

Professional or authentic motherhood? Negotiations on the identity of the birth mother in the context of foster care

Qualitative Social Work

2021, Vol. 20(3) 703–717

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DOI: 10.1177/1473325020912815

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Abstract

This article explores birth parents' negotiations on the identity of the birth mother in three narratives about shared parenthood in foster care. The article draws on data from an interview study exploring the views of 16 birth parents on their experiences of foster care and non-resident parenthood. Through a position analysis, the authors show how the identity of the birth mother is negotiated in light of the moral discourse on intensive mothering. In these stories, birth mothers are positioned as authentic mothers holding a unique, emotional and life-long bond with their children. In contrast, foster mothers are positioned as professional mothers carrying out the formal activities of everyday care. Birth parents re-negotiate the moral discourse on intensive mothering by downplaying the importance of everyday care. The article thus adds to our knowledge on how non-resident mothers find different ways of constructing a sense of mothering, when they are not able to take part in the everyday care of their children. An understanding of such processes is important for social work practice to handle the

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challenges that may occur in relationships between foster parents and birth parents and thereby to support a more collaborative approach of shared parenthood.

Keywords

Foster care, non-resident mothers, birth parents, intensive mothering, shared parenthood, position analysis

In Sweden, social services are required by law to actively promote a regular and continuous relationship between children and their birth parents during a child's placement in foster care (Socialstyrelsen, 2009). This implies that foster parents, birth parents and the child welfare unit actively cooperate on issues concerning the child, in Sweden often referred to as three-part parenting (Skoog et al., 2015). When a child cannot return to his/her birth parents, the most common practice in Sweden is long-term foster care rather than adoption (Skoog et al., 2015; Wissö et al., 2019). Therefore, the primary role of foster parents, even within a long-term perspective, is not to replace but rather to complement the birth parents, creating a co-parenting partnership around the child. Such a collaborative approach between foster parents and birth parents has also been shown to have a positive influence on the child's well-being and on the stability of care (Andersson, 2009; Boyle, 2017). However, research has shown that there can be difficulties in establishing a well-functioning cooperation between foster parents and birth parents, partly due to their experiences of competing with each other on issues such as parenting resources or child–parent attachment (Höjer, 2009; Spånberger Weitz, 2016). In addition, many birth parents experience an existential threat to their identity (Schofield et al., 2011; Sykes, 2011), which may further affect such cooperation.

The starting point for this article is this tension between the authorities' expectations of three-part parenting and birth parents' own experiences of competing parenthood and a threatened identity. More specifically, the article explores negotiations on the identity of the birth mother in birth parents' narratives of shared parenthood. The results are expected to provide important knowledge on how to understand and how to handle the challenges that may occur in relationships between birth parents and foster parents in favour of a more collaborative approach to shared parenthood.

Research on foster care and parental identities

Research on birth parents' experiences of foster care and shared parenthood is scarce (Honey et al., 2018). The few studies that exist show that birth parents often feel powerless and inferior in relation to foster parents, which may have a negative

effect on their ability to engage in their children's lives (Hedin, 2015; Höjer, 2009; Kiraly and Humphreys, 2015). However, this asymmetric relationship between foster parents and birth parents may also comprise a sense of stability, due to the foster parents and the birth parents shared understanding of the foster parents as competent and the birth parents as incompetent parents (Höjer, 2009). Consequently, when birth parents' parental abilities improve, the sense of stability in the relationship between them and the foster parents may deteriorate (Höjer, 2009).

Furthermore, existing research shows that birth parents of children in care often experience stigma as well as a sense of a threatened identity (Höjer, 2009; Schofield et al., 2011). Similar themes have emerged in research on other groups of non-resident parents (predominantly mothers), such as mothers separated from their children because of divorce (Kielty, 2008a, 2008b), imprisonment (Easterling et al., 2019), or mental health treatment (Honey et al., 2018; Klausen et al., 2016). Kielty (2008a) points out how non-resident mothers' sense of a threatened identity seems closely related to a master narrative of the "good mother" as intrinsically associated with being a co-resident parent and the provider of everyday care.

