families in the upkeep of children placed in their care. The number of children in foster care in South Africa continues to grow, which has resulted in the foster care grant system being overwhelmed and the caseloads of social workers becoming extremely high. This raises concerns about the feasibility and appropriateness of foster care grants as a vehicle for providing income to children in foster care. This qualitative desktop review explores the South African foster care grant system, and highlights challenges faced by the system, and the reasons that contributed to the challenges, such as the lapsing of foster care orders, which led to the discontinuance of foster care grants. Moreover, the use of money from foster care grants and their contribution in providing income support to families and children is highlighted. In addition, the shortcomings and unsustainability of foster care grants and their perpetuation of dependency syndrome are explored. Recommendations for the proper use of foster care grants and for addressing the foster care grant crisis in South Africa are outlined.

Keywords

child protection; foster care grants; poverty alleviation; social assistance; South Africa

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1. Introduction

To reverse the legacy of apartheid, the democratically elected South African government had a tremendous task of addressing the inequalities it inherited from its predecessors (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025). The process commenced with its pre-election manifesto of equity and adoption of a developmental approach as a new perspective for achieving socio-economic justice and human rights (Patel, 2015). The Department of Social Development (2013) postulates, "The White Paper provides a framework for the transformation and restructuring of social welfare services in South Africa." To both respond to 21st-century challenges facing children in foster care, and fully accord them of their rights as enshrined in the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the South African government introduced the Children's Act (Act No. 38 of 2005; Republic of South Africa, 2005), which provides a legislative framework for rendering foster care services and for payment of foster care grants in South Africa. The Children's Act replaced the Child Care Act (Act No. 74 of 1983), which was legislation that originated from the apartheid period (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025). Since the introduction of the Children's Act in 2005, there has been instability in rendering foster care grant services (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). Most of the shortcomings relate to ambiguous words and phrases in the Children's Act (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). This has led to a slow uptake of foster care grants and the exclusion of thousands of children who otherwise qualify for them (Hall et al., 2016).

For a foster care placement to occur, a child should be declared as a child in need of care and protection by a presiding officer of a children's court, who acts on a recommendation of a social worker, contained in the social work report that is compiled after an investigation into the circumstances of the child (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). In South Africa, foster parents receive financial assistance to care for the foster children (Dhludhlu, 2021). According to the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA, 2025), foster parents receive a monthly grant to care for their foster children, and it is valued at R1,250 (€60) per child as of 1 April 2025. According to the Department of Employment and Labour (2025), the national minimum wage in South Africa is R4,500 (€218) per month. The South African foster care grant system seems to be grappling with several challenges (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025). Policy experts and social workers have called for a complete overhaul of the South African foster care system to make it responsive and accessible to several children who qualify for foster care grants (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023; Skelton, 2015). This article aims to describe the use of money in foster care and the unsustainability of the South African foster care grant system. The value of foster care grants in providing income support to families will be underscored. Thereafter, challenges associated with the South African foster care grant system will be presented. Lastly, recommendations for overhauling the South African foster care grant system will be provided. The primary research question addressed in this article is: What challenges does the South African foster care system face? The objectives of the study were: (a) to contextualize the use of money in foster care; (b) to determine the contribution of foster care grants in providing income support to families and children; (c) to identify challenges and unintended consequences of the South African foster care grant system; and (d) to devise recommendations for the proper use of foster care grants in South Africa.

2. Legislative Framework for Foster Care Grants in South Africa

The Children's Act of 2005 provides a legislative framework for foster care and foster care grants in South Africa. The key provision is section *150*(1)(a), which outlines one of the grounds for determining whether a child is in need of care and protection, so that a foster care grant can be paid to their foster parents. This

section states, "A child is in need of care and protection if the child has been abandoned or orphaned and is without any visible means of support" (Republic of South Africa, 2005). Problems of immense proportions have resulted from the wording of section *150*(1)(a). This section has proved problematic when a social worker tries to open and finalise a children's court enquiry for a child in foster care whose order has lapsed (Sibanda, 2013). The same is true for an abandoned or orphaned child requiring foster care that has been staying with alternative parents on a private arrangement and now needs state assistance because of a small source of income, which is only sufficient for them but not for an additional person (the child concerned). Such caregivers are usually relatives receiving some form of state assistance (for example, disability grant, older persons grant, or child support grant). A study conducted by the National Welfare, Social Service and Development Forum (2008) found that most children who require foster care reside with elderly relatives. Besides section *150*(1)(a), there is usually no other ground for determining that such children are "in need of care and protection" so that they can be placed in foster care for their foster parents to receive foster care grants. Unfortunately, most presiding officers reject the ground, saying, "The child is not without 'visible means of support' as required by section *150*(1)(a)" (Hall & Proudlock, 2011, p. 2). Such children can only be eligible for a foster care grant if the children's court issues a court order placing them in foster care. It is noteworthy that there has been rejection of foster care applications on a "literal and strict" interpretation of "visible means of support" (*SS v. Presiding Officer of the Children's Court, Krugersdorp and others*, 2011).

Most social workers in a study by Sibanda (2013) expressed serious concerns over this wording—"a child is in need of care and protection if the child has been abandoned or orphaned and is without any visible means of support" (p. 77)—and indicated that it should be changed. Their question was, "What exactly does the phrase 'visible means of support' mean?" (Sibanda, 2013, p. 77). They stated that it is a very subjective phrase and that the lack of clarity on section *150*(1)(a) makes it inevitable for different stakeholders to have different interpretations of the Act. Participants stated that presiding officers of the children's court do not have a standardised way of doing things; they have completely different ways of handling and approaching foster care placements and foster care grant matters (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). Having such an ambiguous phrase allows presiding officers to use subjective discretion in dealing with foster care cases and in deciding whether the child should receive a foster care grant. This frustrates social workers and prevents access to foster care grants by many families (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015).

3. Developmental Approach to Foster Care Grants

The South African foster care system was formulated in such a way that ensures that foster care grants are administered from a developmental approach (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025). South Africa's adoption of the developmental approach was an attempt to transform social service delivery from a residual approach to a developmental approach (Herselman et al., 2023). A developmental approach is underpinned by a human rights-based perspective (Patel, 2015). This article, therefore, makes use of a developmental approach embedded in a human rights paradigm as its theoretical framework, the rationale being that the study was done within the domain of child protection and social protection of one of the most vulnerable groups of society (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). Some of the key principles of a developmental approach, spelt out in Midgley (2010) and Patel (2015), are: participation; universal access; self-reliance; empowerment; appropriateness; and accessibility. These principles are in alignment with the principles stipulated in the Children's Act, which social workers should apply when rendering foster care services to children and their families. The key features of a developmental approach are: harmonising social and economic development;

facilitating and promoting access to rights; and challenging policies and social systems that compromise rights (Patel, 2015).

4. Methodology

This article is based on a literature review of journal articles, dissertations, media reports, reports from government departments, and reports on formal submissions and presentations made to the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa by the civil society regarding foster care issues. The author examined section *150*(1)(a) of the Children's Act as the central section for placing children in foster care and subsequently paying the foster care grant, and then moved into exploring the shortcomings and challenges associated with this foster care grant system.

The study adopted a scoping literature review to provide an overview of the literature on foster care grants in South Africa. The literature review process included the following stages: identifying the research question; identifying relevant literature; selecting literature; summarising; and reporting the results. The Problem, Interest, Context (PICo) framework (see Table 1) guided the development of the following broad question: What challenges are faced by the South African foster care grant system?

Table 1. PICo framework.

Area of focus	Specific area of focus
Problem	Challenges in the foster care grant system
Interest	Contributing factors and effects
Context	South Africa

A search strategy was developed to identify relevant publications related to foster care in South Africa. The search was conducted across multiple electronic databases such as Scopus, ProQuest, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Academic Search Ultimate. These databases were selected because of their relevance to social sciences, social work, and social protection. The search strategy employed keywords to maximise the retrieval of relevant literature. Using the PICo framework, the search terms for the constructs of interest were identified first, including "foster care," "foster care grants," "social grants," "social assistance," and "South Africa." The search was limited to publications in English. To ensure a focused and relevant selection of literature for review, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established (see Table 2).

Data extraction was carried out using a semi-structured data charting form, which facilitated the collection of key information from each selected publication. The data extraction process included the following components:

1. Citation Information: Author(s), year of publication, title, and source;
2. Study Type: Classification of the publication type (e.g., empirical study, policy document, review article);
3. Key Findings: Summary of the main findings relevant to foster care grants in South Africa;
4. Context: Description of the factors contributing to challenges surrounding the South African foster care grant system, including any legislative, institutional, and infrastructural barriers;
5. Gaps and Recommendations: Identification of gaps in the current South African foster care grant system and recommendations for future research and policy improvements.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criteria Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Focus of publications	Literature and publications addressing factors contributing to the challenges in the South African foster care grant system	Literature and publications on foster care grants in South Africa without a focus on challenges and factors contributing to the challenges
Context of publications	Publications with a South African context	Publications with a non-South African context
Publication year	Publications from 2005 to 2025	Publications outside the stated period
Type of publications	Peer-reviewed articles, government reports, grey literature, and dissertations related to the topic	Other types of publications, e.g., non-peer-reviewed articles, reflections, and commentaries
Language	Publications available in English	Publications available in other languages

The application of these components resulted in a more manageable and relevant body of literature for analysis. Analysis of the extracted data was conducted thematically, allowing for the identification of recurring themes within the literature. The thematic analysis followed the process outlined by Creswell (2014): familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Ethical approval for this review was not necessary, as this review is based solely on secondary data from literature sources that have been published and are available in the public domain.

5. Findings

Seven themes emerged from the analysis of the data. The themes and sub-themes are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
Inappropriate and insufficient legislative arrangements for foster care grants (Section 5.1)	
The current foster care grant crisis in South Africa (Section 5.2)	
Shortage of social workers to process foster care grant applications (Section 5.3)	
Implications of providing foster care grants to more foster parents (Section 5.4)	Financial implications (Section 5.4.1) The discontinuance of foster care grant payments (Section 5.4.2)
The use of foster care grants in South Africa (Section 5.5)	Foster care grants as the only source of income and livelihood for foster families (Section 5.5.1) Foster care grants provide economic support and poverty alleviation to families (Section 5.5.2) Foster care grants are used to cater to the educational needs of foster children (Section 5.5.3) Matching the standard of living of other children who live with their biological parents (Section 5.5.4) Foster care grants are used to buy furniture, renovate, and extend houses (Section 5.5.5)

Table 3. (Cont.) Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
Foster care grant dependency (Section 5.6)	
Lack of exit strategy for foster care grant recipients (Section 5.7)	

5.1. Inappropriate and Insufficient Legislative Arrangements for Foster Care Grants

The findings indicate the challenges with regard to the legislative frameworks for the administration of foster care grants. The main provision for determining the placement of children in foster care so that they can receive a foster care grant is section *150*(1)(a) of the Children's Act. This section is full of ambiguity and subjectivity; it implies that a means test must be introduced for accessing foster care grants. Moreover, the legislative arrangements fail to address the current foster care crisis and the shortage of social workers in the country, which has inevitably led to the lapsing of foster care orders and foster care grants. Lastly, the legislative arrangements fail to address the plight of children who are "in need of cash and not much in need of care" (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015, p. 346).

It should be noted that the civil society of South Africa has called for the rejection and overhaul of the foster care legislative framework. They posed a rhetorical question about the legislation: What is "visible means of support"? (Sibanda, 2015). According to Matthews (2015), the phrase "visible means of support" is also equivocal and is likely to be interpreted by magistrates on a case-by-case basis, and hence lead to different standards being applied when assessing suitability for foster care placement and eligibility for receiving foster care grants. Matthews (2015) and Skelton (2015) conclude that the South African foster care grant legislation is legally flawed.

5.2. The Current Foster Care Grant Crisis in South Africa

The shortcomings of the foster care legislation contribute to the current foster care grant crisis in South Africa. Sibanda and Ndamba (2023, p. 45) articulate the following regarding the foster care crisis in South Africa:

> For many decades, the number of children in foster care placements in South Africa remained below 50,000. But when orphaning rates started to increase rapidly in the early 2000s because of rising HIV prevalence rates and the failure of the state to roll out antiretrovirals, there was growing public concern about what would happen to orphans. The number of maternally orphaned children doubled from half a million to over a million between 1996 and 2004. In 2002, the former Minister of Social Development, Dr Zola Skweyiya, stated publicly that the Department of Social Development was encouraging relatives to take care of orphaned children under the foster care package. This shift towards using the foster care system (and the associated foster care grant) for orphaned children was echoed by politicians and policymakers on several other occasions, but without formal consultation or inquiry into the systemic consequences of such a shift.

Similar observations regarding the foster care crisis in South Africa are documented by Fortune (2016, p. 14):

> By May 2000, there were less [sic] than 50,000 children in court-ordered foster care....By May 2007, the number had reached 418,608. This means an increase of more than 700% in seven years, and long waiting lists for social work services and court dates. The system became burdened, and so did its social workers.

As noted above, it was envisaged by the architects of the South African foster care system that it would accommodate not more than 50,000 children at any given time. This is no longer the case as the number of children in foster care has skyrocketed. According to Vivier (2023, p. 1), "recent statistics available about the foster care grant suggest that nearly 400,000 children in South Africa are in foster care." This number is almost 10 times higher than what was envisaged. Due to the systemic failures in the foster care grant system that are caused by being stretched beyond its elastic limits, only half of the foster parents of children in foster care receive foster care grants. SASSA (2024, p. 25) states that, in 2024, there were 253,256 foster care grant recipients in South Africa. This was a huge reduction in the number of foster care grants in payment. The SASSA (2024, p. 25) shows that, in 2018, there were 416,016 foster care grant recipients in South Africa. The question that can be posed is: What is happening to these children's foster parents, who should be receiving the foster care grants but are not? In response to the question, Sibanda and Ndamba (2023, p. 44) postulate, "After 20 years, most of these children would have grown up without [their foster parents] receiving the foster care grant and lost the opportunity to guarantee their survival, development and protection." Similar concerns regarding massive delays in receiving grants by children in foster care are highlighted by the Children's Institute (2014, p. 1) as follows:

> In the past few years, we have seen serious delays in the processing of new foster care applications. Those families who are taking care of orphaned children, who would under normal circumstances qualify, are being denied access by being sent from pillar to post. We have reports of caregivers being told by social workers to place adverts in newspapers. Social workers complain of having limited budgets in relation to advertisement as required by the law, files of those who have applied have just been lost, and other cases just sit for long periods of time with no progress being made. This puts a serious strain on families who themselves are living in poverty. The right to access adequate social assistance is grossly violated.
>
> The foster care system has been overburdened and is being used for what it was not intended for; in other words, it is being "abused." Surely, it cannot cope with 1.5 million children. If we attempt to force it to cope, it will be a disaster; more and more children will continue to fall through the cracks in the system. More and more children who are hungry and thirsty for social work services will continue to be deprived of social work services, as social workers will be busy conducting the administration of foster care. Social workers under strain are forced into crisis intervention mode and end up running ambulance services instead of rendering proper developmental, child protection, and reunification services to children and their families.

There was a constitutional court case in 2011 (*Centre for Child Law v. Minister of Social Development and Others*, 2011a) that instructed the Department of Social Development to design and implement "a comprehensive solution to address the crisis in the foster care system" (Matthews, 2015, p. 7). Failure by the Department

to acknowledge foster care systemic challenges and to design a "comprehensive legal solution as instructed by the Constitutional Court is very disappointing [to civil society organisations]" (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023, p. 44). The South African foster care legislation continues to miss opportunities to address the crisis in the foster care grant system.

5.3. Shortage of Social Workers to Process Foster Care Grant Applications

South Africa has a critical shortage of social workers, which is closely linked to the foster care grant crisis as aforementioned. Section 186 of the Children's Act allows for children's courts to make permanent foster care orders in specified circumstances. Permanent foster care orders reduce the costs and time of the biennial reviews by social workers and courts that were required by the Child Care Act of 1983 (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). Nevertheless, social workers and courts are still required for the first placement decision. The backlog in foster care placement is therefore set to continue. Proudlock and Jamieson (2008, p. 39) reflect on the impact of the shortage of social workers:

> The result is that families caring for orphaned children will continue to wait for a long time before they receive the Foster Child Grant, while services for children who have been abused or exploited will also be delayed as social workers and the courts struggle under a heavy case load. The opportunity to promote the use of the administratively simple Child Support Grant for children placed with relatives and who are considered low-risk placements has been lost. Besides reaching more orphaned children faster and saving considerable costs for both the Departments of Justice and Social Development, it would also have freed up precious court and social worker time to deal with active cases of child abuse.

Similarly, a study by Sibanda (2013, p. 73) underlined the shortage of social workers in the implementation of foster care services:

> Implementation is a challenge, because we are working with a population of over 49 million and we have a drop in the ocean number of social workers, who are supposed to render, not only child protection services, but also family preservation services …and a lot of other services in the welfare sector.

September and Dinbabo (2008) note that social workers are critical in the implementation of foster care services. Unfortunately, the number of social workers in South Africa is insufficient to provide adequate foster care services (Cronje, 2015). The National Development Plan states that South Africa will need 55,000 social workers by 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2011, p. 361). With 2030 just around the corner, this target will likely not be met. Researchers are concerned that the use of professional social workers to process foster care grant applications is an inappropriate use of scarce human resources; foster care grant applications could be processed by administrative staff (Hall et al., 2016; Sibanda & Lombard, 2015; Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). The Children's Institute (2014, p. 2) states:

> Child protection social workers and courts should be providing services to raped, assaulted, neglected, abandoned, and orphaned children. There is no need for them to have to spend their skills and time processing paperwork for foster care grant applications for children, the majority of whom are quite safely living with their grannies or aunts. South Africa has a very effective social security agency with an

> army of social grant officers who could be tasked with processing these foster care grant applications and reaching orphans quickly.

The shortage of social workers leads to massive caseloads, which forces many social workers to implement foster care services from a remedial approach at the expense of comprehensive and holistic services embedded in the social development approach (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025).

5.4. Implications of Providing Foster Care Grants to More Foster Parents

5.4.1. Financial Implications

There are dire financial implications of providing foster care grants to more foster parents. The costs include the direct costs of the foster care grants, plus very high operational costs. According to Matthews (2015, p. 11):

> If the nearly 1 million maternally orphaned children who are not yet in receipt of the foster care grant successfully applied for the grant, the direct cost would be around R11 billion [€534 million] annually, plus enormous costs for court personnel and social workers for the administration of the grant.

The processing of foster care grants is costly because it requires the involvement of the children's courts and social work services in the issuing of a foster care order, which then qualifies the child for receiving a foster care grant (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). Moreover, the foster care placement must be supervised regularly, and periodic reports submitted to the children's court to renew the foster care order so that the foster care grant can continue being active (Republic of South Africa, 2005; Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). The administration of more foster care grants is thus an expensive endeavour.

5.4.2. The Discontinuance of Foster Care Grant Payments

Should the current status quo of accessing foster care grants remain in practice, many orphaned and vulnerable children in South Africa will continue to lack access to the foster care grants. Immense pressure will be exerted on the over-stretched foster care system and social workers. According to Sibanda and Ndamba (2023, p. 47), "the presiding officers require voluminous and unnecessary documents to be attached to the section 159 (extension of orders) reports." These reports are for extending foster care orders, which allow the continued payment of foster care grants. The challenges associated with the extension of foster care orders and the administration of foster care grants are well documented (see Dhludhlu, 2021; Sibanda & Lombard, 2015; Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023).

Social workers managing high caseloads cannot have all documents and attachments to reports for extending orders ready for courts on their due dates (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). It is therefore inevitable that foster care orders will lapse. According to Du Toit (as cited in "Court order to end," 2011, p. 1), an estimated 123,236 children's foster care orders had lapsed by the end of January 2011 without being extended, and many such orders were due to expire each subsequent month. News24 ("Court order to end,"2011) attributed the lapsing of foster care orders to "a building up of backlogs at the various provincial departments, the children's courts and the child protection organisations." In light of this catastrophe, and touched by the plight of large numbers of children who were consequently facing discontinuance of foster care grants, the Centre for Child Law at

the University of Pretoria made an urgent application to the High Court. Delivering his court ruling on the case of *Centre for Child Law v. Minister of Social Development and Others* (2011a), Judge Classen recognised the urgent need to provide a temporary solution for "pre-Children's Act foster care orders requiring renewal, until the Children's Act is amended to provide for a more comprehensive legal solution."

Reflecting on the matter of expired foster care orders, the Children's Institute (2014, p. 3) states:

> In 2011, the Department [of Social Development] was taken to court by civil society because approximately 120,000 foster care grants had stopped being paid to children. Social workers and courts had not kept up with extending the children's foster care court orders. The Department agreed in a court-ordered settlement to reinstate the lapsed grants. The court order placed a temporary moratorium on any further lapsing of grants. The court ordered the Department to design a comprehensive legal solution by December 2014.

On 12 December 2014, realizing that the deadline was approaching and that they had not yet developed a comprehensive solution to address the crisis in the foster care system as ordered by Judge Classen, the Department of Social Development applied to the North Gauteng High Court to request that the Classen order be renewed to avert the discontinuance of the foster care grants for children whose foster care placement orders had expired (Skelton, 2015). According to Sibanda and Ndamba (2023, p. 48):

> It showed a sense of desperation and further proved that there is a crisis in the foster care grant system when the Department of Social Development approached the court to renew an order that was obtained against them by the Centre for Child Law. This was an indirect admission that the foster care grant system was failing to cope.

Nonetheless, the High Court reviewed the application and renewed the order to 31 December 2017 (Skelton, 2015). According to Sibanda and Ndamba (2013), this meant that the Department of Social Development had to address the backlog of all lapsed foster care orders and develop a comprehensive solution for the foster care grant system by December 2017. The Department of Social Development (2015) notes that four years after the court order was issued, the Department provided the following update to the high court in 2015:

> Out of 108,479 orders that lapsed between April 2009 and December 2014, 58,246 were outstanding nationally by June 2015. This means that 50,233 foster care orders were issued since 12 December 2014.

Sibanda and Ndamba (2023, p. 48) made the following observations regarding the above update:

> This indicated that the Department of Social Development had managed to attend to only half the lapsed orders in seven years (2009 to 2015), and it was very doubtful that they would be able to attend to the remaining half in three years (2015 to 2017). Logic suggested that they needed at least seven more years (2015 to 2021) to deal with the outstanding backlog. Again, this further proved that there was a huge crisis in the foster care system. Panel-beating the foster care system is not enough; the system needs a complete overhaul.

Similar concerns of a slow progress in addressing the foster care back log and designing a comprehensive legal solution as ordered by the high court were raised by Skelton (2015), who observed that the South African foster care grant system was being kept from collapsing by the court orders and that without the intervention of the high court and the litigation of the civil society, the foster care grant system would have crashed a long time ago. The continued failure to renew foster care orders means that foster families will continue not receiving foster care grants, which means that they will have to relinquish certain necessities that were being covered by the foster care grant. According to Dhludhlu (2021), the discontinuation of foster care grants engulfs children and families back into a pattern of terrible deprivation and places them in danger of being unable to maintain sustainable livelihoods. The contribution of foster care grants towards the household income, livelihoods, and welfare of South African foster care families is an uncontestable and undeniable fact (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025; Tladi & Setlalentoa, 2020). Matthews (2015) noted that the conflation of the need for care and protection with the need for social assistance entrenched and probably increased the use of the child protection system for the administration of foster care grants. This is worrying because the child protection system is already not coping with the workload of foster care grant applications (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025).

5.5. The Use of Foster Care Grants in South Africa

5.5.1. Foster Care Grants as the Only Source of Income and Livelihood for Foster Families

Some foster parents who are not employed depend solely on the foster care grant and see it as their only source of income and livelihood. In a study by Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020), some foster parents indicated that in the absence of foster care grants, they would not have applied to become foster parents. Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020, p. 15049) note the views of foster parents regarding the use of foster care grants as follows:

> Sometimes you cannot help but use the foster care grant for [everyone] at home. If you use it for electricity, you cannot say it is only for the foster child; it also helps others in the household. The grant helps the foster child and others. It is not easy when there is not much income to use the grant only for the foster child. I think that it is okay as long as it also benefits the foster child.
>
> I do not work; we depend on the foster care grant for everything. I think it should be increased because right now it does not meet all the needs of the foster child.
>
> I use the foster care grant for food, electricity, clothes, and school things. I combine it with the child support grant for my child to cater to all of us.
>
> I pay for burial societies, electricity, and buy food, how will I also pay for school fees and buy her clothes? These children nowadays wear expensive clothes and do not understand when you say there is no money.

5.5.2. Foster Care Grants Provide Economic Support and Poverty Alleviation to Families

The foster care grants assist foster care families in providing for the needs of the children under their care and in relieving them from experiencing extreme poverty (Fortune, 2016). Participants in a study by Dhludhlu

(2021, p. 146) shared that the foster care grants contributed to economic support and poverty alleviation. One of the participants shared that he dropped out of school after the termination of his foster child grant, but once it was reviewed, he was able to go back to school:

> Therefore, from 2009 to 2012, I did not attend school because I [my foster parent] was not receiving any grant, and my family was without any source of income. My foster mother used to blame me for going to the initiation school, and as a result, the family put a lot of pressure on me. Moreover, those were the most difficult years of my life. It was very difficult for me because I had to work during weekends to make ends meet. In 2012, fortunately, I met the new social worker called Bridgett, and she was able to assist me [my foster parent] in processing my foster care placement and the renewal of the grant again.

Furthermore, foster care grants have been pivotal in reducing indigency in families. A social work participant in a study by Dhludhlu (2021, p. 147) stated:

> I would say that with foster care, you would see when they come to apply for foster care placement and during the investigation, that this family needs assistance. In addition, most foster care placements that we have, the foster child grants help the family to alleviate poverty. For some families, you find that this is the only source of income that they have, no one is working, and it helps them.

A foster parent in a study by Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020, p. 15045) explained the importance of the foster care grant in enabling her to buy household items as follows:

> Yes, the grant is important in the lives of foster children because we can buy what the child needs. I use it for groceries, clothing, electricity, and cosmetics for her. When spending the grant, I consider her needs first, I know that it is meant for her. I also know that I should focus on her needs rather than her own wants, which may not be important.

The above quotations denote the pivotal role played by foster care grants in providing income support to families and in enabling families to meet their basic needs. This is in line with the Constitution of South Africa, which states, "Every child has a right to social security, family or parental care, shelter, social services, basic education, including adult primary education and to further education" (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

5.5.3. Foster Care Grants Are Used to Cater to the Educational Needs of Foster Children

Foster care grants are used by foster parents to buy school necessities such as school uniforms, stationery, and books for the children in foster care. Participants in a study by Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020, p. 15052) highlighted the pivotal role played by foster care grants in enabling them to put their foster children through school. Some professed that in the absence of foster care grants, it would have been impossible for them to meet the educational needs of the children in their foster care placement. One foster parent was quoted by Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020, p. 15052) saying:

> The grant helps our children to get a better education than us. We could not go to school because there was no money for that. They are lucky now because there is the foster care grant.

This finding is consistent with the views of Leatt and Budlender (2006, p. 5): "Grants assist in overcoming financial barriers to school attendance, in terms of fees and other costs—school supplies, uniforms and transport, etc."

5.5.4. Matching the Standard of Living of Other Children who Live with Their Biological Parents

Foster care grants are being used by foster parents in a manner that makes their foster children also look like those children living with biological parents. Foster parents in a study by Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020) indicated that they bought expensive items for their foster children so that they would not feel unloved because of their orphanhood status. According to Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020, p. 15051), one foster parent in their study remarked:

> I do not want him to see himself as different from his peers. I try not to make him look different from others, so that he also knows that he is loved.

5.5.5. Foster Care Grants Are Used to Buy Furniture, Renovate, and Extend Houses

Foster parents in a study by Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020, p. 15052) revealed that they used the foster care grant to extend their houses in a quest to create additional rooms to accommodate and cater for foster children in their care. The foster parents stated that it is not right for children receiving foster care grants not to have their own bedrooms and furniture. Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020, p. 15045) quote foster parents who use the foster care grants to buy furniture, renovate, and extend their houses:

> My children and foster children are both aware that the foster care grant is being used to extend my house. My children will not kick them out, saying it was my house and not the foster children's home. We all agreed.
>
> How can a person receive the grant and not buy a bed for her foster child? What does she do with the money? The child must have a bed to sleep on.
>
> When I started with this grant, the social worker who was assisting me said I should ensure that my foster children have a place to sleep. I have bought beds and cupboards for them with the grant.

5.6. Foster Care Grant Dependency

Social workers in a study by Sibanda and Ngwabi (2025) indicated that due to the high rates of poverty and unemployment, most foster parents are dependent on the foster care grant. This has led to desperate measures on the part of prospective foster parents who submit fake documents and foster parents who are unable to save money for the foster children's future. According to Sibanda and Ngwabi (2025), the desperation and culture of dependency are illustrated by the following statements from participants:

> The foster care grant has created a culture of dependency. When it comes to the financial side, they are too dependent, especially those who don't work; the foster care grant is the only source of income in most homes.

