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## **Understandings of biological kinship ties in social workers' accounts: A cross-cultural study of out-of-home placements in Norway and France**

### **Abstract**

Although kinship has been the object of growing anthropological interest since the mid-1980s, few studies have concentrated on the cultural understandings of biological kinship ties in the context of out-of-home placements. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with professionals in Norway and France, this article compares the meanings attributed to biological ties where children are in out-of-home placements. Applying theoretical perspectives from the new kinship studies, the analysis reveals that while a reference to biological ties underlies both the Norwegian and the French accounts, these biological ties are expressed differently. Moreover, these different understandings of biological ties impact on social work practice, for example in respect of parent–child contact. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for social work practice with children and families.

## **Keywords**

Biological ties, out-of-home placement, cross-cultural research, new kinship studies

## **Introduction**

Long equated with nature, biology has been the object of a growing interest for the social sciences since the mid-1980s. Whereas the anthropological literature has long emphasised the socially constructed character of biological kinship ties, only recently have social work researchers put this topic on the agenda. Jones and Logan (2013) pointed out that despite social workers facing increasingly complex family relationships, social work research has failed to fully incorporate new conceptualisations of family from sociological and anthropological theory. In a review of the literature on contacts between children in substitute care and their families, Sen and Broadhurst (2011) have shown that when combined with other professional interventions, contacts positively influence children's outcomes such as successful reunification and placement stability. Conversely, contacts of poor quality can result in placement breakdowns. Sen and Broadhurst also underlined the critical role of social workers with regards to the pattern and quality of contact.

The importance of continuity in attachment relationships is a central argument in favour of contact. However, social workers' concerns with both the possible negative impact of contacts on placement stability and the development of attachment bonds to foster

caregivers may result in ambivalence towards contact, especially when children are unlikely to return to the full-time care of their biological parents (Backe-Hansen, 1994; Sen and Broadhurst, 2011). While the maintenance of biological kinship ties has constituted a debated issue within child protective services since the 1960s, few studies have focused on variation in the meanings of biological kinship ties in out-of-home placements. By applying concepts and theoretical approaches from the anthropology of kinship to explore the meanings given to biological kinship ties in out-of-home placements, I attempted in this article to fill this gap.

Using data from interviews with Norwegian and French child welfare workers, in the article I focus on their perceptions of biological kinship ties between children and their biological parents<sup>1</sup>. My aim is twofold: (i) to compare the participants' perceptions of biological kinship ties and (ii) to underscore the implications of these perceptions for social work practice. The central issues explored in the article concern the similarities and cross-national differences in how these social workers frame biological kinship ties, and how these different perceptions affect social work practice with children and their families, resulting in different practices in relation to contact and distinct modalities of work with biological and foster parents. To shed light on these issues, I conducted a detailed qualitative analysis of interview accounts.

All the social workers from Norway and France who participated in the study were employed in well-developed welfare state systems that intervene extensively in the

family sphere. In both countries, children under the age of 12 and in need of care are preferably placed in foster care, a choice that may be understood as reflecting what both societies consider appropriate for childhood. In the case of compulsory placements (e.g. Section 4-12 of the 1992 Child Welfare Act for Norway and Article 375 of the Civil Code for France), social workers in both countries must implement contact as determined by external jurisdiction – the County Social Welfare Board in Norway and the ‘children’s judge’ in France. Beyond these basic similarities, differences can be discerned in how the role of the family is understood within welfare. Discourses of social welfare in Nordic countries such as Norway emphasise the individual’s independence from family relationships and the state’s responsibility for providing children with opportunities for developing their autonomy. In contrast, in France the state and the family are viewed as complementary, with dependence on families more accepted (Masson, 2009).

Child protection services in Norway rely on four principles, among them the biological principle, which reflects the belief that children should grow up with their biological parents, and where they cannot, the child should have contact with them. Recently, however, the Raundalen Committee whose mandate was to assess the biological principle in child protective services in Norway, questioned this principle. The committee proposed a new principle that emphasises the value of good-quality

attachment bonds for children's development, rather than the primacy of biological ties (NOU, 2012).

In contrast, French child welfare law, despite having no direct equivalent of the biological principle, prioritises the maintenance of biological kinship ties and family reunification (for a detailed examination of the two countries' child welfare laws, see Picot, 2012). The concept of a 'filiation tie' (i.e. the connection between children and their birth or adoptive parents), often used in French public debates about child protection, blends the biological, social, judicial, psychological and symbolic aspects of the parent-child relationship. These distinct legal contexts point towards differences in the cultural understandings of family and biological kinship ties, differences that warrant further investigation. Moreover, child welfare work draws predominantly on attachment theories in Norway (Havik et al., 2004) and psychoanalysis in France (Fablet, 2008). Because of these different theoretical bases, Norwegian and French social workers are likely to approach their work very differently.

### **Theoretical frame: 'New kinship studies'**

Comparing the meanings attributed to biological kinship ties in the Norwegian and French child protective services requires a brief outline of the main contours of the body of work that has come to be known as new kinship studies.

