



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The family-market wall contested: social workers managing contradictory ideals in marketised foster care

Teres Hjärpe, [teres.hjarpe@soch.lu.se](mailto:teres.hjarpe@soch.lu.se)  
Lund University, Sweden

The task of assessing and contracting foster parents, usually undertaken by a child protection social worker, is increasingly framed by market arrangements. This article explores, from the perspective of social workers, whether and how this context poses challenges for foster care considerations. Theoretically informed by the sociology of emotions, the following research questions are explored: how do social workers relate to culturally rooted boundaries between the family and market spheres in their interactions with foster parents? How are right and wrong motives for foster parenting constructed in social workers' retellings of such interactions? The findings are based on abductively processed ethnographic data (observations and interviews) with social workers and managers. The social workers' reflections reveal ambivalence and contradiction. On a normative level, they reinforce cultural boundaries between the family and market spheres, keeping ideals of good parenting separate from market logic. Yet, they face situations in which it is difficult to defend this division, and market arrangements can even be perceived as beneficial. These themes provide an empirical illustration of emotional ambivalence resulting from blurred boundaries between the private and public spheres in neoliberal modernity. As emotion norms directly affect the assessment of foster parents, the sociology of emotions can contribute to social workers' reflections on the sources of tension in foster care.

**Keywords** family-market wall • emotion norms • child protection • foster parenting

To cite this article: Hjärpe, T. (2025) The family-market wall contested: social workers managing contradictory ideals in marketised foster care, *Emotions and Society*, Early View, DOI: 10.1332/26316897Y2025D000000071

---

### Introduction

The task of finding, assessing and contracting foster parents, usually carried out by a child protection social worker, is increasingly being framed by market arrangements. In this article, it is explored from the perspective of social workers: if, and how,

this context redefines interactions with foster parents and presents challenges to the placement process. Like welfare provision, child protection is characterised by rapid structural and organisational change. In parallel with a growing shortage of residential and foster care, and partly in an attempt to solve it through market mechanisms, many welfare states have welcomed non-public agencies to provide child protection since the early 1990s (Colton et al, 2008; Meagher et al, 2016). In Sweden, the presence of for-profit actors has been noticeable for several decades (Fridell Lif, 2023). One implication for potential foster parents is that they can contact or be contacted not only by the local social services but also by any Swedish municipality or private actor that offers supervision, administrative support and financial compensation to varying degrees (Pålsson et al, 2022).

Marketisation has not only diversified service providers, but has also opened up new dynamics, expectations, needs and possible ways of acting in the welfare services. As declared by Bjerger and Bjerregaard (2017), today's frontline professionals find themselves working in a 'twilight zone' between ideas of entrepreneurship and private sector strategies, and practical conditions grounded in traditional principles of public administration. For example, the new role of not only providing but also purchasing services such as foster care in competition requires skills not traditionally associated with the social work profession: marketing, budgeting and ordering, procurement and auditing of contracted services (Höjer and Forkby, 2011; Lundström et al, 2021). Foster parents, for their part, need to distinguish between the different agencies, protect their rights to get support in terms of supervision and reimbursements, and make informed choices between several actors and alternatives.

New incentives to negotiate the price of foster care services following these developments appear to challenge fundamental principles in child protection (Forkby and Höjer, 2018). Children have been the subject of monetary transactions at different historical times, but throughout the 20th century, new meanings of parenthood and new ideals of childhood emerged (Zelizer, 1994; Söderlind and Sköld, 2018). With a growing emotional value attached, children have been taken out of and kept sacred from the 'circuit of exchange' (Illouz, 2009: 388); today, talking about money and children is surrounded by strong opinions and moral positions (Jacobsson, 2023). Colton et al (2008: 873) have observed that within the social services, the 'moral obligation to care' is often put in opposition to 'financial reward', with consequences for those deemed worthy of caring for children in need. By analysing comments on social media, Jacobsson (2023) highlights the moral minefield that potential foster parents enter when they ask too directly how much one can earn as a foster parent. In addition, in welfare states such as Sweden, attitudes towards the idea of 'profiting from vulnerable citizens' are predominantly negative in public discourse (Nilsson, 2020) and among social workers (Kallio et al, 2016).

Through market arrangements of foster care, the economic value of the child can be considered as 'reactivated', although in new forms (Söderlind and Sköld, 2018: 57). It is now a dynamic with implications and potential tensions for the social worker-foster parent relationship, and for social workers' considerations regarding foster care placements. According to scholars within the sociology of knowledge, we can explore this dynamic as a case of emotional complexity in the light of neoliberalism (Hochschild, 2004; 2011; Illouz, 2007). Hochschild (2004; 2005) argues that commodification leaves impressions on emotional life – both private and professional – with certain characteristics when what is being put on

the market are values that we associate with family life. The idea of an impermeable wall between the family and market spheres is deeply rooted in culture, and comes with feeling rules about what kinds of motives and commitments are acceptable for parenting, caring for relatives and so on (Hochschild, 2005: 74, 80). With market advancements such as the one in child protection, the family-market wall is supposedly challenged and negotiated.

Against this background, the purpose of the present analysis is to explore if and how the context of marketisation enters into the interactions between social workers and foster parents, and how it is reflected in the social workers' reasoning about good and bad foster parenting. Previous studies from scattered fields demonstrate that both unscripted and explicit emotion norms are important for the encounters and power dynamics between welfare state representatives and citizens (Huntington, 2009; McCoyd, 2009; Barrett Cox, 2016; Laurin, 2023). How such relationships are negotiated in the light of marketisation, especially in the social worker-foster parent interaction, is a more unexplored field. The more specific research questions guiding this exploration are: how do social workers today relate to culturally rooted boundaries between family and market spheres in their interactions with foster parents? How are right and wrong emotional motives to become a foster parent constructed in social workers' retellings of such interactions?