> People take advantage of the foster care system—some mothers with two deceased children, who are male and female, use the death certificates of these children since they have the same surname. They will claim that the deceased are parents of the child they are applying for foster care for—when you go through the documents, you then realise that the deceased were not married but were siblings.

> The service is not sustainable; we only have a few foster parents who save money for these foster children, and we need more community development projects to help them.

Social grants reduce poverty and promote human rights (Hall et al., 2012). However, Lombard (2008) observed that the government still places greater focus on social grants instead of socio-economic development, which has created a dependency syndrome among grant recipients, instead of fostering self-reliance by connecting grant recipients with productive sectors of the economy. However, the challenge, as observed by Patel et al. (2012), is that social workers have a limited understanding of economic development concepts and of their role in promoting the establishment of microeconomic development initiatives. Failure to embrace their role in economic development is likely to result in the continued entrapment of families in unsustainable foster care grants (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). This then erodes all attempts to transition to developmental social welfare (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025).

5.7. Lack of Exit Strategy for Foster Care Grant Recipients

Social workers in a study by Sibanda and Ngwabi (2025) indicated that there is a barrier in the non-availability of an exit strategy for foster grant recipients. Foster parents receive the foster grant up to the time the children in their foster care placement complete secondary school, and there is no income afterwards (Dhludhlu, 2021). The social workers in a study by Sibanda and Ngwabi (2025) indicated that if these foster children could be empowered with practical skills, given scholarships, or exposed to self-income generating projects, this would ensure that they would not be dependent on the foster grant and that they would be equipped with skills and opportunities that would make them self-reliant, even after the foster grant is terminated. According to Sibanda and Ngwabi (2025), this was explicitly captured in the following statement:

> People who are aging out of the foster care system are a challenge to us because they come back to us and we don't know how to help them, we don't have programmes that are sustainable for them.

This finding is supported by Lombard (2008), who indicates that although social grants alleviate poverty in many households, the government admits that no exit strategies were formulated for social grant recipients. It is imperative to engage in social security that empowers grant recipients to reduce dependency on the state. Lack of exit strategies for grant recipients limits efforts to transform the foster care sector.

6. Conclusion

Foster care grants in South Africa provide the much-needed income support to families since some foster parents are not employed, and the foster care grant is seen as a lifeline and the only source of income in the house. Although very low in value, foster care grants are used to cater to the shelter, clothes, education, electricity, and basic needs of foster children. However, the ways in which foster care grants are used and the range of needs they are expected to cover are too extensive to be supported by the grants alone. Some

foster parents use foster care grants to buy household furniture, beds, and cupboards, while others use the foster care grant to renovate and extend their houses so that it has many rooms for the benefit and comfort of the foster child. Although relevant to the needs of the child, this is not what the foster care grant is meant for; it should be used for the direct upkeep of the child in foster care. If foster parents overly stretch the use of foster care grants, then there are concerns that foster children might end up being neglected financially, because foster parents are focusing on their expensive endeavours and needs at the expense of the needs of the foster children. The overreliance on the foster care grant contributes to the dependency syndrome. There is a need to devise exit strategies for foster care grant beneficiaries and connect them with productive sectors of the economy so that when the grant stops, they will not be left with no source of income. As such, it can be concluded that the South African foster care grant system is unsustainable and is overstretched. Moreover, the foster care grant system is riddled with deep flaws, faces overwhelming challenges, and produces serious unintended consequences.

The legislation that guides the foster care grant system in South Africa should be amended to address the ambiguity and subjectivity associated with it. Moreover, such amendments are necessary to address the current foster care grant crisis and the shortage of social workers in South Africa, which has inevitably led to the lapsing of a huge number of foster care grants. Lastly, the legislation should be amended to address the plight of children who are "in need of cash and not much in need of care" (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015, p. 346) and to future-proof the South African foster care system from abuse, manipulation, and misuse.

The foster care grant is utilised for the basic needs of foster children. As such, foster parents should be trusted that they are responsible and that they will not abuse or misuse the foster care grant, and that they will spend it in the best interest of the foster children. However, since the foster children are placed in one household with the biological children of foster parents, they cannot differentiate or separate what is for the foster child and what is for their biological children. It is unrealistic and unfair to expect foster parents to make this distinction; food and consumables are for every household member. What matters is that all children (whether foster care or biological) have what they need and are well taken care of; it should not matter from which exact pocket or grant the money came from. Enforcing such an expectation on foster parents might result in unintended consequences, where foster children might end up being treated differently from other children in the family.

6.1. Significance and Implications of the Study

This article is significant for both policy development and practical implementation, as it sheds light on critical systemic challenges that currently hinder the efficient delivery of foster care grants in South Africa. By thoroughly examining obstacles in the foster care grant system, the article underscores the need for targeted reforms and strategic interventions to ensure that vulnerable children receive timely and adequate support. Addressing these systemic issues is essential not only to improve the functionality of the foster care system but also to promote social equity and protect the rights of some of the country's most at-risk children.

6.2. Recommendations

Recommendations to address challenges in the foster care grant system include introducing a kinship care grant system that operates in parallel to the foster care grant system, allowing for non-court-ordered care by

relatives (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). The kinship care grant system should be designed in a way that ensures that orphans in the care of relatives receive an adequate social grant in the shortest possible time. The kinship care grant system should not replace the foster care grant system, but should act as a parallel system. Thus, it should ensure that children who need care and protection are referred to the foster care system, and children who need cash are catered for by the kinship care system. This will free up the time of social workers to ensure that they provide proper foster care grant administration services and prevent the lapsing of foster care grants. Moreover, the foster care grant system should be linked with income generation activities to avert the dependency syndrome and lack of economic sustainability associated with foster care grants in South Africa.

Since the findings indicate that in some households the foster care grant is the only source of income and that its value is too low to cater for all the needs of the child, the foster care grant should be increased so that it can meet all basic needs of the foster children. Future studies should focus on designing and developing a foster care grant supervision and monitoring framework to guide social workers and to enable them to identify indicators on the current use of the foster care grant and on assessing whether foster care grants are used in the best interests of the children in foster care.

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Conflict of Interests

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About the Author

Sipho Sibanda is a senior lecturer in the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Western Australia. He also serves as a research associate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pretoria. With over a decade of experience in higher education, he has extensive expertise in teaching and supervising postgraduate research projects. He completed his academic training with a DPhil in social work (2022) and master of social work (2014) from the University of Pretoria, following his bachelor of social work honours degree from the University of Zimbabwe (2007). Before entering academia, he accumulated substantial professional experience in child protection organisations, progressing through various roles including social worker, supervisor, and manager. His research focuses on multiple aspects of child welfare and social policy, particularly child protection systems, foster care practices, family reunification processes, social development strategies, human rights issues, and social justice initiatives. He has conducted research in Australia, Nepal, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

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Perceptions About the Role of Money in Contemporary Romanian Foster Care

Borbála Kovács and Ovidiu Oltean

Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania

Correspondence: Borbála Kovács (borbala.kovacs@ubbcluj.ro)

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Abstract

Despite foster care becoming central to the protection of children in state care in Romania following the push for a rights-based approach in anticipation of European accession, empirical research on fostering remains sparse. Using a mixed methods qualitative design combining findings from 15 in-depth interviews with 16 diverse expert participants with the analysis of a 2019 high-profile scandal surrounding the international adoption of eight-year-old Sorina by Romanian-US parents, this article explores systemic features of the role of money in contemporary foster care practice. The analysis explores three points of consensus articulated by experienced system insiders: (a) the stability of foster care placements; (b) the normalisation of quid-pro-quo arrangements between case workers and foster carers; and (c) inadequate monitoring and oversight of placements. To empirically explore the organisational context that leads to these systemic issues and the implications for care-experienced children, we also expand on the widely mediatised Sorina case. In 2019, a prosecutor had to forcefully remove the adopted child from her former foster carer, who was keeping her without legal basis, to join her adoptive parents. The media attention led to a polarised public hysteria and politically motivated legal intimidation against the adoptive parents. The analysis unpacks the ways in which the relative financial generosity associated with foster care is seen by expert participants to lead to the self-selection of poorly trained, rural families fostering mainly for economic reasons, with potentially undesirable consequences for cared-for children's rights. The article contributes with a detailed account of the variegated ways in which money shapes foster care in contemporary Romanian child protection practice.

Keywords

child protection; foster care; international adoption; Romania

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1. Introduction

Foster care—the placement of cared-for children in substitute family environments—plays a critical role in child protection and out-of-home care across Europe, including in post-communist nations (Eurochild, 2025). As a protective intervention and a societal service, foster care is meant to ensure children's safety, the stability of their upbringing, and personal growth in a way that contributes to social integration and cultural learning (Cameron et al., 2016). In Romania, foster care became an alternative to the Soviet-time large residential care homes after the massive legislative reform during the Năstase cabinet in the early 2000s (Rădulescu, 2011), in anticipation of EU accession (Gavrilovici, 2009). Consequently, not only has the number of children in state care decreased since the legislative reforms of 2004, from 50,238 to 26,823 in September 2024, but the share of children in familial care, including foster care, has been increasing steadily. Of 26,823 children in familial care in September 2024, 14,904 were fostered by 10,587 foster carers (ANPDCA, 2025). Foster carers, being employees of county-level Directorates General for Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC, hereafter also Directorate), figure in staff reports. In September 2024, they represented 38.9% of the total workforce of the Romanian child protection system, the largest category of employees (ANPDCA, 2025).

Despite ample writing on the legal changes governing Romanian child protection, foster care remains a blind spot in research. There are also few system-wide statistical insights into the quality of care offered through fostering. Consequently, this contribution is an unprecedented, albeit incomplete, systemic analysis of contemporary Romanian foster care. The article is structured into five parts. The literature review briefly discusses foster care as a form of protection for children in state care, expanding on foster care systems in neighbouring post-socialist countries, then moves to contextualising the Romanian case by offering information on legal guidelines and a similarly detailed account of foster carers' (*asistent maternal* in Romanian) employment status and pay. Section 3 details the research methodology, including the primary data and analytical process. The empirical analysis in Section 4 is structured into two main components, one detailing the findings from the in-depth expert interviews, followed by the presentation and discussion of the Sorina case, then explores the role that financial motives may have played in the sequence of events leading up to the child's manhandling to remove her from the household of her former foster carer to join her adoptive parents. Section 5 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foster Care as a Core Component of Eastern European Child Protection Systems

Foster care encompasses various forms: kinship care, which maintains cultural and relational continuity; non-relative care, which places children with unrelated carers; foster-to-adopt arrangements, which aim for long-term stability; and professional foster care, where trained and remunerated carers manage high-need placements (Chateauneuf et al., 2022). In England, for instance, varieties of foster care include long- and short-term care, kinship care, emergency foster care, respite fostering, remand fostering, fostering for adoption, and, finally, specialist therapeutic foster care (Gov.uk, 2025). As will be discussed below, only some of these types of fostering are available in Romania.

While foster care is consistent as a concept and in its institutionalisation across European countries, implementation varies significantly, with distinct systems emerging in response to local welfare frameworks

(Herczog, 2024; Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2016). For instance, Norway's "family service" model prioritises in-home support, using foster care as a last resort and providing robust financial and supervisory support for foster carers (Berrick & Skivenes, 2013; Solvi et al., 2024). Norwegian foster parents receive a monthly foster subsidy recommended at NOK 6,700 (€837.50) per child in 2011, where the average net monthly salary is close to €4,986 as of 2024 (Statistics Norway, 2025), and where those caring for children with complex needs are often full-time state employees. In contrast, the US "child protection" model focuses on reactive interventions, with foster care subsidies varying widely by state, from $271 to $828 per month, in a country where the monthly average salary stands at $4,776 per month in 2025 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Foster parents in the US do not have employed status, limiting their access to employment protections and financial support, e.g., subsidised childcare (Berrick & Skivenes, 2013). In contrast, the UK offers foster carers the equivalent of €2,340 per child per month on average, which includes a professional fee and child's needs allowance, alongside National Insurance credits, training, and legal protection (National Fostering Group, 2025). This allowance is notably more generous compared to the average net monthly wage in the UK, which was £2,500 in 2024 (Office for National Statistics, 2024).

In Central and Eastern Europe, child protection system reforms aimed to shift Soviet-style residential care-based models to foster care systems, though institutional funding dominates child protection in countries like the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia (Herczog, 2024), and Romania (Stănculescu et al., 2016). In many post-socialist countries, around 60% of children in care enjoy familial care services, including foster care, on par with the EU-wide average (Eurochild, 2025), including Romania (ANPDCA, 2025). However, as with other welfare state functions, child protection systems remain underfunded, and financial support for foster carers varies greatly. In Hungary, low foster care allowances and underfunded local services continue to hinder effective reform, particularly in rural areas (Herczog, 2024). Foster carers receive a monthly fee of 55% of the minimum wage if they are employed only as a foster carer, i.e., €9.5/day, amounting to €285 per month, plus family entitlements (European Commission, 2024), though the minimum monthly wage is €861, one of the smallest in the EU (Eurostat, 2025b), and the average monthly salary is €1,598, as of 2025 (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2025). Poland's foster carers report that current allowances fail to meet children's basic needs, forcing many to seek personal subsidies (Herczog, 2024), creating a similarly difficult situation for foster parents as in Hungary. It is only recently that a bill has been introduced to increase foster care payments by €230 per month, raising total earnings to approximately €1,050 (Pyka, 2024), which which is just below the average monthly mean equivalised net income for 2024, €1,086 (Eurostat, 2025a).

2.2. The Regulatory Context of Fostering in Romania

2.2.1. Foster Care

In Romania, professional foster care emerged after 1989 as part of the broader deinstitutionalisation process (Anghel et al., 2013), but genuine political commitment to professionalised service came during the early 2000s, when the entire child protection system and rules around adoption were radically reformed (Rădulescu, 2011). Several contributions provide detailed overviews of thirty years of post-socialist reform in the Romanian context (Marin & Stănculescu, 2019; Negoita, 2010), including reviews of legislative changes (Rădulescu, 2011; Roth, 2019).

Law 272/2004, the legal basis for child protection in Romania, defines foster care as a form of familial care for children in receipt of "special protection," alongside daytime services, other familial care, and residential services (Art. 119). Entering foster care is preceded by children being taken into state care. The removal of children from their families starts with a formal request on behalf of the child made by a local or county-level Directorate social worker (for an outline of the Romanian child protection organisational structure, see Supplementary File, Appendix 1). The director of the Directorate approves this request, which is accompanied by an individualised plan of protection, issued within 30 days from receipt of the formal request, i.e., a prolonged process. This can lead to a limbo, e.g., if social workers do not proceed with formalising the request to be taken into care. Indeed, a few of our experts with experience in the child protection system recounted shocking anecdotes of children stuck in emergency residential homes for years.

Social workers elaborating individualised plans of protection are obligated to prioritise certain forms of care above others, prime among which is children's own families (Art. 58), as in the Norwegian system. There is substantial emphasis on either family reunification or seeking other familial care. If these options are not feasible in line with provisions in Art. 28 and 29 of Law 273/2004 (on adoption), the case worker can propose placement (*poate prevedea plasamentul*) with a foster carer (Art. 62). Residential care is the last resort. The recommendation for placement has to then be formally established (*se stabilește*) by the courts, at the request of the Directorate (Art. 65).

The regulatory framework also extends to the establishment of emergency placement (*plasament în regim de urgență*) for children who are: (a) abused, neglected or victims of violence; (b) found or abandoned in medical units; and (c) children whose parents are detained, on remand or arrested; or are admitted to hospital (Art. 68). Emergency placement "is established" by the director of the Directorate (Art. *69*(1)) if the child's carers agree to collaborate with Directorate social workers intervening on the scene, a very unlikely scenario; or by the courts and the office of the state President (Art. *68*(2)), through a legal procedure that involves social workers on site addressing the court for requesting the issuing of a presidential ordinance (*ordonanță prezidențială*; Art *100*(3)). An experienced Directorate social worker frustratingly explained the significant practical limitations of either procedure, not least because the convoluted bureaucratic, multi-institutional mechanism to secure a presidential ordinance was ineffective for most cases of after-hours domestic violence involving (also) child victims.

Distinctions and varieties of foster care are less clear than, for instance, in the UK context. The Romanian legal framework mandates that all placements are temporary, but no distinction is made between short-term and long-term placements. In practice, placements are long-term and, as we describe below, there are incentives for both case workers and foster carers to make foster arrangements enduring for years. As already noted, kinship fostering is actively promoted and almost half of the children in so-called familial care were placed with extended family or other families and individuals in 2024 (approx. 12,000 out of over 26,800; see ANPDCA, 2025). Emergency foster care exists as a legal possibility, but is seen as difficult to impose. Interviewed experts suggest that children in need of emergency placement end up in specialised residential units rather than with familial care solutions following removal: It is from there that they may end up in foster care after some time. Remand fostering is stipulated in law (*supraveghere specializată*; Art. 71) and can be established in the same way as emergency placement, but is invisible in the Romanian context. Finally, there is no explicit, clear regulatory framework for arrangements such as respite fostering, fostering for adoption, or specialist therapeutic foster care, though—as elsewhere—expert interviews overwhelmingly

suggest that children taken into care in Romania have unusually complex needs (Solvi et al., 2024). In theory, all fostering is in anticipation of family reunification or adoption, and foster carers enjoy priority in adoption proceedings. However, as the Sorina case eloquently illustrates, ceasing to be a 'maternal assistant' to become mummy or daddy means notable monetary losses, and is therefore an unattractive option for foster carers for whom the financial component is important to the decision to foster.

2.2.2. The Status and Employment Conditions of Foster Carers

The institution of the foster carer was first regulated in 2003, through Cabinet Decision 679/2003, in 12 articles. This was replaced by a stronger legal instrument in 2024, Cabinet Ordinance 27/2024, with more detailed provisions for the selection, training, and certification of foster carers. Ordinance 27/2024 defines the foster carer as the certified person, employee of the County Directorate, who ensures "the raising, care and educating of the child" for the duration of the placement, including during "breaks" (*perioade de respiro*), i.e., paid holidays (Art. 1). Minimal requirements for being considered for the position include "affective availability" of and agreement from the applicant as well as his/her spouse and children over 14. Another requirement is that the applicant's spouse has earnings (Art. 3) at the time of applying.

Candidates undergo an assessment comprising a social and a psychological component. The former is carried out by a Directorate social worker through a minimum of four meetings, one of which must be at the applicant's home. The psychological component is carried out by a psychologist through at least two meetings, which can also include counselling (Art. 6). The assessment is followed by a total of 80 hours of training, comprising a theoretical component (50 hours) and a practical one. Training is organised by Directorates using a curriculum developed by the ANPDCA (Art. 13). Following the training, the assessment team compiles the applicant's final evaluation report and makes a recommendation for the issuing/non-issuing of a certificate. If the report recommends certification, the applicant submits a formal request to the Commission for Child Protection within the Directorate, which has 30 days to make a decision (Art. 10). Positive decisions lead to certification, which needs approval every two years based on an evaluation carried out by a social worker-psychologist pair (Art. 11). The regulatory framework spells out conditions for certificate suspension and withdrawal.

As permanent employees of Directorates, foster carers' employment is governed by provisions of national labour legislation (Art. 22). As public sector employees, their salaries are specified in national legislation on the payment of public servants (Frame Law 153/2017). Pay grades vary by experience (years worked) and child-related specifics, but not geographic variations in the cost of living: the higher the cost of living (e.g., in large, dynamic urban economies), the lower the financial attractiveness of fostering. In 2024, when the net minimum wage was 2,363 RON/month (€473; see Ministerul Muncii și Solidarității Sociale, 2024), a foster carer with two years of experience fostering one child earned 2,794 RON/month (post-tax, €562) plus a holiday voucher of 1,600/RON/year (€322); fostering two children 2,990 RON/month (€602) plus the holiday voucher; and fostering one disabled child 3,123 RON/month (€628) plus the holiday voucher (DGASPC Sector 3, 2024). In addition to their salary, foster carers also receive a placement allowance (*alocația de plasament*) for each child, amounting to 1,081 RON/month/child (€217) at the time of writing (ANPIS, 2024). In addition, as main carers, they also cash in children's universal child allowance, which accrues to every Romanian national until age 18, amounting to 794 RON/month/child (€160) for children under two years of age and disabled children; and 323 RON/month/child (€65) for children aged two-to-eighteen. In short, a foster carer at the beginning of her "career" in spring 2024, taking two children

older than two into care, received almost 5,800 RON/month (€1,167) plus the annual holiday voucher. This amount exceeded the net average wage in 2024 and single-handedly put the foster family's household into the 4th income quintile (INS, 2024), a generous financial compensation, certainly in the very poorly remunerated context of Central and Eastern European nations.

In short, the foster care system in contemporary Romania may be summed up as follows: (a) foster care is seen as the second best solution after familial reintegration, which our expert participants explain is concerning in lieu of integrated social services to substantively address family abuse, neglect and violence; (b) the placement procedure is highly bureaucratic and with extended deadlines, including for emergency placement, prone to creating undesirable limbo situations during the early stages of children's care trajectories following state intervention; (c) only three in four children with placements enjoy some form of familial care, including foster care; (d) across most of Romania, fostering as a full-time job is decently paid and very generous for rural families whose local employment opportunities are often scarce-to-inexistent.

3. Methodology

This article draws on a mixed-method qualitative strategy combining in-depth interview material with diverse expert informants on rights-based child protection practice in Romania, and a case study, the highly mediatised Sorina case in 2019. The latter centres on an eight-year-old girl in foster care for seven years with the same carer, adopted by the Romanian-US Săcărin couple in April 2019, but whose former foster carer, Mariana Șărămăt, had been preventing her from joining her adoptive parents before and following adoption despite the withdrawal of her own foster carer's certificate. International adoptions are rare in Romania: They have ranged between seven (2013) and 41 (2018) since 2004, and in 2019, Sorina's adoption was one in a total of 22 international adoptions (ANPDCA, 2023). The case came to national media attention in June 2019, when a prosecutor, with assistance from police and riot police (*Jandarmeria*), carried out a search as part of a criminal investigation against Mrs. Șărămăt, initiated by the child's parents. The prosecutor was filmed by members of the Șărămăt family and neighbours forcefully removing the eight-year-old from the home of her former foster carer: This footage was then widely used in the press without protecting the child's identity. After a month of high-profile legal proceedings following Sorina joining her adoptive parents on 21 June 2019, the family was finally able to leave Romania for good. Favourable commentators in a national broadcaster TVR (2020) reportage described "the case" as a national media frenzy manufactured by parts of the media (specifically PSD-sympathetic Antena 3 and other tabloid media outlets, later fined for their coverage of the story) to reinforce a narrative of a corrupt judiciary and to promote conspiracy theories, including against Sorina's parents. Still, Sorina's experience highlights what are seen as typical and systemic shortcomings in the institutionally induced conduct of the Directorate employees involved, including the foster carer.

3.1. Primary Data

The in-depth interviews form part of a comparative Norway-Romania study on child protection practices with a focus on the right to participation, the right to nondiscrimination, the right to family, and the best interests of the child. Information about foster care was not systematically sought, but brought up spontaneously by 16 of the 30 key informants (in 15 of the 28 in-depth interviews). Interviews were conducted via Zoom between October 2020 and February 2021 during the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic-related distancing measures, and transcribed verbatim into Romanian. Purposive sampling, typically used in

qualitative studies (Hennink et al., 2011; Silverman, 2013), was geared towards recruiting diverse expert participants in terms of age (young adults to senior professionals with decades of experience), professional background (youth NGO workers, social workers, local social services managers, central government agency staff, members of parliament, judges and academics), duration of professional experience with child protection (between one and over 25 years), and organisational perspective (local, county-level and/or national; see Supplementary File, Appendix 2).

Participants were invited to participate in the study by senior members of the research team on the basis of their direct and publicly visible involvement with Romanian child protection practice. Conventional ethical guidelines were observed in collecting and processing the primary data (Hennink et al., 2011; Silverman, 2013), including informed consent and the right to withdraw at any time, anonymity and the confidentiality of primary data, and the protection of participants.

The case study featuring the adopted girl Sorina is put together using online media coverage on the most-read Romanian news outlet *HotNews.ro*. Using the keywords "Sorina," "cazul Sorina," "Sacarin," and "Baia de Arama" in the *HotNews.ro* search box, 35 news pieces were identified, all under the section ESENTIAL and signed by the editorial team. These news pieces cover the period between 21 June 2019, the day Sorina was forcefully removed from her former foster carer, and 12 September 2019, when *HotNews.ro* reported on five television channels being fined by the National Council of the Audio-Visual (CNA), the government regulator (and equivalent of the British Ofcom), for their coverage of the Sorina case (for a full list of news items, see see Supplementary File, Appendix 3).

3.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in MaxQDA® by a member of the research team not involved in interviewing, using the original transcripts. Thematic coding was mainly open, following the steps described by Hennink et al. (2011). However, given the prioritisation of the four rights of the child in our comparative study, deductive code families are more prevalent than with a mostly open coding process. Coding unfolded in three stages: (a) a "big picture" reading of all transcripts in no particular order; (b) the development of the code system using a random sample of one-third of all transcripts, audited by other members of the team; and (c) the coding of all transcripts. This coding process resulted in the "foster care" subcode (41 coded segments), nested under the code "inadequacies of the administrative system/context [of child protection]," suggestive of the highly critical tone that most participants—without prompting—discussing foster care adopted, regardless of their diversity. To ascertain rigour in the coding process, an ongoing auditing process was systematically employed to avoid under- and over-coding (by creating new subcodes or merging codes and related segments; coding earlier-coded transcripts with later emerging codes; and recoding segments where relevant in the initial stages of the code-by-code analysis process).

In writing up the findings from our expert interviews, we have chosen to prioritise telling rather than showing our findings. This means that we seldom use direct quotes. While this is unusual in reporting qualitative results (Parkin & Kimergård, 2022), our choice is supported by the fact that direct quotes in no way demonstrate either the rigour of our analysis or the validity of our findings (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006).

HotNews.ro's media coverage was used to construct the timeline of Sorina's trajectory in state care (Figure 1), forming the basis for a systematic process analysis (Hall, 2006). We have chosen *HotNews.ro* coverage because this outlet is the most-read online national news portal. Compared to other outlets, including national broadcaster TVR, it provided the most extensive fact-based coverage during the tumultuous June-July 2019 period. However, later-fined tabloid media outlets ("Cazul Sorina," 2019) also created a lot of publicly influential content, including libelous interviews with public figures and former foster carer Mrs. Șărămăt. This content we excluded due to scope.

Typically, systematic process analysis is used in theory-led comparative research of historical political institutional developments to develop or refine theory (Hall, 2006), not our goal here. However, we employ this qualitative research strategy because it provides a systematic analytical approach to engaging with a process that unfolds in time, the child's care trajectory, in a structured, theory-led way. Furthermore, combining expert interview material with this case study enables us to articulate a more nuanced theoretical formulation for the role that money probably plays in the Romanian child protection system. Firstly, the case study provides a real-life illustration of the abstract, decontextualised assessments that our experts articulated, the two empirical components together contributing to the "rich rigour" and credibility of the study, key dimensions of quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010).

4. Money in Contemporary Foster Care Practice in Romania

Our empirical findings are organised into two main sections. In the first section, we highlight the variety of comments that our expert participants offered in relation to foster care in contemporary Romanian child protection practice. Interviews centred on participants' views of rights-based practice in child protection and public education and, consequently, discussions around foster care came up spontaneously: Discussions of foster care were a sidenote about different, broader rights-related issues in child protection. Thus, instead of the usual thematic organisation of interview data, we present our findings to best explore the tensions seen by experts to be generated by the cash transaction at the heart of Romanian foster care. The second part builds on the timeline of Sorina's care trajectory, outlining key moments in which financial considerations may have actively shaped care decisions on her behalf. This discussion builds on interview data in that it empirically illustrates the instances where systemic challenges in Romanian foster care, articulated by our expert participants, may be instantiated.

