“In a Proper Home”: Foster Children’s Needs and Foster Parents’ Suitability during the Twentieth Century

Ann-Sofie Bergman¹

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Abstract

In all times and in all societies, there have been children who for various reasons have not been able to grow up with their biological parents. The solutions to the problems have varied; in Sweden, most of the children have been placed in foster care. Because of the act regulating state childcare passed in 1926, child welfare boards were established in the municipalities. These boards were responsible for placing children with foster parents and for supervising foster homes. Foster parents were required to be suitable in order to be allowed to take care of a foster child. This article analyzes conceptions of foster parents’ suitability in relation to perceptions of foster children’s needs during the twentieth century. This study is based on document analysis of the child welfare practice. Via a long-term analysis, the study reveals continuity as well as changes over time. Major changes took place in the 1960s and 1970s with new requirements on foster parents due to changes in which children were placed in care and changing perceptions of childhood and parenthood in the society.

Keywords

foster care, foster children, foster parents, child welfare, social work, twentieth century

Introduction

This article analyzes conceptions of foster parents’ suitability in relation to perceptions of foster children’s needs during the previous century in Sweden. At the start of the twentieth century, there was, in various ways, an increased focus on the situation of children in the society. In a period with major social changes such as industrialization, urbanization, modernization, and democratization, children and their conditions became more apparent. The boundary between public and private began to shift. Children became a public concern to an increasing extent. New child laws were passed and implemented, institutions were established, and various kinds of expertise became involved in children’s upbringing. Children were to be saved from poor conditions and inadequate parents, and at the same time be rescued for a future modern society.¹ One vision was that the next century would be the century of the child.² This increased interest in children in general also

¹ Department of Social Work, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden

Corresponding Author:

Ann-Sofie Bergman, Department of Social Work, Linnaeus University, SE-351 95 Växjö, Sweden.
Email: ann-sofie.bergman@lnu.se

concerned foster children, who at this time were numerous, around 41,000 children in Sweden.³ Foster family care began to be regulated in the early twentieth century in order to protect children, as previous care of the foster children in the society was criticized. Problems with the care were highlighted: children in rural areas who could be placed with the person who made the lowest bid, rather than the person who could offer the best care of the child; the existence of a “foster child industry” in the cities, which meant that foster parents were described as taking care of many children for money. Foster parents were accused of neglecting children.⁴ New rules were introduced that those who wanted to take care of other people’s children in their homes were required to be assessed and accepted as *suitable* for their roles when The Care of Foster Children Act and The State Child Welfare Act came into force.⁵ The terms *suitable* and *suitability* were then used throughout the century—and are still used—in public discussions about foster family care. But the intentions of the term *suitability* have not been clearly expressed in the acts, instructions, or handbooks for practitioners. There has been room for discretion.⁶

The aim of this article is to analyze the dominant conceptions of the *suitability* of foster homes and foster parents during the twentieth century in Sweden, with special focus on how the foster parents were expected to take care of their foster children. What was regarded as a proper childhood and upbringing for foster children? How were foster children’s needs understood within the child welfare practices? What needs were foster parents expected to fulfill? The concept of needs here refers to what those responsible for the foster care and the child welfare practices have defined as the foster children’s needs. Conceptions of appropriate parenting are closely intertwined with notions of a proper childhood and youth.⁷

Design and Methods

To understand changes in the *suitability* discourse during the twentieth century, some contextualization is required. During the century, major changes took place in the perception of childhood and parenthood. The reduction in child labor along with the gradually increased school attendance for children resulted in an extended childhood. A proper childhood was to be separated from the adult world. To a higher age than previously, children became an expense to their families rather than a potential source of income. Children became dependent on their parents and carers for longer, a time that would be spent in play, education, and gradual preparation for life as adults. Good parenting consisted in large measure of preserving and prolonging the children’s childhood. There were rapid changes in the conceptualization and experience of childhood in the twentieth century.⁸

One explanation in the changing discourse about foster family care during the twentieth century is that there were changes in the type of children placed in care. There were shifts from younger children to older children in care. In the 1920s and 1930s, almost 75 percent of the children placed in care in the Swedish municipality of Växjö were younger than six years, while 8 percent were over twelve years of age. In the 1960s and 1970s, the age of the children in care changed; children under six accounted for 35 percent, while 40 percent were over twelve years of age.⁹ There have also been shifts in the reasons for children’s placement in care, from children with poor parents to children with their own problems. In the first half of the century, it was to a large extent the parents’ difficulties to combine work and support with infant care, but also housing problems, parents’ illness and death, which led to the children’s placement in foster family care. From the 1960s and 1970s, the families’ problems were often described in a different way, with a greater proportion of children’s and teenagers’ own emotional and behavioral troubles, parents’ problems with addiction and problems in the relationship between children and parents. 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 the separation of children from their parents, even though

most of the children still came from families that were socially and economically more disadvantaged than the population in general.¹⁰