The study is based on ethnographic data from the social services. It contributes through empirical illustrations of the dynamics at play when emotion norms are negotiated in the light of societal change (marketisation). It is demonstrated to be a field full of opinions, ambivalence and contradictions. On a normative level, social workers strengthen the boundaries between family and market spheres, keeping ideals of good parenting separate from market logics. Yet they face some situations in which it is difficult to defend this separation, and others in which market-like arrangements are even perceived as beneficial. These themes identify emotional ambivalence and contradiction in relationships framed by neoliberal modernity.

## **A quasi-market for foster care provision in Sweden**

Swedish municipalities can outsource the provision of child protection through procurement systems and purchase placements on an individual, case-by-case basis. In 2022, for-profit so-called independent foster care agencies covered 25 per cent of all foster care placements in Sweden. These agencies contract foster parents and employ social workers and psychologists for supervision and support (Fridell Lif, 2023: 353). The arrangement is described as a 'quasi-market' since the local municipal social services are legally and financially responsible for the placements but compete with other municipalities and with private actors in the recruitment of foster parents (Forkby and Höjer, 2018: 167).

The National Board of Health and Welfare suggests knowledge-based methods for interviewing and assessing foster parents. These methods aim to identify dimensions such as risk and protective factors,<sup>1</sup> and the emotional surplus for a foster child in the family.<sup>2</sup> Economy alone and religion are examples of motives for foster parenting that are mentioned as being too 'self-centred' (NBHW, 2014: 29). Structured and standardised procedures are also considered to reduce the risk that the assessments are based on the social workers' intuition or prejudices (NBHW, 2014: 15). The level of reimbursement is decided or negotiated on an individual basis, either directly with

the parents or indirectly with the agency that has contracted the foster family. There are national guidelines for the reimbursement levels, which vary from a basic fee of 11,417 to 17,531 SEK<sup>3</sup> per month, depending on the estimated time consumption and work effort of the parents. Additional allowances are given for expenses such as food, clothing and leisure activities (SALAR, 2024). In practice, the level of reimbursement, supervision and administrative support provided to the foster parents may exceed or fall short of the guidelines and vary widely between municipalities and between public and private actors. So far, there is no evidence that outsourcing leads to lower costs, but rather the opposite. The continuing shortage of foster care, giving providers a market advantage, is one possible explanation (Forkby and Höjer, 2018: 166; Pålsson et al, 2022: 183).

A recent report from the Swedish government (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2023: 66) proposes increased state regulation to guarantee quality in child protection services. In foster care, national coordination of the recruitment, assessment and training of foster parents is proposed, as well as licencing foster parents, a limit on the number of children per foster family, and clearer, more binding guidelines for the reimbursement of care providers. These changes could mean less variation in local arrangements and less space for case-by-case price negotiation, yet the actual implications are too early to tell.

## **Foster parenting on the commodity frontier**

From the growing field of the sociology of emotions, this analysis primarily builds on the arguments of Eva Illouz and Arlie Russell Hochschild about how commercialisation echoes in private emotional life. The reading of Illouz on emotional capitalism has served the broader understanding of our modern culture in which neoliberalism increasingly determines how we view relationships and display emotions, while Hochschild's conceptualisations of feeling rules, the commodity frontier and the family-market wall are used as more concrete analytical tools.

### *The market, emotions and ambiguity in modern intimate life*

It is often argued that modern emotional life is fraught with complexity, ambiguity and contradiction associated with changing social structures and the differentiation of societies (Patulny et al, 2019). Eva Illouz (2007; 2009) pays particular attention to the emotional ambivalence surrounding the intrusion of economic principles into intimate relationships. Following influences from psychoanalysis and feminist narratives of self-realisation in the mid- and late 20th century, emotions gained an intensified value in both private and professional life. At the same time, these emotions became intellectualised and detached, creating a paradox that she calls 'cold intimacies' (Illouz, 2007: 36–9). This development towards a more instrumental or 'proprietary' relationship with our emotions, making them valuable, comparable and manageable, has been purposeful for the commodification of emotions, attracting the interest of the market (Illouz, 2007). As a consequence of these developments, emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2007: 5) is now a 'culture where emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other...', and in which traditional boundaries between the public and private spheres are blurred.

Today, we can see the imprint of the market on intimate relationships in many ways. For example, the market offers possibilities to outsource traditional family responsibilities to make the modern work-life balance more reasonable. Baby-sitting, dating, planning parties and caring for older people are a few examples of care activities that we often pay for rather than provide ourselves (Hochschild, 2005: 76). Emotionality is also linked to the consumption of experiences, products and services and relationships are surrounded by expectations of such consumption (Illouz and Kotliar, 2022). Another example is the modern marriage market, characterised by inexhaustible possibilities of choice, where not only economy and social status, but also emotional gain, are included in cost-benefit-like considerations (Illouz, 2012: 180–3).

Hochschild (2004; 2005) sees emotional capitalism through an ever advancing commodity frontier, where the market takes steps into new areas of our daily and professional lives, with multifaceted dynamics for emotionality (Hochschild, 2011: 23). I argue that the marketisation of the foster care sector in later decades, which is the context of this study, can be seen as a case of a (re-)advancing commodity frontier in the sense that the economic value of children is reactivated in these developments. This analysis takes an interest in the dynamics and consequences of this development for the foster parent-social worker interaction.