4.1. The Romanian Foster Care System Through the Lens of Diverse Expert Narratives

One joint interview with two youth NGO workers, both of whom grew up in state care—one in institutional care, the other in long-term foster care—offered a thorough, highly critical insight into "the problems of professional foster care." Among our experts with a system-wide perspective, there was consensus that the shift to foster carers, away from large residential care units, was very welcome and progressing, that there was adequate funding for it, but the shift was too slow. Only one of our participants decried the fact that the closure of large residential homes and children moving into foster care sometimes occurred without adequate planning, with children unprepared for care transition, a failing of adequately trained personnel. Another consensus was that foster care was the second-best alternative to long-term biological familial care arrangements. Overall, echoing other systemic generalisations (Kovács et al., 2025), experts agreed that the foster care system in place was well designed, but in some cases prone to disconcerting failings.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, foster care was imagined as a long-term, stable care solution akin to adoptive familial care, but paid. At least seven of our experts hinted at or described foster care arrangements as pseudo-adoptive familial care arrangements. One of our central government-experienced participants described the maternal assistant as someone "who raises the child as their own," except being paid for it. Both dimensions of this formulation—(a) the foster carer *raising* the child rather than looking after her and (b) the foster carer raising the child *as their own*—are suggestive of foster care being understood as stable, predictable, in both logistic and emotional terms. An exception to this was the pair of care-experienced youth NGO workers, who were highly critical of this assumption. From their perspective, it was precisely this enduring, pseudo-familial dynamic that made it problematic, as highlighted in Sorina's case, which they mentioned spontaneously. Here, the pair commented that it was Sorina's long-term relationship that resulted in the child feeling and, for all intents and purposes, being a de facto adopted child, making her departure to join her adoptive parents a traumatic one. The drama of the departure, in their view, was a direct consequence of the maternal assistant developing a close tie to the child and, as a trusted adult, of convincing her that she'd be taken away by bad people:

> We copied the legislation from France, but we don't implement it properly. That's the major difference. In France and America, the system works differently; it operates under the foster care model. Foster care means: I take you for a month or two, that's it, but I don't have the option to keep you here; during that period the social worker, the case manager, has the obligation to find you an adoptive family from the database of those already registered, vetted, and the match is made. In those two months, sure, the foster parent comes with you, the foster parent accompanies you to the meetings with the matching family, and that's it. The foster parent is not allowed, only in Romania does this happen, not allowed to intervene, to tell the child: "Don't go with these people, look how ugly it is!" like it happened with Sorina, where she was told that masked people in black would come to take her, to take her kidneys, and one morning, guess what, they did come, dressed in black, the riot police, they are clad in black, but they came because she had been kidnapped. That child had been kidnapped. (Interview 3, A & N, Pos. 85)

The NGO workers reference what former maternal assistant Mrs. Șărămăt included not only in confidential official addresses towards various state institutions (Cartianu, 2019), but also libellously stated live on television that the adopting Săcărin couple's intentions with Sorina were to have her organs donated (Pora, 2019a). Care-experienced activists and a small number of other experts suggested that this type of unfounded scaremongering, alongside foster carer play-acting for the sake of the case manager on regular visits, taught helplessness among care-experienced children, and a lack of adequate Directorate control over foster children was systemic rather than isolated. It was against this highly personal perspective that these participants advocated a foster care system that would centre on temporary short-term solutions while children were being put up for (a much faster) adoption.

Another widely shared view among the experts was that foster care was corrupt, with maternal assistants creamed and certificates issued based on actual or future kickbacks. Of the 16 participants, six saw the foster care system as being typically governed by a financial quid-pro-quo logic, even if some participants mentioned that they also knew of dedicated, committed foster carers who really sought the best interests of the child and even took on conflicts with case workers so that their fostered child would get the therapy they needed. The context for the institutionalisation of kickbacks—experts mentioned rural foster carers offering milk, cheese, and other farm products not only to case workers, but their superiors, too—was

what was seen as too generous a financial arrangement for foster carers. Some of the central government-experienced experts noted that for rural families, especially, the amounts paid were very generous. Some argued that this financial generosity commercialised fostering, making children "lucrative," i.e., reliable meal tickets, echoing Alexandrescu's (2019) highly critical report. Indeed, one expert suggested that the high share of disability among children in state care can be explained by the fact that disability means higher per-child financing, creating a financial incentive to invent disabilities for these children. Furthermore, some experts described how, in rural families, foster children could be "lucrative" in other ways, for instance, as unpaid farmhands. One expert decried the absence of what he called the Dutch system, i.e., a register of potential foster carers who would take children into care without any financial compensation, and advocated for a lower financial compensation for fostering, the net minimum wage.

Inadequate oversight and insufficient control were also described by four participants in three interviews as another puzzle in what was seen as the undue commercialisation of foster care. Interviewees A and N, cited earlier, as well as other experts, criticised the fact that foster carers did not have to undergo the very stringent selection and monitoring process that would-be adopters had to, a problematic double standard; and that bureaucratic procedures to do with foster care could be easily carried out superficially, including the 80 hours of training, which they suggested were typically fictitious. A central government-experienced expert also indicated frustration with the absence of face-to-face, regular monitoring protocols of and with children in foster care similar to those that existed for residential care. In short, there was a shared sense among at least half of our participants that children in foster care were much less accessible to social workers than children in residential care, were less accessible unjustifiably, and that this inaccessibility was, in fact, problematic for children's welfare.

In summary, the thorough criticism of the two care-experienced young men and sporadic mentions of fostering in our body of interviews suggest two main conclusions. Firstly, foster care is systemically treated as a de facto long-term solution for young children rather than a temporary arrangement pending expedient family reintegration or adoption: Children can legitimately be "forgotten" about once in foster care by case workers. These placements are often (created) "sticky," i.e., difficult to reverse, exacerbated by weak monitoring, poor communication channels, and a lack of crisis intervention protocols. Secondly, foster care is described as primarily commercialised, financially motivated, as a stable, lucrative source of income, particularly in rural areas where even respectable citizens have very limited local employment opportunities. The financial attractiveness, coupled with weak oversight, is seen to instrumentalise the child's placement, privileging carers' economic interests over children's welfare. Directorate staff, operating under both workload avoidance constraints (Lazăr et al., 2018) and sometimes personal financial incentives, are seen to be positioned to select foster carers based on both professional merit and informal or clientelist considerations, or sometimes only the latter. As a result, fostered children are often seen to end up in a social worker–foster carer relationship incentivised to be enduring, serving carers' and sometimes case workers' best financial interests rather than the best interests of the child.

Such a negative appraisal by diverse experts with very good knowledge of the Romanian child protection system in all sorts of capacities should, however, be considered against the background of absent administrative data on, for instance, the duration of individual children's care trajectories in state care and that of placements, the number of placements per child and regional variations, reasons for placement changes and placement continuity, etc. While the aforementioned shortcomings, described as systemic by

participants, are undoubtedly valid, the absence of equivalent positive real-life illustrations leaves invisible the challenging work that over 10,000 foster carers in Romania today do for the over 14,000 foster children (ANPDCA, 2025).

4.2. The Sorina Case

4.2.1. A Brief Timeline of the *HotNews.ro* Media Coverage

On Friday, 21 June 2019 around 2 pm national news outlets show distressing amateur video footage of an eight-year-old girl being dragged by prosecutor Maria Pițurcă, accompanied by riot police, out of her home to join her adoptive mother, a social worker and a psychologist and be escorted for a medical check-up, in Baia de Aramă, Mehedinți county. The prosecutor is acting in a criminal investigation against the child's former maternal assistant (quickly identified publicly as Mariana Șărămăt), who has been keeping the child illegally and preventing her from joining her adoptive parents, a Romanian-US couple, since her adoption in April 2019. The criminal investigation was initiated by the Directorate, followed up by the parents. During the day, *HotNews.ro* clarifies the legal circumstances of the case and its antecedents (see Figure 1). At the same time, members of the PSD-led government make public statements to PSD-friendly television channel Antena 3 throughout the day. By the evening, acting Attorney General Bogdan Licu announces his request for an internal investigation into the case prosecutor, which later turns out to be a criminal investigation. There are local street protests asking that Sorina "returns home," that "she decides [her fate] herself," and that the child "deserves a place in Romania, with her [i.e., foster] family."

On Saturday, the Minister of Labour and the Minister of Justice speak to reporters for later-fined Antena 3 in which (a) they state that the handling of the child's removal was inappropriate, causing "tears," with the Minister of Justice publicly apologising "for what this little girl had to go through" (referring to her manhandling the day before rather than the 18 months of manipulation, emotional abuse and isolation by her maternal assistant during and after the adoption, which Mrs. Săcărin later details in an interview with Free Europe; see Pora, 2019b); and (b) they promise verifications, checks and other bureaucratic control procedures. On Sunday, some local protesters travel as a group to Craiova, Dolj county, asking for images of the child (made public later in the day by the Săcărin couple, with Sorina's face obscured) and for the annulment of the international adoption. Police trade unions promise new procedures for guaranteeing the rights of the child in similar instances and demand that the legal procedure underpinning the adoption is reviewed, an unlawful request given that the adoption decision was final. Finally, Prime Minister Dăncilă is asked to respond publicly, promising tough personal accountability of anyone "who made mistakes" in the case and an encompassing report, to be made public via the same PSD-friendly Antena 3.

Tabloid television outlets have been fuelling public hysteria since Friday, siding with the former maternal assistant, and promoting conspiracy theories about the adopting couple, including that the Săcărins paid off Child Protection staff to be able to adopt Sorina, which they publicly denied, and that the reason they wanted to adopt the child was to take her to the US and have her organs donated, which they could easily do since the adoptive mother and some of her close family were medical doctors. Interestingly, both accusations feature illegitimate financial motives to construct the adoptive parents into villains akin to the wolf of the widely known Romanian folk tale of the goat and her three kids (echoing the Little Red Riding Hood story). At the same time, the maternal assistant and her family are narratively constructed as Sorina's "real family" through making invisible the employment relationship that underpins Sorina's placement.

Sorina is born in 2011 and enters state care shortly after.

Sorina is placed with maternal assistant	2012		
Adoption proceedings initiated	2013		
M. Șărămăt does not wish to adopt Sorina, but continues to care for her	10 July 2013		
Legislation on adoptions changes	*2016*		
New adoption proceedings initiated	2017		
M. Șărămăt does not wish to adopt Sorina	4 Apr 2017		
Court rules that proceedings for international adoption can commence	16 Feb 2018		
M. Șărămăt formulates a request for Adoption	18 Apr 2018		
M. Șărămăt formulates a request to be certified as an adopter by the County Directorate	25 Apr 2018		
M. Șărămăt formulates a request to be evaluated for certification as an adopter	27 Jun 2018		
M. Șărămăt declares she accepts adopting Sorina if her international adoption fails	8 Aug 2018		
M. Șărămăt withdraws her 8 Aug Declaration	10 Aug 2018		
M. Șărămăt requests that her 10 Aug withdrawal is annulled	24 Aug 2018	24 Aug 2018	Adopting Săcărin couple formulate the request to adopt Sorina
Due to multiple refusals by the maternal assistant, the Directorate has still been unable to organise meeting between child and her adopting parents.			
Mehedinți County court decision on Sorina's adoption in favour of M. Șărămăt	18 Feb 2019		
		Feb 2019	Săcărin couple, County Directorate & ANPDCA attack the decision & request moving the case to Craiova Court of Appeals (Dolj county)
		23 Apr 2019	Craiova Court of Appeals decides adoption definitively in favour of Săcărin couple
County Directorate formally asks M. Șărămăt to bring the child to join her parents at Directorate offices, which M. Șărămăt refuses	16 May 2019		
County Directorate social worker and Police try to collect Sorina, but M. Șărămăt is hostile, refusin to let the child go	20 May 2019		
County Directorate issues an emergency placement order for Sorina, requests assistance from Police to collect Sorina, unsucesfully	21 May 2019		
County Directorate withdraws M. Șărămăt's maternal assistant certificate and terminates her employment contract	**24 May 2019**	**24 May 2019**	Săcărin couple make a criminal complaint to the Prosecutor's office against M. Șărămăt for unlawfully holding their daughter
ANPDCA makes a criminal complaint against M. Șărămăt for a series of criminal acts	30 May 2019		
		10 Jun 2019	Săcărin couple make another criminal complaint to the Prosecutor's Office against M. Șărămăt for various rights violations
Country Directorate officials make phone call to M. Șărămăt to present Sorina at Directorate offices on 13 Jun to join her parents	12 Jun 2019		
Craiova Prosecutor's Office takes over 24 May complaing from Baia de Aramă Office	13 Jun 2019		
		14 Jun 2019	Săcărin couple add further points to their criminal complaint

In the 24 May 2019 criminal case, prosecutor Pițurcă carried out a search at M. Șărămăt's home on **21 June 2019**, with Police and Riot Police Dolj. The search is filmed by the husband of M. Șărămăt and neighbours; video fragments are circulated in local, then in national media.

Figure 1. Timeline of Sorina's adoption.

4.2.2. Sorina's Adoption Process and Rights-Based Practice in Romanian Child Protection

The present discussion highlights how Sorina's placement and adoption highlight some of the criticisms highlighted by our expert participants in relation to fostering. It offers a detailed account of Sorina's situation and the circumstances that led to her forceful removal by state prosecutor Pițurcă and riot police to be able to join her adoptive parents. The focus in the analysis is on case workers' and foster carer Mariana Șărămăt's actions and the role that financial arrangements may have played in these actions.

Mrs. Șărămăt became a foster parent in 2012, at age 39, to foster two little girls, one of which Sorina. At the time, she had a son and a daughter who were both around 18. According to her own official declarations, Sorina and the other fostered girl were her first foster children (Cartianu, 2019). Sorina was taken into care around age one and remained with Mrs. Șărămăt for almost seven years until her international adoption—the very last resort—in April 2019, followed by her forced removal in June 2019. The Șărămăt family had adopted the other girl in their care during this period.

Sorina's first adoption procedure was initiated in 2013, when Sorina was around two. Mrs. Șărămăt had priority to adopt Sorina as her foster carer, but she declined in July 2013. This adoption procedure proved unsuccessful: Directorate staff were unable to find a suitable adopting family, though they consulted over 120 certified adopters (Pora, 2019b). Following legal changes in 2016, a new adoption procedure was initiated. Mrs. Șărămăt declined to adopt Sorina again in April 2017, contributing to the failure of the domestic adoption process. In line with the 2016 new guidance, waiting times were shortened so that the failed domestic adoption process could be quickly followed up by international adoption. International adoption is considered a last resort: In Sorina's case, her right to a family had no other means of being achieved but through this route.

In 2017, the Directorate finally managed to identify one couple who accepted to adopt without prior contact with Sorina, the Romanian-US Săcărin couple, and who remained committed despite Directorate staff being unable to organise meetings between the couple and the child due to repeated refusals by Mrs. Șărămăt. The Săcărins repeatedly declared publicly later on that they agreed to adopt the first child offered to them, Sorina, in response to public claims by Mrs. Șărămăt that the Săcărins had bribed themselves through the Romanian Child Protection System to have Sorina adopted to have her organs donated (Cartianu, 2019). Formal adoption proceedings were initiated in court in February 2018, as the timeline in Figure 1 above outlines. Shortly after, Mrs. Șărămăt's quality as an interested party in the adoption proceedings was admitted by the Mehedinți court against sound legal basis, given that she had foregone her opportunities to adopt Sorina. As a party to a civil case, Mrs. Șărămăt filed a request to have Sorina adopted. The foster carer followed up with a series of applications to Mehedinți Directorate to be certified as an adopter—against her earlier wishes to adopt Sorina. Then she withdrew all of these requests. In short, what seems apparent is that the foster carer was committed to having Sorina remain in her care. Her decision to put herself forward as an adopter only when the genuine opportunity to "lose" the child to international adoption arose, after two formal refusals to do so, suggests that the financial dimension of fostering Sorina was important.

The adoption in local courts was decided in Mrs. Șărămăt's favour in February 2019. It is interesting—and suggestive of a deep-seated conflict between the Directorate and the foster carer, precipitated by the international adoption—that the decision was appealed not only by the Săcărin couple, but also by representatives of the Mehedinți Directorate and the National Agency for Adoption. The fact that the appeal

was moved to another county court of appeals suggests that the international adoption process became a local public issue, making authorities and the Săcărins doubt the court's independence and/or the parties' physical safety. One of the striking details of Sorina's circumstances during her fraught international adoption is that social workers lost access to the child once the international adoption was underway. Between February 2018 and May 2019, when Sorina's adoption court decision remained final, i.e., a period of 14 months, social workers managed to organise meetings between child and adoptive parents only in the home of the foster carer and without opportunities for meetings in her absence. This lack of cooperation between case worker and foster carer should have raised concerns, including the option of discontinuing the placement on suspicion that the foster carer was not acting in line with her duties and the best interests of the child, but the Directorate, interestingly, failed to take action. Furthermore, Sorina's isolation from Directorate staff seems unusual also because fostered children spend time in institutional care while their carers take a paid holiday at least once a year. Yet Sorina seems to have had superficial contact with Directorate staff at least between February 2018 and May 2019, if not longer. This begs the question of why the Directorate team did not intervene at least to uphold Mrs. Șărămăt's contractual obligation to take a paid holiday, leaving the child in temporary institutional care, and failing that, consider changing the child's placement arrangements.

The Directorate staff's inferior power position in relation to Mrs. Șărămăt during the meetings does not in itself tell us much about the basis for the Directorate's failure to intervene: It may have been simply because good foster carers are hard to recruit and Mrs. Șărămăt may have been seen to be one such carer. However, the judge's admittance of her application to be part of the adoption proceedings, without legal basis for such admittance, suggests that, in fact, Mrs. Șărămăt might have been in an unusually strong position. She may have derived this power, for instance, from having political connections in a county that some critical voices have suggested was unusually clientelist in top public sector positions, including often-politicised social services appointments (Alexandrescu, 2019; Postelnicescu, 2019; TVR, 2020). Case workers may have had little to no choice but to go along with Mrs. Șărămăt's exploitation of her position if they could not rely on institutional support to end Sorina's placement with her.

Lack of adequate contact between case worker and child during the legal proceedings for international adoption led to the mishandling of the child's status. The lengthy fostering weakened the relationship between case worker and child and undermined Sorina's adoptable foster child status, enabling her socialisation primarily as a de facto adopted child in a family with another adopted daughter. By the time international adoption was underway, Sorina was, for everyone concerned, including herself, the adopted child of the Șărămăt family rather than the potentially adoptable foster child of Mrs. Șărămăt. For the very few adoptable children like Sorina, the dissociation of the child's legal-bureaucratic status from her de facto care status is evidently against the best interests of the child because it rests on blurring the identities, social roles and, thus, the boundaries that are the prerequisites for these adoptable children to be able to exercise their right to a family when the adoption procedure is successful. Even for cared-for children who are not adoptable, weakening their formal status as non-adoptable foster children in the benefit of a make-believe adopted child status is problematic because it mismanages expectations and emotional attachments in the event of a family reunification, which the child may or may not want, or her placement with another foster carer at a later date.

The broader context for this is what our expert participants reiterated time and again, namely that a systemic problem in Romanian child protection is that social workers are first and foremost office work-preferring bureaucrats rather than social workers doing fieldwork (see Lazăr et al., 2018): Insufficient personnel to work properly with clients is one impact of systemic underfunding. Consequently, there is system-wide, regular sidelining of personal contact between social workers and children in care. A good foster carer against systemic pressures for social workers to place children with foster carers—and Mrs. Șărămăt may have been a good foster carer—means that social workers will be happy to delegate the day-to-day work of caring for the child, including preparing her for adoption and leaving her foster family, to foster carers. In Sorina's care, this led to undesirable outcomes, namely her isolation from Directorate control and intervention when Mrs. Șărămăt proved uncooperative. This is a failure of the system, to which adds the absence of routinised protocols to do with genuinely unannounced home visits (which, according to the rules, cannot be denied, yet seem to have been regularly denied by Mrs. Șărămăt, without penalty) and confidential meetings and discussions between children and their social workers. These shortcomings are further exacerbated by the physical distance, with Directorate social workers located in the county capital and fostered children living with families across the entire county, many in rural areas. For the social worker to have regular, quality contact with children placed in foster care, she would have to be on the road most of the time.

Finally, a frequently cited factor in expert narratives seen to undermine reliable child–social worker relationships is the likelihood of corrupt, clientelist practices between foster carers and social workers. As already noted, some analysts have claimed that Sorina's case illustrated first and foremost the collusion between a PSD-controlled Directorate and its PSD-vetted "client" foster carer network (Postelnicescu, 2019). The level of institutional weakness to intervene against Mrs. Șărămăt, detailed earlier, seems puzzling unless the Directorate team was facing someone with political backing, as other research suggests (Alexandrescu, 2019). And wider institutional collusion seems even more likely since Sorina's adoption court case presents unusual details: it was unusually protracted; the appeal had to be moved to Craiova (Dolj county); and the case came to national media attention via PSD-friendly Antena 3. Finally, a 2020 TVR reportage presented the Sorina case as a politically motivated attack, first and foremost, on the legitimacy of prosecutors in the Romanian judicial system, a PSD narrative at the time, rather than a case of international adoption gone awry.

It is interesting that the highly polarised media frenzy that followed Sorina's forceful removal from her foster carer, whose certificate was withdrawn in May 2019 and, as far as media coverage indicates, was never reissued, heavily relied on financial motivations on both sides. Commentators critical of the Șărămăt family suggested that the foster carer and her family had expressed interest in Sorina's adoption only once they saw they could lose her and the financial arrangement she represented. Mrs. Săcărin stated in interviews that Mrs. Șărămăt gave the impression during the adoption process that she hoped some private financial arrangement could be made with her so she would give up Sorina to this wealthy Romanian-US doctor couple (Cartianu, 2020). Similarly, the Săcărins were described—including by members of the Șărămăt family—as financially motivated: adopting to take the child's organs and to have been "given" Sorina for adoption rather than a different child as a result of bribes.

After finally being able to leave Romania following a month of legal proceedings against the Săcărins, and heightened public attention at the Șărămăt family, with whom public opinion sided throughout the media

frenzy, public attention in the so-called Sorina case faded. Five television channels, including Antena 3, where Mrs. Șărămăt and other family members made strong claims against the Săcărins, were fined symbolic sums for their coverage of the story in August 2019 ("Cazul Sorina," 2019). In 2023, the Sărăcin couple successfully initiated forced execution of Mariana Șărămăt's property for legal costs accrued in the court case in which Mrs. Șărămăt attacked the international adoption, and lost ("fanatik.ro: Lovitură," 2023). Furthermore, the Săcărins, including Sorina, were awarded damages in excess of €120,000 from the Romanian state for being unlawfully detained for a month in Romania in 2019 ("Familia Săcărin câștigă," 2023). In 2024, România TV had to pay damages close to €100,000 to the Săcărins for their portrayal by this outlet during the media frenzy of 2019 (Burlă, 2024). During the year after taking Sorina to the US, the Săcărins released several home videos to show her progress and her integration into her family's day-to-day life (TVR, 2020). In an interview with Free Europe Romania a year after the adoption, Mrs. Săcărin stated that Sorina had offered ample details of her abusive treatment by the Șărămăt family, of her reluctance to visit Romania or be in any contact with her former foster carer (Cartianu, 2020).

5. Conclusions

The transition of Romania's child protection system to a family care model was catalysed by the country's European accession process, pressuring political elites to streamline a rights-based approach (Negoita, 2010). This shift, essential in doing away with the Soviet-style residential care-based system, emphasised fostering as a key component for children separated from their families (Anghel et al., 2013). Over the past two decades, fostering has become central to Romania's child welfare system, but its implementation has been marked by significant systemic and financial difficulties.

Combining expert participants' views on foster care in Romania and the analysis of Sorina Săcărin's fraught international adoption aims to show that foster care in Romania, while potentially providing a family-*like* environment, can be entangled in practices that undermine its potential to serve as a stable, nurturing, strictly temporary care solution. The slow, bureaucratised placement process, coupled with weak monitoring mechanisms, engenders a situation where paid carers can exploit their position, not necessarily in the best interest of the child. This dynamic is especially evident in rural areas, where foster care is often more lucrative than potentially available employment options. Despite attempts at reform, the Romanian foster care system remains problematic due to insufficient funding for interventions and services, and weak monitoring, creating incentives for financial gain at the expense of the best interests of children (Alexandrescu, 2019; Anghel et al., 2013). The lack of adequate oversight is exemplified well in Sorina's case, where foster care, initially intended as a temporary placement, became an indefinite arrangement. The inability of the Directorate to effectively supervise foster carers or intervene in cases where carers' interests conflict with the child's welfare highlights a significant flaw in the system.

The structure and regulation of foster care, marked by comparatively generous financial compensations, yet weak oversight and monitoring, mirror broader bureaucratic tendencies within the Romanian child protection landscape, where social workers appear increasingly disconnected from the social realities and lived experiences of their cases (Alexandrescu, 2019; Lazăr et al., 2018). The preference for desk-based administrative tasks at the expense of direct, ongoing, and meaningful fieldwork has contributed to an environment where foster care arrangements are allowed to evolve into quasi-permanent arrangements. This dynamic is reinforced by the legal and regulatory context governing foster care, which, despite

recent updates of standards and protocols, remains without robust mechanisms for oversight, accountability, and transparent reporting. As illustrated by Sorina's story, these shortcomings facilitate the personalisation and privatisation of child protection, effectively allowing individual foster carers considerable autonomy over the lives of fostered children. This autonomy can extend to a problematic sense of ownership of children, particularly when carers become emotionally attached to children and rely on fostering as an economic survival mechanism in lieu of other employment opportunities. Such a situation can distort the fundamental objectives of foster care, i.e., child welfare, emotional security, and eventual family integration or adoption. Foster children, already marginalised by separation from their biological families and placed into an environment ostensibly aimed at their protection, can become commodified within a bureaucratic-economic nexus.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Primary data can be consulted upon request by individual researchers. Access to the data will be granted on a case-by-case basis.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors.

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About the Authors

Borbála Kovács is an assistant professor at Babeș-Bolyai University. She holds a DPhil (Oxon.) in social policy and worked previously at Aarhus University and Central European University. She has published in *Children & Society*, the *Journal of European Social Policy*, and *Social Policy & Society*.

Ovidiu Oltean is an assistant professor at Babeș-Bolyai University and a researcher at the Centre for Comparative Migration Studies. He has recently published in *BMC Public Health*, the *Social Change Review*, the *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, and in collective volumes tackling migration and social change at Anthem Press and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

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Historical Perspectives on Foster Care Payments: Changing Practices During the 20th Century

Ann-Sofie Bergman

Department of Social Work, Stockholm University, Sweden

Correspondence: Ann-Sofie Bergman (ann-sofie.bergman@socarb.su.se)

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Abstract

Payment of foster carers has long been a controversial issue, reflecting the question of whether fostering is a voluntary or professional activity. This article explores explanations for the change that took place during the twentieth century concerning economic compensation to foster parents for caring for other people's children in their homes. The study is based on document analysis of the child welfare discourse and practice in Sweden. The data consists of documents selected from a municipal child welfare board, documents from the child welfare agent and child welfare assistant at the county level, and documents from national-level sources, such as legislation and leading social work journals. Foster parents who took care of other people's children in their homes often received some economic compensation for the care from the municipal child welfare board. In the early twentieth century, this compensation was usually greatest when caring for younger children and lower for older children. Radical changes took place during the century, however, that affected the payment system. In the 1970s, the boards instead paid the greatest compensation to foster parents who took care of teenagers. Starting in 1974, the boards also began paying a subsidy to foster parents. The article analyses explanations for these changes. In summary, the following explanatory factors are discussed: changing perceptions of childhood, changes in circumstances in which children were placed in care, urbanization, and women's transition to paid employment.

Keywords

foster care; foster children; foster parents; historical perspective; payment; social work; Sweden

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1. Introduction

In all times and in all societies, there have been children who, for various reasons, have not been able to grow up with their birth parents. Families have informally or formally taken care of other people's children in their homes. The organization of the care has varied over time and across different cultures (Askeland, 2006; Colton & Williams, 2006). In Sweden, most of these children have been placed in foster care. Placement of children in private homes has been prioritized over placement in institutions, as life in a home with a family has been regarded as a natural solution, while life in an institution has been considered more artificial (Bergman, 2011). Previous international research has also shown that one incentive for placing children in foster homes has been that it is less expensive than group care for children in institutions (Briggs & Hunt, 2015).

In the early twentieth century, to protect children, family foster care began to be regulated in Sweden, as the previous care of foster children in society had been criticized. Some problems with the care were that children in rural areas could be placed with the person who made the lowest bid, rather than the person who could offer the best care, and that a foster child industry existed in the cities, meaning that foster parents were described as taking care of many children for money (Isberg, 1959; Sköld, 2006; Wawrinsky, 1892). In the early twentieth century, new legislation was introduced, according to which those who wanted to take care of other people's children in their homes had to be assessed and deemed suitable. Starting in 1926, child welfare boards became compulsory in the municipalities. These boards were responsible for placing children and supervising foster homes (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 1924).

In many cases, the contracted foster parents received some economic compensation for the care of their foster children. If the birth parents could not pay, it was the child welfare board's responsibility to provide economic compensation to the foster parents. In the early twentieth century, this compensation was usually greatest for the care of younger children and lower for the care of older children. Radical changes took place in the foster care practice in the 1970s. The payment system shifted. From then on, the child welfare board generally paid the lowest compensation to foster parents who took care of younger children, while the greatest compensation went to foster parents looking after teenagers.