Mothers with children placed in care may struggle to preserve their identity as a mother, partly through inventing new ways of being involved in their child's life (Honey et al., 2018; Sykes, 2011). When they are no longer able to take part in the everyday care of their children, mothers may instead engage in advocating for their children or working to maintain an emotional connection despite limited contact (Honey et al., 2018). However, as a result of the discursive concept of mothering as being exclusively intertwined with the hands-on activities of everyday care, these non-custodial activities are often not acknowledged or even recognized as mothering activities by the child welfare services, thus implying an ideological discord regarding the inner meaning of mothering (Honey et al., 2018).

This study aims to contribute to this field of research by focusing on narrative negotiations on the identity of the birth mother. A narrative approach makes possible further understanding of how birth parents navigate the moral discourse on intensive mothering when narrating experiences of shared parenthood in foster care.

Theoretical framework: Moral discourses on motherhood and narrative identity

The meaning ascribed to parenthood and motherhood is understood here as being socially constructed in the sense that relationships between parents and children as well as between families and other institutions are socially, historically and culturally situated. Hence, parenthood or motherhood is not viewed as inherent essences or biological traits. Good motherhood is not a fixed ideal, but negotiated in relationships between institutions and individuals, and within moral discourses.

The moral discourse on intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) is a cultural script conveying what defines good motherhood in modern western societies. Within this discourse, mothering activities are expected to involve much more than (just) the everyday care of small children; aspects such as being child-centred, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, expert-guided and financially expensive are also included (Hays, 1996). Furthermore, mothering is constructed as “a lifetime vocation, with the need to maintain the ‘good mother’ ideology throughout a woman’s life” (Pedersen, 2016: 34). Thus, the intensive mothering ideology differs somewhat from the idea of mothering as merely focusing on the hands-on activities of everyday care, which has been pointed out as a dominant idea within the child welfare system (Honey et al., 2018). In this context, birth parents’ narrated experiences of shared parenthood in foster care can contribute to a further understanding of how parents make sense of non-residential motherhood by navigating the moral discourse on intensive mothering.

In this article, the birth parents’ stories are viewed as socially situated actions and identity performances (Mishler, 1999). When someone tells a story of their personal experiences to another, they tell that other person who they were in that time and place, who they have become and who they wish to be. Moreover, stories of personal experiences take shape through the embodied activity of telling in social and cultural contexts (Bamberg, 2011). This approach to narratives opens a path to understanding parents’ storytelling as a way of doing parent identity (Karlsson et al., 2013). To expose the identity aspect of birth parents’ storytelling, a model for the positioning analysis of narrative identity performances is applied. The model, described by Bamberg (1997, 2004), rests on assumptions about storytelling as embedded in culturally available discourses related to the storied topics, here a moral discourse on intensive mothering. The model is presented in more detail below.

Method

This article is based on data from a previous study (Spånberger Weitz, 2016) investigating experiences and expectations of support from social services to birth parents of children in foster care. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with nine mothers and seven fathers, four of them in pairs (mother and father together) and the others individually. The interviews took place in the interviewees’ preferred location (e.g. in their home, in the researcher’s office or in a café). The interviews lasted for between 45 and 90 minutes. Following an interpretative approach (see Edwards and Holland, 2013), the interviews took on a form of interactional dialogue between interviewer and interviewee(s), focusing on the parents’ experiences of having their children placed in foster care and, more specifically, on their expressed need for support in this situation. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The study was approved by the Regional Ethical Vetting Board in Stockholm. All interviewees participated on the basis of informed consent and all data have been made anonymous.

In a previous analysis of the data, an emerging theme was the perceived differences between birth parents and foster parents, manifested in birth parents' concerns about their parenting being measured against that of foster parents (Spånberger Weitz, 2016). For this article, the ambition was to explore more deeply the birth parents' identity negotiations in the light of these findings. Accordingly, all interview transcripts were re-read, specifically looking for narratives where this tension of competitiveness between birth parents and foster parents was clearly expressed. Following this selection criteria, three narratives stood out as particularly salient examples of this theme and was thus selected for in-depth analysis. Early in the analysis process, it became clear that birth mothers and foster mothers stood out as central figures in these narratives. Hence, our focus in the analysis was narrowed to target specifically the narrated negotiations of the identity of the birth mother in birth parents' stories of shared parenthood.