The changes as regards which children were placed in foster care can also be understood in the context of deinstitutionalization. During the postwar period, residential care for children and youth declined. Many institutions for children and youth were closed down. The size of the remaining institutions also declined.¹¹ Placement in a foster home would be considered even for children with problems that previously had been handled in institutions for children.¹²

This study is based on document analysis of child welfare discourse and practices. When the State Child Welfare Act came into force in 1926, child welfare boards (barnavårdsnämnder) became compulsory in the municipalities of Sweden. The legislation was an attempt to achieve a higher level of institutionalization in child welfare through mandatory direction by the state.¹³ These child welfare boards were responsible for placing foster children with suitable foster parents and for supervising foster homes. The foster parents had to be inspected and assessed as suitable.¹⁴ At the county level, child welfare agents (barnavårdsombud) were introduced from the 1930s. These agents were initially employed by child welfare associations in different counties. They were responsible for assisting the child welfare boards with tasks such as recruiting foster homes and conducting foster home inspections. In the 1930s and 1940s, the child welfare agents made inventories of foster homes around the country. They visited the municipalities, counted the number of foster children, and made assessments of the contracted foster parents.¹⁵ In 1945, child welfare assistants (barnavårdsassistenten) were employed at the County Administrative Boards (Länsstyrelserna). These assistants had a control function over foster care at the county level.¹⁶

The source material that is the basis of this study has been selected from different levels of the child welfare discourse and practice: on a local level, documents from the child welfare board in the town of Växjö; on a regional level, documents from the child welfare agent and the child welfare assistant in the county of Kronoberg; on a national level, from laws, government investigations and bills, social handbooks, and leading social work journals. Because part of the source material on local and regional level is confidential, this study has been assessed and accepted by the ethical review board in Linköping (Dnr 90-09).

During the data collection, foster home placements from three different periods during the twentieth century were selected, each period covering ten years: (i) the first period is the years 1926–1935, *The regulation of child welfare*: The placement of children and supervision of foster homes began to be regulated. Child welfare boards became required in the municipalities through The State Child Welfare Act, which came into force in 1926. At this time, a large number of children lived in foster homes in Sweden; (ii) the second period is the years 1946–1955, *The expansion of a welfare state*: During the postwar period, the groundwork was laid in building a modern welfare state, with increased ambitions, reforms, new institutions, and new actors in the social field. In the counties, child welfare assistants and child welfare agents were employed to be in charge of certain tasks in foster family care, such as recruitment and supervision of foster homes. The number of foster children in care declined during this period; (iii) the third period is the years 1966–1975, *The peak of the welfare state*: In relation to earlier decades, most families lived with an increased material standard. Social policy reforms aimed at families with children were implemented. There were also some major changes in families' lives. Women, even married women, worked outside the home to a greater extent. Day care centers for children were built up. The number of children in foster care decreased significantly compared with the earlier periods.¹⁷

All children who were placed in foster homes during these three periods were followed in the documentation, which means the source material contains placements from the whole period 1926 to the 1980s.

In the analysis of the source material, the discourse and argumentation have been the primary focus of interest, that is, how foster parents' suitability and foster children's needs have been

formulated and handled. Suitability assessments have been analyzed with inspiration from Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse and the clinical gaze.¹⁸ Foucault's concept of discourse is a broad term covering "the entire practice that generates a particular type of statements."¹⁹ In this sense, the term discourse means an overall understanding, which affects and shapes the way people think and act. To analyze discourses means to focus on what is expressed, but also on what is done and what is taken for granted.²⁰ The clinical gaze is a professional tool, a working method for gaining knowledge. It was developed in the medical clinic in the late eighteenth century. Later, it expanded to other areas of society outside hospitals, to other human services, and social practices.²¹ In the foster care practices, the inspectors' observations of foster parents, foster homes, and foster children were not neutral; instead, their gaze was directed toward something considered to be most relevant. The focus of this analysis is on what the foster home inspectors wanted to see and did not want to see in a foster home, by studying how the gaze was directed at foster home inspections. What signs were considered to indicate suitability? What was important to observe in different times?