### *Renegotiated feeling rules and the family-market wall*

In everyday life and relationships, emotional capitalism produces ambivalences and contradictions, for example in questions of how to be authentic as a spouse or a friend (Illouz, 2007: 10, 111), or as in our main interest here, a foster parent. Hochschild offers analytical tools to capture these dynamics empirically, arguing that each culture, historical context or social position offers its specific register of socially accepted feeling rules. These emotional ‘maps’ are constantly negotiated in social interaction, guiding us on how much or how little to feel in different situations and how to manage our emotions accordingly (Hochschild, 2008: 80). We can be sure that there is a feeling rule by the reactions when someone breaks it, or when we sense a discrepancy between a rule and what we feel in any given situation (Hochschild, 1979: 563). With every advance of the commodity frontier, feeling rules are negotiated, calibrated, adopted or resisted, and emotion norms get adjusted and sometimes normalised (2011: 26, 31). Hochschild also suggests that the more commodified different aspects of our lives become, the more symbolic meaning is attached to the parts that are not yet commodified, as seen, for example, in the way motherhood is often iconised today (2004: 15).

Using the metaphor ‘the family-market wall’ (2005: 75), Hochschild illustrates her point with relevance to the interest in foster care. Culturally, at least in the modern West, the family and the market are understood as two distinct spheres, defined as opposites, and separated by an impermeable wall. The family sphere is thought of as enchanted and magical, where the foundations for communication and action are personal relationships, gift exchanges, care and emotional attachment (Hochschild, 2005). The market sphere, on the other hand, is cold and disenchanting, and we are expected to be rational, calculative, impersonal and professional (Hochschild, 2004; 2005; 2011). Although we have these firm ideals, they are constantly negotiated in modern life, and can be a source of contradiction:

We feel one way about the location of the ‘wall’ between market and non-market life. But we may actually *be* in another place *vis à vis* that wall. [...] Our feeling rules puts us on the non-market side of the wall while circumstances force us onto the market side. [...] How we imagine acts to symbolize love may not accord with what we’re able to do, or honestly feel like doing. We may be living on one side of the commercial wall, while our feeling rule reside on the other. (Hochschild, 2005: 80, emphasis in original)

The quote describes an ambivalence in which our ideals do not align with how we or others act. We move back and forth across the wall, sometimes mixing the logics of these spheres to get on with our lives, Hochschild states. Boundaries are blurred and logics are borrowed from one side of the wall to the other. The meaning making of this ambivalence can be empirically studied in the everyday formulations, negotiations and accountings regarding the family-market wall when it is challenged. In this study, these analytical tools are used to explore how the relationship between foster parents and social workers, and the emotion norms for foster parenting, are negotiated in the marketised context where foster parents and social workers potentially take on new roles.

## Interviews, observations, and documents for an ethnographic approach

### *Data collection*

The data used for the present analysis were collected as part of the three-year project ‘Social workers’ reasoning when placing children and adolescents in institutional or foster care’, initiated by a research and development board in southern Sweden. Seven municipalities of different sizes (around 10,000 to 110,000 inhabitants) were represented. Over nine months in 2022, a representative number of interviews and observations were conducted with social workers and frontline managers employed in child protection. The dataset is summarised in [Table 1](#).

**Table 1:** Methods and amount of data

| Method for data collection | Number               |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Observations               | 21 half or full days |
| Interviews, individual     | 42                   |
| Interviews, group          | 2                    |
| Validation workshops       | 7                    |

The observations were realised at staff meetings and supervision sessions with between two and 30 participants. The observations were ‘slightly’ participatory, in the sense that I sometimes interacted with the social workers, either socially or by asking for clarification (Emerson et al, 2011). For the most part, I adopted a withdrawn approach, listening and taking field notes with the aim of catching ‘naturally occurring talk’ in as much detail as possible (Silverman, 2011). Field notes were taken by hand on paper and then transcribed.

The interviews were typically with individuals, except for two group interviews with three and 19 social workers, respectively. All individual and group interviews

followed a semi-structured interview guide and lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours. A tape recorder was put on after consent had been given to transcribe the interviews verbatim.

In 2023, I returned to all the municipalities for 'validation workshops'. The aim was to present themes selected from the material to confirm the validity of my interpretations. Some adjustments were made to clarify social service routines but mainly the themes were confirmed as relevant by the participants.

### *Coding and thematisation*

Field notes and interview transcripts have been considered as ethnographic material, contributing to a thick understanding of the practices, not only in talk and text but also in action and interaction (Silverman, 2011). The findings were elaborated through an ethnographic abductive strategy, a process of iterative movement between ideas, observations, theoretical fragments, analysis, data production and conclusions (Atkinson, 2015: 56–7). The data collected were processed through a qualitative thematic analysis (Silverman, 2011: 9–10). This was carried out in three steps.

As the project took a broad and exploratory approach to the circumstances that influence child placement decisions, the field was entered with broad initial questions about routines for making placement decisions, logics and considerations, preconditions and challenges, and the dynamics between private and public actors. The initial coding followed these four themes. This first coding resulted in a number of prominent sub-codes. In the next and second step, selected parts of the material were recoded, starting from one of the sub-themes about the dynamics between private and public actors: negotiations about reimbursements. The second coding resulted in the following new themes: foster parenting as engagement or work; good and bad reasons for becoming a foster parent; feelings as the knowledge base; and interactional market strategies. In a third and final elaboration, the coding was theoretically informed by the sociology of emotions literature and focused on the different ways social workers related to the metaphor of the impermeable wall between the family and market spheres. The themes of this final coding are represented in the structure of the forthcoming analysis.

### *Ethics*

Due to the non-sensitive nature of the data to be collected, with the main research interest being the social workers' reasoning in general, the Swedish Ethic Review Board recommended that the project should not undergo an ethical review.<sup>4</sup> All participants consented to participate in observations and/or interviews either on paper or on tape. All names of social workers and municipalities have been pseudonymised.

