

Emotional kinship care and neutral non-kinship care — the struggle between discourses

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, social workers' ideas of kinship care and non-kinship care as foster placement alternatives for vulnerable children are analysed and discussed. The study is based on group interviews with Swedish social workers, using a discourse analytic approach. The interviews took two vignettes of children who needed an immediate and long-term placement because one of the parents had killed the other parent, as their point of departure. Domestic violence is a common social problem across countries, and controversies about placement alternatives become even more apparent when discussing lethal violence. The analysis revealed three main discourses: 'emotional kinship care', 'neutral non-kinship care' and 'a real family'. The emotional kinship care discourse also revealed two competing sub-discourses: 'emotions as glue that binds' and 'emotions as obscuring a child perspective', displaying a struggle concerning the advantages and risks that social workers connected to kinship care. In this paper, the results and their implications for vulnerable children are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to analyse and discuss social workers' ideas of kinship foster care and non-kinship foster care as possible placement alternatives, when children need an immediate and long-term placement due to lethal violence in the family. The study is based on group interviews with Swedish social workers using a discourse analytic approach. According to critical discourse analysis, discourse can be regarded as a social practice that is both constituted by and shapes other social practices (Fairclough 1992, pp. 65–66). This approach means that social workers' constructions about different placement alternatives have implications for practice because ideas about reality guide people's actions. At the same time, the social and national contexts influence social workers' ideas.

The Nordic countries have been described as family service oriented (Gilbert *et al.* 2011), providing early support families to prevent placements of children. Stability in care in such a system is primarily obtained by the use foster care and maintained contact between children and their parents, and the goal is family reunification (Backe-Hansen *et al.* 2013). Social workers' ideas

about the possibilities for kinship vs. non-kinship care to provide stability in care are thus of special interest and will be especially highlighted in this paper. In Sweden, kinship foster carers are entitled to the same rights to support as non-kinship foster carers and the placements are equally formalized and supervised. Social workers are obligated by law to consider the child's own network when a child needs out-of-home care, and the proportion of children placed with relatives in Sweden has been estimated at 30% (del Valle & Bravo 2013, p. 255). In this paper, *kinship care* is used to describe foster care provided by relatives or friends of the family, and *non-kinship care* refers to foster care in a family previously unknown to the child (Backe-Hansen *et al.* 2013).

In Sweden, compulsory out-of-home care of children is only possible in very serious situations if the custodians (usually the parents) do not consent to such care (§ 1 Care of Young Persons Act). Even serious cases of neglect or abuse of children might thus result in voluntary placements, and the parents usually remain as custodians when a child is in foster care. However, the social services have the authority to initiate a separate court process and suggest a change in custody.

Adoption without the consent of the child's custodians is not possible.

Violence in the home affecting children is a global social problem (UNICEF 2006). In Sweden, children who witness violence are defined as victims of crime, and the social authorities are obligated to investigate the child's situation if they suspect that a child has been exposed to or witnessed violence (5:11 Social Services Act; SOSFS 2014:4). However, shared custody is strongly recommended in Sweden, and research has shown that a contact presumption (maintained contact between the child and each parent after divorce) usually overrides protection of children in practice in cases of domestic violence (Eriksson 2010; Bruno 2015).

Stability in care

Research has indicated that kinship care is a more stable placement alternative and less likely to disrupt than non-kinship care (Iglehart 1994; Sallnäs *et al.* 2004; Holland *et al.* 2005; Holtan *et al.* 2005; Chamberlain *et al.* 2006; Winokur *et al.* 2014). It also appears that children in kinship care have better contact with their birth parents (Berrick *et al.* 1994; Holtan *et al.* 2005; Hedin *et al.* 2011) and experience better well-being, fewer behavioural problems and fewer health problems compared with children in non-kinship care (Holtan *et al.* 2005; Winokur *et al.* 2014). Nordic studies also indicate that teenagers in kinship care feel more at home compared with teenagers in non-kinship care (Hedin *et al.* 2011) and that children placed with relatives experience care as less stigmatizing (Egelund *et al.* 2010).