The model for positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997, 2004) accounts for multi-dimensional performances of identities in storytelling. Here, this model is used to explore how the birth parents position themselves and others as certain kinds of people in the stories and through the act of telling, within a moral discourse of intensive mothering. The analysis works on three levels and makes the following visible: (1) positioning of the story characters (e.g. birth parents, foster parents) within the story, (2) positioning of the storytellers (birth parents, interviewer) in the interview situation, and (3) how these positions are accomplished "vis-à-vis cultural discourses and normative (social) positions" (Bamberg, 2004: 336). When the birth parents tell stories about their experiences of shared parenthood, they draw on a moral discourse on intensive mothering to make themselves and others understand what the stories are about and what is at stake in them.

Negotiating motherhood from a distance

The following analysis targets the identity of the birth mother in birth parents' narrated experiences of shared parenthood. All three stories argue that the birth mother is the only one who, regardless of shortcomings, can know and love their children in ways that foster parents, and particularly foster mothers, never can. The positioning analysis explores how three different birth mother identities (the irreplaceable mother, the misunderstood mother and the remote mother) take shape in light of a moral discourse on intensive mothering.

The irreplaceable mother

The first story was told during an interview with a couple whose daughter Melinda was placed in foster care at the age of 16 years (Box 1). The birth mother formally agreed to the foster placement under the threat that the child welfare services otherwise would take the issue to court. The story depicts events that took place a short time after their daughter had moved in with the foster parents. It tells how

Box 1. The irreplaceable mother.

M One of them is like very firm, so she put all these demands on Melinda. She wasn't allowed to eat almost anything there. She likes to bake, but not even that, she was like, well they, she just, she had to come home [to the birth parents] and baked something, and wanted to bring it with her, so she hid it [from the foster mother].

I Why was that?

M Because they were like "You should only eat sweets on Saturdays". But I just "Hey, she's 16 years old".

F Yes, well she took over the mother role, a role more appropriate for a much younger child.

M Yeah. So she came home crying, and she was completely destroyed.

[I min cut from the original transcript]

M So that day, when Melinda came home completely destroyed, and stayed the night, the day after we had the family team [child welfare services] over, and they saw how devastated she was. She just cried in front of them, and she had never met them before that day.

F She [the birth mother] had to call her case worker [at the child welfare services].

M Yeah, I had to call the case worker and say "This is how it is, she's [Melinda] feeling really bad about all this". So they, like, had to talk to the foster home and... there were many takes on this, like, "you can't be this strict with her". And you know, I was very clear, "You're not her real mum".

F No, she somehow tried to take over that role [as mother].

M "You're a foster home. We are the parents, not you."

F No, because they never took that away from us, they just... .

M No, because she tried for a long time to take over that role, but I pointed it out repeatedly.

F Melinda said it herself, "She acts like she's my mum", she says.

I: interviewer; M: mother; F: father.

the foster mother tried too hard to impose strict rules on their daughter, who did not approve of this and returned home to the birth parents in tears. This is the complicating event (Labov and Waletzky, [1967] 1997) around which the story revolves.

The story characters are the foster mother, the daughter Melinda, a caseworker at the child welfare services, the child welfare services family team and the two birth parents, of whom the mother is much more visible and agentive than the father. At the beginning of the story, the foster mother is positioned as being *too strict and demanding* in relation to Melinda. This also positions Melinda as being *controlled* by the foster mother. The description of Melinda, having to hide her homemade sweets from her disapproving foster mother, positions her as *frightened* by the foster mother's behaviour. At the same time, Melinda is positioned as *old enough to decide for herself* through the description of the mother saying, "hey,

she's 16 years old". This positions the birth mother in the story world as both *rational* in her estimation of her daughter's maturity and *frustrated* by the foster mother trying to take over the mother role and treating Melinda as a much younger child.