## **Analysis**

The analysis will show that, from the perspective of the social workers, the question of how it is appropriate to feel and act as a foster parent is currently being negotiated in the light of marketisation, and is something that provokes opinions and contradictions. The analysis is structured around four themes that represent the ways in which

social workers, in their retellings of encounters with foster parents, express feeling rules and relate to the family–market divide. The first two themes suggest that the normative division between the family and market spheres is reproduced and even reinforced. The practices of good foster care are placed exclusively on the family side of the wall and are seen as impossible to combine with financial motives to become a foster parent. The following two themes show that these boundaries are paradoxically blurred when social workers, partly reluctantly, acknowledge foster parents as market actors and sometimes even find advantages with the market logic in their interactions with foster parents.

### *Unconditional love and magic on the family side of the wall*

A first observation is that social workers reproduce culturally embedded feeling rules for parenting through the message that there should be feelings and emotional attachment involved in foster care from the beginning. What social workers look for in foster parents is the potential to give parent-like love, warmth and unconditional commitment. While recent studies on child protection in Sweden suggest that traditional family-oriented ideals are partly being replaced by a professionalisation discourse (Shanks et al, 2021), the social workers in this study emphasise family-oriented dimensions as ideals for foster parents. To start with, the child is often portrayed as needing and deserving of unconditional love, the kind that parents, rather than professionals, can provide. This was expressed in formulations such as ‘they are thirsty for love’, or ‘they just need a warm embrace’. In a supervision session, a manager and a social worker are making sense of the recent resignation of a foster parent couple, and love becomes the centre of attention:

- SW: The foster parents have just resigned.  
Manager: Oh, that’s sad, but maybe it was good that they didn’t wait a year to resign.  
SW: Yes, it was bad from the beginning, the mother said to us that ‘I will not be able to love these children as if they were my own.’  
Manager: Wow...  
SW: And then I think that maybe you should not become a foster parent at all. (Field note, supervision session, municipality 2)

The news that foster parents have resigned is met, and perhaps minimised, with the reaction that it was for the better since there was no prospect for the child to get parent-like love anyway. Although this is a situated (perhaps even defensive) explanation to make sense of the resignation, the requirement for parents to strive for emotional attachment constructs a feeling rule that successful foster parents feel love.

Furthermore, social workers expressed that being a foster parent should preferably be an identity in which the foster child is treated as a biological child: ‘they don’t talk about him as a foster child’ or ‘he is one of us’ are expressions used by participants that illuminate this point. This commitment is not only unconditional, but also lifelong: ‘I mean, you will be the child’s foster parents for the rest of your life, right?’, one social worker echoed the reasoning of a parent she admired. These perspectives resonate with foster children’s statements about the importance of ‘belonging’ to a family and having a normal childhood (Höjer, 2019). The social

workers talked about this attitude as ‘indefinable’ and surrounded by a certain enchantment (Hochschild, 2005):

Foster parents should be engaged and really want to ... I mean it is about how they think about the child's need. There is just a warmth that you don't find in other families. For example, when they don't hesitate to stay in contact with the biological network, because this will be important for the child. It is a special attitude that is almost magic. (Interview with social worker MR)

To interact and stay in contact with the biological network is something often perceived by foster parents as difficult and sometimes fraught with tension (Höjer, 2019). As perceived by this social worker, when foster parents are warm and committed and work through the mechanisms of the family sphere (emotional attachment), they can put the child's interest first and give up their own comfort. In this example, it is considered a natural part of the task because it is in the child's interest, it is a non-egoistic feature exclusively happening within the family ‘magic’. In the next theme, I will demonstrate how these qualities were constructed as incompatible with market logics.

### *Strengthening the family-market wall*

In many social workers' arguments, the desired love-based engagement is constructed as incompatible with neither a work-based approach to being a foster parent nor an interest in money. To start with, the desired attitude described above was perceived as threatened by national engagements to professionalise foster parenting, for example in commitments to training, authorisation and increased financial compensation (Pålsson, 2023). Such aspirations could be acknowledged, but at the same time always weighed against: ‘... the danger that it turns into a job’, as one social worker put it. Another social worker explains that it can cause challenges for the fundamental temporal dimensions of foster care:

There are more foster families who resign today, and maybe it has to do with the independent foster care agencies. If they [the foster parents] feel that they work on assignment, and assignments can be terminated [...] maybe then it becomes easier to feel that they have a job instead of an engagement in a young person's life and that they have an important function for that child for the rest of its life ... it is something in the way that this is formulated as an assignment. (Interview with social worker SS)

In this quote, marketisation is believed to have an impact on the conditions under which foster parents are recruited. A contract-based way of becoming a foster parent may increase the tendency to terminate the mission, like ‘quitting a job’ when circumstances change. A contrast is drawn between something ‘new’ (working on a job-like assignment) and something ‘traditional’ (engaging in a young person's life). In a slightly different version, it was put as follows: ‘Today you often hear that they have “started” a foster home, but it is not something you start, it is something you are.’ The market-related expression ‘starting a company’ becomes the opposite to ‘having an engagement’. As the next section will illustrate, the professional motive

to be a foster parent becomes particularly problematic for the social workers when money becomes an issue.

In many accounts, a perceived focus on money would automatically exclude persons from being considered good foster parents. Such statements often leaned on boundary work that contrasted heart or love with money and economy: 'There must be a heart that is not about money,' or 'a genuine interest in helping and supporting people *or* a more economic interest'. Höjer (2019) and Jacobsson (2023) have problematised the sensitivity for parents to raise questions about money since the reason can be need rather than greed. Judging from common reasoning in the present study, the money question is on the social workers' radar:

Researcher: What makes a good foster care placement?