Kinship care has thus come to be interpreted as a predictor of stability. Even if some research brings doubts about kinship care as a marker of stability (Oosterman *et al.* 2007; Ward 2009; Holtan *et al.* 2013), no study indicates that kinship care increases the risk of breakdown (Vinnerljung *et al.* 2014). In Sweden, as well as in other countries, many moves are also planned transitions within the care system based on the idea of reunification with birth parents (Sinclair *et al.* 2005; Ward 2009; Skoog 2013). The definition of breakdown differs between studies, and the qualitative experiences of care are also important to discuss (Andersson 2009; Holtan *et al.* 2013). Studies from the USA and the UK show that kinship carers tend to be older and be single parents and have poorer health and lower income when compared with non-kinship carers (Berrick *et al.* 1994; Farmer & Moyers 2008). Similar results have been found in a Nordic study (Holtan *et al.* 2005). Despite this, kinship carers receive less support from social

authorities compared with non-kinship carers (Berrick *et al.* 1994; Holtan *et al.* 2005; Farmer & Moyers 2008).

Social workers' attitudes about kinship care

There is limited research on social workers' attitudes about kinship care, but studies reveal ambivalence amongst social workers in this matter. Studies from the UK and the USA show that social workers tend to associate kinship care with both positive and negative aspects (Peters 2005; Farmer & Moyers 2008). Maintained ties with relatives, parents and schools are regarded as positives, and kinship care is perceived as less stigmatizing for children (Peters 2005 pp. 600–602; see also Farmer & Moyers 2008 pp. 188–189). However, the presumption that dysfunctional family dynamics might exist amongst relatives is regarded as a risk by social workers (Flynn 2002; Peters 2005; Linderot 2006; Farmer & Moyers 2008). Providing support to kinship carers is also regarded as time consuming because negotiating between different relatives and their ideas about the child's needs might be necessary (Beeman & Boisen 1999; Peters 2005). Kinship carers are usually only assessed for a specific child, and their private role as public carers might be regarded as problematic for social workers (Flynn 2002). Portengen & van der Neut (1999, pp. 52–54) point out that social workers' power and position as the central link between the child and its foster carers might be challenged when private relationships form the central basis of care.

Linderot (2006) has studied practice regarding different foster care placements and social workers' attitudes towards kinship care in Sweden (57 case studies and interviews with 27 professionals). Her study showed that social workers perceived kinship care as a 'natural love' which made the child adapt easier to its environment and facilitated contact with birth parents (Linderot 2006, pp. 122–123). Social workers also felt positive towards the idea of kinship; however, it was not always considered in practice (a.a.). Similar results were found by Farmer & Moyers (2008) in the UK because the social workers in their study did not actively look for possible kinship carers but rather responded to relatives or friends who wanted to take care of the child.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The group interviews with social workers were conducted within a research project on social workers' assessments of children in need of an immediate and long-term placement due to lethal violence in the family,

and the interviews took vignettes as their point of departure.

Vignettes

Due to ethical concerns, I did not use real cases; instead, I constructed two somewhat different vignettes in three phases each. Being a researcher with a previous background in child welfare was helpful in this process, and the vignettes are based on a combination of previous research and knowledge of child protection cases and the research questions of the project (see Hughes & Huby 2004). Vignettes are useful for discussing sensitive matters in groups, but they need to be realistic (a.a.), and I have tried to give the vignettes a content that would seem familiar to the social workers. The lethal violence is the trigger that 'starts the case', but both vignettes also provide common social problems and dilemmas.

Each phase corresponds to a specific part of the legal decision-making process: decisions regarding the immediate care decision (phase one), choice of long-term placement (phase two) and finally, assessing if a change in custody was needed (phase three). A semi-structured interview guide was used, and the social workers were asked to discuss how to start the case (first intervention), whether or not compulsive care was needed, violence as a risk factor, choice of suitable placement alternative, how they assessed the possibility for kinship care, contact between children and the violent parent and if a change in custody was needed. In this paper, it is only the discourses that were revealed when social workers discussed different placement alternatives that are analysed, which were mainly connected to phases one and two in the vignettes, which is why those phases are described in more detail. After each interview, I asked all participants whether they had any comments on the vignettes or if they regarded them as trustworthy. All social workers assessed the problems in the vignettes to be familiar and trustworthy, but in two interviews, the initial placement of children in institutional care (vignette 1) was questioned, which might be a matter of organizational differences regarding the use of institutional care for younger children.

