



Inside Family Foster Care

Exploring emotions, relations and expectations

PhD Dissertation 2019
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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN · DENMARK
PHD DISSERTATION 2019 · ISBN 978-87-7209-270-6

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Ph.D. dissertation

University of Copenhagen, Department of Sociology

VIVE – The Danish National Center for Social Science Research

Inside Family Foster Care: Exploring emotions, relations and expectations

PhD dissertation

Handed in April 2019

Public defence June 2019

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Funded by TrygFonden and
VIVE - The Danish National Center for Social Science Research

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ISBN 978-87-7209-270-6 (Printed book)

ISBN 978-87-7209-272-0 (E-book)

Printed by SL grafik, Frederiksberg, Denmark (slgrafik.dk)

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the children and parents (foster care and birth) who kindly shared their thoughts and experiences regarding foster care; I thank you for your willingness to do so. To the (foster care) families who invited me into their homes and took the time to both speak about and show me their everyday family lives, I extend my sincere appreciation.

Throughout this process, I have received the assistance of many other people whom I wish to thank. To Tove Holmgaard Sørensen and Mette Larsen from Copenhagen municipality, thank you for your valuable assistance with contacting the foster care families and for your thorough and insightful comments on the study's design and findings. To the dedicated consultants from the Social Supervision, including Anne Marie Løvenbalk Tang, Lisbeth Christensen, Charlotte Helbo and Runa Krabbenhøft, who answered all my questions and took me along in their work when approving new foster care families, I owe you great thanks.

I would like to thank my research group, including Mette Gørtz, Petra G. Cavalca, Frank Ebsen and Idamarie Leth Svendsen, for listening to my thoughts and findings and offering their comments and support. In addition, special thanks to Mette Ejrnæs, the project's PI, who has been both supportive and patient.

This project was made possible with funding from the Danish foundation TrygFonden, to whom I am most grateful.

I wish to thank my head supervisor Margaretha Järvinen, who has continuously kept me on the right track by inspiring me, pushing me forward and holding me back whenever needed. She has shown great enthusiasm for the material, and I have learned extensively from her and the sociological range that she represents, which she has generously conveyed to me. To my co-supervisor and colleague Tea T. Bengtsson, I am thankful and grateful. Tea has been invaluable during the process with her knowledge of out-of-home care, together with her clever and creative sociological and methodological guidance. Life has been taking its course alongside this project, and we have shared our ups and downs. I have cherished both the personal and the professional support that I have received from Tea.

I also want to thank Jill D. Berrick, professor at the UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare, who warmly welcomed me as a visiting scholar for a semester in sunny California. Jill was always ready to answer my questions, read and comment on my work and assist me with contacting interviewees.

I have valued many good discussions with both colleagues and fellow PhD students at VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, including Pernille, Rikke, Signe, Misja, Anne-Dorthe, Mette and Kirstine. A special thanks to a previous dear colleague Turf, who introduced me to academia and was the reason why I began this PhD study.

To my friends and family, I have appreciated your interest and encouragement during this process. A special thanks to our sweet cousin Emma for travelling with us to Berkeley and making every day fun and safe for Ava. To my mother, who is a great support on more than one level, thank you for helping us make ends meet with the girls. To Kristian, who has been patient and encouraging and who, together with our two girls, Ava and Sally, matters the most.

1. Setting the scene

This dissertation explores foremost how Danish foster care parents position themselves between parenting and professionalism – being both private (substitute) parents and professionally hired caregivers. From a sociological standpoint, it investigates how this dual aspect of foster caring can come to be expressed in the everyday lives of foster care families. This question is analysed empirically drawing on an ethnographic study of everyday life in eight foster care families. The main research field where the dissertation unfolds is ‘family sociology’, with theoretical references to ‘family practice theory’, ‘sociology of emotions’ and the sociological inquiry of relationality, bodily intimacy and belonging. The project was motivated by a wish to offer sociological and qualitative insight into this dual role of foster care parents as well as the overall everyday lives of foster care families. This is somewhat elucidated internationally (see, e.g. Pithouse & Rees, 2015; Rees, 2009; Hedin et al., 2012; Schofield et al., 2013; Kirton, 2013), yet still highly underexposed in a Danish context.