The present article explores explanations for the change that took place during the twentieth century concerning economic compensation to foster parents for caring for other people's children in their homes. Historical research has shown that economic resources have played an important role in foster parents' ability to take care of a foster child (Bergman, 2011). Current research has revealed that practical support, including economic resources, is essential for foster parents' health, well-being, and retention (Blythe et al., 2014). Previous research has demonstrated that foster carers are often inadequately reimbursed for the expenses they incur. An Australian and a British study found that foster carers reported insufficient funding to cover the costs of the care provided (Briggs & Hunt, 2015; Kirton et al., 2007). A Swedish and a British study showed low satisfaction with payment among foster carers (Höjer, 2001; Kirton et al., 2007). Support for foster children and their foster parents is an important issue in different countries, as the problem of recruitment and retention of foster carers has recurred in the debate over the years (Bergman, 2011; Briggs & Hunt, 2015; Colton et al., 2008; Hanlon et al., 2021). Payment of foster carers has long been a controversial issue, reflecting the question of whether fostering is a voluntary or professional activity (Briggs & Hunt, 2015; Colton et al., 2008; Kirton et al., 2007).

2. Relevant Historical Changes

To understand the changes in economic compensation to foster parents who took care of foster children, some contextualization is required. This section presents the changes in society that occurred during the twentieth century, such as changes in the perception of childhood, reasons for placing children in foster care, the labor market, and urbanization. Major changes took place in the perception of childhood and parenthood (Cunningham, 2021). These changes are linked to the emergence of a modern welfare state. In the late 1800s, many countries had enacted laws that banned or restricted children's work. Sweden introduced laws against child labor in 1881 and 1900 (Sjöberg, 1996), and the regulation of child labor in agriculture began in 1949 (Sjöberg, 2004). The reduction in child labor and the gradual increase in school attendance among children resulted in an extended childhood. A proper childhood was to be kept separate from the adult world. Children came to be dependent on their parents and caregivers for a longer period than they had been before. This time was to be devoted to play, education, and gradual preparation for life as an adult. Childhood was supposed to be a protected and happy time. Good parenting consisted in large measure of preserving and prolonging children's childhood. The perceptions of children's value changed; from being considered a labor resource in the household, there was a shift toward a greater emphasis on children's emotional value for parents (Zelizer, 1994).

The circumstances surrounding child placements have changed throughout history. During the twentieth century, changes took place regarding which children were placed in foster care and the reasons they were placed in care. Caring for foster children has become a societal concern in situations where children have been orphaned, where they have been abandoned for some reason, or when their parents have been ill. Children have been left temporarily in foster care during periods when parents, often single mothers, have had difficulty combining work and caring for young children. Leaving the child in foster care has been a strategy used to cope with difficult stages in the life cycle. Institutions for children and foster homes have sometimes served as a complement, as a form of daycare, and when the parents' situation improved, they were able to take care of their children again (Clement, 1979; Creagh, 2006; Nyberg, 2000). Placements of children have also been considered when the birth parents have been deemed inappropriate to take care of children, such as when they have been assessed as neglecting them (Hendrick, 2003). In Sweden, there were shifts in the stated explanations for children's placements in out-of-home care in the latter part of the twentieth century. Reasons accounting for a greater proportion than previously were children's and teenagers' own emotional and behavioral problems, parents' problems with addiction, and problems in the relationship between children and parents. However, even if children were not explicitly moved from their parental home due to problems associated with poverty, poverty could still underlie the stated grounds for placement. During the century, there was also a shift from placing younger children to placing older children in care (Bergman, 2011).

The changing levels of economic compensation in foster care practice can also be understood in the context of increasing numbers of Swedish women entering the labor market from the 1960s onwards. As a result of economic growth in society and an increased need for workers, new attention was focused on women as an unexploited available workforce. Mothers and housewives were encouraged to engage in occupational work. During the 1960s and 1970s, married women with children worked outside their homes in paid employment to a greater extent than they had during the earlier decades of the century (Axelsson, 1992; Lundqvist, 2007). The tax policy changed in 1971 when joint taxation for married couples was abolished. This meant

that women, who were often the lower earner within a marriage, no longer suffered the disadvantage of having their income taxed at their husband's tax rate when they entered the formal labor market. At the same time, the process of urbanization was going on in Sweden. Many families left the countryside and settled in urban areas. Traditionally, most of the Swedish foster homes have been located in the countryside (Bergman, 2011). Therefore, it became increasingly difficult for the child welfare authorities to find new homes for children in need of care.

3. Method and Sources

The present study is based on document analysis of the child welfare discourse and practices. When the State Child Welfare Act came into force in 1926, child welfare boards became compulsory in Swedish municipalities. These boards were responsible for placing foster children in suitable homes and for supervision of foster homes. At the county level, child welfare agents (*barnavårdsombud*) were introduced starting in the 1930s. The child welfare agents were initially employed by voluntary child welfare associations in the counties. They were responsible for assisting the child welfare boards with tasks such as recruiting foster parents and conducting inspections. In 1945, child welfare assistants (*barnavårdsassistenter*) were employed at the County Administrative Boards (*Länsstyrelserna*). The child welfare assistants served to oversee family foster care at the county level (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 1945).

The source material for the study consists of documents selected from the child welfare board in the Municipality of Växjö, the child welfare agent, and from the child welfare assistant in the County of Kronoberg, located in southern Sweden. Växjö is a municipality of medium size. Other documents for the study were collected from national-level sources, such as laws and leading social work journals. During the work on my PhD thesis, which focused on suitability assessments of foster parents during the twentieth century, I found data on child welfare practices concerning economic compensation to foster parents. In parallel with the work on my PhD thesis, I collected anonymized data for the present article. The data collected has been subsequently supplemented. Data on the personal circumstances of individuals are subject to a 70-year period of confidentiality, according to The Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 2009). The article is based only on data that is publicly available. Three different periods during the twentieth century are presented, each period covering ten years:

1. The regulation of child welfare, 1926–1935: During this period, the placement of foster children and supervision of foster homes began to be regulated. According to the State Child Welfare Act, which came into force in 1926, child welfare boards were required in the municipalities. A large number of foster children lived in foster homes in Sweden. In the early twentieth century, there were around 30,000 foster children in the country (Statistics Sweden, 1934).
2. The expansion of the welfare state, 1946–1955: During the postwar period, after the first and second world wars, the groundwork was laid for building a modern welfare state in Sweden, with increased ambitions, reforms, new institutions, and new actors in the area of social welfare. In the counties, child welfare agents and child welfare assistants were employed for tasks such as supervision of the care of foster children. During this period, the number of foster children declined (Swedish Government Official Reports, 1974).
3. The peak of the welfare state, 1966–1975: During this period, most Swedish families lived with material standards higher than those existing in the earlier decades of the century. Social policy reforms were

implemented aimed at families with children. Married women worked outside the home to a greater extent than before. Daycare centers for younger children were established. The number of children in family foster care decreased significantly compared with earlier periods. In the early 1970s, there were just over 16,000 foster children in the country. The placements declined most during the 1950s and 1960s (Swedish Government Official Reports, 1974).

Data on economic compensation to foster carers, during the three periods, have been collected, and a structured template was used to record information from protocols, records of children under supervision, and the foster child inspector's documentation. The collected data is based on the authorities' documentation of monetary compensation. There were also examples of compensation in the form of clothing for children. Such form of compensation may have occurred even in cases where it was not documented. The data consist of decisions about payment to foster parents in practice as well as recommendations from authorities like the Social Welfare Association (*Svenska Socialvårdsförbundet*). The source material was analyzed both inductively and deductively with a focus on factors relevant to the payment to foster carers during different periods. The following factors were revealed to be relevant: the age and gender of the children, the reasons for their placement, and access to foster families. The analysis is focused on continuity and change over time. The results are placed in the context of relevant historical changes that took place during the period studied. One strength of this study is its long-term perspective, which allows for comparisons over time. However, the design has a limitation in that it does not reveal changes that occurred between the selected time periods.

4. Payment for Family Foster Care During the Twentieth Century

When a child was placed in family foster care, several parties were involved: the children, their birth parents, the foster parents and the municipal Child Welfare Board. When the board had decided about a child's placement, it also took responsibility for the child's maintenance and payment to the foster parents, although the board in turn could demand some financial compensation from the child's birth parents. The results of the analysis are presented below according to the three selected periods during the twentieth century.

4.1. The Period 1926–1935: When Payment Was Reduced With the Increasing Age of the Child

During this period, the foster parents received the greatest reimbursement for taking care of a young child, and the payment was reduced with a child's increasing age. Payment of 200–300 Swedish crowns (SEK) a year was common. According to the child welfare board's written contracts with foster parents from the years 1926 and 1929, the following reimbursement rates were applied: 300 SEK a year until the child was five years old; 240 SEK until the child was ten years old; and then 180 SEK until the child reached 16 years of age (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1926, 1929a). At age 16, the children were no longer foster children; they were expected to support themselves. There are also examples showing that the economic compensation to foster parents could be reduced when the foster child was 14 years of age. A comparison between the Swedish municipalities in the late 1920s found that payments to foster parents could vary a great deal, but seemed to have been consistently reduced with the children's increasing age (Barkman, 1929). Previous research on family foster care in the 1800s has revealed similar results. The economic compensation paid to foster parents was greatest for younger children and was then reduced with age, as it was assumed that older children could be of some use to foster parents in their households (Kertzer, 2000; Lundberg, 2000; Skoglund, 1992). In the

early 1900s, most foster families lived in the countryside and could count on some help with the farm work from the older children (Bergman, 2011). The youngest foster children could not be expected to contribute to the household. Instead, they needed more time, care, and resources.

When the birth parents had placed their children themselves, they often paid a fee of 10–40 SEK a month to the foster parents. This could be a great deal of money for a single mother supporting her child in this way. In 1929, one foster child's mother earned 15 SEK a month (plus food and shelter) for her work as a housekeeper. In 1930, another mother earned 50 SEK a month as a housekeeper and paid 20 SEK to the foster parents who took care of her child in their home. It was difficult for a single mother to combine work, maintenance, and care of younger children. At this time, it sometimes happened that the birth parents paid a single payment, "once and for all," to the foster parents, a sum intended to cover support during the child's entire childhood. In 1927, one mother paid 2,000 SEK "once and for all," and in 1935 another mother paid 3,000 SEK "once and for all," while one father paid 3,500 SEK—amounts that were intended for their children's support. Divided over 16 years, this means 125, 187, and 219 SEK each year, respectively, slightly lower than the common compensation rate. During this period, there are also examples showing that birth parents contributed to their children's maintenance in kind instead of in cash: "the mother sends clothes to the child." Sometimes, foster parents could even take care of foster children without receiving any economic compensation at all: "no maintenance," "no compensation is paid" (Bergman, 2011). Table 1 shows data on economic compensation to foster parents in 1926 and 1935 and on the range of compensation.

Table 1. Average economic compensation to foster parents and the range of compensation.

Year	Yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK	Range of yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK
1926	220 (N = 65)	100–448
1935	239 (N = 62)	120–480

At the child welfare board, there was a quest to find foster parents who agreed to take care of children without requiring any financial compensation. When the child welfare board in the 1920s advertised for a foster home for a younger child, the board received as many as 40 responses and then decided to choose the foster parents who required no economic compensation: "The child welfare board would obviously to the greatest extent search for good foster homes that take care of children without reimbursement" (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1929b). The board regarded foster care as a voluntary task rather than as paid work (cf. Briggs & Hunt, 2015; Kirton et al., 2007).

4.2. The Period 1946–1955: When Age, Gender, and Reason for Placement Affected Payment

For the children who were placed in foster care during this period, the economic compensation could vary significantly. In Växjö in 1946, the compensation for children 0–16 years of age was on average 335 SEK a year. There was a large spread, between 180 and 800 SEK. The relatives who took care of a foster child and received economic compensation for this generally received slightly lower compensation. It was not unusual for relatives to take care of the children without any economic compensation at all. Taking care of a child without economic compensation was also common among foster parents when there was a plan for adoption of the child. In Sweden, it became possible to adopt children when the first Adoption Act came into force in 1918 (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 1917). The aim of the act was that children who lacked

economic and social support would be looked after by childless couples with good economic circumstances, thus ensuring care and support (Lindgren, 2006). Typically, before the adoption was completed, these foster parents did not receive any economic compensation during the period they were foster parents. After adoption, the adoptive parents had a legal obligation to support the child. The maintenance responsibility was shifted from the municipality to the adoptive parents.

During this period, in the middle of the century, there were also foster parents who took care of children from countries affected by the Second World War; there were children from Finland, Norway, Germany, and the Netherlands. These foster parents could likewise take care of children without receiving any financial compensation. Table 2 presents data on economic compensation to foster parents in 1946 and 1955 and on the range of compensation.

Table 2. Average economic compensation to foster parents and the range of compensation.

Year	Yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK	Range of yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK
1946	335 (*N* = 90)	180–800
1955	675 (*N* = 42)	240–1,260

In the mid-1940s, there were national-level discussions about the low compensation paid to foster parents and the great variation in compensation rates between different parts of the country. In many cases, the payment did not cover the costs for the child, according to debaters in the Swedish *Journal of Child Welfare and Youth Protection*, who argued for increased economic compensation as part of an effort to gain access to a sufficient number of foster homes (Grönlund, 1947; Malmroth, 1945). During the same period, the child welfare board of Stockholm sent an official letter to the child welfare board of Växjö, as the board found it necessary to increase payments to make acquiring a sufficient number of foster homes possible (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1948a). The board distinguished between foster homes in Stockholm and foster homes in the provinces. Foster parents in Stockholm received greater economic compensation than foster parents in other parts of the country owing to the higher housing costs in the city. The child welfare board of Stockholm also distinguished between foster parents who took care of boys and girls, as well as boys of various ages. The highest payment went to foster parents in Stockholm who took care of boys, while the lowest payment went to foster parents in the countryside who took care of girls and younger boys: foster carers in Stockholm received 900 SEK a year for boys and 840 SEK for girls. Foster carers in the countryside received 840 SEK a year for school-age boys and 720 SEK for girls and pre-school age boys (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1948a). One explanation for the higher compensation paid to foster parents who cared for boys was that the board found it more difficult to find foster homes for boys, as many foster parents preferred to care for girls (cf. Creagh, 2006).

Another categorization that existed in parallel was different payment depending on whether the placement could be considered permanent or temporary. In 1947, the child welfare agent in the County of Kronoberg wrote to her colleague in the neighboring County of Kalmar regarding the payments generally applied for child placements: "for children up to two years where the foster parents were allowed to keep the child" 30–35 SEK a month; "for children up to two years with only temporary placement" 50–60 SEK a month; "for older children, without remarkable faults and shortcomings" 35–40 SEK a month; and "for difficult children" 50–75 SEK a month (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1947). Previous historical research has likewise shown that greater compensation was sometimes paid to foster parents who took care

of children who were ill or difficult to manage (Kertzer, 2000; Lundberg, 2000; Skoglund, 1992). The reason for this is probably that it was difficult to find foster homes for these children. In the present study, we can see that the payments also varied depending on whether the placements were expected to be temporary or permanent. One explanation for the higher reimbursement for temporary placements is that it could be more challenging to recruit foster homes in these cases, as many prospective foster parents wanted to care for children whom they were allowed to keep in their homes permanently (Bergman, 2011). Many wished for "good children and children to keep" (Carlsson, 1949). From 1948 onwards, foster parents could sometimes also receive a child allowance (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1948b). The child allowance was, and still is, a universal public benefit for all children in Sweden, paid for the first time in 1948 (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 1947).

As we have seen, the economic compensation during this period could be somewhat greater for older children. One explanation for this change in relation to the previous period is that the children were not expected to work in the foster homes to the same extent as previously. Children were supposed to go to school. Childhood was to be a time of education, play, and gradual preparation for life as an adult (Cunningham, 2021). Children should be allowed to be children (Hacsi, 1995). However, in the 1950s, some foster parents might still have benefited from their foster children engaging in agricultural work, which can be illustrated by the following example. The foster parents of one boy contacted the child welfare board to ask for greater economic compensation for caring for the boy due to the situation that they had sold their farm and no longer had "any work" for their foster child (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1952).

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Social Welfare Association (*Svenska Socialvårdsförbundet*) sought to standardize compensation rates for family foster care, with a view to avoiding disputes between municipalities. In 1952, 70 SEK a month was recommended for the care of "healthy normal children" in foster care (The Swedish Social Welfare Association, 1952). Starting in 1955, 80 SEK a month was recommended as compensation for caring for "healthy normal children" (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1954a). These new, more standardized regulations could result in a substantial economic lift for some foster parents. There were foster parents who received increases from 45 to 70 SEK, from 30 to 60 SEK, and from 25 to 70 SEK (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1953a, 1953b, 1954b, 1955). Still, there could be great local variation in the payments made in the same municipality. In Växjö in 1955, there was a large spread between 240 and 1,260 SEK a year (see Table 2).

Despite more standardized regulations, the child welfare assistant reacted to low payments in several cases in the county: "The payments to the foster parents are generally very low" (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1953). Foster parents taking care of one girl received only 15 SEK a month, which was "far too little" according to the child welfare assistant, as at least 60 SEK was typically paid at that time (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1953). The child welfare assistant also questioned why some foster parents did not receive any payment at all and demanded an answer from the child welfare board: "For a couple of the children it has been reported that no compensation is paid. What are the reasons for this?" (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1953). In the studied documents, there are examples of foster parents who, according to the child welfare assistant, resigned because they had not received any economic compensation at all after taking care of a child for a period of one and a half years (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1948). As a consequence, the child lost his foster home and was relocated. Adequate support, including financial support, and a feeling of being respected

were relevant factors influencing whether foster parents would remain or leave the system (cf. Briggs & Hunt, 2015).

4.3. The Period 1966–1975: Higher Payment for Teenagers With Psychosocial Problems

During this period, most Swedish families enjoyed increased material standards, in comparison to the earlier decades of the century. Social policy reforms were implemented that were aimed at families with children. Married women worked outside the home in paid employment to a greater extent than before (Axelsson, 1992; Lundqvist, 2007). Daycare centers for younger children were built. The number of children in family foster care decreased significantly compared with the earlier periods (Bergman, 2011).

For foster children who were placed in Växjö during 1966, the payments to foster parents were on average 4,448 SEK a year. This was roughly in line with the levels that had been recommended on a national level by the Association of Local Authorities (*Kommunförbundet*). According to the child welfare assistant in the County of Kronoberg, payments of 150–350 SEK a month were common in the year 1967 (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1967). However, as previously, there was a large spread during this period, from 1,320 up to 8,700 SEK a year. There were also foster parents who did not receive any economic compensation at all. As previously, lower reimbursements were paid to foster parents who were the children's relatives and in cases where there were adoption plans. Table 3 presents data on economic compensation to foster parents in 1966 and 1975, including the range of compensation.

Table 3. Average economic compensation to foster parents and the range of compensation.

Year	Yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK	Range of yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK
1966	4,448 ($N = 50$)	1,320–8,700
1975	13,593 ($N = 36$)	5,340–22,980

From the mid-1960s onwards, the Association of Local Authorities' recommendations concerning economic compensation to foster parents were stated as a percentage of the basic amount (*basbeloppet*). The basic amount was and still is used to calculate various benefits and payments in the community. It is changed annually so as to reflect and adjust for inflation. In 1971, the lowest compensation for the care of younger children was to be 75 percent of the basic amount, which meant 4,800 SEK a year or 400 SEK a month (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1971). In 1972, the lowest compensation was set at 90 percent of the basic amount, which meant 6,390 SEK a year or 532 SEK a month (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1972). The compensation was greater for older children and for children for whom it was hard to find homes for some reason. The board argued that in some cases it was justified and even necessary to pay more, for example, in the following situations:

> When physical defects are present, such as blindness, severely impaired vision, deafness, or severely impaired hearing and disability affecting mobility. Other special reasons are long-term troublesome illness, such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease, or eczema. Special conditions may be considered to exist in the case of children whose mental problems place particularly great demands on the foster carers. Special reasons may also be considered if the child is placed in temporary care. (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1966).

In the mid-1970s, the payments in Växjö were on average 13,593 SEK a year. Still, there was a large spread from 5,340 to 22,980 SEK a year, and there were still foster parents who did not receive any economic compensation at all. Greater compensation was paid to foster parents who took care of older children and children who were "hard to place." In 1971, the child welfare board established the following reimbursements: children 0–10 years, maximum 650 SEK a month; children 11–14 years, up to 750 SEK; and children 15 years and older, up to 850 SEK (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1971). This result, that higher compensation was paid to foster parents who cared for older children and children with disabilities, is consistent with the findings of the Foster Child Investigation survey carried out in 1970 (Swedish Government Official Reports, 1974).

The reimbursements could sometimes be higher. Foster parents who took care of teenagers with psychosocial problems such as crime, truancy, or abuse could receive greater compensation (Bergman, 2011). During this period, children could be placed in family foster care for reasons that had previously resulted in institutional care (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 1960). Swedish society at the time was experiencing ongoing deinstitutionalization. Many institutions for children and youth were being closed down, and at the same time, the size of the remaining institutions was being reduced, resulting in fewer institutional places for the care of children and young people (Sallnäs, 2000).

Starting in 1974, the child welfare board began paying subsidies to the foster parents, which were considered compensation for the foster parents' work of caring for the children (cf. Swedish Government Official Reports, 1974). The economic compensation was divided into a subsidy for their work and an allocation for expenses in accordance with recommendations from the Association of Local Authorities (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1974). In 1975, the subsidies could vary from 375 up to 975 SEK a month. The higher subsidies went to foster parents who took care of teenagers. Some foster parents only received compensation for expenses and did not receive subsidies. At this time, Swedish women were working outside the home to a greater extent than during the previous decades (Axelsson, 1992; Lundqvist, 2007). It became more difficult than before to find new foster homes. During this period, many children who needed new foster homes were older. There were also changes in the reasons for foster home placement. Fewer infants and toddlers were placed in care (Bergman, 2011). Single mothers had greater opportunities than previously to care for their youngest children because daycare centers were established (Nyberg, 2000). At the same time, there were fewer unwanted children, as women had access to contraception and legal abortions (Lennerhed, 2008).

4.4. Summary of Economic Compensations

This section contains a comparison of the economic compensation to foster parents during the periods studied, specifically the following selected years with available data: 1926, 1935, 1946, 1955, 1966, and 1975. The comparisons in Table 4 below show data on the compensation to foster parents in relation to the consumer price index (CPI) and the average salary for female and male industrial workers. A description of the basis for the calculation can be found in the Supplementary File.

The table shows that over time, the compensation for taking care of foster children increased significantly. Over the same period, the CPI also increased significantly but not as much. The comparison also reveals a large increase in the economic compensation to foster parents in relation to CPI. Foster parents generally received increased monetary resources to take care of their foster children. The comparison also reveals an increase in

Table 4. Economic compensation to foster parents in relation to CPI and average salary for workers (female/male).

Year	CPI (percentage change)	Yearly compensation in SEK (percentage change in relation to base year)	Compensation in relation to CPI (percentage change)	Compensation as a percentage of workers' salary, women in Sweden	Compensation as a percentage of workers' salary, men in Sweden
1926	100 (base year)	220	–	12.2%	7.4%
1935	91 (–9%)	239 (9%)	+ 19%	13.3%	8.0%
1946	137 (37%)	335 (52%)	+ 11%	9.8%	6.5%
1955	198 (98%)	675 (207%)	+ 55%	8.4%	5.8%
1966	304 (204%)	4,448 (1922%)	+ 565%	24.2%	18.5%
1975	519 (419%)	13,593 (6079%)	+ 1090%	30.9%	26.2%

Source: Data on CPI from Statistics Sweden (2025); data on salaries from Statistics Sweden (2020).

relation to the average salary for industrial workers during the period as a whole, but a decrease during the middle of the century. The lowest economic compensation to foster parents in relation to workers' salaries was in 1955; this coincides with the era of housewives in Sweden, which reached its peak during the 1950s. The largest increase was at the end of the period studied, when at this time, many women had entered the labor market. In the 1960s and 1970s, a great many housewives shifted to paid employment (Axelsson, 1992), and thus, it could be difficult to find foster parents during this period. The increased financial compensation at this time can be interpreted as a recognition of foster parents' care work for vulnerable children.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The present article analyzes change and continuity in paid family foster care during the previous century. In the early twentieth century, economic compensation to foster parents was usually greatest when caring for younger children and lower for older children. Radical changes took place in practice when the payment system shifted around the 1970s. From then on, the child welfare board generally paid the lowest compensation to foster parents who took care of younger children, while the highest compensation instead went to foster parents who looked after teenagers. In this section, the results are discussed in relation to the following explanatory factors: (a) changes during the century in the perception of childhood and how children were valued; (b) changes in the reasons why children were placed in family foster care; (c) changed gender roles as an increasing number of married women entered the labor market; and (d) the consequences of urbanization for the foster care system.

5.1. Changed Perception of Childhood

During the twentieth century, major changes took place in the perception of childhood. Children's schooling was prolonged, and there were expectations that their leisure time should be stimulating. Children were dependent on their caregivers for a longer time than before, and this extended time was to be devoted to play, education, and gradual preparation for adult life (Cunningham, 2021). This changed perception of childhood is reflected in the foster care payment system. There is obvious continuity regarding the association between economic compensation and the children's age. In the early 1900s, foster parents

received higher payments when they took care of younger children, while the compensation declined with the child's increasing age. Young children were considered the most demanding in terms of time and effort. Later during the century, the payment system shifted. Starting in the middle of the century, foster parents could receive greater compensation when they took care of older children. During the latter part of the twentieth century, it is obvious that looking after older children generated the highest level of reimbursement. This can be interpreted as meaning that older children were perceived to be more demanding in terms of costs and effort. Older children were no longer considered a labor resource in the foster homes, at least not to the same extent as in the early decades of the century.

5.2. Changed Reasons Why Children Were Placed in Foster Care

During the latter part of the century, there were changes in the type of children placed in family foster care, with shifts from younger to older children. There were also changes in the reasons for children's placement in out-of-home care, from younger children with poor parents to older children with their own problems. Due to the economic development and the emergence of a welfare state during the postwar period, with various forms of support for families, poverty alone was usually not a reason for separating children from their parents. The foster children could be teenagers with psychosocial problems who needed a new home. Because of the ongoing deinstitutionalization in society, children could be placed in family foster care for grounds that previously resulted in placement in an institution. Family foster care was initially described in terms of treatment, and foster parents were considered experts of some kind (Bergman, 2011). One explanation for the higher reimbursement levels for older children in the latter part of the century is that finding foster homes for these children, who could have their own problems, was difficult. Many foster parents wanted to take care of younger children. When the reasons for children's placement changed, greater economic compensation was paid to foster parents who cared for older children who were difficult to manage or difficult to find homes for.

5.3. Changed Gender Roles as Women Entered the Labor Market

One shift in the payment system occurred when municipalities, starting in 1974, began paying subsidies to the foster parents and not only compensation for the costs of care, as they had previously. This coincides with major changes in gender roles in Swedish society. During the 1960s and 1970s, there was economic growth and the need for labor increased. Mothers and housewives were encouraged to do occupational work. Welfare services were transferred from the family sphere to the state. Expanded childcare services, individual taxation, and the linking of social security benefits to individual income were incentives for women to seek paid employment. A great many mothers and married women entered the labor market. Women's exit from the home was particularly widespread during the 1970s (Axelsson, 1992). During the 1960s and 1970s, there was an intense gender debate in society, including criticism of the established roles of men and women, and visions of change that would result in economic support of the family and care of children being shared responsibilities between men and women. In this context, when many women entered the labor market, the increased economic compensation and subsidies given to foster parents (mothers) can be interpreted as a kind of recognition for their care work.

5.4. The Consequences of Urbanization

The period under study was one of gradual urbanization in Sweden. Many families left the countryside and settled in urban areas. In the early 1900s, 30 percent of the population lived in urban areas. In 1935, about half, in 1950, about 66 percent, and in 1970, about 81 percent of the Swedish population lived in urban areas (*Nationalencyklopedin*). Historically, most of the foster homes in Sweden have been located in the countryside (Bergman, 2011). This made it increasingly hard for the municipal child welfare boards to find new foster homes for children in need. The type of family preferred as a foster family became increasingly rare, according to Vesta Almqvist, director of the Children's Welfare Foundation (*Allmänna barnhuset*):

> In purely rural areas, the families who are of appropriate age are decreasing. In the cities, families are generally not so interested in taking care of foster children, many households are overcrowded and the housewife usually has paid employment. (Almqvist, 1968)

Almqvist highlighted four reasons for the lack of foster homes: (a) People of appropriate ages left the countryside and moved to the cities; (b) urban families often had smaller homes, which left no room for foster children; (c) urban families were less interested in taking care of foster children; and (d) in the cities, many women worked outside the home and therefore the families were not suitable for foster care. The highly valued kind of foster home had a stay-at-home foster mother who provided care, and a foster father who worked outside the home as the family's breadwinner (Bergman, 2011). As foster parents became more difficult to recruit, their position was sometimes strengthened in the sense that they could receive increased financial compensation to provide for the children, especially when they took care of older children, who could be "hard to place."