Summary of vignette one

Phase one. The vignette is about Emil (aged 5) and Oskar (aged 7). During the night, the boys have been placed at an institution by the duty social services after the children's father (Karl) had killed the children's mother (Anna). Karl is now in remand prison and has confessed to the action and wants psychiatric care because he suffers from depression. The family is

previously known to social services because Karl has previously threatened and abused Anna in front of the children. The children visited relatives and did not witness the deadly abuse.

Phase two (after 3 months). The children are in temporary foster care, and the father is expected to be sentenced for murder. Karl wants the children to be placed in kinship care with his sister and her family. The mother's single sister is also willing to take care of the children. The aunts have different opinions about Karl's future capability as a father. Karl's sister thinks that regular contact between the children and their father is important and that the children can return to the father when he has received care. Anna's sister thinks that Karl is unfit as a father and that contact needs to be on the children's terms. The children do not wish to meet with their father at present.

Phase three. Karl has been sentenced to 10 years in prison for murder. The children want to stay at their present foster home. The children's contact with their father and whether a change in custody ought to be made are discussed.

Summary of vignette two

Phase one. The vignette is about Esther (aged 12) and Simon (aged 10). Information is received from the police, saying that the children's mother, Eva, has killed the children's father, Hampus, during a fight. The children are still at school. The family is known to social services because the parents have previously received counselling due to their heavy conflicts and violence. Eva claims self-defence.

Phase two (after 4 months). The children are placed temporarily with their grandmother and grandfather (Eva's parents). Eva has been sentenced to prison for 2 years for causing Hampus' death, but the prosecutor plans to appeal and claim manslaughter. The children have regular contact with their mother and want to keep in touch; however, they want to remain with their grandparents where they have stayed many times previously during their parents' fights. Eva wants her children to be placed with another independent foster family. Eva has begun a new relationship with a man.

Phase three. The children are in kinship care at Eva's parents' house, and Eva will soon be released from prison. Eva then wants the children to live with her

and the man she has married. The children's contact with their mother and whether a change in custody ought to be made are discussed.

Group interviews with social workers

Information about the research project was distributed to directors of the child welfare agencies in seven municipalities of different sizes, and the social workers who wanted to participate contacted the researcher by e-mail. Information and ethical guidelines were also provided to the participants before the interview. I conducted six group interviews with 14 Swedish social workers from November 2014 to May 2015; each interview involved two or three participating social workers. The social workers belonged to four middle-sized or larger municipalities in Sweden. All social workers worked, or had prior experience of working, with assessments of children or teenagers within social services in Sweden. In all group interviews, there was at least one participant who had either assessed or come across or heard of similar cases at their workplace (totally nine social workers).

Because there is an over representation of women in social services in Sweden, 13 of the respondents are women. The social workers were between 26 and 63 years old (average age 42 years). Their time in the profession ranged between 5 months and 40 years (average length 11.7 years). The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and 30 min and were recorded and then transcribed. The social workers have been anonymized and are represented by numbers (1–14) in the text. The quotes have been translated into English.

The participants in each group interview were too few to be described as traditional focus group interviews. However, the interviews combined vignettes with a 'focus group approach', in the sense that they were not strictly structured but rather centred on particular themes and a discussion, and a variety of answers was encouraged (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009).

Analytical approach

Discourse has been defined as 'a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)' (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 9). One theoretical feature of discourse analysis is social constructionism, which is characterized by a critical perspective of knowledge and the idea that our knowledge of the world is connected to and interdependent of a specific history and culture (Burr 1995, p. 3; Jørgensen