The story goes on to say that the family team visited the family the next day. The description of Melinda crying in front of these strangers as something out of the ordinary helps to strengthen her position as *frightened* and the foster mother's position as *too strict and demanding*. Through this, the family team is positioned as a *witness* to the unjust treatment of Melinda in a way that works to justify the mother's position as *frustrated*. The visit from the family team stands out as a turning point in the story. In what follows, the mother is positioned as *agentive* and *righteous* through the description of her calling the caseworker to report on the problem, and of the subsequent actions taken by the child welfare services to remedy the situation. These narrated events work to position the caseworker as a *bringer of justice* who acts on behalf of the birth parents and Melinda. The story ends with a kind of victory for the birth parents, through the foster mother being instructed by the child welfare services not to be so strict with Melinda. This resolution of the narrated events ends with an evaluation in which the foster mother is positioned as an *imposter mother* trying to rob the birth mother of her rightful position as *the only true mother* in Melinda's life. The description of the foster mother as being a "foster home" positions her as being different from a real mother, and the birth parents are positioned as *the true parents* through the description of the child welfare services not having taken their parenthood away from them.

Focusing on the telling of the story in the context of the interview conversation, other aspects of the birth mothers' identity position as the irreplaceable mother become visible. One such aspect is how the mother acts as the main narrator, whereas the father takes part through confirmations and by adding details to the story. Together, the parents position themselves in relation to the interviewer as *outraged* about the foster mother's behaviour towards their daughter. Furthermore, they put a lot of effort into convincing the interviewer of their righteousness. This is visible in their frequent use of reported speech of the foster mother, the daughter, but mostly of the birth mother, which works to position the interviewer as a *judge* who needs to be convinced that their case is legitimate and just. Overall, as the birth parents cooperate in telling the story about the foster mother stepping over the line, they position the birth mother as *irreplaceable*. This is further consolidated by the marginal position given to and taken by the father in both the story and the storytelling. He only becomes visible as an important character in the evaluation of the story as part of the parental "we" and "us", but not as an individual parent.

The misunderstood mother

The second story was told during an interview with a mother who has two of her three small children placed in foster care; the youngest lives with her and the child's

father (Box 2). When she was a single mother with her two oldest children, she applied for support from the child welfare services and the children were placed in part-time foster care. This arrangement later became a permanent foster care placement, against the mother's will. At the time of the interview, she only saw them one weekend a month. In this story, she tries to make sense of what happened when her children were placed in permanent foster care. The complicating event of the story (Labov and Waletzky, [1967] 1997) is the birth mother's description of

Box 2. The misunderstood mother.

M Yeah, well I guess the child welfare services were asking the foster mother questions, and then it all came up. I had only just changed my daughter's diapers, a diaper was lying on the table, I hadn't had the time to throw it away.

I No, that can easily happen. I have small kids of my own, so I know.

M And we had only just got out of bed. I hadn't pulled the curtains up. We were lazy the night before, we had been doing lots of things that day, so we had pizza, and there were pizza boxes that we hadn't thrown away yet. And there were drawings on the wall from two years back, mostly cleaned away by my mother-in-law. So, and the bed wasn't made and that's, you know, it's not even possible to make that bed and count on it to stay made with two kids who love to jump on it.

I No, that's not possible. And a made or unmade bed, that will hardly affect the children's well-being.

M And then, Moa sat in the sofa with a dummy and a blanket, because she was newly awake, and Marcus didn't want to put his clothes on. I thought that, well if I get her up, then maybe he wants to. But no, then they turn all that against you. I'm like, well, what does this have to do with, how I am as a mum?

I No. But were those the kind of things they brought up when they were like explaining things then, or what?

M Yeah. Those were the things, put in a handwritten letter from her [the foster mother], all those . . . well ok, it was untidy then, just because I didn't have the energy to clean up, because at that point, I just wanted to be with my kids as much as possible. It was the first time I had ever put off the cleaning for later. Usually I'm pedant, so I clean up the apartment; the whole apartment can be done before I'm off to bring the kids home from pre-school, between nine and three. So no, that did not feel good at all. I don't get what that has to do with how I am as a mum. I was going to tidy up later during the day, but when the kids left, I just collapsed.

I Yeah, of course.

M Yeah. And it has only gotten worse and worse and worse and worse.

I So you find yourself feeling worse and worse?

M I don't feel good after all this. It's a miracle that I still can breast feed, really. Because a lot of things can be affected. It affects her [the baby] as well now. And this is, well it's not good for the kids either. So, this is how I see it, it's better to let the kids come back to me, so we can all get up on our feet again, because I think the kids will do better if they're with their mum, actually, than if they're not with me.

I: interviewer; M: mother.

the foster mother turning the child welfare services against her by telling them things that made her appear as an unfit mother, leading to the foster placement of her children becoming permanent.