6. Conclusion

In summary, the following factors were relevant to explaining the changed practice in economic compensation to foster parents during the twentieth century: the changing perceptions of childhood; the changes in circumstances in which children were placed in care; urbanization; and, last but not least, women's transition to paid employment outside the home. Different levels of economic compensation to foster parents have also been dependent on factors such as the child's age, gender, and whether the placement was expected to be permanent or temporary. In the middle of the century, the payment could be greater when foster parents took care of boys and children in temporary placements. During the whole period under study, children's age has been of relevance to payment levels. There is continuity in the large spread of economic compensation to foster parents, and some foster parents did not receive any payment at all for the care provided. Paying foster parents has long been a controversial issue. Should foster care be regarded as a voluntary or professional activity? Foster carers are often women of working-class or lower-middle-class background. Many foster mothers face dilemmas when trying to coordinate work and family (Haysom et al., 2025; Roman, 2016). Foster parents themselves express a need for compensation for the expenses they incur while caring for children, as well as for the care work they provide (Brown & Calder, 2000). The material realities of care work need to be recognized (Swartz, 2004). The present article provides examples of foster parents who, according to the child welfare assistant, resigned because they had not received any economic compensation at all. Therefore, one consequence of losing foster parents is that

children lose their home, thereby indicating that support, including economic support, is important to maintaining stability in foster care (cf. Semanchin Jones & LaLiberte, 2013).

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Data Availability

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Supplementary Material

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About the Author

Ann-Sofie Bergman is an associate professor of social work. She also holds a master's degree in history. Her research focuses on social work with children and young people, children as next of kin, and violence in close relationships.

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ARTICLE

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Unlawful Deductions to Fees or Allowances: Fostering Remuneration and Unlawful Deductions to Wages

Mairin Macleod

Legal Department, Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain, UK

Correspondence: Mairin Macleod (mairinmacleod@iwgb.co.uk)

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Abstract

There is a duality in the role of the foster carer: They are expected to be both parents to the children in their care and workers for the fostering service provider, on whose behalf they care for the children; yet in England, they are legally recognised as neither. In recent litigation, respondents have presented those two dual roles as mutually exclusive and irreconcilable—therein lies tension. The duality of the role is reflected in the two types of remuneration English foster carers receive—a fee and an allowance—and the distinctive purposes those types of remuneration fulfil. This article considers how a litigious foster carer might seek to recover an underpayment to their fee and/or allowance through the employment tribunal. It takes as its starting point the distinctive purposes of the types of remuneration and recent developments in status-related case law. Application of the law of unlawful deductions to wages—and the importance of the purpose of remuneration—provides a useful paradigm for reconciling the tension of the dual role of the foster carer, understanding them as workers undertaking the work of parenting.

Keywords

allowances; deductions; fees; fostering; purposive approach; remuneration; wages

1. Introduction

In England, foster carers are individuals who are registered with a fostering service provider (often, but not necessarily, a local authority) to provide care for children whose parents or family are unable to do so, from their (that is, the foster carer's) own home. In that role, they look after the children as if they were their own, without taking on parental rights and responsibilities (Davis, 2010, as cited in Mitchell, 2020, p. 10). They do so under the direction of, and are supervised by, the fostering service provider with whom they are registered.

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There is a duality in this: Foster carers are expected to be parents to children, carrying the responsibility of parenting, but do so under the control and supervision of the fostering service provider. They enjoy neither the freedom to parent (Government UK, 1989, section 31) nor the protections enjoyed by workers (*W v Essex County Council*, 1999). The perceived dichotomy between these dual roles is reflected in the two types of remuneration paid to foster carers—a fee and an allowance—and their respective distinctive purposes.

In recent years, foster carers have been mobilising (Kirk, 2020), taking collective action and litigating, arguing for recognition of themselves as "workers" (*Glasgow City Council v Johnstone*, 2019; *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2025; *National Union of Professional Foster Carers* [NUPFC] *v The Certification Officer*, 2021). While many fostering service providers argue that that status would be impractical (Booth, 2020) and detrimental to the welfare of the children who foster carers care for (*NUPFC v Certification Officer*, 2021; *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2025). This article considers how a litigious foster carer might sue for their remuneration. In so doing, it proposes that human rights law might provide a means of overcoming the hurdle of precedents arising from *W v Essex County Council* (1999), which prevents foster carers from accessing the suite of workers' rights, and considers how far that approach and the reasoning of the employment tribunal might assist in reconciling the tension of the foster carer's dual role.

This article takes, as its starting point, an assessment of the dual purposes of foster care and considers how this is reflected in the two types of remuneration they receive. When viewed through the lens of a (theoretical) unlawful deduction to wages claim, usually only available to workers and employees, the article considers how a litigious foster carer might sue for their remuneration, and how the employment tribunal might treat their remuneration. In so doing, the reasoning of the tribunal provides a potentially useful paradigm for reconciling the perceived dichotomy between their dual role of workers and parents, distinguishing between the working relationship and the work of foster carers and treating foster carers as workers undertaking the work of parenting.

2. Dual Role: Parent and Worker

Foster carers simultaneously fulfil two roles: They are workers and parents on behalf of the fostering service providers (usually local authorities), which typically retain many parental rights and responsibilities for the children in their care (Government UK, 1989, section 31). Foster carers are legally recognised as neither parents nor workers and therefore enjoy neither the freedom nor protections either status might provide (Government UK, 1989, section 31; *W v Essex County Council*, 1999).

The parental role is emphasised in the requirement under Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services (England) 2011 Regulations to "care for any child placed with them as if the child was a child of the foster parent's family" (Government UK, 2011). Many of the tasks carried out by foster carers in pursuit of this are tasks ordinarily carried out by parents (Mitchell, 2020)—providing food, personal hygiene, school runs, and emotional support for the children in their care. It has been suggested that "effective foster care means good parenting" (Sellick, 2006, in Mitchell, 2020, p. 10).

However, foster carers do not carry out their role with the same freedom as parents: They do so under the supervision and control of the fostering service providers (Mitchell, 2020; *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2025, para. 73–80). They must follow the placement plan for the child (Government

UK, 2011, schedule 5, section 5), are appointed a supervising social worker who regularly holds "supervision meetings" (Department for Education, 2011; Mitchell, 2020), and are subject to annual reviews and panels to determine their suitability to foster under section 28 of the *Fostering Services (England) Regulations, 2011* (Government UK, 2011). This control has been used to support arguments for workers status (*Glasgow City Council v Johnstone*, 2019; *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* 2025; *NUPFC v The Certification Officer*, 2021). Similarly, many of the tasks carried out by foster carers are not those associated with the ordinary parenting role (Mitchell, 2020), such as keeping detailed logs of children's activities, health and safety inspections of homes, attending training, and seeking permission for routine activities such as haircuts.

Despite being presented as mutually exclusive and irreconcilable, there is clearly some intersection between the parental and worker roles of the foster carer. That intersection appears to lie in the work they carry out, which resembles both the parental role and includes tasks unique to foster care which are carried out under strict supervision and control. Foster carers may therefore be more accurately described as workers undertaking the work of parenting.

3. Fostering Remuneration: Regulation and Purposes

The relationship between the fostering provider and foster carer is primarily formalised and maintained through the *Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011* (Government UK, 2011) and *The Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards* (Department for Education, 2011), published under the Care Standards Act (Government UK, 2000, section 23). The procedural requirements for becoming "registered" as a foster carer are set out in sections 28 and 27 of the *Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011*. That process requires an extensive assessment and a panel for determining "suitability to foster," culminating in the foster carer and the fostering service provider entering into a foster care agreement (Government UK, 2011, schedule 5). That agreement sets some minimum terms, but much of the detail of the relationship is found in the *Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards* document (Department for Education, 2011).

The minimum terms of the foster care agreement are set out in the "Matters and Obligations in Foster Care Agreements" of the *Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011* (Government UK, 2011, schedule 5)—although parties are also free to include additional terms. It includes, for example, the foster carer's terms of approval, the support and training to be provided, and the procedure to review their approval. It also sets out the foster carer's obligations, including, for example, to notify the fostering provider of any expected changes to the fostering household, and to comply with the placement plan for any child placed with them. Notably, it contains no remuneration obligations.

The obligation to pay an allowance is found in section 22C (10)(b) of the Children Act of 1989, which states that a local authority may determine the terms on which they place a child with a foster carer, including regarding payment. The *Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards* requires fostering service providers to pay foster carers a "national minimum fostering allowance" during the time a child is placed with them (Department for Education, 2011, standard 28.1, p. 55). The amount is set annually by the Government and varies largely according to the age of the child, but parties are free to agree on any amount that meets or exceeds the national minimum allowance.

The Fostering Network describes the allowances as "designed to cover the cost of caring for a child in foster care. This includes food, clothes, toiletries, travel and all other expenses incurred and varies depending on the age of the child" (Foster Carer Finances, n.d.). The *Foster Care in England Report* describes the allowance as paid "to cover the cost of caring for a child" (Narey & Owers, 2018, p. 44). Policies of fostering providers also often reflect this. For example, the policy of the London Borough of Waltham Forest described allowances as "expected to cover all food, clothing, pocket money, personal and household expenditure" (*Oni & Ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & Ors*, 2025, para. 85). Other fostering providers, such as the Staffordshire County Council, prescribe how certain percentages of the fostering allowance should be spent on the children (Foster with Staffordshire County Council, n.d.). Thus, the payment of an allowance to foster carers is intended to cover the costs associated with caring for a child. It is intended to be spent quite specifically on the care of the child and the ordinary expenses that might be incurred.

Standard 28 of the *Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards* document also refers to fees, but is silent as to the amount. It requires that:

> There is a clear and transparent written policy on payments to foster carers that sets out the criteria for calculating payments and distinguishes between the allowance paid and any fee paid. The policy includes policy on payment of allowances and any fee during a break in placement or should the fostering household be subject to an allegation. (Department for Education, 2011, p. 55)

The payment of fees to foster carers, which appears to be aligned with the gradual "professionalisation" (Kirton, 2013) of foster care, is generally understood as intended to recognise a foster carer's time, skills, and experience (Foster Carer Finances, n.d.; Narey & Owers, 2018). Many local authorities have developed a fee system linked with training and experience—often foster carers may progress through "skill-levels" upon demonstrating certain competencies and thereby receive an increased fee. Leeds and Hampshire are highlighted as examples of such a model (Narey & Owers, 2018). Fees, then, should be understood as intended to remunerate foster carers for their time, skills, and experience in carrying out the work of caring for a child and appear to arise from the working relationship with the fostering provider. The fee, therefore, has much in common with wages.

The two types of remuneration, and their distinctive purposes, reflect the dual roles fulfilled by foster carers. Allowances compensate for the costs of caring for a child (the work), whereas the fee—akin to the work–wage bargain—arises from the foster carer's working relationship with the provider.

4. Fostering and Litigation

There is a long history of foster carers seeking to challenge authorities in court to recover monies owed to them. In a recent study, Rhodes (2024) followed the stories of 50 petitions by women carrying out "non-kin childcare" (akin to modern-day foster care) who had cause to challenge the authorities in court. Foster carers continue to have cause to challenge the authorities in court today; however, the manner in which such complaints are litigated has significantly changed, particularly given that the ruling in *W v Essex County Council* (1999) precludes foster carers from raising wages complaints in the employment tribunal.

In Rhodes' study, she reviewed the court papers of women who petitioned the courts for payments, which were not received, in exchange for looking after children in the Parish. Rhodes identified that these women were more successful in persuading the courts to force Parish authorities to pay, particularly when compared with biological parents (Rhodes, 2024, pp. 6, 13). In part, Rhodes attributes this success to the carers' ability to present their arguments as wage complaints, based more on broken promises (even contracts) than pleas for help (Rhodes, 2024, pp.13–14). Rhodes cites one petitioner, who described themselves as having "contracted" with Parish authorities, describing their language as "formalised and legalistic" (Rhodes, 2024, p. 7). Whilst acknowledging the possibility that those were not the petitioner's words, it is interesting to note the legal, rather than emotional, arguments.

Today, foster carers are unable to make these legal arguments in the employment tribunal. Since *W v Essex County Council* (1999) is the "authority" for the position that a foster care agreement is not contractual, foster carers are legally self-employed and without access to the suite of rights afforded to employees or workers (Government UK, 1996, section 230). The reasoning in *W v Essex County Council* (1999) has since been followed in a number of decisions (see *Armes v Nottinghamshire County Council*, 2017; *Bullock v Norfolk County Council*, 2011; *Rowlands v City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council*, 1999). Meaning modern-day foster carers are precluded from the more persuasive legal arguments.

Foster carers have recently sought to challenge this position. Either seeking to overturn *W v Essex County Council* (1999) as no longer representing good law, or through human rights law to access certain claims. The argument that *W v Essex County Council* (1999) is no longer good law was (unsuccessfully) presented in *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025) on the basis that it is not consistent with the UK Supreme Court's purposive approach in *Uber BV and ors v Aslam and ors* (2021). That purposive approach indicates that, in questions of worker status, the starting point should be the purpose of protecting vulnerable workers—subordination or dependency and control being the touchstone of that vulnerability (*Uber BV and ors v Aslam and ors*, 2021). The alternative, more successful, argument presented in both *NUPFC v The Certification Officer* (2021) and *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025) is that, to comply with human rights law, foster carers must have access to *some* workers' rights.

In *NUPFC v The Certification Officer* (2021), the claimants successfully argued that the exclusion of the NUPFC from being listed as an official trade union under Schedule A1 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act of 1992 amounted to an unlawful interference with the human rights of the members of that organisation to form and join a trade union (Council of Europe, 1950, art. 11). As a result, *only* for the purposes of determining whether an organisation "consists wholly or mainly of workers" (Government UK, 1992, section 1), and can therefore be listed as a trade union, foster carers can be interpreted as workers (*NUPFC v The Certification Officer*, 2021, para. 147).

Similarly, in *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025), the claimants argued, among others, that their exclusion from claims under the Equality Act of 2010 (relating to discrimination), and Part IVA of the Employment Rights Act of 1996 (relating to whistleblowing) amounted to an unlawful interference with their human right to a private life (Council of Europe, 1950, art. 8.) and freedom of expression (art 10). Judge Crosfill found that the claimants' enjoyment of their convention rights was not "secured without discrimination" on the ground of the "other status"—that being the status of foster carer, courtesy of the ruling in *W v Essex County Council* (1999; see also *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2025, para. 330). Their exclusion

from those claims was not found to be a proportionate measure pursuant to a legitimate aim, which therefore amounted to an interference with Art. 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights (*Wandsworth London Borough Council v Michalak*, 2002).

Foster carers in Rhodes' study made contractual arguments to challenge the non-payment of wages (Rhodes, 2024). Following *W v Essex County Council* (1999), that claim is not available in the employment tribunal to foster carers. Instead, foster carers seek to dilute the pervasive effect of *W v Essex County Council* (1999) by using human rights law to access at least some of the rights and protections afforded to workers.

5. Unlawful Deductions to Fees and Allowances

This article seeks to apply the law of unlawful deductions to wages to foster carers' fees and allowances to consider how a modern-day foster carer might bring such a claim. But how might the employment tribunal treat the two types of remuneration, and does that reasoning assist in navigating the tension in the dual role of foster carers?

We should briefly acknowledge alternatives to the employment tribunal, such as civil claims, judicial review, or indeed extra-judicial avenues such as the formal complaints mechanism. These avenues are largely outside the scope of this article—however, their deficiencies as alternatives to the employment tribunal were explored in *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025), with the judge noting the benefits and expertise of the tribunal in dealing with matters arising from work (para. 370–374).

Sections 13 and 14 of the Employment Rights Act of 1996 confer upon workers the right not to suffer unlawful or unauthorised deductions to their wages, and the right to bring a claim before an employment tribunal for such deductions. To do so, there must have been a deduction (*Delaney v Staples*, 1991) and that deduction must have been made to wages, defined in section 27 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 as "any sums payable to a worker in connection with his employment, including whether under his contract or otherwise" (Government UK, 1996). The deduction would also have to have been authorised by a contract term or other agreement (*Discount Tobacco and Confectionary Ltd v Williamson*, 1993).

Given that claims under section 13 of the Employment Rights Act of 1996 are reserved for workers or employees (as defined in section 230 of the Employment Rights Act of 1996) and the precedent set in *W v Essex County Council* (1999), litigious foster carers could attempt to bring claims within the ambit of a human right (*Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2025). They would then have to bring the fees and/or allowances within the statutory definition of wages.

The claimants in *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025) successfully argued that their exclusion from certain claims, based on their foster carer status, amounted to an interference with their human rights, in breach of Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights—which prohibits discrimination in the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set out in the Convention (Council of Europe, 1950, art. 14). Whilst unlawful deductions to wages was not averred, they did argue that their exclusion from claims under the National Minimum Wage Act of 1998, the Working Time Regulations of 1998, and the Working Time Directive of 2003, interfered with Article 1 Protocol 1 (hereafter A1P1) of the European Convention on Human Rights: The right to one's peaceful enjoyment of possessions (Council of Europe, 1952). These arguments were

rejected as circular and arising from something to which they were not entitled (*Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2025, para. 289). A1P1 cannot be used to create a right or possession (Meade, 2022). An unlawful deduction in a wages claim would not suffer these deficiencies, as it is already established law that salary earned is a possession within A1P1 (*Baka v Hungary*, 2014, as cited in Meade, 2022).

A deduction is likely to be fact-specific, but if less is paid than was expected—even nothing—that might amount to a deduction (*Delaney v Staples*, 1991). The litigious foster carer would need to be mindful that the deduction is not, in fact, a recovery of an overpayment, which is excluded from claims under section 13 (Government UK, 1996, see also section 14). Unfortunately, this is reasonably foreseeable given that foster carers are often paid in advance and placements can end abruptly (for example, when an allegation results in the removal of a child under section 47 of the Children Act of 1989). Assuming that there has been a deduction, the foster carer would carry the burden of proving that the deduction was made to "wages" as defined by statute. Case law suggests that the employment tribunal would consider the purpose of any remuneration in determining whether it constitutes "wages."

In *Lucy and Ors v British Airways plc* (2009), the appeal tribunal considered whether several allowances amounted to wages (and were therefore within the jurisdiction of the employment tribunal). This case concerned employees of British Airways, working as cabin crew, who were eligible to earn allowances when flying. In 2006, the Manchester depot was closed and, although cabin crew were not made redundant, they ceased to fly (and, therefore, to earn the allowances). In finding that the allowances were not "wages," or therefore justiciable in the employment tribunal, Judge Burke drew a distinction between:

> Wages or salary payable periodically to an employee who works or is ready and willing to work if no work is provided…[and] remuneration which is only earned if specific tasks are carried out, such as commission for sales, allowances for flying or allowances for overnight stays. (*Lucy and Ors v British Airways plc*, 2009, para. 39)

This distinction lies in the purpose of the remuneration—wages are paid because of the employment relationship, whereas, in this case, an allowance is contingent upon specific tasks.

The purported purpose of the foster carer's fees—remuneration for their time, skills, and experience—may point to the fee element being akin to wages. Foster carers receive the fee when there is a child in placement, and some, such as the National Fostering Group, are paid on a retained basis (National Fostering Group, n.d.). They also remain available to take on a placement, and often the fostering provider's control and supervision continues when a child is not in placement; for example, by completing training and reflecting on recent placements. Irrespective of whether there is an ongoing placement, foster carers should have a supervising social worker assigned to them (Department for Education, 2011, p. 55, standard 28), and supervision meetings often continue irrespective of whether there is a child in placement. Similarly, the fee's purpose in remunerating for time spent has more in common with the work–wage bargain.

In contrast, allowances are intended only to cover the costs of caring for a child in care and are (usually) contingent upon a child being in placement. In reaching his conclusion in *Lucy and Ors v British Airways plc* (2009), Judge Burke drew an analogy with a lorry driver who receives a meal allowance, irrespective of whether he incurs the cost of the meal. Similarly, foster carers receive an allowance to cover costs of caring for the child,

e.g., providing food, regardless of whether they incur precisely that cost in providing the food. Allowances paid to foster carers—such as those in Staffordshire, whose spending of the allowance is quite tightly prescribed by the fostering provider—may be more likely to be found to have been made to cover costs, and therefore constitutes an allowance rather than "wages" as defined by section 27 of the Employment Rights Act 1996.

The lawfulness of any deduction is likely to be fact-specific but would have to be consensual. The foster care agreement is not required to include financial information. It is, therefore, more likely that the lawfulness of any deductions would arise either from policies that should set out what should happen to a foster carers' remuneration in the event of a child being removed from their care (as required under the *Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards* document; see Department for Education, 2011), or from individual agreement with the carer in advance. In the absence of a statutory requirement, practice varies between providers, but some continue to pay foster carers during an investigation when a child is removed, either until its conclusion or for a pre-determined number of weeks (Swindon Borough Council, n.d.). Failure to make payments in accordance with that policy might then amount to an unlawful deduction. It is more likely that fostering providers would seek individual agreements to cease payments during this period. This itself has problematic implications of a power imbalance—the very power imbalance that worker status ought to protect against (*Uber BV and ors v Aslam and ors*, 2021).

An unlawful deduction in wages claim appears to be available to the modern-day litigious foster carer, despite the hurdle of *W v Essex County Council* (1999): By relying on A1P1 and Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1952) and demonstrating that, at a minimum, the fee element—based on its purpose—likely constitutes wages (assuming a non-consensual deduction rather than an overpayment). The application of the law of unlawful deductions to wages reveals a useful paradigm of distinguishing between the *working relationship* and the *work*: the fee arising from the working relationship and the allowance from the work itself. That paradigm, then, might usefully be applied to common objections to worker status to reconcile the tension in the two roles.

6. Application of the Paradigm

When facing worker status claims by foster carers, respondents argue that it would fundamentally damage foster care. For example, the then executive director of social care for Glasgow City Council described it as meaning "literally overnight—the end of foster care" (Booth, 2020). Objections to foster carers' worker status may be broadly separated into two categories: one theoretical and the other practical. Theoretical objections focus on worker status as inconsistent with the purpose of foster care being to prioritise the best interests and needs of the children (described as a "mandate analysis"; see Bogg, 2018). Practical objections suggest that access to worker status will also grant access to rights that are not practical for foster carers to exercise. Does applying the paradigm of viewing foster carers as *workers doing the work of parenting* to both theoretical and practical objections assist in navigating the tension of the dual roles that are often presented as mutually exclusive and irreconcilable?

The "mandate analysis" suggests that, because foster carers are mandated to care for vulnerable children and prioritise their needs, the purposes of foster care are inconsistent with worker status (Bogg, 2018). That familial purpose of foster care is emphasised by the "matters and obligations" referred to in the *Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011* which obliges foster carers to:

> Care for any child placed with them as if the child was a child of the foster parent's family and to promote that child's welfare having regard to the long and short-term plans for the child. (Government UK, 2011, schedule 5, section 2(a))

However, when foster carers are understood as workers carrying out the work of parenting, it becomes easier to overcome this objection. "Mandate analysis" could be applied to any care work (Bogg, 2018) and, in *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025), when considering the availability of whistleblowing claims, Judge Crosfill drew a comparison between health workers and foster carers, pointing to the extent to which they both work with vulnerable people. The argument's focus on the nature of their work can be extended to suggest that the "mandate" should be better understood as *how* the work (of parenting) is carried out (perhaps even as a standard of care) rather than relevant to determining the nature of the working relationship. Such a position is more consistent with the purposive approach taken in *Uber BV and ors v Aslam and ors* (2021).

It has further been suggested that the conferral of workers' rights would risk the commodification of care (which is argued to be inconsistent with the familial purpose of foster care). As Judge Crosfill pointed out in *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025), and as was discussed earlier in relation to unlawful deductions to wages, at the point of litigation in the employment tribunal the commodification has already happened: The litigious foster carer would be seeking to enforce a pre-existing agreement to payment rather than creating an expectation of payment.

Respondents making a familial argument also make a jurisdictional one (*Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2021, para. 331), arguing that the conferral of worker status will lead to decisions about children being made in the inappropriate forum of the employment tribunal. Again, viewing foster carers as workers undertaking the work of parenting goes some way to resolving this. Matters relating to the working relationship would be resolved in the employment tribunal, which is experienced in distinguishing employment from domestic matters (see *Tiplady v City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council*, 2017, in *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2021, para. 354). The substance of the work, for example, the child's placement plan, would be determined through, presumably, the family courts.

Practical arguments against worker status for foster carers suggest that foster care is a 24/7/365 role (*Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2021) and that worker status carries rights which are not practical, e.g., to a minimum hourly rate (Government UK, 1998b, section 1), rest (Government UK, 1998, sections 4, 10, 11, 12) or leave policy (Government UK, 1998a, section 13). Following the trend discussed earlier—that is, of using human rights as a means of accessing some workers' rights— the litigious foster carer would be required to bring their claim within the ambit of a human right (*Wandsworth London Borough Council v Michalak*, 2002). It would also potentially invite questions as to how to define the time spent undertaking the work of parenting. Arguably, this does not appear to entirely reconcile the tension between the legal expectation that workers only work for limited periods of time (Government UK, 1998a) and the 24/7/365 nature of parenting—leaving foster carers in the unsatisfactory position of lacking in the protections afforded to workers.

6.1. Human Rights as a Means of Accessing Some Workers' Rights

Whilst the earlier analysis of *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025) presents human rights as a means for the litigious foster carer to access workers' rights, the potential of that strategy is limited. It only

allows access to those rights that litigants can bring within the ambit of a human right (*Wandsworth London Borough Council v Michalak*, 2002).

Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors (2025) indicates that minimum wage and working time rights would not fall within the ambit of A1P1. There is some case law to indicate that challenges might be brought within the ambit of other human rights; for example, under Article 8 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (the right to a private life; see Council of Europe, 1950), where compulsory overtime impinges upon private life, or the observance of holy days under Article 9 (the right to religious freedom; see also McCann, 2010). There may therefore only be limited circumstances when foster carers could bring their working time and minimum wage complaints within the ambit of a human right.

To a certain extent, this strategy of gradually bringing claims which can be brought within the ambit of a human right might be viewed positively as giving more agency to foster carers themselves to choose which rights best reflect the reality of their work, and to therefore litigate over. However, thus far it has only enabled access to limited rights—for an organisation representing them to be listed as a trade union, and to bring claims for discrimination and whistleblowing (*NUPFC v The Certification Officer*, 2021; *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2021). A presumably unintended consequence of this strategy, then, may be that there are some rights and claims that remain inaccessible to foster carers. In turn, this leaves foster carers vulnerable to underpay and overwork—the purpose of the worker status being to protect workers from both these things (*Uber BV and ors v Aslam and ors*, 2021, para. 71).

6.2. Defining the Work of Parenting

Even if foster carers could bring claims within the ambit of a human right, this will inevitably invite consideration as to when foster carers are "working." One answer to such considerations may be to reject the "always on" depiction of foster care (*NUPFC v The Certification Officer*, 2021, para. 39) and clearly delineate when precisely foster carers are working (or rather when they are undertaking tasks that would be considered working time). Such an approach might be consistent with the tribunal's approach of assessing the purpose of remuneration when determining whether it constitutes wages (*Lucy and Ors v British Airways plc*, 2009). If the purpose of the fee is rewarding time, skills, and experience (Narey & Owers, 2018), and employment status is contingent upon subordination and control (*Uber BV and ors v Aslam and ors*, 2021), time spent on activities such as supervision meetings or training, which are undertaken under the control and supervision of the fostering provider, might reasonably be considered working time, for which foster carers are being remunerated by way of their fee (wage). Provided the foster carer did not spend too much time on these activities, this may also go some way to resolving objections relating to the working time and national minimum wage. This also has similarities with the reasoning adopted in *Royal Mencap Society v Tomlinson-Blake* (2021) relating to whether sleep-in shifts constituted working time. In that case, the court drew a distinction between time spent working and time spent available for work—finding that time spent working would be relevant for the purposes of calculating compliance with the national minimum wage, whereas time spent available for work would not.

The argument that foster carers are workers doing the work of parenting, in working time and national minimum wage claims (which essentially ask claimants to tell the tribunal *when* they are working), naturally invites a delineation between activities which are work and those which are not. As was discussed in *Oni &*

ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors (2025, para. 70–72), this is a difficult, if not impossible, task. The example given by Judge Crosfill was the claimant who spent an entire night checking on the welfare of a child who had a history of self-harm. The foster carer was "required to be available to care for the child 24 hours a day" (*Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2021, para. 71). Or as Lord Justice Underhill put it in *NUPFC v The Certification Officer* (2021, para. 39), they are "always on."

Further, even if time or tasks could be delineated in this way, such an analysis assumes that the tasks undertaken by foster carers can be neatly categorised as tasks which develop their skills and experience and/or time spent at the direction of the fostering provider. Many of the tasks undertaken by foster carers do not necessarily fit either of these categories. Consider cooking dinner—this is clearly the work of parenting, but it does not clearly develop skills or experience and is unlikely to be undertaken at the direction of the fostering provider—other than expectations that foster carers assist children in maintaining a healthy diet, which ranges from quite prescriptive requirements relating to portions of fruit and vegetables to less prescriptive requirements (Fostering with Wiltshire Council, 2024). More concerningly, even if those tasks could be delineated, it may result in downward pressure on fees—if fostering providers felt that they need only remunerate foster carers, at a national minimum wage rate, for the (potentially limited) time spent on certain tasks.