& Phillips 2002, p. 12). Knowledge is seen a result of social processes in a specific time and place, and ideas that are taken for granted and that become constructed as 'knowledge' or 'truth' also affect people's actions (a. a.). There is little guidance about how to conduct discourse analysis, but it is possible to combine concepts and elements from different approaches (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002). The approaches used in this paper have been inspired by *critical discourse analysis*, with its focus on the interaction amongst the *text*, *discursive practice* (how the text is influenced by and influences discourses in social practice) and the *social practice* that surrounds it (Fairclough 1992) and by concepts from *discourse theory* (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, pp. 66–74). According to discourse theory, there are always competing discourses providing different understandings of a phenomenon or concept (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). This has been described as *hegemonic struggles* because *hegemony* refers to an agreed understanding or a consensus position (Fairclough 1992, pp. 91–96). Each discourse is organized around one or more *nodal points*, a fixed meaning or understanding of a central concept (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, p. 112). However, what is a fixed nodal point in one discourse might become a *floating signifier* in the struggle between discourses because a concept might be filled with different meanings in different discourses, as a result of the concepts and language embedded within it (Laclau 1990, p. 28). After each interview, I made notes regarding themes and contradictions that had been discerned in the interview and in relation to previously conducted interviews. The transcriptions were read several times, themes were adjusted during the analysis, and text fragments were connected to different categories. The discourse analytic approach also provides analytical focus points for the analysis, and the analysis was guided by the following questions described by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, pp. 165–166): What discourses are articulated? What meanings are established and excluded? What are the nodal points of the discourses? Do different discourses define nodal points in different ways (possible struggles to fix meaning)? Which meanings are taken for granted across different discourses? What identities and groups are discursively constructed? I also tried to relate the discourses in the text to ideas related to the surrounding social practice that was discerned in the text.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Throughout all the interviews, there is an overarching discourse related to the social practice in Sweden, which

I call *stability through existing relations*. However, two discourses can be discerned that provide different solutions to *how* stability through existing relations is best achieved: by *emotional kinship care* or by *neutral non-kinship care*. A third parallel discourse was also discerned, stating that children need *a real family*, meaning two care givers of an appropriate age. While neutral non-kinship care and a real family were stable and fixed in meaning and express constructions that favour these placements, emotional kinship care revealed a struggle between two sub-discourses: *emotions as glue that binds* and *emotions as obscuring a child perspective* (Fig. 1).

A real family

The nodal point in the real family discourse was ‘family’, fixed to the meaning of a couple (two adults). The belief that the children needed a ‘family’ was strong; it was only in one interview that some social workers thought that institutional care might be appropriate in the acute phase. When I asked if there was a need for other placement alternatives, or if a child could alternate between two foster families, the social workers stressed that *one* single family was what the children needed. The ‘real family’ was constructed as a *safe couple of an appropriate age*.

1 ‘Then they need a mother and a father; the children need a safe couple of parents, I think.’

2 ‘And they’ve needed it for a long time, looking back.’

1 ‘Yes, they’ve needed it all the time.’

2 ‘Yes.’ Interviewer ‘So you think it’s a disadvantage that the aunt is single?’

1 ‘Yes.’

2 ‘Mm.’

(Interview one; vignette one, phase two)

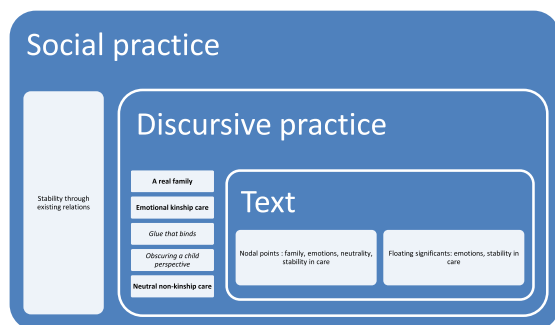


Figure 1 Discourses regarding placement alternatives.

Some social workers also questioned the single aunt’s ability to cope with being a foster carer on her own.

10 ‘It affects the family picture and what she can cope with.’

11 ‘Cope, yes precisely.’

10 ‘Because it takes two adults to cope.’

(Interview five; vignette one, phase two)

Being single was assessed as a possible risk by the social workers, and the age of the grandparents in vignette two was also discussed as a possible disadvantage. Looking at research, kinship carers tend to be older or to be single parents when compared with non-kinship carers (for example, see Berrick *et al.* 1994; Holtan *et al.* 2005; Farmer & Moyers 2008). The risks that social workers associated with single or older foster carers did not mean that the relatives were disqualified as kinship carers in this study; the emotional attachment they could provide was also assessed. What is interesting is that the real family discourse is characterized by rather old-fashioned norms regarding what constitutes an ‘ideal’ strong and safe family because the general view of what constitutes a family is often more inclusive and heterogenic today.