SW: Well, if the first discussion we have is not about money, that is a good sign. With some parents you just end up in the money questions all the time, and I just hate it. In other cases, I can explain about the money the first time we meet and then it does not get infected later, but if you suspect already in the first meeting that this is a task they do for profit .... (Interview with social worker VH)

As we can see, money can be mentioned by the social worker in conversations with foster parents. Many social workers acknowledged the right to have a 'reasonable reimbursement' and that parents could not be expected to engage 'completely free of charge'. However, they preferred to deal with reimbursements as a 'point of information', taken on their initiative, rather than as a 'matter of negotiation'. The upsetting feature in the quote by social worker VH is when parents themselves ask about money too early, as this seems to reveal this as the *main* motive. Thus, there seems to be a fine line as to when and how money can be mentioned when parenthood is considered. While money as *compensation* is accepted, money as *profit* is not.

It seemed to be a particularly incriminating characteristic for foster parents if they were perceived to be using the care deficit to their financial advantage. Foster parents dictating the recruitment process were described with frustration: 'They set a price even before discussing the need of the child!', and even with anger when the focus on money was experienced as potentially contagious:

We contacted a foster family for an emergency placement, and the kid had big needs. Then the foster parents say that they want 4,000 [SEK] over the maximum reimbursement and 'then we'll take her'. So, we ended up in a hostage situation, and I really don't like that. They use us in a desperate situation. But we cannot pick and choose so we had to agree. Then something else happened, the foster parents talk to each other; 'How stupid you are that you don't have higher demands, we get this much,' and so on, and 'We don't want to have these discussions,' and 'We don't want foster parents with that attitude.' (Interview with social worker SJ)

As Hochschild states (1979), a feeling rule is most visible when someone breaks it and in the reactions that follow. Although not explicitly formulated as a feeling rule here, the quote supports my argument that parents who are perceived as interested

in maximising their profit challenge the social workers' ideals. From a market logic, it is an admirable strategy to try to get the best price for your service. However, it does not appear desirable in the family sphere, following the logic that it cannot be combined with real care. In this case, the strategy is equalised with 'taking a hostage' and dismissed as an attitude that social workers 'really don't like'. Even more problematic for the social worker is when the market logic spills over to other foster parents who may get inspired to ask for a pay rise. When acting from the market side of the wall, foster parents may confuse the possibility of being considered good foster parents.

So far, it has been demonstrated how culturally embedded feeling rules are reproduced in the social workers' retellings of encounters with foster parents. The idea of the impermeable wall between the family and market spheres is reproduced and even reinforced, as can be seen from the strong reactions when parents are perceived to cross the wall. Thus, one kind of response to the advancing commodity frontier seems to be resistance and the strengthening of traditional values.

#### *Proactive foster parents blurring the boundaries*

There were times when it did not seem that easy for the social workers to categorise parents as genuine or not in relation to the market-family divide. The following discussion shows the ambivalence when parents raise questions about reimbursement, yet cannot be dismissed as 'bad parents'. The discussion takes place in a team meeting:

- SW1: They are already at the highest compensation level possible, but they keep on fighting for each crown. They also asked for extra compensation for some expenditures, and I said, 'Well, send me a list.'
- SW2: Ah, wow.
- SW1: Yes, I know, they already get [per month per child, they also got a one-time big compensation. Now they had read somewhere about raised minimums, and they think it applies to them as well. But we said no, and then they started to ask for compensation for all these little things.
- SW3: It is like they feel underpaid.
- SW1: Yes, but they are the least underpaid of all our foster parents.
- SW2: How sad to act in that way when you have this kind of engagement, to be a foster parent, I mean.
- SW3: But they are great with the kids, they are thriving in her house.
- SW1: Well, I think we have already been very generous with them. I mean you do this out of heart or for money, and in this case, I am starting to wonder.
- SW3: Well, they have done a great job with the kids, and that is the same spirit that has benefited the children. They finally got their trauma treatment, that was another fight they took.
- SW1: I don't think that the one who screams the loudest should get the most money. They don't even have very heavy kids. It is not fair to the other parents that does this by heart, and don't get the same compensation .... (Field note from team meeting municipality 6)

In this interaction, the family-market wall is again reproduced by social workers 1 and 2, and further strengthened by an argument of justice and fairness in relation to limited resources, a theme also mentioned in other interviews. It seems disturbing that those who shout the loudest get the most at the expense of those who do it 'by heart'. However, an alternative interpretation is offered by social worker 3, who carefully points out that the children 'thrive in the family'. The entrepreneurial spirit of the parents is even described as benefiting the children when channelled towards other authorities. These parents 'take fights' and guard their own and their children's rights in relation to the welfare system.

There are many ways in which expressions of emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2007) are normalised in contemporary parent-child relationships. Parents who replace presence with gifts may be questioned, but parental love and commitment are often expressed through gifts or experiences (Ennis, 2014; Sanders, 2020). Another way of demonstrating engagement as a parent actor in the service market is to be proactive and to invest time and effort in knowing their rights and options among multiple actors and alternatives, hopefully leading to a place in a good school or an after-school programme. In the above interaction, although appearing as an alternative position to a dominant norm, or perhaps as an excuse for being money-oriented, we see an opening for an acceptance of proactive agency, which is necessary in a context framed by the market in the first place.

In conclusion, the fact that these parents are meeting their children's needs, and the act of 'greed' are two pictures that seem difficult to put together. The boundary between good and bad parenting, which is linked to the family-market wall, is somewhat blurred.