By distinguishing the *worker* from the *work* (of parenting), it is possible to overcome the theoretical objections to the worker status for foster carers—indeed, it goes some way to reconciling them. By placing the familial purpose of foster care and the best interests of the children at the centre of the work (rather than the working relationship), we can think of it as a standard of care rather than determinative of a working relationship. However, when that paradigm is confronted with the legal expectation that workers do not work 24/7/365 and work for at least an hourly minimum wage, it becomes more challenging. How this is resolved may depend on the determination of litigious foster carers: If *W v Essex County Council* (1999) cannot be set aside, they may be forced to accept the limitation that they can only pursue *some* workers' rights (leaving them vulnerable to underpay and overwork). In so doing, they may still be forced to try to artificially define the work of parenting in a way that likely does not reflect the reality of the work. Neither represents an entirely satisfactory outcome.

6.3. Pragmatism Over Legalism?

Although largely out of the scope of this article, extra-judicial solutions should be acknowledged. It is possible that fostering providers may turn to practical means of avoiding the risk of litigation, or legislation might overtake litigation. Either of which could change the practical functioning of foster care outside the employment tribunal.

For example, fostering providers might rely more on kinship care rather than foster care, although there have been recent cases that emphasised that kinship carers ought to receive the same training and benefits as foster carers (*London Borough of Tower Hamlets v R X*, 2013). This means that fostering providers would be well-advised to exercise caution in such an approach. Alternatively, they might start to change the way fostering is organised.

There has been an increased use of "Mockingbird" constellations in the UK in recent years (The Fostering Network, n.d.). Although its merits are outside the scope of this article, the basic idea is that foster carers

operate in a constellation caring for each other's placements on both a planned and ad-hoc basis to replicate the extended family model. This might allow foster carers to have rest breaks—mitigating against the possibility of working time or national minimum wage claims—without causing the potential damage to placements discussed in *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025, para. 237–238). Of course, this would not resolve the lack of status, but might afford foster carers the rest time and remuneration they may otherwise want to enforce.

Alternatively, legislatures might follow the advice of Lord Justice Underhill to "introduce bespoke legislative provision for the position of foster carers, which would either preserve the present exclusion or provide for rights appropriate to their very unusual role" (*NUPFC v The Certification Officer*, 2021, para. 152). In *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025), the judge pointed to the position of health workers as having been specifically included by legislation to enjoy whistleblowing protections. A similar approach might see legislation introduced to afford foster carers specific rights. Although again, this may still not afford foster carers the full suite of workers' rights and continue to leave them vulnerable to underpay and overwork.

It has been suggested that the two roles of the foster carer—parent and worker—are mutually exclusive and irreconcilable. Application of the paradigm that foster carers are workers undertaking the work of parenting goes some way to reconciling them by overcoming the theoretical objections relating to consistency with the familial purposes of foster care. It separates the working relationship from the work, placing those familial purposes at the centre of the work. However, this is not true of all claims. National minimum wage and working time claims, which revolve around time spent on specific tasks, resting time, and remuneration per hour, may be more difficult to bring within the human rights arguments presented in *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025) and *NUPFC v Certification Officer* (2021), and require an artificial delineation of which tasks constitute the work. In the absence of any pragmatic solution, there appears to be no satisfying resolution to the practical concerns surrounding the unsatisfactory employment status of English foster carers.

7. Conclusions

There is a tension in the dual roles of foster carers: They are expected to be both skilled workers, working under the control and supervision of a fostering provider and undertaking training and development to gain expertise in caring for often traumatised children, and parents, bringing those children up in a familial environment, with their best interests at heart (Government UK, 2011, schedule 5), yet enjoy neither the protections nor freedom of either role.

This article has considered how a modern-day litigious foster carer might litigate to recover unpaid wages. In so doing, it took as its starting point the distinctive purposes of the two types of remuneration English foster carers receive—a fee (to remunerate time, skills, and experience) and an allowance (to compensate for the costs of caring for a child). The assessment of the foster carer's remuneration through the lens of the law of unlawful deductions to wages considers (a) how a litigious foster carer might litigate *despite* hurdles presented by the precedent status set by *W v Essex County Council* (1999) and (b) how this might help in reconciling the dual roles which are often presented as mutually exclusive and irreconcilable.

By following the approach successfully adopted in *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025), it is suggested that a modern-day litigious foster carer might pursue their fostering provider for unpaid

wages in an unlawful deduction to wages claim under section 13 of the Employment Rights Act of 1996. It also suggests that the tribunal would assess the two types of remuneration by reference to their distinctive purposes—likely finding that the fee amounts to wages, whilst the allowance may not be justiciable as entitlement arises from specific tasks as opposed to the working relationship. This analysis of the fee arising from the working relationship, while the allowance compensates for the costs of tasks arising from the work, reveals a useful paradigm—distinguishing the working relationship from the work to understand foster carers as workers undertaking the work of parenting (with the familial purpose as the standard for that work).

That paradigm might also assist in reconciling the tension in the two dual roles by overcoming objections to worker status. The strength of theoretical arguments—i.e., that the purpose of foster care is inconsistent with worker status—is "diluted if not extinguished" (*Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors*, 2021, para. 363) in respect of certain claims, and might be further extinguished in respect of all claims when familial purposes are positioned as central to the work rather than the working relationship. The same is not necessarily true of the practical arguments, particularly when applied to claims that demand the assessment of time. The human rights approach taken in *Oni & ors v London Borough of Waltham Forest & ors* (2025) and applied in a theoretical unlawful deduction to wages claim only assists foster carers in accessing *some* workers' rights. This leaves litigious foster carers in an unenviable position. They may be able to pursue only some rights (potentially leaving working time and minimum wages questions unresolved and foster carers vulnerable to overwork and underpay), or even if they can access these claims, they may be forced to try to artificially delineate the work of parenting. While *W v Essex County Council* (1999) continues to be authoritative, neither is a particularly satisfying solution to the question of foster carers' employment status, which continues to leave them legally neither workers nor parents and vulnerable without the protections of worker status.

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Conflict of Interests

The author is employed by the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB) and works closely with the Foster Care Workers' Union (which is a branch of the IWGB).

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About the Author

Mairin Macleod is a caseworker for the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain. Working closely with colleagues in the Foster Care Workers Branch, she has a special interest in foster carers' employment status and litigation that highlights and challenges the difficulties arising from their employment status.

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ARTICLE

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Child Protection and the Municipal Budget: Interaction and Sensemaking Over a Welfare Dilemma

Teres Hjärpe

School of Social Work, Lund University, Sweden

Correspondence: Teres Hjärpe (teres.hjarpe@soch.lu.se)

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Abstract

This article provides ethnographic insights into how the welfare dilemma of balancing the moral imperative to meet needs with the financial responsibility of allocating limited resources is understood and handled in social work practice. Particular attention is paid to the everyday interaction of managers and social workers within the context of child protection. The analysis draws on interviews and participant observations conducted in child protection departments in Swedish municipalities as part of three research projects between 2014 and 2023. The results demonstrate that the dilemma is present in everyday negotiations, tensions, and power dynamics within the social services. On the one hand, the costs of child protection are constructed as a burden on the municipal budget through engagements in fundamental organisational structures, routines, and control mechanisms. The cue at the centre of this problem construction is "Don't waste taxpayers' money." Conversely, budget constraints and budget control are framed as obstacles to providing quality child protection, based on the cue, "Don't let children's well-being depend on money." These are two values with strong societal support, neither of which participants want to be held responsible for neglecting. However, in public discourse, the unconditional worth of the child is given greater weight. This can sometimes lead to budget-related activities being concealed behind more socially acceptable justifications.

Keywords

child protection; budget control; sensemaking; social work

1. Introduction

As part of public welfare arrangements, social workers must navigate numerous inherent paradoxes and tensions, as there are parallel and contradictory principles, ideological values, and needs to consider when

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attending to citizens (Brunsson, 1990; Parton, 1998). Perhaps the most fundamental inherent dilemma in modern welfare is the tension between citizens' rights to individualised needs assessment and care, and strivings for equality and legal certainty: Should the interests of the collective or the individual prevail, given that needs are always endless and resources are always limited to some extent? Whether consciously or not, social workers and front-line managers engage with this dilemma when deciding on interventions for children at risk of maltreatment. Children are not the only citizens with needs, and decisions and costs must be justified in relation to tax-funded resources and budgetary frameworks (Llewellyn, 1998a; Power, 2004).

While being an inherent dilemma to welfare arrangements from the beginning, parallel developments have strengthened both citizens' rights and requirements for budgetary accountability. On the one hand, children's individual rights have gradually been strengthened through legislation and policy. For instance, Sweden ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2020, and there are now requirements to reflect the child's perspective in casework documentation (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2021). On the other hand, repeated financial crises and ageing populations have changed the preconditions for welfare funding, leading to calls for reduced spending (Esping-Andersen, 2006; Hood, 1995). Alongside austerity politics and management models imported from the private sector, front-line staff in public organisations face new demands to justify expenditure and prove cost-efficiency and performance (Hood, 1995; Martinelli et al., 2017; Shore & Wright, 2015). Attempts to raise budget awareness at the front line include giving managers at different levels an increased mandate and creating new professional roles or titles for social workers, such as controller, quality manager, or care manager (Hall, 2012; Kurunmäki & Miller, 2006; Llewellyn, 1998a). Danish researcher Svanholt (2023, p. 2) describes a development towards being "required to consider costs in ways that were not previously part of social work." In a report from the Swedish union Vision (2022, p. 1), social services managers express a current manifestation of the inherent welfare dilemma: "Are we supposed to keep to budget or follow the law?"

This article explores how these parallel and contradictory interests manifest in the everyday work of child welfare and how they are understood and handled by social workers and managers. Social policy scholar Michael Lipsky explains that a distinguishing feature of street-level organisations and their bureaucrats is the constant handling of cross-pressure from competing demands, not only from legislators and citizens, but also from professional and organisational standards, ideals, and logics (Lipsky, 1971, p. 397, 2010, p. 29). Presumably, the welfare dilemma of balancing needs and budgets becomes interwoven with other tensions and negotiations throughout the child welfare casework. While Lipsky (2010) and others have investigated the coping strategies developed by street-level bureaucrats to deal with cross-pressure and insatiable demands (Lipsky, 2010; Vedung, 2015), I will examine the processes of sensemaking and truth construction, and how the welfare dilemma is understood and addressed based on central cues and theories of action.

Previous results of importance for my study come from the fields of business and management studies, sociology, political science, and social work. Some studies explicitly focus on the dynamics of budget awareness and welfare decision-making. Llewellyn (1998a, 1998b) and others (e.g., Allain et al., 2021; Timor-Shlevin et al., 2023; Westlake et al., 2022) have found that social workers initially respond to increased budgetary responsibility with resistance, and by constructing boundaries between caring and costing. In Llewellyn's Scottish studies, resistance sometimes switched over time towards more accepting approaches (1998a) and sometimes resulted in the creation of new work roles, such as the practice team managers. In Sweden, Andersson (2004) observed that, as a result of organisational reform, Swedish elderly

care case workers justified refusals based on legal certainty and budgetary considerations rather than the actual needs of the elderly.

In a Danish context, Schrøder (2019, 2020) and Schrøder et al. (2022) have demonstrated that the role of costs in child welfare decision-making varies from case to case, depending on timing (e.g., emergency level of the case) and the spacing (e.g., laws and spreadsheets used in the case; Schrøder, 2019). Schrøder et al. (2022) have also shown that welfare professionals "sequence" (i.e., postpone, split, and separate) everyday activities to avoid clashes and conflicts between co-existing registers of valuation of goodness (feeling, theorising, formalising, and costing). Another important finding is that cost considerations are not always explicit and are sometimes managed behind the scenes, away from parents and children (Schrøder, 2019, 2020). Also in a Danish context, researchers (Bukh et al., 2021; Bukh & Svanholt, 2020, 2022; Svanholt, 2023) have found that managers' sensemaking and interpretation processes in relation to tighter budget responsibilities are crucial for how these responsibilities are approached and linked to professional practice, as well as for their effectiveness. Finally, within the sociology of professions, researchers have identified new definitions of meaningful work, expertise, and knowledge based on management and administrative values, including cost-consciousness, as manifestations of re-professionalisation (Evetts, 2009; Liljegren & Parding, 2010; Mik-Meyer, 2018), which is sometimes referred to as hybrid professionalism (Evetts, 2009; Kurunmäki & Miller, 2006).

I will contribute to this research with ethnographic insights addressing the following research questions:

1. How does the inherent welfare dilemma of balancing children's needs with the efficient use of resources manifest in the day-to-day interactions between management and social workers in child protection?
2. How is the dilemma understood, balanced, made sense of, and acted upon within an organisational context?

1.1. Background: Child Protection and Municipal Budgets in Sweden

In Sweden, child welfare budgets are tax-funded and allocated and controlled yearly by politically appointed councils and boards at the municipal level (Swedish Parliament, 2001). These budgets are the result of state allocations and regulations, current prioritisation, trend forecasting, and need estimation. Beyond statutory regulations, different local political regimes can formulate different directives for child welfare budgets and spending (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2025). For example, in one municipality, the social welfare board may issue directives to be restrictive with expensive foster care, while in another municipality, the same service may be prioritised for quality or ideological reasons. Within the child welfare department, there is typically an internal delegation order for decision-making, partly related to costs (Wittberg & Kelfve, 2024). Although the social welfare board is formally responsible for all decisions relating to individuals (Swedish Parliament, 2001), the case social worker may be authorised to approve certain services independently, while extensive and/or costly services require the approval of a manager, or the social welfare board itself.

The arrangement for providing foster and institutional care in Sweden is described as a *quasi-market*. Since the late 1980s, municipalities have been able to outsource child protection services through procurement systems and purchase placements on a case-by-case basis (Forkby & Höjer, 2018, p. 167). However, it was

not until 2010 and onwards that private actors became noticeable in residential and foster care (Meagher et al., 2016). Although national guidelines on reimbursement levels for service providers exist, these are ultimately negotiated individually. In practice, both reimbursement levels and the services delivered can vary considerably between municipalities and between public and private providers. Marketisation arrangements were introduced to make the child welfare system more cost-efficient and competitive, but there is currently no evidence that costs for child protection have been reduced. One possible explanation is the continued care deficit, which gives providers a market advantage (Forkby & Höjer, 2018, p. 166). Direct cost negotiations between social workers and foster parents or their private contractors have been identified as a new kind of market-based relationship between social workers and citizens (Hjärpe, 2025).

2. Eyes on Social Interaction and Sensemaking

Being an ethnographic study, I take an interest in how people interact and make sense of everyday life (Atkinson, 2015), which in this study refers to life at work and the practices that take place in the interplay between social workers, administrators, and managers. Theoretically, I draw on traditions that enable me to engage closely with actors and that emphasise the importance of empirical studies in specific contexts of practice, focusing on what people do both in words and in other kinds of action (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Garfinkel, 1967; Samra-Fredericks & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2008).

2.1. The Budget and Need Balance as "Worked Up Accomplishments"

Following an ethnomethodological approach, I consider the significance attached to budget controls and what it "becomes" in practice as something that is achieved through continuous "work" and "doing" in the social services office (Garfinkel, 1967). This is work that is carried out both individually by managers, caseworkers, and administrators, and collectively through their interactions with each other. Ethnomethodology asks questions about how members "do when they do what they feel they need to do to get the job done" (Randall & Sharrock, 2011, p. 15). A key aspect is how members attribute meaning to situations they encounter, which situationally underpins their actions and behaviours (Samra-Fredericks & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2008, p. 657). Regardless of the task at hand or the context, members use methods, competencies, and strategies to accomplish the tasks before them. These methods range from rhetoric to actions and beyond. Several different considerations must be weighed against each other, which is why decisions and actions should always be considered as situated. This contextual "know-how" also involves members reflexively relating to, justifying, and legitimising their actions in relation to their own and others' claims. Members also consider how their work is perceived from the outside, developing tactics and strategies to respond accordingly (Garfinkel, 1967). These "member competences" are defined as work or doing and are therefore actor- and agency-centred. It is characteristic of my analysis that I emphasise the participants' agency, whether they follow budget directives from above or resist them from below.

2.2. Sensemaking Within Organisational Power Relations

Within the study of organisations, Karl E. Weick has developed ideas about what characterises sensemaking in organisations compared to other areas of everyday life (Weick, 1995, pp. 63–69). He states that organisations accommodate sensemaking in certain ways simply by being organisations, and that some questions are only raised at work. For instance, how interaction is coordinated through specific hierarchies,

routines, and habitual actions is unique to organisations, as are the criteria for defining extraordinary events and novelties (Weick, 1995, pp. 73–75). Organisations also have strong incentives and structures that encourage shared sensemaking, where actors (in our case, street-level bureaucrats) can easily substitute one another due to the need to control resources and demonstrate legal security and legitimacy to stakeholders (Weick, 1995, p. 171).

Sensemaking is defined as the active interpretation and construction of actions and events, as well as the actions themselves (Weick, 1995, p. 73). As beliefs and actions are interrelated, sensemaking can start at any point, as it is by doing things that we figure out what we believe. Sensemaking is an effort to tie beliefs and actions more closely together (Weick, 1995, pp. 135, 155). While much sensemaking in organisational life is invisible and embedded in internalised routines and taken-for-granted premises, there are occasions that stimulate sensemaking to become more explicit as meanings are formulated, tested, and negotiated. This occurs when there are ruptures in the flow of events, when something out of the ordinary happens, or when there is arousal, discrepancy, shocks, paradoxes, ambiguity, and uncertainty (Weick, 1995, pp. 47, 90). Other examples include high information load, complexity, turbulence, and other situations in which one cannot rely on habitual routines (Weick, 1995, pp. 87–88). Organisational ambiguity and uncertainty can increase during organisational changes, situations of resource shortages, administrative turnover, situations in which many interpretations are possible, and different value orientations are negotiated (Weick, 1995, p. 93). Bukh et al. (2021) and Svanholt (2023) have interpreted changes in Danish management control practices as such interrupting events that lead to sensemaking processes.

Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as a social process connected to identity, and as ongoing, retrospective, and based on extracted cues. Resources are used, such as words, ideology, paradigms, premises, theories of action, coping mechanisms, tradition, and narratives, and sensemaking is both belief-driven and action-driven (Weick, 1995, pp. 133, 155). From his rich framework, two analytical tools are visible in my analysis. First, the idea that the construction of something as a problem is part of the sensemaking itself (Weick, 1995, p. 90). This is evident in the structure of the analysis, which is based on the observation that the budget and the placements are constructed as each other's problems. Secondly, the idea that certain cues are central for sensemaking has been useful for the analysis. Actions and beliefs create cues that provide meaning and can be tested through actions. Cues are the more concrete elements that make sense and refer to how events and information are related to other things (Weick, 1995, p. 110). Extracted cues are simple, familiar structures from which people develop a broader understanding of what may be occurring, and how an extracted cue develops depends on the context (Weick, 1995, pp. 51–53). In the present analysis, I identify cue arguments and standpoints that, with the help of bracketing, make different theories of action and reasoning possible.

Since sensemaking ultimately deals with the construction of social reality and the cues at the basis for theories of action, it is also a perspective of power. Through sensemaking processes, we can capture expressions of power relations and dynamics, both internal (within the organisational hierarchy) and external (regarding organisations' legitimacy within society). Power is visible in who controls the cues, what people accept, and what is taken for granted. It is also evident in the identities that are valued or disparaged, the histories that are singled out and retold, and the actions that are permitted or prohibited (Weick, 1995, p. 171; Weick et al., 2005, p. 418).

3. Human Service Ethnography in Swedish Social Services

3.1. Data Collection

This article builds on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2023 across three different research projects, during which I observed and interviewed case social workers in the field of child protection. The projects had similar interests, such as documentation practices number governance and placement considerations, all of which are relevant to questions of budgets and needs. Table 1 provides an overview of the material gathered during this fieldwork.

Table 1. Overview of fieldwork and participating municipalities.

Year	Municipalities	Observations	Interviews
2014	1 (Municipality A)	28	11
2017	3 (Municipalities A, B, C)	36	28
2023	7 (Municipalities D, E, F, G, H, I, J)	21	43

In total, the data represent 10 municipalities ranging in size from 8,000 to 130,000 inhabitants. Fieldwork was conducted over periods of nine months (2014), six months (2017), and nine months (2023), with varying levels of intensity within these periods. With the exception of the Head of department in municipality A, all participants quoted in this analysis have an educational background in social work.

As fieldwork has been conducted as a human service ethnography, the organisational framework has influenced the study in various ways (Jacobsson & Gubrium, 2021). For example, I have come and gone from the field at different times, adjusting to organisational time and confidentiality constraints, which can be seen as limitations to participation. I observed people "at work," mainly through their interactions in various types of large and small meetings, which gave me access to one kind of reality. Participants may see themselves, to varying degrees, as representatives of their organisation or profession, and their relationships with each other, which form certain social expectations, will influence the interaction. Participants' stories and statements may take on the character of an "institutional language" that highlights the organisation's ideology rather than its actual practice (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 768).

The observations were carried out during work sessions, staff meetings, and supervision sessions with between 2 and 40 participants. The observations were "slightly" participative in that I sometimes interacted with the social workers, either socially or by asking for clarifications (Emerson et al., 2011). At other times, I adopted a more withdrawn approach, listening and taking field notes to capture "naturally occurring talk" in as much detail as possible (Silverman, 2011). The extent to which I interacted with participants depended on how I adjusted to the situation to best neutralise my presence. Sometimes this meant participating in activities, and at other times taking notes quietly. Interviews were usually one-to-one, except for six group interviews with 3 to 19 social workers present. All individual and group interviews followed semi-structured interview guides and lasted between 50 minutes and one and a half hours. The tape recorder was switched on after consent had been given in order to transcribe the interviews verbatim.

I have returned to many municipalities to lead "validation workshops." The aim was to present themes selected from the material and confirm the reasonability of my interpretations. A few adjustments were

made to clarify social services routines and central concepts, but the participants mainly confirmed the relevance of the thematisations.

3.2. Coding and Thematisation

Field notes and interview transcripts are considered ethnographic material that contributes to an in-depth understanding of practices in both talk and text and in action and interaction (Silverman, 2011). The results were analysed using an ethnographic abductive strategy, which is a process involving iterative movement between ideas, observations, theoretical fragments, analysis, data production, and conclusions (Atkinson, 2015, pp. 56–57). For this article, the data were re-coded and further elaborated. I started by searching the entire dataset for interactions containing one of the following words: "budget," "costs," "expensive," "cheap," "money," "tax," "economy," "financial," "price," and "resources." After selecting quotes and field notes containing such content, I conducted a two-step qualitative thematic analysis (Silverman, 2011, pp. 9–10). The first round of coding followed the themes of "cues," "arguments," and "the construction of problems relating to budgets and placements." The themes of the second round of coding are reflected in the structure of the subsequent analysis.

3.3. Methodological Reflection

Since the data have been collected in different geographical contexts and over 10 years marked by changes in economic awareness, tighter governance models, and the implementation of technology for economic control, one must ask whether these contextual changes have influenced the findings I am presenting. Without claiming to have conducted a comprehensive comparative analysis, I have not identified any distinctive patterns specific to particular times or places in the data. Rather, I found expressions of all the positions and reasoning presented in the fieldwork. The selected quotes should be seen as representative of common and recurring themes throughout the material, jointly illustrating how an inherent welfare dilemma is negotiated at the front line.

3.4. Ethics

All participants have given their consent to take part in the observations and/or interviews, either in writing or verbally. All social workers' and municipalities' names have been pseudonymised. The research focuses on social workers' reasoning in general rather than the specifics of individual cases, and no social work clients are represented in the data. The projects have undergone assessments by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr. 2013/348, 2022/01415-01).

4. Analysis

Throughout the analysis, I will demonstrate that the welfare dilemma of balancing needs and resources emerges in the everyday practice of child protection, particularly in situations where budgetary constraints and child protection costs are interdependent. On the one hand, the costs of child protection are constructed as a burden on the municipal budget. The cue at the centre of this problem construction is "Don't waste taxpayers' money." Conversely, budget constraints are presented as obstacles to providing effective child protection based on the cue argument, "Don't let children's well-being depend on money."

These are two arguments with strong societal support, and neither of which anyone wants to be held responsible for failing. Let us take a closer look at the situations in which these arguments arise and how they manifest. As we will see, this dilemma is also interwoven with other tensions and controversies in child protection practice relating to power relations within the municipality, different perspectives on quality in social work, and the use of knowledge and evidence.

4.1. Child Protection as a Problem for the Municipal Budget

I will start by demonstrating how placements become a problem for the municipal budget through: (a) engagements in fundamental organisational structures and routines; (b) arguments that resources are limited and should be used for those who need them most; and (c) the rhetoric of ineffective and expensive placements.

4.1.1. Overspent Budgets and Costs Running Out of Control

The first observation is that the system and routines for budgeting, planning, and managing costs in child protection already create the conditions for problems to arise. Since it is almost impossible to predict placement needs, budgets are based on statistics from previous years, estimates, and other budget considerations. This often results in insufficient resources from the outset. Based on my fieldwork, almost every municipality has experienced situations where budgets have been exceeded, and working groups, projects, and other initiatives have been set up to limit spending and find more affordable service alternatives. The way exceeded costs are discussed when budgets are scrutinised is the most evident means by which the problem is constructed: "It is the placement costs that stand out," commented a quality manager, examining last year's results. Managers talked about "costs spiralling out of control" or "we are overspending," signalling that something is wrong. One unit manager described it as follows:

> Right now, we have high costs for expensive placements. We have been bragging about a low number of placements, and if you compare with many other municipalities, it is still low. Then it started to run downhill. It has nothing to do with us, but with the fact that these cases are heavy. But if the starting point is that it is low, even a small increase becomes a big deal. For example, we took three siblings into care due to domestic violence, and suddenly the costs were huge. So right now, we're running a big deficit in the budget, partly because of these three placements, and we'll have to explain why. (Interview with head of unit, municipality G, 2023)

With the expressions "bragging" about keeping the budget, and "running downhill," this quote captures perfectly how finding placements for children becomes a problem in relation to the budget estimated. In another context, the same activity could be considered either a solution to a problem, such as the protection of a child, or problematic for another reason, such as being paternalistic. Although the manager can justify the costs, the arguments appear more like excuses than legitimate explanations, which acknowledge the problem as such.

In a study by Bukh and Svanholt (2020, p. 281), managers described a change in how placement costs were viewed after a management control system was implemented. What were previously considered normal fluctuations became budget items labelled as "looking good" or "unbelievable costs," to be explained during

regular check-ins with managers and controllers. During my fieldwork, participants discussed how such events could sometimes produce feelings of shame:

> It was always "The family unit has high costs," and after a while, I raised my hand, "That's me!" You had a feeling of shame and guilt because we placed kids in foster care. (Interview with unit manager, municipality D, 2023)

As it appears, a simple standard organisational routine, such as checking the balances at regular meetings, is perceived by a manager as stigmatising the activities she represents. She acts as if to demonstrate that she understands she should feel guilty and take responsibility, raising her hand and saying, "That's me!" By interpreting the situation in this way and acting on it, she adds to the problem construction of child placements.

When budgets are tightened, the demands for cost awareness trickle down to the social worker who is responsible for suggesting an intervention (Bukh et al., 2021). Participants discussed social workers' tendency to suggest placements too readily as a lack of capacity to harbour their concerns, or a naive trust in placements as a solution. "They place away their concerns," one manager put it, and sometimes such reasonings were combined with a questioning of the social workers' cost awareness, as in the following conversation:

> Head of department: Yes, and then there is the cost awareness at the child protection investigation unit, yes, it is what it is, and we know it.
>
> Unit manager: So, I don't think, of course, there should be cost awareness, but then I don't think that's what we work with primarily. (Field note, municipality A, 2014)

Llewellyn (1998b, p. 297) demonstrated that social workers are often reluctant to increase the financial awareness of their assessments. In this conversation, the head of department presents this as a widely recognised problem and questions social workers' willingness to engage with cost awareness. The unit manager acknowledges the value of cost awareness but argues that it should be a secondary concern.

Not only was the lack of cost awareness among social workers talked about as a problem, but it was also addressed in more or less explicit ways. My fieldwork data reveal strategies ranging from presenting budget information at staff meetings and raising the issue "carefully" at supervision to making it a criterion in salary discussions. Front-line managers and supervisors were often given responsibility for gatekeeping placements and discussing alternative care solutions with social workers. The following field note describes a unit manager who suspects that the lack of such supervision is the reason for the high running costs. She is working at her desk and takes a moment to explain to me:

> Group three has many placements. Their head of unit left, so no manager has had any insight into it. I was surprised by how many placements they had there. But I have to check because it could also be a coincidence that it is pure bad luck that a group gets heavier cases and thus more placements. But I need to check what it's all about because I will have to explain it. I have to answer for this in relation to the political pressure. And as I said, it seems as if no one is really holding the reins. (Field note, municipality D, 2023)

While wanting to make clear that high costs incurred by one team could be a result of a high volume of challenging cases, placement work is portrayed as a runaway force if there is no one to control it. As a middle manager with budgetary responsibilities, this social worker needs to explain increased costs to upper management and politicians. The organisational control mechanisms for which she is responsible also contribute to the construction of not only placements, but also social workers' cost awareness as a problem relative to limited resources.