The single aunt in vignette one was constructed by some social workers as ‘weak’ because she lacked support from a partner, and being a couple was constructed as ‘strong’ and thus safer for the children. Handling conflicts or possible threats from a parent is also a difficult task for kinship carers (Farmer & Moyers 2008), and the idea of strength connected to the number of carers might be understood as a special precaution by social workers and an ambition to promote the opportunities for stability. It might, however, narrow the assessment if stereotypes of carers guide social workers’ actions. It is not possible within this study to say whether these constructions are also related to gender. However, gender differences in relation to how women’s and men’s capacities as parents are judged have been found in previous research on domestic violence in Sweden (Eriksson 2010).

Emotional kinship care

Emotional kinship care is based on the idea that kinship carers have subjective emotions towards the child as well as its parents because they are known to each other and have a shared history. ‘Emotions’ is a nodal point *and* a floating significant within the emotional kinship care discourse because its meaning

is not fixed but is flexible, resulting in two sub-discourses.

Emotions as glue that binds

Within this sub-discourse, emotions are understood as a factor that provides emotional and practical familiarity for children. As a temporary solution, relatives were at least considered by the majority of the social workers in both cases. The emotional connection that probably exists between the child and the carers was constructed as healing for the children. A few social workers also mentioned that things usually turn out better for children in kinship care, signifying an indirect reference to some research in this area, even if this was not spelled out. Within this discourse, emotions are regarded as *glue that binds* the child and its kinship foster carers together in a way that provides emotional safety in a chaotic situation.

10'It is important that these children get peace and quiet in some sort of way. I don't know exactly what I'm thinking, but in a way, they have their crisis and grief as well as these other family members. And it's important to match it, because I think it eases their grief if they can share the family's mourning process.'

(Interview five; vignette one, phase two)

The possibility of children sharing their grief with their carers is regarded as positive within this discourse. Some social workers also stressed that if the relatives lived in the same municipality as the children, then stability might be achieved by having similar routines.

13'Because, as we discussed in the previous case, they (the grandparents) have the strength to protect the children from Eva when necessary. So I think that it might be suitable that they stay there, where they apparently like to be, where there's peace and quiet. The grandparents don't seem to be co-dependent on the mother's problems. They don't have to leave the municipality; they've formed relationships outside the family, which are...'

14'Important.'

(Interview six; vignette two, phase two)

Practical and emotional familiarity is outlined as something that kinship carers can provide for the children according to the social workers, which corresponds to previous studies (see for example Peters 2005; Linderot 2006; Farmer & Moyers 2008). The risk associated with kinship carers transferring dysfunctional family patterns found in previous research (Flynn 2002; Peters 2005; Linderot 2006; Farmer & Moyers

2008) was also mentioned in some of the interviews, and the benefits of familiarity were assessed together with the carers' capacity for handling their own emotions towards the child's parents. The child's contact with the violent parent was not a paramount concern within this discourse; the focus was on the *best interests of the child 'here and now'*, which can be seen as a construction of the child as 'being' rather than as 'becoming' (Qvortrup 1994; see also Eriksson 2010).

8'I must say that I'm very critical; I think it's a bit naive. There are good things about it as well, you read about, and there have been discussions here as well, about whether children should be placed outside their family and still have access to both sides... But if you consider the best interest of the children, it's to satisfy their needs here and now, and it's not certain that they'll have as much contact with the relatives on the perpetrator's side./.../ So I think these children should be placed among relatives, where they belong, and perhaps even be brought up there.'

(Interview four; vignette one, phase one)

This 'here and now' perspective might explain why this discourse dominated at the beginning of the case discussions when immediate out-of-home care was needed (phase one), where kinship care was mentioned as a prior alternative by most social workers.

Emotions as obscuring a child perspective

Within this sub-discourse, emotions are understood as a factor that obscures the carer's ability to act in accordance with the best interests of the child (as defined by social services). Even if shared grief could be regarded as glue that binds, if the carers were in too severe a state of grief or shock, then this was regarded as negative.