#### *Acknowledging the strategies of the market side*

The boundaries between the market and family spheres were not only occasionally blurred, as in the previous example. Social workers could also rationalise and account for foster parents' questions and actions with logic from the market side of the wall. These positionings were observed to a limited extent in the social workers' talk about foster parents' attitudes and actions, but more often indirectly, in how they could use market-side strategies in their interactions with foster parents and with each other. Some of these strategies are illustrated below.

To start with, it was earlier demonstrated that social workers prepared in advance to talk about money with foster parents (to explain the reimbursement system, for example). Reimbursement in this sense was often talked about in normalising terms, as expressed by one social worker: 'Nobody does this totally for free, I totally buy it,' establishing a position where it would be odd not to inquire about remuneration. However, such an argument could also be made with direct references to other market-based arenas:

I never make a placement without discussing the reimbursement first. I mean, it is not fair play if you don't. You wouldn't want to accept a job and then you'll see what your salary is. Or you don't buy a car and then you have to pay it one month later without knowing the price in advance. We must clear all these things out first. (Interview with social worker KBL)

In this illustration, a market logic is regarded as natural for foster care. The foster parent-social worker relationship is rhetorically equated with the employer/employee in the labour market and the buyer/seller in the consumer market. The discussion of foster parent remuneration is as unquestioned, like the negotiation of salary or price in the market. It is a matter of 'knowing in advance' what you are buying and selling. These arguments are powerful since they equalise a more unusual experience – that of being a foster parent– with relationships most people have experience of – to be an employee or a buyer of a product.

Second, social workers could also take actions that confirmed and acknowledged the importance of money in other ways. For example, I observed that opportunities to negotiate reimbursement on behalf of the parents were taken whenever it was opportune. In the following field note, social workers take the opportunity to maximise financial compensation when an inconsistency has been identified by a newly appointed manager:

- Manager: We need to go through our list. We have some levels that I don't understand. We are not consistent.
- SW1: I think we should raise the level for X because she has big needs, and her foster parents have been on a very low [compensation] level.
- Manager: Yes, I was wondering why they were so low, based on her history.
- SW1: We should raise for all her three kids, actually.
- SW2: And X is on the third level from the top but she is also very demanding, the foster parents have to stay home from work a lot.
- SW2: Same with X, he has tough diabetes but is not on the top level.  
(Field note from team meeting, municipality 7)

When the goal is to make reimbursements more equal, the opportunity is taken to raise some foster parents' reimbursements rather than lower those of others. Arguments about the severity of the children's problems, such as severe diabetes, and the sacrifices the parents have to make, are used to justify higher reimbursements. A little later that same day, social worker 1 calls up one of the foster parents to deliver the news that, 'Now you are at the highest level!', an action that can be interpreted as an acknowledgement that the financial compensation can be of importance in building relationships with foster parents. Thus, social workers can act as the foster parents' advocates for higher reimbursement and borrow from across the wall if they find it is needed to get the job of finding and keeping foster parents done.

Another way in which the logics of the market were acknowledged was when social workers required value for money and even found advantages in doing so. As [Hochschild \(2005: 80\)](#) points out, there are many benefits to market-based deals over relationship-based gift exchanges. They appear more transparent and measurable, and come with freedom of choice and relief from further expectations beyond paying the cost. The social workers talked about some arrangements as being appreciated with arguments that followed a market logic: 'It can feel good to tell them that "Well, you are paid so well, so this task should be included."' Thus, expensive placements could be comfortable because the social worker could push back the responsibility, leaning on the high reimbursement. Administrative and other tasks were sometimes negotiated in relation to the price:

Well, I have high demands because we pay them for it, we demand a lot from them, but they are full-time parents, and they get a salary for it, so to speak. They are home all the time. They can drive themselves to pick up the kids ... they don't call us as soon as there is a meeting and they have to take time off from work, they solve it themselves ... and if something happens, I expect the professionals in the agency to do their job, and in that sense, it becomes less job for me. (Interview with social worker ML)

This social worker uses a market logic that values what she gets for what she pays and she knows her right as a purchaser to demand a certain quality: the salary comes with certain responsibilities. Because she is relieved of specific workloads, the exchange has advantages. Similar calculations could be made prior to a placement, for example, if a child to be placed in foster care was perceived as 'heavy' with extensive needs. Expensive private placement could even be preferred to municipal contracts with explicit reference to the profitability: 'If they have special competences, then we benefit from contracting private actors.'

I will end this analysis with a quote that is particularly illustrative of the ambivalence I have been trying to illustrate. A social worker reflects on assumptions about foster parents' motives, that she thinks social workers may be making a little too hasty:

The foster parents could say that 'you [social workers] only talk about money', but I thought that it was to them [the parents] that it matters .... It was a bit funny.... (Interview with social worker KL)

As it seems, assuming that money will be important in the foster parent-social worker interaction is something that can hit right back at the social workers themselves and create confusion. Summing up, the constructions and strategies illustrated in the last two themes form something of a paradox to the family-market-divide outlined in the first part of the analysis. We have seen that, in parallel with ideals of market-free relationships with foster parents, the market is reflected in their interactions in different ways, and to some extent market-based logics are accepted. In the following discussion, I will suggest possible ways to make sense of this ambivalence and the complex dynamics of established feeling rules and action in the foster care practice.