Everyday life is the continuous making of social reality created through relations, practice and interaction (Scott, 2009). Researching everyday life is broad and comprehensive as many different aspects of everyday life could be put at the forefront. Rather, in this study,¹ I offer insight into selected aspects of the complexities that encompass foster care families’ everyday lives and that are all more or less related to the complex role of foster care parents. The four articles that make up this dissertation are composed from the voices of foster care parents, children² living in foster care and birth parents to children now in foster care.

Some clarifications around terminology and lines of demarcation of the study are in order at this early stage of the introduction as these terms differs across countries.³ In Denmark, the term ‘foster care *parent*’ [in Danish, ‘plejeforældre’] is used, which differs compared to e.g. the United Kingdom or the United States, who use ‘foster carer’, ‘caregiver’ or simply ‘carer’. Already, here the usage of terms relates to and opens up a discussion around how the role of foster care parents is perceived in practice and in research--as primarily a ‘professional’ with caring functions or as a (substitute) ‘parent’ with professionalism that intertwines with (substitute) parenting functions (Schofield et al, 2013; Kirton, 2013; Kjeldsen & Kjeldsen, 2010). Different aspects of this discussion are further elaborated on in a later section around previous foster care research (section 2.4). For now, the point is that, in this

¹ When referring to the overall PhD project, I use ‘study’, ‘dissertation’ and ‘project’ interchangeably.

² I use ‘children’ to encompass children and young people aged 0 to 18.

³ I use ‘introduction’ to describe the contextual, methodological and theoretical reflections leading up to the four articles.

introduction, the term ‘foster care parent’ is preferably used as this aligns with Danish usage.⁴ The central, empirical part of the project is an ethnographic study of eight foster care families. In these families, the foster care parents are ‘regular’ foster care parents, meaning that they have been neither recruited from the children’s network nor identified through kinship. These are, therefore, families with no prior knowledge of the children who have come into their care. In Denmark, ‘regular’ foster care families form 87.2% of all foster care placements (Statistics Denmark, 2017), and while network and kinship care entail interesting aspects as well, some of these differ from the issues to be taken up here. Regular foster care, besides being the main type used in Denmark, further holds certain features relevant for sociological inquiry, e.g. that foster care parents and children initially are strangers to one another, thus this type was chosen to be the focus of this study.

The four articles of the dissertation display somewhat differing analytical and theoretical frameworks, but they all stem from a social constructivist and interactionist tradition. I focus on how foster care parents and children in care *do*, *navigate*, *manage*, *negotiate* and *practice* their everyday lives in interaction with others. For instance, I examine the ‘work’ foster care parents do, e.g. their ‘emotion work’ (Hochschild, 1983; Harris, 2008). I explore how foster care parents, children in care and birth parents to children in foster care ascribe *meaning* to their social world as they see it. For instance, I examine how foster care parents ascribe meaning to different aspects of foster caring, understood as a meaning-making which they produce through interaction and relational to their context, as well as their interaction with me as a researcher (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Järvinen, 2005). Throughout the study, I adopt a poststructural framework, viewing the social reality of my informants as dynamic, fluid and continuously changing. This social reality includes the practices of bodily intimacy in new foster care relationships (article 1); the institutional norms related to the roles of the parenting adults, including both foster care parents and birth parents (article 2); emotion ideologies related to the different role-aspects of a foster care parent (article 3) or the senses of belonging for a child living in foster care across family relationships with both foster and birth families (article 4).

In Denmark, as internationally, foster care is emphasised as the ‘first option’ when children for different reasons cannot live with their birth parents (Fernandez & Barth, 2010; Herbert & Kulkin, 2017; Pithouse & Rees, 2015). Still we have very little knowledge of what everyday life in foster care looks like. In Denmark, foster care—as the preferred out-of-home placement, compared to institutional placements—is founded on a belief that foster care features small-scale family settings with

⁴ However, in article 2 and 3 ‘foster carer’ is used, as this was customized to the international context of the journal which these article has been submitted to.