In this story, the characters are the mother, the foster mother, the children and the child welfare services. Throughout the story the mother is positioned as *deceived* and *misunderstood* by the foster mother and the child welfare services. The foster mother is positioned, in relation to the birth mother, as *the villain* who wants to take her children away from her with the help of the child welfare services. The child welfare services are positioned as both *problem seeking* and *incomprehensible*, through the description of the birth mother trying to understand what she did wrong.

The story revolves around the notion that a good mother keeps a tidy home. The detailed description of untidiness in the family apartment when the foster mother came to visit (a diaper left on the table, unmade beds, closed curtains, undressed children and last night's pizza boxes) positions the foster mother as *looking for trouble*. It also works to position the birth mother as *a good enough mother* who was *wrongfully accused* by the foster mother in the midst of the everyday chaos of family life. Furthermore, the untidiness is described as a result of the birth mother choosing to be with her children over tidying up the apartment. This evaluation positions the birth mother as *a present mother* who chooses to spend time with her children over household duties that can be done later. The children are depicted as being in the loving care of their mother, doing the things that small children do. The description of them as jumping on beds and having pizza positions them as *normal kids living ordinary lives* with their family. Otherwise, the children remain passive characters in the story in contrast to the birth mother, the foster mother and the child welfare services. In the coda of the story, the birth mother is positioned as *suffering* in ways that affect her children negatively. The story ends with a plea from the birth mother who believes that her children would be better off at home with her instead of with the foster family.

The birth mother tells this story in the mode of a formal defence, which is especially noticeable in the ways she accounts for all the chores she does when caring for her children. This, and the detailed description of what may have been seen as untidy by the foster mother, also works to position her as *a knowledgeable mother* who knows what needs to be done and what is expected of her. She positions herself in relation to the interviewer as *unjustly treated* by the foster mother and the child welfare services, and as *confused* about what she has done wrong to deserve having her children taken away from her. The interviewer explicitly confirms and supports her expressed outrage over being criticized for an unmade bed in a way that positions the two of them as *typical mothers* sharing frames of reference. At the same time, the mother positions the interviewer as *a judge* to whom she can plead innocent by telling her side of the story. Overall, both in the story and in the way the story is told, the birth mother comes forth as misunderstood by the foster mother and the child welfare services.

The remote mother

The third story was told during an interview with a mother who has two teenage children in foster care and several younger children still living with her and their father (Box 3). Her second oldest child, who is the focus of this story, was placed in foster care at three years of age and has since lived in four different foster homes. He is now 13 years old and faces yet another move in the near future. Throughout the interview, the mother describes her current family situation as stable, whereas in the past she did not have the capacity or the suitable life circumstances to properly care for her children. Considering her son's current situation and placement history, the mother urges the child welfare services to help promote a closer relationship between herself and her son. The following story was initiated early in the interview when the interviewer asked the mother about what happened when her son was placed in foster care. During the interview, the mother repeatedly returned to the instability and vulnerability in her son's history of foster care. The complicating events (Labov and Waletzky, [1967] 1997) are the many placement disruptions leading to her son repeatedly moving from one foster home to another.

There are many characters in this story, a feature also of the son's moves between different foster homes. The mother and her son figure as the main characters throughout the story, and the foster parents in the four different foster homes appear in different parts of the story. Other characters include another foster child and the child welfare services.

The story departs from the current situation with the boy facing yet another placement disruption, but then casts a net over the last 10 years of foster care in the boy's life. In contrast to the other two stories, the child figures as the main character, and the birth mother, even though she is the narrator, appears most clearly at the beginning and at the end of the story. At the beginning of the story, the mother is positioned as *vulnerable but caring* in relation to the child, through the description of her situation when he was first placed in foster care. Here, the child is positioned in relation to the birth mother as *in danger of maltreatment* and *in need of help* from outside the family. He stays in the position of being in danger of maltreatment throughout the story in relation to the foster families, who are positioned as *unfit* or *unable* to give him the care and safety he needs, because they are too old, lack the ability to handle him or they are outright weird. The boy is positioned as *repeatedly abandoned* as foster home after foster home gives up on him for various reasons, even the ones with whom he wanted to stay. The individual foster parents in the story are mostly women with the exception of the description of the third foster home where the birth mother had to communicate with the man in the family because the woman was weird. The frequent mention of women over men signals that the birth mother ascribes more importance to or expects more from the women in the foster families than from the men. The mother is mostly positioned as *a distanced observer* in relation to the many foster parents and as *helpless* in relation to the many failed foster home placements. The child

Box 3. The remote mother.