Who visited and assessed the foster homes is relevant for what will be in focus for the inspecting gaze. When child welfare boards became required in the municipalities in the early twentieth century, it was stated that the members of the boards should have specific competences; there should be a physician, a teacher, a priest, a member from the poor relief board, and people with a special interest in the care of children and youth. At least one of the boards' members was to be a woman.²² These members of the boards usually took care of much of the practical work, such as investigations and supervision of foster homes. From the middle of the century, it became more common to have trained and employed social workers in the municipalities.

The source material has been analyzed based on the suitability assessments of the foster parents and their homes. In the studied documents, there are normative statements about foster parents and foster homes that can tell us about conceptions and what kind of arguments had validity for decisions, and visualize the construction of problems within the foster care discourse and practice. In cases where a foster home was deemed appropriate, I have studied the documented argumentation and motivation, focusing on words and values that have been associated with suitability. I have also studied the documented arguments in cases that were deemed as controversial, and in cases where the board decided to relocate children from homes that were assessed as unsuitable. Those cases tell us something about how the foster home should *not* be. They can indicate the limits of what was acceptable, the limits of the discourse.²³

The Foster Home Discourse and Practices

In the following, the results of the analysis are presented. As mentioned, the studied documents concern foster home placements from three periods during the century, placements that also were followed in the documents over time as long as the children stayed in care. The results reveal two main periods in the discourse of suitability, one period in the first part of the century and one period in the latter part of the century, that is, from 1960s and 1970s onward, with new requirements on the foster parents and their homes as a result of changes as regards which children were placed in care, changed reasons for the children's placements, and changing conceptions of children's needs.

Foster Children's Needs and Foster Parents' Suitability during the First Part of the Century

In the early twentieth century, the basic premise was that there should be stricter requirements of a foster home than of an ordinary home. According to The Government Bill on the State Child Welfare Act and Doctor Gotthilf Stéenhoff, who wrote handbooks and guidance on foster care, the foster homes and foster parents should be a little bit better, a model, or a good example for other people to follow.²⁴ This can be understood in the light of the foster parents' and the child welfare boards' role in promoting

normalization. Social work can be considered as a normalizing practice that defines, creates, and maintains normality, through reintegration into the society.²⁵ The stated requirements can also be understood as a reaction against earlier practice, as there was criticism against the society's care for foster children.²⁶ During the first part of the century, the highly valued foster parents were a married childless couple, who lived in a spacious, airy, bright, clean, and well-arranged home. The foster parents should preferably have a good economy. The child welfare board preferred placing children in homes in the countryside.²⁷ The countryside was considered advantageous for the children for health reasons. In the early 1900s, country life was idealized. There was a vision of the good home located outside the city, which could be understood as a reaction against industrialization, urbanization, and the housing situation with crowded homes in the cities.²⁸

It was a requirement that there should be a woman in the foster home who took responsibility for the children and the household. The nuclear family discourse was dominant. In the most suitable home, there was a foster father who had the role of breadwinner and a stay-at-home foster mother who provided care. It was essential that there was a woman in the foster home; otherwise, the home could not be assessed as suitable. But if the foster mother died or if she for some reason was unable to take care of the children and the home, it could sometimes be accepted that she was replaced by another "female help." In the 1940s, the child welfare assistant contacted all the child welfare boards in the County of Kronoberg about the care of children in foster homes that had no foster mother:

*In all cases, where there is no foster mother an inquiry is submitted to the relevant foster child inspector about the exact circumstances in the foster home. A minor child will naturally need a mother's care and nurture. In many cases the foster father has engaged a housekeeper. I would be grateful to you if you could directly inform me how you have arranged female help in the home.*²⁹

The foster parents should also be well behaved, orderly, hardworking, and sober people who took care of the children in an appropriate way. In the early decades of the century, the inspectors' assessments of the foster children's needs were to a large extent standardized. In the documents from inspection tours around the county, the foster home visits were often summarized at a group level, there was talk of "the children," and all the children were supposed to have similar needs. In their reports to the child welfare board, inspectors could summarize their experiences after inspection tours to a number of foster homes:

*To give a description of each of these homes is not possible as it might be too much, I need to restrict myself to saying that these homes generally are of very good character; homes generally spacious and clean; foster parent's way of life irreproachable, care of children affectionate and good; school attendance regular; diligence and conduct satisfactory; health in general good; bedding and clothes fairly well maintained.*³⁰