2'Well, like (social worker 1) I would also like them to be placed among relatives, with the reservation that you've met with these relatives and checked how they reason. Because if they're in a state of grief or crisis and they talk about it in a way that's not good for the children, then it might be better for them to be somewhere else. But always bear in mind that it should be as familiar as possible.'

(Interview one; vignette one, phase one)

Social workers also expressed fear that the children could be used in, or affected by, conflicts between relatives. If the kinship carers had negative feelings towards the violent parent, then this could be seen as preventing the child's ability for contact with the violent parent.

1'I think these children will cope with their difficulties better by being placed in foster care, like an independent foster home, but then still have contact with their relatives.'

2‘Yes, I agree.’ 1‘I think so. You’re building on them being in a neutral place with someone who can help them in the best way in this difficult... I find the aunt on the father’s side to be directly disqualified; what I’m considering is the aunt on the mother’s side. But if you place the children with her, there’ll be complications concerning contact with the father, and that’s not right for the children.’

(Interview one; vignette one, phase two)

If the social workers had doubts about the kinship carers’ capacity for handling their emotions in relation to the violent parent, then this might be regarded as obscuring a child perspective.

14‘I don’t believe that they’ll be able to be totally... “objective” might be the wrong word, but to keep a child perspective.’

13‘No, I do not think so either, no.’

(Interview six; vignette one, phase two)

Within this discourse, it was assessed as being important not to exclude the possibilities of contact between the child and the violent parent, displaying the strong contact presumption that has been found in previous research (Eriksson 2010; Bruno 2015). Ideas about contact with the violent parent and what will be in the *best interests of the child in the long run* influence decisions, and the children tend to be constructed as ‘becomings’ rather than as ‘beings’ (Qvortrup 1994).

Previous research has indicated that social workers regard kinship care as a placement that might facilitate contact with the child’s birth parents (Peters 2005; Linderot 2006). However, where domestic violence is concerned, relatives and friends of the abused person are usually practically or emotionally involved (Hydén 2015). According to this, social workers might view kinship care as more complicated in these cases. Research has also indicated that social workers find kinship carers difficult to supervise and control (Beeman & Boisen 1999; Portengen & van der Neut 1999), which was also found in this study.

7‘Temporary foster homes and foster homes often do as they are told. But with relatives, it might be harder if they say “no, we can deal with this within the family”, or “the child doesn’t need that”.’

(Interview three; vignette one, phase two)

To conclude, emotional attachment *to the child* is regarded as a strength in kinship care and as glue that binds, but emotional engagement *in the child’s care* is more controversial and might be regarded as obscuring acting in accordance with a child perspective.

Neutral non-kinship care

Neutral non-kinship care was presented as a solution to some of the problems that messy emotions or strong opinions amongst kinship foster carers might result in. Within the neutral non-kinship discourse, the nodal point was ‘neutrality’, described as an external position giving the foster family the ability to handle family conflicts and emotions in a more professional way. Non-kinship carers were constructed as ‘neutral’, with an ability to be objective or emotionally neutral towards parents.

4‘My spontaneous reaction after reading this is, don’t put them in any of these (relatives’) homes.’

5‘No, let them stay at the temporary foster home.’

4‘Place them in a professional temporary home or a foster home that can cope with this in a professional way and meet with them all, based on the children’s needs. Because, if you place the children with any of their aunts, you also pit these families against one another.’

5‘Yes. They’ll (the children) end up in the middle of something.’

4‘Yes, the kids will end up in a damn mess.’

5‘Yes, all the different opinions and the children are ambivalent, of course.’

3‘But then, how do we consider that the children might be best off by staying with people they know and maybe have met with their entire lives?’

4‘Mm. But the risk is that you set these (families) against one another, because they have very different perspectives.’

3‘Absolutely. /---/’

4‘There’s a risk that they will hinder future contact and the network since they have such different views. If you put the children in a neutral place, then you might build on the existing relationships instead of opposing them. Then you might even make them cooperate in the end.’