M My son, he was placed in foster care, I think, yeah in [year]. And that was because I was feeling really bad and I felt that I couldn't manage to take care of him. And well, for his sake, that's why I wanted this, because it was not as if he was taken away from me, but because I wanted their help, and I said that "I can't handle this anymore". So, it was for his sake that, well, I wanted him to get the best help possible, you know, with his future. Then they moved him to a place in [city], or no, yes in [city], nearby, I don't remember. He lived there for a year and a half. He was small then, only three. But that didn't work out, he had to leave after one year. Since then, he has been moved around from place to place. And then he lived with an old woman. But he couldn't stay there, because of her age. He really liked it there. And then he lived with another couple. It was only them and their dogs. And then, no, that woman couldn't handle it, his, that he was so difficult to handle. Yeah, so he had to move to a farm last year.

I And now, they too have terminated [the foster care placement]?

M Yeah, it's because of the other children.

[11 minutes cut from the original transcript]

I So, how has your contact with the various foster homes worked out during the years?

M Well, it's been good. Not with this second last. She [name of first foster mother] and I got along well, and we were always talking. In the end, we didn't even need the child welfare services. That was really really good. We understood each other and that felt great. Then, it was this old lady, but she, well I talked some with her as well, but she, well she was like this sweet old woman, really. And then, with these [names of foster parents], the contact with them was no good at all. She was like really weird that woman, and [inaudible], so it was the dad, or the man, that I mostly talked with.

I And did they have other foster children as well?

M No. They got one later. Yeah, but later when they got another child, that's what he reacted to, Dennis.

I There was another child coming.

M Yeah. Then he started to feel neglected. And it was after that he had to move away. And he has mentioned this, that this was why [he had to move]. Because he felt that was the reason, and so did I.

I So he has mentioned that, Dennis has mentioned that. But the child welfare services has not explained why he had to move, have they?

M No. Well, it was because they [the foster parents] couldn't cope anymore. But I think it was, I actually think it also was, because it happened when she [the other foster child] had just moved in. So that wouldn't have felt very good for him. He lived there for a long time.

[24 minutes cut from the original transcript]

M And I just feel that, those [foster parents] who have him, they're only doing a job. Like, they get paid if they have their, you know, what's it called, well to me, they're just doing a job. That's also what I told the child welfare services last time, that it's not like they're, well, like they have him because they love him or anything like that, they're doing their job, they get an assignment. Like, this is what they're obliged to do. And if they can't handle it, then they cancel, whatever it's called, the contract, so to speak. I just, he's only a, well he's not a family member or anything. That's why I tell them "Why can't he be allowed to stay with us on weekends, instead of with this contact family".

I: interviewer; M: mother.

welfare services are a rather distant character, positioned as *facilitators of foster care* in relation to the boy and his mother. The story ends with a positioning of foster parents as *professional parents* in relation to the boy, in the sense that they are just doing a job. In contrast to this description, the mother is positioned as a *true but remote mother* who loves and cares for her boy in a way that foster parents never could.

In the interview situation, the mother positions herself in relation to the interviewer as *resigned* about the foster parents' lack of ability to care for her son and as wanting to care for him more often herself. At the same time, she positions herself as *knowledgeable of her son's situation* when she provides a detailed chronological description of her son's journey between foster homes, and of her contact with the foster parents. In contrast to the other stories, the foster parents are not called foster mothers or fathers, except for once when the man in the third foster family is called both the father and the man. Instead, they are called the woman, the man, the couple or by their first names. This way of naming the characters in the story can be seen as a positioning of the foster parents as *non-parents*. The story ends with a plea for help as the mother asks the interviewer why the boy cannot visit her at weekends, instead of regular visits to a contact family to give respite to the foster home, as is now the case. This plea re-actualizes the overall positions given to the mother in the story as *vulnerable and caring*, as a *distanced observer* and as a *true but remote parent*, and her storytelling position as *resigned*.