The assessments were firmly based on basic material needs such as a separate bed for the child, good and adequate food, and clothing together with warmth and protection. The well-being of children was enhanced. In accordance with democratization, the children had the rights to a protected childhood.³¹ When the inspectors came on their visits, some foster parents had to show them all the foster children's clothes. Sometimes the inspectors also examined the clothes the children were wearing; and in this context, the inspecting gaze could also be directed toward the children's bodies. Their bodies should be clean and free of vermin.³² In the early 1930s, it was also recommended in a handbook for supervision of foster care to undress the foster children "completely" to observe the hygiene and the children's body condition.³³

For some decades around the middle of the century, the foster home inspectors in the municipality, the child welfare agent, and the child welfare assistant in the county were highly engaged in the project that all foster children should sleep in beds of their own. The inspecting gaze could also be

directed to the bed linen, which had to be clean and in order.³⁴ The motive for this requirement of a proper and separate bed for each child was partly based on hygiene and health aspects, to prevent the spread of serious diseases such as, for example, tuberculosis. In advice literature about the care of children, the Swedish pediatrician Harald Ernberg stated, "When children are lying or sleeping unnecessarily close to others, the likelihood of infection increases."³⁵ During the first decades of the century, tuberculosis was a threat, as many people died of the disease. In this context, housing conditions and hygiene were of significance.³⁶ The requirement of a separate bed for all foster children could also be justified on the basis that it gave deeper rest during the night: "The resting place should be held in sanctity. Human beings are restored during their sleep."³⁷ But the requirements of separate beds could also be related to an ambition to protect foster children, especially foster girls, against sexual abuse. When it was revealed that an eleven-year-old girl shared bed with her foster father, the girl was moved from the home.³⁸

Themes such as separate beds, enough clothes, and food for children are often taken for granted nowadays. These issues are probably rarely explicitly problematized in current foster care in the Western world, but were of great relevance during the first decades of the twentieth century. Many foster families, as well as the foster children's biological families, suffered from economic hardship. In fact, all children did not have their own bed and some of the children did not have much more clothes than those they were dressed in. An inspector wrote in his report from a foster home inspection in 1929, "When I visited the home and asked to see the girl's clothes, the foster parents confessed that the girl had not any other clothes than those she was wearing, except for a few small chemises."³⁹ The children's physical health was a high priority, and to achieve good health it was necessary that the children received sufficient food, clothing, and warmth. Emotional needs such as loving care and continuity were also emphasized. Over time, there was an increasing emphasis on the relationship between the foster children and foster parents.

The foster parents were expected to supervise their foster children. This supervision involved caring as well as supervision of the children's behavior, so that they would not be considered disturbing to other people.⁴⁰ The children would be protected from danger and at the same time society would be protected from the dangerous children.⁴¹ The children were expected to be well behaved and not delinquent or maladjusted. The foster parents were to bring up the children in an appropriate way; in this respect obedience, regular schooling and work were obvious ingredients in preparing the children for a future life outside their foster homes. The children would receive experience in some "useful things."⁴² What was considered to be useful things could vary depending on whether it concerned girls or boys. Usually, the foster girls were supposed to learn about domestic chores while the foster boys would learn about farming. A major aim of the foster family care was that the foster children would become capable members of the society, who could earn their own living.⁴³ During their time in foster care, the children would be prepared for their future life as adults. At the age of sixteen, the children were no longer a responsibility for the foster care system; instead, they were expected to support themselves. The pediatrician Isak Jundell said that foster children should become "adequate links in the national chain."⁴⁴ He thought that the foster parents' role was "day in and day out [. . .] to heat and forge, form and steel the links."⁴⁵ The children would learn to work and it was regarded as worrying signs if they showed aversion to work.⁴⁶ But even if the work was of great importance, the inspectors could also react to the fact that some children had to work too hard in their foster homes. Too much work and a joyless life could lead to a foster child's relocation from one foster home to another.⁴⁷ The foster child should be prepared for a future life as an adult, but should also have a good childhood.