## Discussion

The ethnographic findings of this study have served to demonstrate that marketisation as a social policy principle for foster care provision echoes in social worker-foster parent interactions and creates tensions in the foster care recruitment process. After analysing social workers' retellings of interactions with foster parents and their reasoning about good and bad motives for foster parenting, we can conclude that this is an area of ambivalence and contradiction. Social workers search for love, enchantment and other values located in the family sphere, in a socio-political context framed by the logic of the market sphere, often described as its opposite. At the normative level, social workers reinforce culturally rooted boundaries between the family and market spheres, but they face some situations in which it is difficult to defend this division, and others in which the market-framed negotiations are acknowledged and even perceived as beneficial. As the empirical data illustrate, there is both a strong

rejection and signs of adoption and normalisation of the market logic. I argue that this ambivalence can be understood as a response to and a negotiation of an advancing commodity frontier (Hochschild, 2004), where the market sphere has re-entered the culturally sacred realm of the parent-child relationship (Zelizer, 1994). It is a case of what Illouz (2007; 2012) has described as blurred boundaries between the public and private spheres in which social workers struggle to navigate the coexistence of monetary and emotional values.

What the interactions and negotiations presented here mean or express in the long term is a matter for further inquiry and reflection. Perhaps, the dynamics displayed here first and foremost can be understood as an early screenshot of the workings of the commodity frontier as it advances: initial strong reactions to a change that is slowly becoming normalised and institutionalised. As for the context and the conditions of the foster parent-social worker interaction becomes increasingly framed by market logics; it will be purposeful to adopt their strategies, like it or not, for the simple purpose of getting the job done. Party planners, nannies, dating agencies, surrogate mothers and even social work itself, are services that are paid for and economically negotiated on in ways that were unthinkable in other historical contexts. If this is the case, parents asking for money or negotiating for higher reimbursement will not be that remarkable in the future, and boundaries will be blurred even when it comes to what we expect from foster parents. Another interpretation, based on Hochschild's (2004) reasoning, is that the division between market and family spheres is being reinforced at the normative level in response to the increasing commodification of parts of family life, with echoes in our own actions, logics and feelings: whatever is still left on the 'other side' of the wall (in this case, the foster parent-child relationship) becomes even more sacred and is given an over-symbolic value to compensate for everything else that has changed. In order to live with the rapid changes and to legitimise our own changed ways of living and acting, we hold on even tighter to what is left. If these are the dynamics at play, the separation between good foster parenting and market logics, will become even stronger. While these questions need to be further explored empirically and theorised, a contribution to the sociology of emotions has been made through the empirical illustration of redefined relationships between social workers and foster parents, a case of emotional ambivalence in neoliberal society (Illouz, 2007).

## **Implications for policy, practice and research**

In child protection policy making it needs to be considered that market arrangements have consequences for the welfare state's relationships with its citizens, often mediated by welfare professionals. Social workers, supported by their organisations, can create space to reflect on how their relationships with clients and co-workers are shaped by current developments and what conditions they need to protect vulnerable children in this context. As emotion norms have a direct impact when interviewing a prospective foster parent (also discussed by Colton et al, 2008), the sociology of emotions perspective can contribute to these reflections by shedding light on causes for tensions and contradictions in social worker-foster parent interaction. In research, further investigation is needed from the perspectives of foster parents and children, as this research has explored the social worker's point of view.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See 'BRA-fam' (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> 'Nya Kälvesten', see [www.socialstyrelsen.se/kunskapsstod-och-regler/omraden/evidensbaserad-praktik/metodguiden/nya-kalvestenintervjun](http://www.socialstyrelsen.se/kunskapsstod-och-regler/omraden/evidensbaserad-praktik/metodguiden/nya-kalvestenintervjun).

<sup>3</sup> Approximately 1,100–1,700 euros.

<sup>4</sup> No. 2022-01415-01.

## Funding

The project has been supported and funded by FoUSjuhärad, Högskolan i Borås, Sweden.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## References

- Atkinson, P. (2015) *For Ethnography*, Sage.
- Barrett Cox, A. (2016) Correcting behaviors and policing emotions: how behavioral infractions become feeling-rule violations, *Symbolic Interaction*, 39(3): 484–503. doi: [10.1002/symb.239](https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.239)
- Bjerger, B. and Bjerregaard, T. (2017) The twilight zone: paradoxes of practicing reform, *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 6(2): 100–15, doi: [10.1108/joe-02-2017-0006](https://doi.org/10.1108/joe-02-2017-0006)
- Colton, M., Roberts, S. and Williams, M. (2008) The recruitment and retention of family foster-carers: an international and cross-cultural analysis, *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(5): 865–84, doi: [10.1093/bjsw/bcl375](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl375)
- Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R.I. and Shaw, L. (2011) *Writing Ethnographic Field Notes*, 2nd edn, University of Chicago Press.
- Ennis, L.R. (2014) *Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood*, Demeter Press.
- Forkby, T. and Höjer, S. (2018) Placeringar i köpt vård: om rationell styrning och kontraktproblem på den sociala barnvårdsmarknaden [Placements in purchased care: on rational governance and contract problems on the child protection market], in M. Sallnäs and S. Wiklund *Socialtjänstmarknaden - om marknadisering och konkurrensutsättning av individ- och familjeomsorgen [The Social Service Market – On Marketization and Competition in Child and Family Services]*, Liber.
- Fridell Lif, E. (2023) The use of independent foster care agencies by Swedish local authorities: do structural factors matter?, *European Journal of Social Work*, 26(2): 348–59, doi: [10.1080/13691457.2023.2166017](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2023.2166017)
- Hochschild, A.R. (1979) Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure, *American Journal of Sociology*, 85(3): 551–75, doi: [10.1086/227049](https://doi.org/10.1086/227049)
- Hochschild, A.R. (2004) The commodity frontier, in J. Alexander, G. Marx and C. Williams (eds) *Self, Social Structure and Beliefs: Essays in Sociology*, UC Press.
- Hochschild, A.R. (2005) 'Rent a mom' and other services: markets, meanings and emotions, *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion*, 1(1): 74–86, doi: [10.1504/ijwoe.2005.007328](https://doi.org/10.1504/ijwoe.2005.007328)
- Hochschild, A.R. (2008) Feeling around the world, *Contexts*, 7(2): 80, doi: [10.1525/ctx.2008.7.2.80](https://doi.org/10.1525/ctx.2008.7.2.80)
- Hochschild, A.R. (2011) Emotional life on the market frontier, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37: 21–33, doi: [10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150137](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150137)
- Huntington, C. (2009) Familial norms and normality, *Emory LJ*, 59: 1103.