Discussion

In this article, we have shed light on foster care, shared parenthood and birth parent identities in Sweden through the lens of birth parents' narrated experiences and the moral discourse of intensive mothering. The narrative performance of the birth mothers can be understood as a form of "extensive discursive labour" (Throsby, 2002), a term previously used to describe the narrative work of non-resident mothers, who through the telling of their stories, find different ways to defend themselves against a "bad mother label" and thereby defy society's negative stereotypes of non-resident motherhood (Kielty, 2008b). The identities of the birth mother that emerge through the narrative analysis (the irreplaceable mother, the misunderstood mother and the remote mother) all relate to the moral discourse of intensive mothering, but in different ways. In the stories, and through the ways in which they are told, birth parents relate strongly to the discourse as they argue for the birth mother's position as different from that of foster parents. Two somewhat different aspects of the moral discourse on intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) are made relevant through the narratives: *a good mother is deeply involved in the everyday care of children*; and *the mother-child bond is unique, emotional and life-long*. Even though the birth mothers are deprived of opportunities to provide everyday care to their children, they all claim to possess detailed knowledge about their children's everyday lives, needs, feelings and difficulties, and thus know better than the foster parents what is best for them. They also invoke the idea of a

unique, emotional and life-long bond between mother and child through their emotional displays of outrage, vulnerability, confusion and frustration about not being a natural presence in their children's lives. The narratives thus show different ways of constructing a sense of mothering when deprived of the everyday care of ones' child. This is in agreement with other studies exploring mothering identities and the "mother work" of non-resident mothers, showing that mothers living apart from their children describe a deep engagement in activities other than everyday care, but still with a clear focus on their children's well-being and thereby still qualifying as critical mothering activities (Honey et al., 2018; Kielty, 2008a).

In contrast to the construction of true mothering as orbiting around the core of a unique mother-child bond, the everyday care conducted by foster mothers is constructed as a formal and instrumental way of mothering in the stories. This way of constructing foster mothers as lacking emotional and non-negotiable closeness to their children, thus missing out on a central prerequisite of authentic motherhood, is a pervading theme throughout the stories. This relates partly to what Sykes (2011) describes as associational distancing, i.e. the process whereby mothers who have their parental ability questioned by society maintain their self-assessment as good mothers by comparing and contrasting their own motherhood with that of other mothers whom they define as the actual "bad mothers". However, in the stories presented in this article, foster mothers are not constructed as bad mothers per se. Rather, they are constructed as non-mothers who may be professionally qualified to perform everyday care of children as a formal and instrumental task, but who lack the unique emotional bonds present between birth mothers and their children. Through the positioning of foster mothers as professionals, birth parents thus re-negotiate the moral discourse on intensive mothering by downplaying the importance of everyday care provided by foster mothers. In contrast, as shown throughout the analysis of the stories presented in this article, birth mothers are positioned as holders of an authentic motherhood that defies any hardships and distances that come between them and their children.

Implications

In Sweden, when a child is placed in foster care, birth parents, foster parents and the child welfare services are expected to cooperate around the child through what is usually called three-part parenting (Skoog et al., 2015). This is important not least for the well-being of children in foster care (Andersson, 2009; Boyle, 2017). However, creating such a cooperation is hard. Birth parents often feel inferior to both foster parents and the child welfare services, and both foster parents and birth parents may feel threatened in their parental identities (Höjer, 2009). This article contributes with important knowledge on how birth parents make use of moral discourses on motherhood in their attempts to make sense of foster care and shared parenthood in a way that may condition such cooperation. An understanding of moral discourses on parenthood and childhood, and of the power that such discourses can wield in contexts of foster care, may facilitate the cooperation

between birth parents and foster parents. Instead of unknowingly partaking in reproduction of moral discourses, social work practitioners can, as also suggested by Kieley (2008b), help non-resident mothers to deal with the negative stereotypes produced through such discourses, creating instead opportunities for them to claim alternative non-custodial mother identities that may empower them rather than shame them. Such endeavours may improve the possibilities for birth parents and foster parents to create a shared parenthood whereby their respective parenting abilities can be combined in a productive way in the best interest of the child.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by a grant from Allmänna Barnhuset in Sweden.

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