(Interview two; vignette one, phase two)

In this way, neutral non-kinship care is constructed as something that in the long run might promote children’s contact with relatives. The quote also provides an example of the struggle between the emotions as glue that binds discourse and the neutral non-kinship care discourse because social worker 3 had some doubts about placing the children in non-kinship care. At the beginning of the interview (in phase one), the social workers

had also discussed kinship care as a possible alternative. The neutral non-kinship care discourse also leaned on the argument that it is not always in the best interests of children to stay in the same environment. Different opinions amongst relatives were seen as problematic for the children; additionally, it was considered that the parent's crime could involve a strong stigma.

14'They (the children) need to be lifted out.'

13'Yes.'

14'From all of that. /.../'

14'This will be spread among the football team, in the class.'

13'Everywhere.'

14'Their friends' parents. They won't be allowed to hang out with them since their father is a murderer, so...'

13'Yes, I think so too, I think you would think something else... perhaps start over.'

(Interview six, vignette one, phase two)

Earlier research has shown that social workers assess kinship care as less stigmatizing for children compared with non-kinship care (Beeman & Boisen 1999; Peters 2005; Farmer & Moyers 2008). However, in this study, the violent crime of a parent could also be regarded as a stigma itself, advocating for a need to move the children from their municipality as well as from family conflicts. Neutral non-kinship care could thus be constructed as less stigmatizing and problematic in these cases.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The vignettes were constructed around deadly violence and are examples of rare child protection cases. However, social workers' discussions about such extreme events made the normative struggle between different discourses surrounding placement alternatives clear. Domestic violence is a gendered phenomenon where the father is usually the abuser, and studies have indicated that legal and normative ideas of gender equality regarding parenting might benefit violent fathers in Sweden (Eriksson 2010; Bruno 2015). A limitation of this study is that it is not possible to draw any conclusions regarding gender issues because the vignettes differ from one another, and the aim has been to analyse other aspects of the decision-making process.

The social practice in Sweden is influenced by the discourse 'stability through existing relations', and 'stability in care' can be regarded as a shared nodal point in all three main discourses found in the text but as a floating

significant between discourses. Stability within the real family discourse is associated with the child's need for two deputy parents. In the neutral non-kinship care discourse, stability is associated with a neutral position amongst carers that enables the child to have contact with all relatives, which are judged as being equally important. In the 'emotions as glue that binds' discourse, stability is associated with emotional and practical familiarity and the child's need for deeper contact with some relatives at the expense of others. Different constructions of stability thus affect what kind of relationships and family bonds are judged as being most important for the child.

In this study, different placement solutions were suggested by many social workers as the case proceeded in vignette one, where the children were younger and the relatives had different opinions on the parents' capacity. Even if kinship care was suggested by most social workers in the initial phase, some social workers strongly favoured non-kinship care in phase two, while others preferred kinship care or expressed ambivalence, revealing the struggle between different discourses. Research has revealed that children in foster care tend to experience a number of planned moves or a breakdown while in care (see for example Berrick *et al.* 1994; Sallnäs *et al.* 2004; Sinclair *et al.* 2005; Farmer & Moyers 2008; Ward 2009). Several studies indicate that kinship care might decrease the risk of breakdown and moves for children (for example Sallnäs *et al.* 2004; Farmer & Moyers 2008), but this has also been questioned (Oosterman *et al.* 2007; Ward 2009). Planned transitions can also be seen in relation to the goal of reunification with birth parents (Sinclair *et al.* 2005; Backe-Hansen *et al.* 2013). In relation to the results of this study, planned moves can also be understood as the result of different discourses regarding foster care guiding decision-making as the case proceeds over time.

The discourses found in this study can also be related to constructions of the child as either being or becoming (Qvortrup 1994). The younger children (in vignette one) were not assessed as being old enough to influence decisions regarding placement, and a contact presumption with the violent parent – similar to that found in Swedish studies on domestic violence (Eriksson 2010; Bruno 2015) – might result in a disqualification of kinship care in favour of non-kinship care in these cases. Given the vulnerable position of children who are left behind in cases of lethal domestic violence, such a construction might be highly problematic from a child perspective. The results contribute to the understanding of

how social workers understand emotional commitment amongst kinship carers and ideas about neutrality amongst non-kinship carers. A critical question is if, or to what extent, neutrality amongst non-kinship carers is possible or desirable in complex cases. Further research is also needed, based on the placement experiences of children and their foster carers in child protection cases involving lethal violence.

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