In the middle of the century, the suitability assessments were changed in some respects. The discourse about the ideal rural foster home was not as strong as previously. At this time, foster homes in urban environments could be accepted as well. Due to increased urbanization in the middle of the century, a life in the countryside was no longer considered essential for the children's living conditions. It increasingly became rather important that a foster home should not be too remote or isolated. The foster parents would preferably live near a school. The distance to the nearest school was documented in

the foster home assessments.⁴⁸ It was also important that the children had the chance to play with other children of their own age.⁴⁹ When a foster home was too remote, it was also considered an obstacle to the boards' control of the foster child's care.⁵⁰ However, hygiene and health continued to be important themes in the foster home investigations. The foster parents' health was observed because it was regarded as important for the foster children's upbringing; this especially concerned the health of the foster mothers. As already mentioned, the foster mother was essential for the foster home's continuity. Without a mother in the home, the home could not be accepted as a suitable home, and the foster child could be relocated.⁵¹ But even the children's health was in focus. When a child was pale, it could be a worrying sign of disease. According to inspectors, the children sometimes seemed to be pale because they had not been allowed to spend enough time outdoors. The inspectors could insist that the foster mothers allow the children to spend more time outdoors.⁵² In accordance with contemporary advisory literature, fresh air and sunlight were considered to be the best health-care resource for the children.⁵³ When the children were thin and skinny, this was regarded as a worrying sign of disease or poor health, while big and chubby children were perceived as healthier.⁵⁴ In the mid-century, new kinds of problems with the children were identified. As child psychiatry clinics were established, the interest in "the mental factor" began to increase. On their foster home visits, the inspectors drew increased attention to nervous, tense, nail-biting children, and children with stomach pains.⁵⁵ Psychological and psychiatric theories began to gain increased importance in the child welfare system.⁵⁶

Unsuitable Foster Parents and Homes during the First Part of the Century

When foster parents and their homes in the first half of the century were considered as unsuitable for taking care of foster children, it was often on the grounds that their homes were too poor, dark, and crowded. According to the state Child Welfare Act, an unhealthy home could be the reason why foster parents actually were forbidden to take care of foster children.⁵⁷ It was also seen as problematic if there were lodgers or any unsuitable people living in the foster parents' homes or if there were too many other children. The most desirable arrangement was one single foster child in each foster home, but two children in the same home was acceptable as well, especially if the children were siblings. When several siblings needed foster family care at the same time, the child welfare board could search for homes where they could stay together. When a foster child shared a bed with another person in the home, it was deemed highly inappropriate, in particular when it was discovered that foster girls slept together with their foster fathers. This was judged to be "obviously unsuitable" and could "in no case be approved" according to the inspectors' demands.⁵⁸ In a few cases, these problems led to the relocation of the foster girls, which can be understood as an ambition to protect them from sexual abuse in the foster homes, even if this was not explicitly expressed in the inspectors' documentation. The term "sexual abuse" does not occur until the year 1974 in the studied documents, concerning the suspicion of a father's abuse against a child.⁵⁹ A study by Ingrid Söderlind about orphanages for girls in Stockholm from 1870 to 1920 likewise indicates that there was an awareness of sexual abuse against the children, even if this was expressed in different terms.⁶⁰

Other problems that were highlighted by inspectors during this time were malnutrition, severe diseases such as tuberculosis, or abuse of alcohol in the foster home. Foster home problems could also be related to complications such as the absence of female care as well as quarrels and disputes between the foster parents. When such problems were identified, it could lead to complaints, to increased supervision, or to relocation of the children.⁶¹

Foster Children's Needs and Foster Parents' Suitability during the Latter Part of the Century

In the 1960s and 1970s, fundamental changes in the foster care practice can be noticed. There were new requirements of foster parents and foster homes. The inspectors no longer wrote that the homes

should be sufficiently large, warm and orderly, or at least not to the same extent as before. As regards living conditions and housing situation, much had changed in the Swedish society since the middle of the century. During the postwar period, a great many new houses were built and the older housing stock was modernized.⁶² When the foster families' homes had been significantly improved, the inspectors instead were more interested in the furnishings and atmosphere in them. Foster homes could be described in terms of being homelike, tasteful, and fresh. Suitable homes would ideally also be well planned, functional, and child-friendly.⁶³ The foster homes should be in order, but still not too proper. In a child welfare handbook, the inspectors were warned about "perfectionism":

Normally good order should prevail in the foster home; however, one should be wary of perfectionism in this area. In the overly clean home the child becomes an annoyance rather than a gladly accepted family member.⁶⁴