- Höjer, S. and Forkby, T. (2011) Care for sale: the influence of new public management in child protection in Sweden, *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(1): 93–110.
- Höjer, I. (2019) Vård i familjehem [Care in foster families], in G. Andersson, I. Höjer, M. Sallnäs and Y. Sjöblom *När samhället träder in: barn, föräldrar och social barnavård [When Society Steps in: Children, Parents and Social Protection]*, Studentlitteratur.
- Illouz, E. (2007) *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Polity.
- Illouz, E. (2009) Emotions, imagination and consumption: a new research agenda, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 9(3): 377–413, doi: [10.1177/1469540509342053](https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540509342053)
- Illouz, E. (2012) *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*, Polity.
- Illouz, E. and Kotliar, D.M. (2022) Capitalist subjectivity, Tinder, and the emotionalization of the web, in *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Consumption*, Routledge, pp 229–40.
- Jacobsson, K. (2023) ‘Hur mycket får man som familjehem?’ En riskfylld pengafråga med snåriga svar [How much do you get as a foster family. A risky question with snarky answers], in *Den empiriska glädjen: En vänbok till Malin Åkerström [The Empirical Joy: A friendbook to Malin Åkerström]*, Lund University, pp 120–34.
- Kallio, J., Meeuwisse, A. and Scaramuzzino, R. (2016) Social workers’ attitudes to privatization in five countries, *Journal of Social Work*, 16(2): 174–95, doi: [10.1177/1468017314568850](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017314568850)
- Laurin, E. (2023) Mother blame and emotion work: a sociological study on Swedish mothers of children with long-term school absenteeism, *Emotions and Society*, 1(aop): 1–18, doi: [10.1332/26316897y2023d000000008](https://doi.org/10.1332/26316897y2023d000000008)
- Lundström, T., Pålsson, D., Sallnäs, M. and Shanks, E. (2021) A crisis in Swedish child welfare? On risk, control and trust, *Social Work and Society*, 19(1).
- McCoyd, J.L. (2009) Discrepant feeling rules and unscripted emotion work: women coping with termination for fetal anomaly, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 79(4): 441–51, doi: [10.1037/a0010483](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0010483)
- Meagher, G., Lundström, T., Sallnäs, M. and Wiklund, S. (2016) Big business in a thin market: understanding the privatization of residential care for children and youth in Sweden, *Social Policy and Administration*, 50(7): 805–23, doi: [10.1111/spol.12172](https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12172)
- Ministry of Social Affairs (2023) *Official Report from the Swedish Government, SOU 2023:66. För barn och unga i samhällsvård [For Children and Youth in Child Protection]*, Ministry of Social Affairs.
- National Board of Health and Welfare (2014) *Manual till BRA-fam. En standardiserad bedömningsmetod för rekrytering av familjehem*, Ministry of Social Affairs.
- Nilsson, L. (2020) *Strong Public Support for the Traditional Swedish Welfare State During Restructuring and Marketization*, Göteborgs Universitet, SOM-institute, pp 321–36.
- Pålsson, D., Lundström, T. and Sallnäs, M. (2022) Nya villkor för ett gammalt problem: familjehemsrekrytering i en tid av privatisering och professionalisering [New conditions for old problems: recruiting foster families in times of privatization and professionalisation], *Socialvetenskaplig tidskrift*, 29(2): 173–90, doi: [10.3384/svt.2022.29.2.4612](https://doi.org/10.3384/svt.2022.29.2.4612)
- Pålsson, D. (2023) Supervising a family or a service? Social worker approaches to foster care supervision in six Swedish authorities, *Nordic Social Work Research*, 1–13, doi: [10.1080/2156857x.2023.2167854](https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857x.2023.2167854)
- Patulny, R., Bellocchi, A., Olson, R.E., Khorana, S., McKenzie, J. and Peterie, M. (2019) *Emotions in Late Modernity*, Routledge, p 368.

- SALAR (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions) (2024) *Cirkulär 23:50. Ersättningar och villkor vid familjehemsvård av barn, unga och vuxna, vårdnadsöverflyttningar med mera 2024 [Reimbursements and Conditions for Foster Care of Children, Youth and Adults 2024]*, SALAR.
- Sanders, R. (2020) The impact of capitalist-led neoliberal agendas on parents and their children, *Children Australia*, 45(2): 101–8, doi: [10.1017/cha.2020.1](https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2020.1)
- Shanks, E., Lundström, T., Meagher, G., Sallnäs, M. and Wiklund, S. (2021) Impression management in the market for residential care for children and youth in Sweden, *Social Policy and Administration*, 55(1): 82–96, doi: [10.1111/spol.12613](https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12613)
- Silverman, D. (2011) *Qualitative Research*, 3rd edn, Sage.
- Söderlind and Sköld (2018) Privata utförare av social barnavård- en affär under flera sekel [Private contractors in child protection – a business for centuries], in M. Sallnäs and S. Wiklund (eds) *Socialtjänstmarknaden- om marknadsiering och konkurrensutsättning av individ- och familjeomsorgen [The Social Service Market on Marketization and Competition in Child and Family Services]*, Liber.
- Zelizer, V.A. (1994) *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, Princeton University Press.