4.1.2. To Prioritise and Be Careful With the Municipality's Resources

In the previous section, we have seen examples of problem construction through what in organisations theory (Perrow, 1986, as cited in Weick, 1995, pp. 113–114) is called first-order control (control by direct supervision) and second-order control (by programs and routines). Weick (1995) gives special attention to third-order control processes as important for sensemaking. They consist of assumptions and premises on which arguments and conclusions rest, and that are close to emotionally charged beliefs. Throughout my fieldwork, I observed that many engagements and suggestions for action were based on the assumption that resources for child protection were limited. This was mainly expressed by supervisors and managers when reasoning about their responsibility to use placements wisely. A supervisor argues:

> It is a question of costs, of course, because it is usually a huge amount of money. All placements are expensive; some are more expensive than others, and we should be careful with our residents' money. That's the way it is. It should go to those who need it most, and sometimes it can be the case that this young person needs a very advanced placement, and then you have to invest that money in that young person, but if you expect more people to get help and support, then… (Interview with supervisor, municipality D, 2023)

The cue in this line of reasoning is that citizens' money is limited and should be handled carefully, which is followed by a theory of action: to prioritise based on the logic of who needs it most. The supervisor also makes her point by exemplifying that when money is spent on one child with advanced needs, there is no money left for other children. Hence, her concern relates to spending money to the detriment of others who might also need it. In another discussion, the same concern is complicated by the argument that it might be unclear if a placement will make any difference:

> It's not just about the economy, but of course we [managers] might take a bit more responsibility for it—the higher up you go, the more responsibility you might feel that you actually have to choose which children to place….You can't place everyone, and then you need to place the ones that you think really need it and the ones for whom it makes a difference. Take an autistic child who is not doing well at home, but who is terrified of changes. To keep on placing them in temporary foster homes and maybe have to re-place them as well—what does that do to the child? (Interview with supervisor, municipality C, 2017)

Even without budget restrictions, it is a complex engagement to decide whether to separate a child from a dysfunctional, yet familiar network. If the placement turns out to be unsuccessful, the consequences of separation can be worse than staying. In this supervisor's reasoning, this dilemma is complicated by the fact that resources are limited, leading to a responsibility to be careful with placements if you don't know that it will make a difference. In contrast to Andersson's (2004) study of Swedish case workers in elderly care,

I rarely found social workers at the front-line taking responsibility for the municipal budget in their assessments. It was, rather, supervisors and managers who reproduced this perspective, from the position of having this responsibility assigned. As this supervisor explains, it is a responsibility you "feel" even more the higher up in the hierarchy you are.

4.1.3. Expensive and Ineffective Placements

The third way in which placements manifested themselves as problematic was when high costs and poor quality were linked, reinforcing the belief that costly placements did not lead to successful outcomes. Social workers and front-line managers often expressed concern that placements did not always have the expected effect. It was not uncommon for them to have to find new foster homes or institutions for children due to "breakdowns." While explanations for these breakdowns were sometimes centred on the "too difficult" child, the quality of the care was often questioned and weighed against the costs: "You don't get value for money" and "These are fantasy sums, and it doesn't even make any difference" are examples of how this frustration was expressed by social workers. A particular source of outrage was private care providers using the existing care deficit to push up prices, without offering an equivalent improvement in quality: "Private companies take advantage of the situation," one social worker said. Often, the motive of private actors to produce care was questioned. For example:

> So, it's like, if the motive is to take in a placed child to have a high compensation, then I become a little bit more sceptical, because I think there needs to be a heart in it which is not about money. Then, of course, you should have reasonable compensation. No one does this for free. I fully buy that too. But in some cases, I have seen that the compensation has been the priority for them. (Interview with social worker, municipality D, 2023)

In Llewellyn's (1998a, p. 34) study, social workers in the UK expressed disbelief towards private care homes and institutions that offered "value for money," reasoning that such low prices could not guarantee quality. Interestingly, the social workers in my study expressed the same suspicion, but with a reversed logic: A heart and an interest in money cannot coexist. The high amounts charged by private providers were often talked about as "horrible amounts" or "money ending up in someone's pockets" and were contrasted with how this money could have been spent more effectively. Two expressions by social workers representing this perspective are "That's a whole year's work consumed in 12 weeks" and "We can hire two people full-time ourselves for the same money." A phrase often used has an alliterative effect in Swedish (*dyrt och dåligt*) and can be translated as follows: "Placements are expensive and ineffective," putting these two contents together as an obvious truth. Here, a politician uses the phrase to make a statement about not letting the citizens down:

> Expensive and ineffective, that is what private placements are! We should be able to offer good care in our own municipality; otherwise, it's like letting the citizens down. (Field note, municipality E, 2023)

As suggested here, private placements are not only expensive, but they also raise ethical questions regarding the care of children and the spending of citizens' tax money. The same logic was also applied in reverse, in the many ways in which good care and reduced costs could be combined. The following statements illustrate this reasoning: "It is a question of better control *and* economy"; "We can have more internal collaboration *and*

value for money"; "These placements are more normalising *and* cheaper"; "Raise quality *and* lower costs." It is interesting to note how these arguments combine what are otherwise often considered incompatible factors.

4.2. The Municipal Budget as a Problem for Child Protection

In parallel with the problem construction illustrated so far, alternative and opposing narratives were being formulated, both in general and in relation to specific situations in which budget restrictions limited child protection options. The arguments used by participants are based on cues that either children's needs should not be related to money at all, or that it is not cost-effective to economise on children's needs in the long term. These positions, in which the budget is seen as affecting the quality of child protection, are more often formulated from "below," from the perspective of those who have to deal with and are disappointed by budget constraints. In some cases, this dilemma gives rise to strategies such as micro-resistance and the externalisation of responsibility.

4.2.1. Being Stingy With Children's Needs

The deeply rooted cultural and emotional value placed on children in modern Western societies keeps them ideologically sacred from "the circuit of exchange" (Zelizer, 1994). As Jacobsson (2023) and Hjärpe (2025) have demonstrated, money negotiations with foster and institutional care providers, fuelled by the marketisation of the sector in Sweden in recent years, are surrounded by strong opinions and moral positioning. During my fieldwork, many participants expressed the principle that children's needs should not be subject to financial considerations:

> Clearly, we should not waste resources. We are working with taxpayers' money, but that should not govern our work. It is the needs that should govern it. And then we need to have the resources for it. (Interview with unit manager, municipality C, 2017)

This unit manager gives a confirming nod to the other key principle of the dilemma by stating, "Clearly, we should not waste resources," but then effectively brackets the children's needs as a priority. A social worker is more direct in her statement, presenting the idea that money should not be a top priority as an unquestionable rule:

> Social worker: Sometimes you can feel a resistance to the higher powers. I can see that needs and a small money bag control how many resources we have, and then I can get very frustrated and think, "No, it's not that damn money bag that should decide about services, it's our clients' needs."
>
> Interviewer: Do you have an example?
>
> Social worker: Yes, the kid we talked about earlier. We wanted to put him as far away as possible, in a place where he couldn't get drugs. But then our managers just said, "No, it has to be here in our own care, and it shouldn't be too far away, and it mustn't cost too much money," and I just said, "No, now the money bag is there again." But to some extent, they had to give in, that it might be a placement after all, but probably not the placement I wanted. (Interview with social worker, municipality H, 2023)

This social worker effectively labels cost awareness as stinginess. The expression "The money bag is there again" implies that, out of stinginess, a person does not grant another person something they need. Her suggestion for an expensive placement is met with disapproval; however, she also describes her stubbornness as having had some success. The statement "feel a resistance to the higher powers" reveals the social worker's feeling of powerlessness yet is illustrative of resistance and reluctance towards budget controls noted in other studies (Allain et al., 2021; Llewellyn, 1998a). Llewellyn (1998a) writes that within the social services, costs have been socially constructed as "the other" or as an outside force against which social workers must unite. The experience of many participants in my study—that limited resources prevented them from choosing the best care option—was often accompanied with expressions of anger directed towards politicians. These are some examples of how this was expressed by social workers or managers: "It is not we who decide, it is the politicians and the budget"; "We could do so much more but we can't, because it costs money"; "I think you should be able to choose what you think is best without having to consider what costs less." The ideas for cheaper and better home-based care solutions (than placements) described earlier were, on these occasions, labelled "a political game," invented just because the municipalities run low on the budget. Some social workers even went so far as to say that too tight economic control would be a reason for wanting to quit their job: "I don't understand how you get the motivation to stay and work in a place where money rules," said one social worker.

4.2.2. Saved Costs Now, More Costs Later

Besides arguments where money and children are separated into incompatible spheres, there were also statements that, instead of dismissing the economic reasoning, countered it using the same logic but based on an alternative, preventive rationale. Saving resources now will only push costs to the future, many participants argued: "Maybe they need treatment and we say no, but in three or four years this kid might be one of these criminals"; "Things might be costly now, but in the long run, you can save a whole lot of money." In the following conversation, managers 2 and 3 are drawing on earlier negative experiences from similar cutbacks as they are currently facing, while manager 1 has an alternative perspective:

> Manager 1: Where we were in 2012/2013, we were also in 2006/2007, with the same high numbers.
>
> Manager 2: That, M3 and I can tell you what it is about…
>
> Manager 1: I think it just comes in batches. We should try to prevent these episodes that we are experiencing now.
>
> Manager 2: And then management goes in and says, "Now you can't make placements, now it's only home-based interventions that apply," and so this is the rule for five years until everything goes to hell, and you will need to place them anyhow.
>
> Manager 1: Now you're generalising quite a lot…
>
> Manager 2: No, that's actually the case, at least it was when we worked as social workers. I didn't get all the placements through, but those people are placed now.

> Manager 3: It was the politicians who said the same thing they say today.
>
> M2: But X [Manager 3] has a point, the reason we got into this organisation in 2002 was exactly that…it was to reduce costs that this new organization was made.
>
> M3: Yes, but it's not right to say that we can't make placements at all.
>
> M1: Of course, we're allowed to make placements, but of course, it is true that we've ended up in situations where we haven't been allowed to, and they have given us sharp instructions for placements.
>
> M2: You're not allowed to say that you cannot make placements, but then they say so anyway. (Field note, municipality A, 2014)

Different ways of making sense of high placement costs that have led to cuts are presented in this lively conversation, where we find arguments rooted in alternative ideas for budgeting: to use it preventively instead of reactively. Manager 1's interpretation that these are natural fluctuations leads to the theory of action that they can and should be prevented by means other than placements. By making references to historical events, managers 2 and 3 present an alternative strategy. Their implicated theory of action is to not hold back on money and make the placements that need to be made now, or they will come back with even higher needs. The comment by M3 ("It is not right to say…") refers to regulations in the Swedish Social Services Act (Swedish Parliament, 2001) establishing the right to individual needs assessment. This targets the grey zone of budget control and the laws regulating social services, a theme that will be further elaborated under the next and final analytical theme.

4.2.3. Relocating Children to Cheaper Caregivers

As a final observation, the budget appeared particularly problematic for participants when given instant directives to reduce spending on placements. Such directives could lead to the task of finding new, cheaper homes for children living in expensive private care arrangements. These are situations where managers and supervisors make decisions and considerations they perceive as imposed and unwanted, and the dilemma comes to its most concrete expression. To start with, a quote demonstrating the moral sensitivity of making such re-placements, again in a discussion between the same managers as in the previous example:

> M2: The difficult thing for us is that they are younger children, because when you think purely in terms of the child's best interests, it's difficult to move them. You can't just take them from a family home and put them in an institution. That's not really an option.
>
> M3: No, you can't really have that as an ace up your sleeve!
>
> M1: From a humane point of view, it's not something you want to work towards. But generally, I'm still completely against privatised foster care. (Field note, municipality A, 2014)

Manager 3 expresses a social and moral norm: Doing something potentially to the detriment of a child's wellbeing from an economic rationale is not accepted in society and is not something they want to be associated with. The conversation rather has the flair of having to do someone's dirty work in relation to values such as the child's best interest and being human. In a final field note, four managers are dealing with a similar directive to end all private care arrangements and find cheaper alternatives. A few days before the conversation takes place, all units of the social services have been required to hand in suggestions for how to reduce costs with risk analyses from a work-environment perspective. The field note is a summary of a much longer conversation that took many detours:

> Head of department: We're going to talk about how to work on savings. Let's start with the foster care placements. We have already decided to do it, so we don't need to spend too much time on the risk analysis. We have four children in private foster care that we have to re-place. The problem here is that the kids are very young and that they are thriving in their families.
>
> Manager 4: And the children have already suffered as a consequence of the system, so if you just looked at it from the child's point of view, you'd say no, we can't move them. There is a risk that we will continue to maintain the pattern of insecurity with more moves…. It's strange that we make a foster placement because of a family breakdown, and then we perpetuate it? He doesn't get to live with his mum because she does what we do now…
>
> Head of department: No, it is not pleasant that we are about to do this.
>
> Manager 4: Yes, and that can't be the official argument, we can't say that they have to move because we're saving money, that it's too expensive, we have to justify this in another way…
>
> Head of department: This is a systemic error…we are in the hands of private actors who charge far too much money, there are people profiting on this. Yes, this is shit…but what can I do about it?
>
> Manager 2: I have to ask, as a matter of tactics, how do we explain to the children and foster parents that we are re-placing the children? How do you do that, formally speaking?
>
> Manager 4: I think we should do a risk analysis from the perspective of the third party and not only about the work environment.

Later, at the end of the meeting:

> Manager 4: Ok, so I will write a risk analysis regarding the placements.
>
> Head of department: Ok, but don't spend too much time on it.
>
> Manager 4: But I want to do it! And then you can include it if you want; it's up to you. (Field note, municipality B, 2014)

What in the beginning of the meeting is presented by the head of department as something already decided, turns into a more complex matter throughout the meeting. In the interaction, the budget-based instruction to re-place children is worked up as a problem for (a) what is perceived as the child's best interest, (b) the managers' comfort and self-image, and (c) the organisation they represent.

To start with, it is framed as "a problem" (as per the Head of department) that the children have to be moved from foster homes where they thrive, and concerns are raised about the consequences regarding attachment patterns and network continuity (Manager 4). At one point, Manager 4 even equates the social services with a neglectful parent by saying they "will continue to maintain the pattern of insecurity." Second, the interaction reveals that the situation is also challenging to the managers themselves and for issues of responsibility and professional ethics. It is most clearly expressed by the Head of department: "No, it is not pleasant that we are about to do this" and by the manager, reflecting on the double moral of their actions, acknowledging that they are repeating the same behaviour (interrupting) as the parent. Third, just as social workers in Schrøder's (2019, p. 328) study allowed themselves to think aloud about costs when parents could not hear, the managers in this conversation understand the situation as problematic in relation to what can be externally communicated, to the foster parents and children (Manager 2: "matter of tactics" and "formally speaking"), and officially (Manager 4: "that can't be the official argument").

These discussions demonstrate, not least, that the managers are aware that the issue they are dealing with is both morally and formally questionable. They clearly find themselves in a sensitive area where children's well-being is negotiated with financial concerns. Perhaps this is a case of what Brunsson (1990, p. 193) has pointed out: "There are things that can be done but cannot be said by organisations", and: "Ethical norms tend to limit what organisations say more than they limit what they do." Managers have to do the organisations' dirty work, creating a dilemma to which they apply different strategies. Manager 4 initiates a kind of "micro-resistance" when she suggests switching the focus of the risk analysis from the work environment to the consequences for the children. Furthermore, she insists on writing the risk analysis thoroughly despite being told not to put too much work into it. The head of department has another strategy in repeatedly referring to their limited options, putting the blame on the private enterprises that "profit" on the care deficit.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the context of child protection, and informed by ethnomethodology and organisational sensemaking theory, I have illustrated the complexities, nuances, and power dynamics that arise when a welfare dilemma trickles down to front-line services. I have taken a particular interest in how this dilemma manifests in everyday interactions and negotiations, and in how front-line managers and social workers understand and make sense of such complexities.

As has been demonstrated, balancing needs and resources is a common activity in public welfare organisations where budgetary constraints and the cost of child protection are mutually perceived as each other's problem. The central cue "Don't waste taxpayers' money" means that unexpected and costly child protection becomes a burden to the municipal budget. Conversely, the argument that budget constraints and a lack of budget control hinder the provision of good child protection is based on the premise, "Don't let children's well-being depend on money." That it is a dilemma is evident in how participants repeatedly acknowledge both values

while setting one aside to develop a theory of action for the task at hand. Contrary to Schrøder et al.'s (2022) finding that caring and costing are sequentially addressed in different forums to avoid conflict, I have rather found sensemaking to be more confrontational, with actors considering both aspects yet making a stronger argument for one of them.

The interactions between social case workers and managers presented in this article facilitate reflection on power dynamics, both internal and external, in public child welfare. Firstly, the interactional and institutional resources underlying the two problem constructions are qualitatively different to some extent, which speaks to the relationship between the organisation and its professionals. When child protection is constructed as a burden on the municipal budget, this is achieved through (a) fundamental and conditioning organisational structures and routines for budgeting, whereby placements become problematic in relation to interruptions to the administrative workflow (e.g., exceeding budgets) and the creation of new tasks (e.g., having to justify costs); and (b) ideologically and emotionally loaded arguments that locate the problems in either social workers' priorities or private actors' money-motives. Placements become remarkable "overspending" or "budgets running downhill," and we also find intentions to automatically align high costs with poor quality. The relative powerlessness of case workers is manifested in their engagement with routine budgetary tasks and control mechanisms, their acknowledgement of the need to excuse or explain exceeded costs, and their feelings of shame when answering to higher management and politicians.

The constructions of the allocated budget as a problem for qualitative child protection generally come from more cornered positions where professionals are frustrated or disappointed with organisational structures and decisions. While similar rhetorical resources as in the contrary argumentation are employed, such as casting doubt on others' motives (stingy politicians and greedy private actors) and drawing boundaries between costing and caring, there are no organisational structures or positions (such as managers) that maintain such argumentation. Indeed, we have seen examples of social workers and managers using their agency to find spaces for action and resistance, such as voicing discontent, being stubborn about expensive placements, or insisting on making a risk analysis; yet, the power structures they act within are robust.

Secondly, with regard to external actors, we can observe public organisations' relative dependence on public opinion in how the social workers and managers engage in discussions about how to communicate budget-related re-placements of foster children. The unconditional worth of children and the responsible use of public resources are two values that enjoy strong societal support and that no one wants to be held responsible for failing to uphold. However, according to my analysis, one of these failures is perceived as worse in public discourse. Directives to find cheaper foster care placements for children already in foster care were met not only with arguments concerning the children's best interests, but also with discussions about how to communicate such actions to the parents and children, as well as to other stakeholders.

In conclusion, child protection appears to be an area in which there is a gap between what can be said and what can be done in the public sector, which puts social workers and managers on the front line in complex and ethically challenging situations. We have also seen proof of the complexities of welfare decision-making in how actors make sense of, connect, and negotiate the balancing of costing and caring in relation to various considerations such as legal frameworks and rights, the organisations' interests, children's situated needs, and different socio-political perspectives, professional values, and ethics.

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About the Author

Teres Hjärpe is an associate professor in social work at Lund University. Her dissertation explores how social work practice takes form around quantification and measuring activities in the social services. Current research concerns the role of documents, statistics, and digital tools in social work practice and the marketisation of foster care.

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ARTICLE

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Supporting the Ordinary Family: Finding the Organisational Space for Foster Care Support

Veronica Hällqvist and Johanna Sköld

Child Studies (TEMAB), Linköping University, Sweden

Correspondence: Veronica Hällqvist (veronica.hallqvist@liu.se)

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Abstract

Communicating with foster carers and providing them with adequate financial support and assistance has been identified as important in the recruitment of new foster carers. In Sweden, such support can be provided by local authorities, private agencies, or public intermediary organisations formed through inter-municipal cooperation. Through interviews with inter-municipal organisations, local authorities, and foster carers, this article examines the costs associated with fostering and the types of support foster carers value. It also explores how the involvement of a third actor—an inter-municipal organisation—impacts these costs and the support provided. The findings show that foster carers seek to avoid financial loss due to fostering and attribute different meanings to various forms of financial support, which may help them to negotiate additional compensation. Moreover, some relationships linked to the fostering role are perceived as burdens or costs, requiring support to manage. As a third actor, inter-municipal organisations provide foster carers with assistance in managing the costs associated with the fostering role.

Keywords

foster care; inter-municipal cooperation; triadic relationships; support; costs; money; Sweden

1. Introduction

In Sweden, support to foster carers can be provided by local authorities, private agencies, or public intermediary organisations formed through inter-municipal cooperation. The following quote is derived from the operations manager at Gemensam Familjehemsorganisation (GFO):

> We cannot compete with money. But at GFO we can compete by ensuring they [foster carers] receive good basic training, that they receive further education, that we organise them, and that they get to

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> meet. The municipalities should subsequently support the placement, and we will step in if needed. That is our business idea. (Gustafsson & Sköld, 2021, p. 32)

GFO is a Swedish inter-municipal public cooperative organisation responsible for the recruitment, training, and certain aspects of support of foster carers in six municipalities. The manager observed that, in the competitive landscape of foster carer recruitment, it is not only financial incentives but also non-financial forms of support that constitute valuable resources.

Successfully recruiting enough foster carers remains an ongoing challenge in many countries (Reimer, 2021). The interest in becoming a foster carer is limited amongst the general public. A survey conducted among a sample of the Swedish population aged 25–64 indicated that fewer than one percent reported being "very likely" to apply to become foster carers in the future, while fewer than eight percent stated that it was "rather likely" (Lind et al., 2024).

In Sweden, foster care is a hybrid between work, family life, and voluntary work (Lind et al., 2025a). Due to legal restrictions, foster care cannot be classified as paid employment; rather, it is considered an assignment for which foster carers receive financial support. This support typically includes a reward, reimbursement for child-related expenses, and, sometimes, compensation for loss of income. According to the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR, 2024), which provides recommendations regarding financial support, the monthly remuneration for long-term foster carers should range between 1,050 EUR and 1,600 EUR, following a 3.5% increase implemented in 2024. Caring for more than one child entails higher financial compensation, and long-term foster carers are typically also employed in either full-time or part-time positions outside the household. In comparison, the average monthly salary for a childcare worker, such as those employed in preschools in Sweden, is approximately 2,500 EUR (SCB, 2023).

Although fostering is not a professional occupation, foster carers are expected to possess specific skills, undergo training, and update these throughout the placement. These demands differ significantly from common perceptions of family life. Yet, most foster families are expected to be "ordinary families" offering a new home to a child in need (Pålsson, 2024).

Since the current foster-care system was introduced in the 1980s, the profile of foster children has changed. Children now enter care at older ages and often present more complex emotional, behavioural, and developmental challenges (Sköld et al., 2014; Vårdanalys, 2016). Additional state requirements have also been introduced, including the appointment of a designated child social worker and expectations around maintaining relationships with biological families. Foster carers are also assigned a separate caseworker (SNBHW, 2023). As a result, carers must manage multiple relationships throughout the fostering experience, relationships that may be time-consuming and disruptive to family dynamics. These relational demands can entail costs that "ordinary families" may be reluctant to take on without adequate support (Lind et al., 2025b).

Although Sweden is internationally recognised for its strong public welfare model, significant changes in out-of-home care provision have occurred over the past few decades, making it a particularly relevant case for welfare research. Reforms in the 1980s promoting privately delivered but publicly funded care facilitated the expansion of private actors within the welfare sector. While legislation aimed to position private care

merely as complementary to public services, it eased the entry of private companies (Lundström et al., 2018) and, today, comparative Nordic studies show that residential care in Sweden is among the most privatised in the region (Shanks et al., 2021). Similarly, in foster care, recent research indicates that 90% of municipalities outsource some or all placements to private agencies (also referred to as independent foster-care agencies) (Fridell Lif, 2023).

Following these changes in the 1980s, municipalities began collaborating to deliver public child-welfare services (Wiklund, 2011, p. 126). In foster care, municipalities with populations ranging from a few thousand to well over 100,000 cooperate to strengthen their ability to compete with private agencies, improve service quality, and reduce costs. Several inter-municipal organisations have been established to recruit and assess in-house foster carers and, in some cases, provide training and support. These publicly governed organisations are funded through fees from participating municipalities (Hällqvist, 2025). While each municipality's local authority retains formal responsibility for children in its care, operational tasks, such as recruitment and support, may be delegated to either private agencies or these public inter-municipal organisations.

Moving beyond the conventional dyadic relationship between caseworkers and foster carers, a further layer of complexity arises through the involvement of such a third actor. The introduction of new relational dynamics may involve additional costs or support (Gustafsson & Sköld, 2021) associated with the fostering role. Unlike when hiring private agencies, municipalities are often required to pay for inter-municipal services regardless of how much they use them (Hällqvist, 2025), making the arrangement more binding once begun. These factors shape the conditions experienced by foster carers and require both carers and caseworkers to navigate new relational complexities. Despite the growing use of inter-municipal cooperation in Sweden—and its use within child welfare systems in countries such as Belgium (Prins, 2010), Norway (Jacobsen & Kiland, 2017), and the UK (Education Committee, 2025)—the involvement of a third actor to undertake the recruitment, assessment, training, and sometimes support of foster carers on behalf of the responsible body (for example, the local authority) introduces a new relational configuration that remains underexplored.

1.1. Theoretical Foundations: The Costs of Childrearing and Triad Constellations

The theoretical premise of this article is that childrearing entails costs that benefit both the individual children and society at large. However, these costs are not always visible, as childrearing typically occurs within the private sphere, outside the domain of the market economy. These costs depend upon how a society's economy is constructed: for instance, how the working time of adult carers is valued, the standards set by the state for safeguarding children's wellbeing, and the personal preferences of carers (Folbre, 2008). Consequently, the types of resources valued by foster carers constitute an important dimension of the costs associated with foster care. Equally significant are the requirements for safeguarding children's wellbeing that are valued by social services.

The support provided by local authorities to foster carers takes various forms, both financial and in terms of assistance. However, the values and meanings attributed to these support measures are socially and culturally constructed (Zelizer, 1997) and may be interpreted differently by foster carers and social workers. Money and intimate relationships, such as those between family members, are often perceived as belonging to separate spheres, with money viewed as potentially corrupting personal ties. Zelizer (2005), however,

challenges this notion, demonstrating that monetary values are, in fact, an inseparable aspect of intimate relationships. Financial and other resources are used to express social ties and symbolic values. In this article, the analysis is broadened to include various types of costs, not only financial, and to explore how these costs necessitate different kinds of resources within foster care.

Both financial support and practical assistance require resources to be made available to foster carers, and these may be provided by various constellations of actors. The constellation relevant to this article is the "triad," comprising (a) the foster carer(s), (b) the local authority caseworker, and (c) a social worker from an inter-municipal organisation. Our interest in this triad derives from Simmel's (1950/1964) sociological analysis, in which he explores the transformation from a dyad to a triad, the distinct roles each actor (or "element," as Simmel calls them) may assume, and the variations that may emerge within triadic relationships.

Simmel (1950/1964) argues that each actor within a triad inevitably functions as an intermediary between the other two, either facilitating unity or contributing to division in their relationship. This implies that the third actor—for example, the social worker from the inter-municipal organisation—may function as a support, strengthening the relationship and assisting in resolving conflicts between the other two actors (the foster carer and the caseworker), or may disrupt the relationship. The triad may reduce some costs of fostering for foster carers, while simultaneously imposing or highlighting new costs.

1.2. Aim and Questions

This article seeks to explore the costs of fostering and how inter-municipal organisations may affect foster carer satisfaction through the nature and quality of the support provided by a third actor.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- What types of costs are associated with fostering and what forms of support may compensate for these costs?
- In what ways does the involvement of a third actor, an inter-municipal organisation, impact the costs and support within fostering assignments?

2. Support Offered to Foster Carers in Theory and Previous Research

2.1. Financial Support

Whether or not fostering is recognised as a formal occupation varies across countries, as do the types of support available to foster carers (Reimer, 2021). A longstanding debate in the recruitment of foster carers concerns the tension between professionalism and altruism, which is closely tied to the issue of financial support. Foster carers typically receive some financial support for their role. The literature employs various terms to describe this financial aspect, including "financial reward" (Baginsky et al., 2017; Colton et al., 2008; Kirton, 2007, 2013), "financial compensation" (Reimer, 2021), "financial support" (Colton et al., 2008; Hanson & Jacobs, 2007; Randle et al., 2018), and "remuneration/payment" (Kirton, 2007). These terms may encompass different components of the fostering arrangement. In this article, we adopt the broad term financial support, to refer to the various forms of compensation that foster carers in Sweden may receive (SNBHW, 2023).