It was now obvious that all children should sleep in their own beds; this was taken for granted, and no further argumentation was required for this issue. Most foster families had improved economic conditions and more space in their homes. At this time, it even began to be required that children have their own room or a private corner.⁶⁵ The children should have the opportunity for privacy. This reveals a changed perception of the individual; even the child would have the opportunity to retreat and to have some privacy.⁶⁶ The own child room also illustrates the division between children and adults, with a special place for the children, their play, and activities. A proper childhood should be separated from the adult world.⁶⁷

While in the first half of the twentieth century it was seen as an advantage that foster parents were childless couples, in the latter part of the century their experience of children and knowledge about children's development were highly valued.⁶⁸ One explanation for this shift is that foster children no longer, to the same extent as before, were younger children who needed to come to new families for the rest of their upbringing; instead, many were older children who were deemed to need help and treatment for their own psychosocial problems. The problems could be, for example, psychiatric problems, school problems, delinquency, or problems in the relationship between the children and their parents.⁶⁹ From the 1970s, it is possible to identify a new perspective on foster parents as a kind of professionals; they could be described as "qualified" and as "experts."⁷⁰ One explanation for this shift was the existence of a deinstitutionalization at the same time in the society. A lot of institutions for children and young people were closed down; this meant that children and young people were placed in foster homes for reasons which had previously led to placement in some kind of institution such as a "rescue institution" (räddningsinstitut) or a reformatory (uppföstringsanstalt).

While the foster children and their needs were often described at a group level in the analyzed documents during the early twentieth century, over time it is possible to note an increasing individualization. The inspections of the foster children's conditions and the foster parents' suitability were documented as individual cases. Foster children were more frequently called by their first names, and not as previously "the child," "the boy," or "the girl." It was important that the children were raised to be social people in the community, but they would also develop as individuals. As increased importance was attached to the subject of psychology in social work, the children's individuality and independence became essential. It could be formulated as the child's need to have a "distinct personality," that children should be "themselves."⁷¹ While autonomy and independence were highlighted, the children were also expected to be social and adaptive.⁷² In general, the children were described more as individuals in the documents in the latter part of the century. This can partly be explained by the fact that the children placed in foster care were often slightly older than previously. The older children's own statements, wishes, and initiatives were documented to a higher degree.⁷³ "The child himself has expressed a wish to come to the foster home, it would therefore be appropriate to place him there."⁷⁴ Due to democratization, at this time children began to acquire rights not only to protection but also rights to be heard in decisions that might affect their lives.⁷⁵

During this period, the inspectors paid more attention to the foster children's free time. The children had received increased free time as a result of extended childhood and schooling and decreased child labor. The children's leisure would not be left to chance, but should be organized and controlled and filled with stimulating activities. Inactivity was understood as a threat. The inspectors expressed their appreciation when foster families were engaged in activities such as sports, culture, and outdoor recreation and associations. Foster children as well as foster parents would preferably be active people. "The foster parents are living an active and healthy life."⁷⁶ Foster parents would also have time for the children, they would make sure that the children were active and give them adequate stimulation. "The foster parents have devoted much attention on providing the child with suitable and stimulating activities."⁷⁷ It continued to be highly significant that foster children had access to friends of their own age. But these friends should not be just anyone, they would be "good friends," that is, children who likewise had appropriate characteristics and interests, not children with social problems of their own.⁷⁸ This can illustrate the child welfare boards' role to promote normalization and reintegration, to create and maintain normality.⁷⁹

Generally, the social relationships came to be more in focus than previously. As psychological theories had a greater influence on the social work with children and families, this meant an increased interest in interpersonal relationships and also a new interest in the foster parents' own childhood. When developmental psychology and psychoanalytic theories about how childhood forms people and has implications for their adult life became established within child welfare, the foster parents' childhood and upbringing came to be important themes in the foster home investigations. The foster parents' history became important, not only their lives here and now. They should ideally come from a peaceful childhood environment.⁸⁰ The idea of "social heredity"⁸¹ acquired a great influence, that is, the belief that social problems often are inherited from one generation to another. Therefore, even earlier generations' lifestyle became a focus of interest for the inspectors. In many cases, the foster homes were described as contrasting to the environments the children came from. The children were assessed as needing to get away from their milieu, to be placed in another and better one. They would get away from the city, bad friends and gangs, understimulating environments, problematic family relationships, and parents who were unable to take care of and raise them adequately.⁸² At this time, there was a belief that the children's problems could be solved in a constructive way by a change of location. This was considered to have a curative effect on children who were assessed as "harmed by their environment."⁸³ Although placement in rural areas was still common, there was now also ambivalence about the countryside as a suitable location for foster children. A placement in the countryside could possibly be good for anxious children with special needs of peace and quiet, but for some urban kids the darkness and silence in the countryside could probably be "downright frightening" according to a child welfare assistant in one of the country's biggest cities:

For the young people who have become used to the big city's noise and neon lights, the darkness and silence in the countryside must often be downright frightening. A 14-year-old girl recently expressed her bewilderment about this matter: where are the tower blocks?⁸⁴

While the arguments for placement in the countryside in previous decades had been about the children's physical needs such as health and fresh air, the arguments were now more related to their social and psychological needs. Some of the problems mentioned as regards the conditions of foster children living in the countryside were that there could be a shortage of friends, stimulating activities, and various forms of expertise, such as child psychiatry and remedial classes.⁸⁵

Radical changes took place in the foster care practice around the year 1970—changes that can be characterized as a shift in the discourse. Regarding child welfare practice, this coincides in many places with the amalgamation of municipalities, the introduction of central social boards (*sociala centralnämnder*) and child psychiatric wards, and significant changes in the society that resulted

in the professionalization of foster care. It became more common that trained and employed social workers were engaged in the supervision of foster homes in the municipalities. In the same period, a more problem-oriented approach to foster care was added, including a recognition in the research of negative consequences of foster home placements was recognized. The authorities sought to implement short-term rather than long-term foster home placements. The foster parents would to a higher degree serve as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, the biological parents.⁸⁶ In this new role for foster parents, their knowledge and experience of children and childcare became highly significant.

Unsuitable Foster Parents and Homes during the Latter Part of the Century

During the latter part of the century, as previously, the foster home inspectors in some cases concluded that the homes they visited were unsuitable for foster children. But at this time, it could partly be due to new and different reasons. It is obvious that the suitable age of foster parents was interpreted in a stricter way in the latter part of the period studied. There should not be a great age difference between foster children and foster parents. Older foster parents could be deemed unsuitable to a greater extent than previously. But also young foster parents could be deemed unsuitable. In terms of age, it was desirable that the foster parents could have been the child's "natural parents." There was a concern that the older foster parents could not cope with raising children in an appropriate way.⁸⁷ Divorced foster parents could also be assessed as unsuitable. The foster children could be relocated when their foster parents divorced. The children would normally be placed in "complete homes," having both a foster mother and a foster father.⁸⁸ The inspectors focused on the relationship between the members of the foster family. Throughout the period studied, it was considered inappropriate if there were quarrels and disputes in the foster homes. Serious conflicts between the foster parents could result in a relocation of the foster child.⁸⁹ A foster home was expected to be a harmonious place. Good relationships between the family members had great significance for the inspectors' assessments, as well as good relationships with their relatives, friends, and neighbors.⁹⁰ Children with experience of conflictual relationships in their biological families would be provided with notions of the characteristics of constructive relationships.

Continuing Focus on Motherhood and the Nuclear Family

The discourse about the foster family care changed in many ways during the last century, but it also includes elements of continuity. One example is that during the whole period studied, there was a continuous and heavy focus on mothers despite major societal changes. During the 1960s and 1970s, there was an intense debate about gender equality and changing gender roles in society, with criticism of the established roles of men and women, and visions of change so that economic support of the family and the care of children would be shared responsibilities between men and woman.⁹¹ However, this debate did not have any impact on foster care discourse or practice. Foster mothers served as the focus of the inspectors' examinations and assessments. Over time, there have been requirements that there must be a woman in a foster home; this has been a main theme. In some cases, this requirement has been explicitly stated when the inspectors have viewed the absence of a woman in the home as a problem. In other cases, however, the requirement has been implicit. The presence of a foster mother in a foster home has been regarded as so obvious that it hardly needed to be mentioned. The foster children have been the foster mothers' responsibilities. Consequently, the inspectors have primarily been interested in the suitability of the woman in the foster home. During the first half of the century, the foster children in many cases were relocated if their foster mother died or for some reason was unable to take care of them. Relocation of the child could sometimes be avoided if there was other supporting "female help" in the foster home.