To understand the different types of financial support that foster carers may require and/or be offered, it is essential to consider the meanings attached to these forms of support. Zelizer (1997) demonstrates how people classify and organise money based on moral, relational, and cultural factors, assigning different meanings and uses to it. This perspective is particularly relevant to the financial support provided to foster carers, which is categorised as addressing various types of expenses, even though the monetary form remains the same.

As the expectations placed on foster carers increase, so too do their expectations of support and the aspects that they value may change (Wilson & Evetts, 2006). In some countries, including Sweden, the financial aspects of fostering have become an increasingly important factor in the recruitment of foster carers (Baginsky et al., 2017; Berrick et al., 2011; Pålsson et al., 2022), even though financial considerations in fostering have long been a topic of discussion (Sköld et al., 2014). Changes in family and working life have altered how time is valued, and having sufficient time to foster is now regarded as a crucial factor in becoming a foster carer (Lind et al., 2025a), which may be compensated through financial support.

While national regulations generally establish foster families' basic rights to support, the actual support provided can differ significantly between local authorities and other public and private actors. Consequently, the support that foster carers receive is often highly dependent upon the specific actor responsible for delivering it (Swedish Government, 2023).

2.2. Assistance Support

In addition to financial support, foster carers typically receive other forms of assistance to manage the new relationships that the fostering task entails. This may include emotional, educational, and practical support.

Research has shown that both the type and quality of support provided significantly influence foster carers' overall satisfaction (see Randle et al., 2018). Recent studies in Sweden on prospective foster carers have revealed that one of the primary deterrents to becoming a foster carer is uncertainty about whether adequate support will be provided by the local authorities responsible for foster care (Lind et al., 2025b). Similar findings have been reported in an international review of foster care within the EU, which identified the provision of adequate support and high levels of satisfaction among current foster carers—who may serve as advocates for fostering—as key components of effective recruitment strategies (Reimer, 2021). Despite this awareness, several studies have found that not all foster carers receive the support they deem necessary, an issue highlighted by both foster carers themselves (Cosis Brown et al., 2014; Pålsson, 2023) and social workers (Brown et al., 2017; Cosis Brown et al., 2014). This lack of adequate support may help to explain the concerns raised by families who are considering becoming foster carers.

It has also been found that some of the needs described by foster carers are difficult for caseworkers to meet, often due to budgetary constraints and high workloads (Brown et al., 2017; Randle et al., 2018). The relationship between foster carers and caseworkers is particularly important, with carers placing high value on caseworkers who are reliable and accessible, especially during placement crises (Cosis Brown et al., 2014). However, previous research has also highlighted that caseworkers cannot be expected to manage all aspects of support alone. This reveals a potential need for resources beyond what local caseworkers can provide, particularly in situations involving challenges with foster carer performance or when efforts are

required to rebuild trust and collaboration in the relationship between the carer and caseworker (Brown et al., 2017).

In summary, existing research has shown that, if given appropriate financial support and assistance, a larger number of families may be willing to take on fostering roles. The central challenge lies in establishing an organisational framework capable of effectively delivering and sustaining this support.

2.3. The Question of Organisational Space for Support

Some comparisons have been made regarding foster carers' and social workers' satisfaction with the support provided by different actors and constellations of actors (Fridell Lif, 2025a, 2025b; Kirton et al., 2007a). However, there is little research exploring inter-municipal organisations. A few evaluations have shown that foster carers are generally satisfied with the support, training, and contact provided by cooperative organisations (Gustafsson & Sköld, 2021; Löfstrand, 2009). However, in Gustafsson and Sköld's (2021) evaluation, most of the interviewed carers were critical of the contact with local authorities, and the support received—or not received—from them after beginning to foster.

Caseworkers report mixed levels of satisfaction when using private agencies as intermediaries. Local authorities often seek to avoid them due to high costs and concerns about quality (Fridell Lif, 2025b). In contrast, foster carers with experience of private agencies tend to express more positive views, particularly valuing the agency's role as a buffer between themselves and the supervising local authority. This is especially true of experienced carers, who prefer limited contact with the authorities (Fridell Lif, 2025a). In the UK, where similar comparisons have been made, carers have also noted advantages, including better emotional and practical support, feeling valued as part of the team, and greater satisfaction with financial arrangements (Kirton et al., 2007a, 2007b).

3. Methodology

This article presents a case study of seven inter-municipal foster care organisations in Sweden. Six were interviewed during 2022–2023 (Hällqvist, 2025) and one, GFO, in Västernorrland, in 2024. These organisations are responsible for recruiting, assessing, training, and further assisting long-term foster carers on behalf of participating municipalities. Typically, once a placement is made, responsibility for maintaining contact and support is transferred to a municipal local authority caseworker, although carers can still reach out to the organisation when needed. Some organisations, such as GFO in Västernorrland, also recruit and support contracted emergency foster carers directly.

Data was collected by the first author through semi-structured interviews with 13 social workers/caseworkers from eight municipalities who were currently, or had previously been, involved in one of these inter-municipal organisations, and 14 who were employed within such organisations. The interviews explored organisational aspects, success factors, challenges in inter-municipal cooperation, and the types of support offered to foster carers, along with their needs.

The study also includes semi-structured interviews with nine foster families recruited by GFO in Västernorrland. All were long-term carers, with two having experience as both long-term and emergency foster carers. Seven

homes consisted of two carers (a woman and a man), while two were run by single female carers. One male carer participated in an interview together with his partner, while the remaining interviews were conducted individually with the female carers in the foster homes. Seven of the interviewed foster families had cared for one or two children, while the two also serving as emergency carers had cared for eight or more. Foster carers were asked questions such as: What expectations do you have of the organisation? What expectations do you have of the local authority? What kinds of support does a foster carer need? What support have you received as a foster carer, both from the organisation and from the local authority?

All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, except one, which was held over the telephone due to technical issues. Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised by removing identifying details such as names and other personal information. Participants gave informed consent for the non-anonymisation of the names of the organisations and municipalities involved. Ethical approval for components involving sensitive personal data was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2021–06940-01).

This article employs thematic analysis as its method of inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). The interviews were transcribed and reviewed to gain an initial understanding. The full dataset was then coded, with a particular focus on sections addressing the types of support available to foster carers and how these may help them to manage their responsibilities. While the interview questions were informed by existing categories in the literature, the coding aimed to move beyond these predefined frameworks. A latent approach was adopted, emphasising what foster carers expressed as valuable or burdensome within the various forms of support offered.

Codes included terms such as availability, feeling valued, intermediary support, support from local authorities, support after negotiating, feeling used, and 24/7 jobs. Ultimately, four themes were identified:

1. Financial costs and financial support
2. Negotiation of the financial value of the foster care assignment
3. Costs of unavailability versus accessible support
4. Relational costs and relational support

Data extracts identified during coding and theme development were then analysed in relation to the research questions and relevant literature.

3.1. Limitations

The foster carers in this study are not a representative selection of carers recruited by inter-municipal organisations. However, they formed a diverse group in terms of their views on fostering, the organisation, and local authorities, enabling an analysis of both similarities and differences in how the organisation is perceived. Among the nine foster homes, two had ceased fostering due to conflicts and a perceived lack of support. The remaining seven, mostly new to fostering and having cared for only one or two children, described their experiences as relatively problem-free. The predominance of positive views may reflect this sample, as more experienced carers might have faced greater challenges and expressed a stronger need for support.

4. Results

The analysis identifies various types of costs, alongside forms of financial support and assistance that may help to offset them. Furthermore, it explores what the triadic relationship between the foster carer, caseworker, and organisation entails in terms of both support and associated costs.

The analysis is structured around the four themes listed above. The results are discussed in a concluding section, including an account of implications for practice.

4.1. Financial Costs and Financial Support

The majority of foster carers emphasised that they should not incur financial losses as a result of becoming or being foster carers. Most participants in the study discussed various forms of financial support that they felt they required. Although all these forms of support were financial in nature, the foster families associated them with distinct purposes and sentiments, for example, a financial reward that conveys appreciation of their role; reimbursement for expenses, acknowledging the costs of welcoming a new child into the household and building new relationships; and compensation for lost income, recognising that attending meetings or training sessions would otherwise impose a financial burden on the family.

Most of the foster carers described the reward for being a foster carer as relatively fair, provided they receive the correct amount according to SALAR's recommendations and the difficulty of the placement. They also emphasised that the role should not be about making money. However, several noted that, if you were to consider the fact that foster carers perform care work 24/7 and the emotional and practical demands it entails, the pay would be quite low:

> If you were to see it as a job, it would be a job with an extremely low salary because it's not an eight-hour-a-day job, it's 24 hours, and there's a lot that comes with it. I know there are placements that work very well, but there are also placements where I tiptoe around the biological parents and have to handle the crash landing after each visit. If you look at it in relation to what it costs,…no one is willing to go from their full-time salary to a lower amount and work more. Yes, you might not have a placement for two months, you get an income and do nothing, but you're on standby, you can't travel far, you can't do anything, and then they wonder why they can't find people. No, because it takes a toll on your energy and strength. (Contracted emergency and long-term foster carer 3)

In the above quote, the foster carer stresses that the cost in time, and therefore money, quickly adds up. This includes the relational labour, such as building and maintaining contact with biological parents, which represents an additional, often overlooked, cost. This involves not only emotional investment but also time-consuming coordination and communication. Finally, the requirement to remain on standby imposes a cost on personal autonomy, as it restricts carers' ability to engage freely in other activities.

The following quote illustrates how foster carers value receiving recognition for this care work, which can be meaningfully expressed through a financial reward, even though they stress that their motivation for taking on the role is not primarily financial:

> If you're going to work so hard, you must first of all get a little more for it, even if you absolutely don't do it for the money, because then, then I might as well, if it was money I was interested in, then I would have stayed in my job. That's not why I did it, it wasn't for the money, but it was everything around the child that was so hard, and then of course it affected my own family. (Long-term foster carer 2)

Another type of financial support identified in the interviews was reimbursement for expenses incurred when foster carers needed to purchase items for the child. One foster carer described a negative experience with this form of support, explaining that the compensation did not accurately reflect the actual costs of the necessary purchases:

> Well, he didn't have clothes or shoes, and we didn't know we would have to pay out of pocket….The day before he moved in, we received 4,000 SEK [360 EUR], and we had to set up a room and buy clothes, shoes, and various pieces of equipment he would need….I also called about it when he arrived…[and told them] this is a loss for us right now. And how do we know the money will come?...Like a desk, and do they know how much a pair of trainers costs? (Long-term foster carer 6)

Another foster carer had a different experience in relation to compensation for expenses from the local authority, finding no problem with receiving this before the purchase was made:

> It was no problem at all; I didn't even have to pay out of pocket. I said that I'd found this and that, asked if it was reasonable, and they thought it was reasonable and then transferred the money. (Long-term foster carer 5)

Besides the discussion regarding the fostering reward and compensation for expenses, the social workers at both organisations and the local authorities have noticed an increasing discussion about loss of income:

> It's the eternal debate about loss of income, so to speak. It was probably the first time I encountered it, but it's becoming more common today in foster care, if someone is to take on the assignment. In the past, it wasn't an issue; it didn't exist, it was just expenses. (Familjehemscentrum i Norr Organisation)

Foster carers' experiences of receiving financial support—and their level of satisfaction with that support—varied across the study. Two participants said that the lack of compensation for lost income hindered their ability to fulfil their roles, particularly in relation to participating in training. Attending such training sessions without financial compensation would result in a loss of income, placing an additional burden on the family's finances:

> It was like this: When I was supposed to attend it [the basic training], my foster child was so sick all the time that I couldn't leave. And then, when you don't have any [children], when you're not a foster family [in between placements], you don't get compensation for it. And then it felt difficult to spend a lot of unpaid days on it. (Long-term foster carer 10)

Other foster carers said that they wished they had received financial compensation that would have allowed them more time:

> Because the thing is that it's so natural if you were to receive a baby, then you're at home for one or two years with the child….But when you take in a child who isn't little, who has great needs, that is, time. It's something that I would have liked to have talked about….Can you say yes, but we want to take time off work for six months, to at least be able to pick up this child earlier from preschool…so that you get more time. (Long-term foster carer 6)

4.2. Negotiating the Financial Value of the Foster Carer Assignment

Social workers at both the inter-municipal organisations and the local authorities perceived financial support as something that has become increasingly important when recruiting new foster carers. One social worker said: "The [topic of] compensation has increased more and more. The families know their value, so to speak."

Local authorities were sometimes described as willing to meet foster carers' requests; however, in other cases, they declined to do so, often viewing the requested financial support as excessive—regardless of the carers' qualifications. In such instances, the inability to meet foster carers' demands was frequently attributed to a lack of available financial resources. Within a triad of inter-municipal cooperation, one foster carer's request can be presented to several municipalities for negotiation:

> Then sometimes there are those who turn to us right away and say, "yes, we're a good family home but we want 1500 SEK [135 EUR] a day" or "we want 1000 SEK [90 EUR] a day," and sometimes we have an assignment, a child with greater needs….Then we check with the municipalities—we have this family, but they want this compensation; are you in any way prepared to move on with this family for that compensation? Then we can pass it on. (Familjepoolen Organisation)

Several foster carers also reported successfully securing compensation, for example, for lost income, after negotiating with local authorities and presenting a case for additional financial support. In these discussions, they often emphasised the importance of spending time with the child as a central part of their argument:

> We've been able to take time off a few times because he [the child] has had difficulty being at preschool, especially during holidays and such. So, we've negotiated, you could say, to be able to take time off with him for his sake. When the after-school programme and preschool have been closed for holidays or training days, we've managed to get time off. (Long-term foster carer 8)

When the financial support is perceived as insufficient relative to the demands of the role, foster carers may feel exploited by the system, prompting a need for negotiation:

> Then she says a sum to me, "this is what you get." Oh, okay, you don't know, but then when you understand what the assignment entails; we felt, at least, we felt used from a round-the-clock perspective. So, then I called and said it, we won't sign this. (Long-term foster carer 6)

Several social workers from both inter-municipal organisations and affiliated municipalities described the organisations as advocating for foster carers, particularly regarding financial support and the costs associated with fostering. They noted that the organisations often represent foster carers with local authorities, emphasising the value of certain forms of financial support. However, views differ

across organisations and local authorities, reflecting varying perspectives on the organisation's role as an intermediary:

> You have to account for a loss of income. Eh, by this much, I [the social worker at the organisation] recommend this and that. Then you could represent the [foster families'] case, but I couldn't make decisions. (Familjehemscentrum i Norr Organisation)

A caseworker from a municipality that withdrew from the cooperation described the triad relationship that included the inter-municipal organisation as problematic, particularly regarding the discussions around financial support:

> As I mentioned earlier, one issue has been that they [the personnel at the local authorities] felt [the organisation] sided with the foster families, which wasn't their role. That wasn't part of the agreement. This puts us in a difficult position because, just like when we [the local authorities] place children in residential care or with consultant support [private agency], we have discussions about compensation. We end up in the same situation here, where we would also have to have a discussion with the foster families connected to the inter-municipal organisation, which is what we wanted to avoid. (Local authority that has exited the inter-municipal organisation Familjehemscentrum Jämtland)

A social worker from an inter-municipal organisation noted that issues around financial support can cause frustration among foster families, underscoring the need for the organisation to intervene:

> We [the organisation] took over the [financial] agreements with the foster families this year, and we know from the municipalities that finances are an important issue for foster families....If there's stress in a municipality and discussions need to be held about finances or perhaps a bit more compensation for costs, and you can't reach your caseworker, it breeds frustration. I believe that having a clear agreement that's received and processed every month helps everyone. That's a clear benefit, I think. (Dalsland Organisation)

In this case, the representative from the organisation emphasised the importance of financial support for foster carers and argued that they can offer this support more effectively because they are not as stressed as the local authorities.

To conclude the first two themes—financial costs and support, and the negotiation of the assignment's value—the foster carers reported varied experiences regarding both their need for financial support and the adequacy of the financial support received. Nevertheless, most of the foster carers ascribed meanings to different types of costs and expenses associated with their fostering role in ways that helped them to justify and negotiate the financial support they believed necessary.

4.3. Costs of Unavailability vs Accessible Support

Several foster carers highlighted the importance of accessibility and the potential consequences when support is lacking. In this context, accessibility refers to having someone available to answer calls, proactively reach out, and listen attentively. When another actor, such as an inter-municipal organisation, is involved, foster carers

are not solely dependent upon local authorities. In the following example, the carer is not entirely reliant upon the local authority caseworker, who is often described as unavailable, but can instead turn to the organisation. This third actor offers a sense of security when the local authority is inaccessible:

> I can imagine that many people may be quite lost in things. Where to turn and such, but if you have GFO…I think most things will work out. Because if you only have the caseworker at the local authority, then you're much more on your own…and what you need is that they listen to you, and I felt that they [the organisation] always did. It was kind of the salvation that you could always call there. That, you know, they're always available. It's an on-call system, that there's always a hotline to call, and if there was no one [to] answer on the weekend, they [would] call up quickly.…It creates a sense of security, and they were good at creating that security. (Contracted emergency and long-term foster carer 2)

In the following example, the foster carer had been transferred to the local authority, and the organisation was no longer sharing responsibility for support. As a result, the carer had become dependent upon the local authority's availability, and its absence was experienced as a loss and, hence, a cost:

> And of course, as long as they [the caseworker at the local authority] didn't hear anything from us, they didn't take the time just to call and ask: "Is everything okay?" But they assumed it was fine. And it was too, but of course it was still hard.…It would have been good if that person had just called sometimes…but I have full understanding of their work situation, and especially then, in the summer.…[That's why] we're so super happy with GFO, [which] felt so super professional in every way, and maybe not as happy with the municipality [local authority]. It feels like GFO, they had time for this, time for their [foster carers] who they work with, and you may not experience that as much in the municipality. (Long-term foster carer 7)

This view of inter-municipal organisations is echoed in how one such organisation described its role: as a supportive actor that alleviates stress for both local authorities and foster carers by being available when the authorities are not:

> A foster family might call and say: "I can't reach the person in [the local authority]." It doesn't have to be about money; it could be about something else. I can check it out and get back to you [the foster carer], which provides a level of service that reduces stress for both foster families and caseworkers. We're not supposed to do their job, but we can help ease the burden a bit. (Dalsland Organisation)

Several social workers from both inter-municipal organisations and local authorities noted that the former generally have greater resources to ensure accessibility. Representatives from smaller municipalities highlighted that these organisations often have back-up staff available, an advantage not always found within local authority structures:

> Well, I'm thinking it's positive for them that there's a social worker [at the organisation], I mean, when we only had one, if that person was on sick leave, there was no caseworker, and that also affects the child if the foster carers don't get the support they need. So, the social worker group [at the organisation] can compensate for each other and take over for each other, so I'm thinking that's good for the children…and the [foster carers] get access to more training, which we couldn't offer when we only had one person here. (Local authority part of Familjehemscentrum Jämtland Organisation)

4.4. Relational Costs and Relational Support

Beyond the relationship with the child, fostering involves managing multiple connections, such as with biological parents, other foster carers, caseworkers at local authorities, and social workers within the cooperative organisation. Some of these relationships were perceived as burdens or costs, while others offered support and, in some cases, compensated for challenges in the fostering assignment.

Foster carers who expressed dissatisfaction with their caseworker or the conditions under which they fostered particularly valued the organisation's support. In such instances, the inter-municipal organisation played a key role as an intermediary, assisting carers in managing relationships and facilitating communication with local authorities:

> If you don't agree with the municipality [placing the child], that is, if you don't have a good dialogue, it will be as if GFO can become like an intermediary in communication or whatever it may be that causes it to go wrong. (Long-term foster carer 3)

One foster carer explained that the organisation had played a pivotal role in the couple's decision to continue fostering at all:

> Well, I didn't get along with many caseworkers….I can say that thanks to [the organisation], I was able to continue for so long….It was at [the organisation], especially [name], who was responsible for us, she was the one who investigated us and so on, and I don't know how many times I called [her] and said: "I think I'm going crazy, what is this?" and she was a great support. (Contracted emergency and long-term foster carer 2)

Some foster carers also expressed a preference for receiving assistance support from the organisation rather than from local authorities, as they perceived the organisation to have a different role in which they were more attuned to and focused on the needs of foster carers:

> We were just left to a local authority that comes with a list of demands. This is what you're expected to do, and we're just people who are supposed to be a normal family. But the task requires so much more than that….And I would rather have that help from [the organisation] than from social services…because they [the local authority] also only have the child's interests in mind, do you understand what I mean? They have a child they need to find a home for, and I feel like a real complainer; that's how the communication becomes. It's not like: "Here we are, and we're going to help a child."…We end up feeling like we're just complaining, that we can't handle it. We don't get the emotional support we need….There's no overall picture of how the family is doing now that the child lives with us, because now we're a new family. They focus on the child, but [the organisation] knows us. (Long-term foster carer 6)

Conversely, some foster carers reported not needing support from the organisation, because they were satisfied with the support provided by their local authority caseworker. For these carers, the organisation was primarily seen as an "umbrella," or central contact point, that maintained communication during periods without active placements. Even among those expressing a minimal need for support, many still found reassurance in the organisation's availability, which contributed to a sense of security:

> First, I turn to their [the children's] social worker, second, to our [caseworker at the local authority], and third, to [the organisation]. I think I've called [the organisation] once during these four years the girls have been with us, and that one time I was so angry I thought I was going to die, but that's the only time….I don't really have any expectations, but I know that [the organisation] is there. (Long-term foster carer 3)

Several organisations noted challenges when a third actor conducts the initial assessment and builds positive relations with foster carers, only for the local authority caseworker to later assume responsibility. This shift can position the caseworker as an intruder in an already established relationship:

> The downside is that we do these investigations and get to know the families pretty well. We have a pretty good picture of what we think are their strengths and what might be weaknesses and what might become difficult for them during an assignment…what we might need to think about when it comes to supporting them and such….So that's the downside. That it's not the ones who've investigated and got to know the family who then provide the [main] support. (Familjehemscentrum Jämtland Organisation)

> We establish our relationship, but then this relationship gets interrupted [when] the caseworkers [at the local authority] take over and, of course, as a foster home, maybe it's not optimal, maybe they want to have the same social worker the whole time. (Familjepoolen organisation)

Several foster carers viewed the presence of caseworkers from various local authorities during their initial training as a positive aspect. One carer noted that having their future caseworker involved in the training helped to establish a relationship that could later be built upon when selecting their assignment, making the triad relationship smoother:

> It was four whole days that we were at that basic training, and there were two caseworkers from the local authority in the municipality, from which we've now received a placement….They were newly hired and needed to take the basic training, and one of the caseworkers, he's our caseworker now…he [knows] us since we met at the training and we [know] him, and we knew about him when the child was presented to us. We felt it was kind of nice that we'd met the caseworker and felt that this was a good person, like a good person to collaborate with, and so that maybe determined, or maybe didn't determine, but it was a plus. (Long-term foster carer 7)

The foster carers in this study are part of an inter-municipal organisation that offers mentorship from experienced carers. While mentors are sometimes seen as valuable sources of support, they are occasionally perceived as unfamiliar contacts and that it requires effort to build positive relations with them. Rather than someone providing immediate support, the mentor may be viewed as another relationship to cultivate. The mentor's intended role is to provide assistance support. However, one carer described the mentor as a burden, simply another new relationship demanding time and energy:

> We've felt that we've had a great mentor. There's nothing wrong with her, and we've had good conversations. But we've almost felt like it's become sort of a burden more than support because it's another meeting that needs to be booked in…and it was a whole new person for us, this mentor, and I think it would have been better if someone from GFO had kept being our contact and sort of been there as a sounding board at the beginning. (Long-term foster carer 7)

To conclude the final two themes, foster carers must manage various relationships, some centred on the child, and others supporting the fostering process. Most notably, these themes highlight the triadic relationship between the foster carer, the local authority caseworker, and the organisational social worker. Interviewees described this third actor as both a resource and a potential source of tension. Both carers and social workers stressed that insufficient support places a burden on carers, with the third actor's role becoming most visible when dissatisfaction arises, such as limited availability or strained interactions with the local authority.

5. Concluding Discussion

In this article, we have explored the types of costs that are associated with fostering and what support may compensate for these costs. Furthermore, we have addressed how the involvement of a third actor, in the form of a public inter-municipal organisation, impacts costs and support within fostering assignments. The costs incurred by foster carers, as well as the types of support they seek in order to mitigate these costs, vary depending upon the perceived needs of the child in their care. Nevertheless, certain categories of costs and support recur across cases.

From the perspective of social workers, there is a growing perception that foster carers are increasingly focused on financial compensation. In contrast, and consistent with previous research (Colton et al., 2008), foster families tend to emphasise the costs that financial support is intended to cover, particularly the value of their time commitment and the expenses associated with placements. While some public professionals stated that public authorities cannot compete financially, it is also evident that foster carers frequently negotiate the financial aspects of their role, and by attributing specific meanings to these expenses, they justify the need for additional financial support.

A longstanding debate within foster care (Colton et al., 2008) and care work more broadly (Folbre, 2008; Zelizer, 2005) concerns the tension between altruism and financial remuneration. The prevailing norm suggests that intimate relationships and acts of care should not be intertwined with monetary considerations, which may explain why foster carers stress that they are not driven by financial gain. However, the interviews reveal that fostering often involves responsibilities that extend beyond those of an "ordinary family." The ability to financially sustain oneself while caring for a foster child inevitably incurs costs that require compensation (Zelizer, 2005), some of which may be underestimated due to their intangible nature (Folbre, 2008).

The interviews illuminate what Folbre (2008) refers to as invisible costs; in this context, stemming from relationships that foster carers find challenging to navigate due to conflict and limited availability. One frequently discussed relational dynamic involves both dyadic and triadic interactions among the foster carer, the local authority caseworker, and the inter-municipal organisation's social worker, as well as various configurations of these roles. The interviews reveal multiple layers of negotiation between these different actors, and the significance of availability and meaningful relationships between foster carers and caseworkers/social workers is strongly emphasised. Echoing findings from previous research, there is a persistent desire for someone who genuinely values and supports the foster family (Reimer, 2021).

The triadic structure further enables foster carers to voice their claims for reimbursement and reward, not only to a single municipality but to several, while also serving a mediating function between the carer and

the local authority. When the relationship with the local authority caseworker is strained, the organisation is often perceived as effective in mitigating these challenges. It does so by compensating for the shortcomings of, for example, an unavailable caseworker. It becomes evident that the organisation frequently sees itself as a mediator and acts accordingly as it assists foster carers in negotiations and communication with caseworkers. However, this support is not without complications, as foster carers are not the only stakeholders relying upon the organisation within the triadic relationship.

Simmel (1950/1964) argues that a third actor in a triadic relationship may act as an impartial mediator, provided they are trusted by both parties. However, if the mediator is perceived as biased, they risk losing legitimacy. While the organisation's advocacy for foster carers may help in securing necessary support, it can also undermine trust between the organisation and the local authority caseworker. This may lead to perceptions of partiality—for example, as the interviews suggest, being seen as "on the foster carer's side"—which in turn generates dissatisfaction among local authority caseworkers. This tension is evident in the interviews with the caseworkers, several of whom described the organisation's advocacy role as burdensome for the caseworker.

5.1. Implications for Practice

Conflicts between foster carers and caseworkers regarding various aspects of fostering are likely to occur, as their roles often involve divergent perspectives (Cosis Brown et al., 2014). This suggests that an intermediary may be beneficial, particularly in complex cases or when relationships are strained. This study shows that inter-municipal organisations can effectively fulfil this role and help to offset the costs associated with relational complexities, especially in smaller municipalities where limited staffing may intensify tensions. However, the findings also indicate that intermediaries are not always welcomed and may, at times, complicate relationships between foster carers and local authorities. This reflects similar dynamics observed within private foster care agencies, which are sometimes viewed as buffers, an arrangement that may be more or less appreciated depending upon the interests of the actors involved (Fridell Lif, 2025a, 2025b).

An inter-municipal organisation that operates independently of local authorities can assume various roles that foster carers perceive positively, potentially increasing their satisfaction. Such an external entity may offer additional support and advocacy, encouraging carers to remain in their roles for longer, an outcome that benefits children in need of stable placements. However, depending upon how the organisation defines its role and how it is perceived by local authority caseworkers, tensions may arise within the triadic relationship, and these require careful management. It is worth considering whether such organisations should function as compensatory mechanisms for shortcomings within municipal systems similar to what has been observed with private foster-care agencies (Fridell Lif, 2025b). However, child welfare authorities have long expressed concerns about limited time and resources to adequately support foster carers. This raises the question of whether delegating certain responsibilities to organisations outside local authorities might be a viable strategy to ensure that these tasks receive the attention they require, and to address the costs associated with relational and structural gaps.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, supporting data is not openly available.

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About the Authors

Veronica Hällqvist is a PhD student at the Department of Thematic Studies (TEMAB) Child Studies, at Linköping University, Sweden. Her research interests are centred around foster care, specifically focusing on the recruitment of foster families through inter-municipal cooperation.

Johanna Sköld (b. 1976) is a professor of child studies at the Department of Thematic Studies, Linköping University, Sweden. She has studied the history of foster care, child welfare markets, and how the past is addressed in present-day redress politics internationally.

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