The discourse that foster children should grow up in nuclear families has dominated throughout the period studied, and it has also been strengthened. In the early twentieth century, many younger children were placed in foster homes on the parents' own initiative. In several cases, the mothers had selected the foster homes as well. Mothers chose to a greater extent to place their children with single foster mothers, such as with the children's own grandmothers. In the middle of the century, this form of placement declined. When it became more common that the social workers selected the foster parents for older children with their own problems, nuclear families were preferred and placements with single foster parents became rare.⁹² It was considered an ideal that the foster child should be in "a real home," where the child had access to a foster father who was the family's breadwinner and a stay-at-home foster mother who provided care.

There was an orientation to modernization and development in child welfare, but there was also a parallel movement in the opposite direction. During a time of social change, urbanization, and visions of greater gender equality in society, foster children were still assessed as in need of tradition. Nuclear families were perceived to be the "natural" and "normal" family constellation and were highly idealized:

Many children are growing up with a single mother. This generally works well, but one cannot deny that it has still been an inconvenience for the children. When it comes to replanting a child in a new environment the relocation in itself entails complications and it is therefore important to try to avoid other types of complications. Thus one should, as stated, generally choose a married couple as foster parents. It is of undeniable importance for the child that there is both a man and a woman in the home. This natural combination gives the child increased opportunities to grow into the normal forms of human cohabitation.⁹³

When the children to a greater degree were placed in foster family care because of their own problems or because of family and relational problems, the nuclear family ideal came to be emphasized even more strongly.⁹⁴

Foster Parents' Suitability and Foster Children's Needs—Changes during the Century

Throughout the twentieth century, there was a dominant discourse in Sweden that a child should grow up in a home. For those who could not live with their biological parents, foster family care was prioritized over institutions for children. Foster parents and foster homes were required to be suitable in order to be allowed to take care of a foster child. What then was meant by the term suitability? This article analyzes conceptions of foster parents' suitability in relation to perceptions of foster children's needs during the previous century. To summarize trends, the discourse about the suitability of foster homes and foster parents changed during the century. In broad terms, this change could be described as a shift from: (i) focusing on the child's needs for placement in rural areas that allowed access to a physically healthy environment and fresh country air, to focusing on the needs of a child-friendly environment including space for play and proximity to the child experts; (ii) focusing on the need to learn to work, to the need for education and stimulating leisure; (iii) focusing on mental health, rather than physical health; (iv) an interest in children's bodies, to their psyche and relationships; (v) attention to order and cleanliness in the foster home, to considering the atmosphere and feel in the home; and (vi) concentration on the material and concrete, toward the abstract, when looking at assessment criteria.

In the first half of the century, it was to a large extent the parents' (mother's) difficulties in combining work and support with infant care, but also housing problems, parents' illness and death, which led to children's placement in foster family care. For these children, childless foster parents were preferred and married couples who could provide the children with a new home. Due to

economic development and the emergence of a welfare state with various forms of support for families with children, from the middle of the century, the placements of younger children decreased. From the 1960s, poverty alone was usually not a reason for the separation of children from their parents, not to the same degree as previously. Then, the child welfare boards changed their practice, and placement in a foster home could be considered even for children with problems that previously had been handled in the institutions for children and adolescents, for example, behavioral, emotional, or school problems. This resulted in a shift with new demands on the foster parents' suitability. Knowledge and experience of children were required. Some of the foster parents' homes began to be described in terms of "treatment." These new demands on foster parents could also be understood in the context of major changes in the perception of childhood and parenthood which took place during the previous century. The reduction in child labor along with the gradually increased school attendance resulted in an extended childhood. Children became dependent on their parents for longer, a time that would be spent in play, education, and gradual preparation for life as adults.⁹⁵ The role of parents, and in this case foster parents, was to enable and maintain this new ideal of childhood.

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Author Biography

Ann-Sofie Bergman is a senior lecturer in the Department of Social Work, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden. Her recent publications include *Lämpliga eller olämpliga hem? Fosterbarnsvård och fosterhems kontroll under 1900-talet*. (Växjö: Linnaeus University Dissertations, 2011); "När föräldrarna inte räcker till: Anlitade och lämpliga fosterföräldrar under 1900-talet," *Barn: Forskning om barn og barndom i Norden* 4 (2012); and (with Mairon Johansson), "Mirakel inom äldreomsorgen?—idén om en salutogen äldreomsorg och dess omsättning i praktiken," *Socialvetenskaplig Tidskrift* 1 (2014). Her current research is about children as next of kin—children whose parents are in custody disputes, support for children when a parent dies, and support for children who become young carers when their parents have some kind of problems such as substance abuse, disability, or mental health problems.