The designation 'new kinship studies' refers to the resurgence of the anthropological study of kinship following a radical attack on it in the 1980s by American anthropologist David Schneider. He argued that Euro-American folk models understand kinship as the social construction of natural, i.e. biological, facts (Schneider, 1980). Later, he elaborated on this argument by proposing that the anthropology of kinship merely reproduced taken-for-granted assumptions about the biological nature of kinship within these models (Schneider, 1984). Even though Schneider was critical of past kinship studies, he still viewed kinship in terms of biogenetic links. However, the meaning of biology is not reducible to genes: biology may refer not only to shared biogenetic substance, but also to gestation and birth (Edwards and Salazar, 2009).

As kinship emerges from an interplay between biological and social elements, 'rather than from the elaboration of natural facts' (Edwards, 2000: 28), reducing kinship to biology is misleading (Bestard 2004; Edwards, 2000; Mason, 2008). Moreover, the division between social and biological kinship is not clear-cut (Carsten, 2004; Edwards and Salazar 2009). Recently, Mason (2008) has challenged the association between fixity and biology. She argues that kinship may be given in ways that are not related to biology, stating that 'fixed affinities may have no connection with biological ties' and 'can contains layers of electivity (and can be created)' (Mason, 2008: 35).

In her study of kinship in Great Britain, Strathern (1992) has highlighted the shifts in conceptions of biology in the wake of technological changes. She argues that biology no

longer constitutes the incontestable ground for kinship. Because the new reproductive technologies make the contribution of human interventions to the production of biological kinship visible, they have resulted in a greater explicitness about nature and biology. When biology and nature are made explicit, taking them for granted is no longer possible, thus requiring that biology be understood as involving social and cultural phenomena that must be discussed and examined (Strathern, 1992).

As these anthropological studies indicate, biology requires interpretation; it can take on various meanings and can play different roles in the production of kinship relations. Moreover, the role given to biology in kinship relationships varies across societies and across contexts within a single society. For example, Melhuus and Howell (2009) have contrasted the increasing emphasis on biological kinship in Norwegian public discourses about assisted procreation with the great importance granted to social components in the area of international adoption.

Within the body of literature known as new kinship studies, I have identified three dimensions that are of particular relevance for this article: (i) the interplay between biological and social kinship, (ii) explicitness about biology and (iii) the various meanings and roles attributed to biology in the construction of kinship. Applied to the data, these perspectives provide a theoretical frame for understanding the cultural similarities and differences in the French and Norwegian social workers' accounts. How and when do social workers treat biological ties as an issue? What are the links between

biology and the child–parent relationships as presented in these accounts? As previously noted, the social and biological aspects of kinship are tightly interrelated and often difficult to disentangle. Nonetheless, because the term ‘biology’ is widely used in the Norwegian discourses and practices of child welfare, this article focuses primarily on biological kinship ties as a way of problematising this category.

## **Methods**

The study draws on a corpus of tape-recorded qualitative interviews with professionals in Norway and France. In total, 43 semi-structured interviews were conducted (20 in Norway and 23 in France). Using open-ended questions, I invited participants to describe and reflect on their experiences of child welfare work, including their duties, the problems of children and families, the grounds for intervention and the implementation of child protection interventions. The interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2013 at local child welfare agencies in two Norwegian municipalities and two French ‘départements’ – local authorities that politically and territorially sit between the municipality and the region. All participants received written information about the research project and were promised confidentiality<sup>ii</sup>. They all gave informed consent to participate in the study. Each interview typically lasted one and a half hours.



The analyses reported in this article are based on a subset of interviews in which the participants reported on their intervention practices related to out-of-home placements. This subset consisted of 27 interviews. All the Norwegian participants and 10 of the 17 French participants were women. Moreover, all participants had completed at least three years of vocational training at university colleges (Norway) or social service schools (France). In both countries, child welfare work involves members of two social work professions, one general and the other specialised: general social workers and child welfare pedagogues (social workers trained to work in all areas of child protection) for Norway, and general social workers and specialised educators (social workers trained to work not only with children and young people, but also with adults facing various challenges) for France.

Eight of the 10 Norwegian participants were child welfare pedagogues and two were general social workers. Eight of the 17 French participants were specialized educators and 9 were general social workers. Eight of the 10 Norwegian participants and 12 of the 17 French had more than 10 years of experience in social work with children and families.

The research applied a thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). I gained familiarity with the data through transcribing the interviews and reading the transcripts many times. Then I coded the material manually using data-driven codes, and I searched for patterns and common themes in the data set. Furthermore, I compared

and contrasted the codes and themes across countries to identify similarities and differences. To classify the data, I grouped the interviews under four categories that I used as subheadings: (i) beneficial attachments with the biological parent; (ii) constructive ties with the biological parent; (iii) problematic ties to the biological parent; and (iv) ties to toxic biological parents. Two of these categories (i and iii) present data from Norway and the two others (ii and iv) data from France.

### **Distinctive vocabularies: Norwegian and French references to biological ties**

The analysis of the data revealed that the Norwegian and French social workers used distinctive vocabularies with clear differences. The Norwegian participants talked about biology and used the term ‘biological parent’ to refer to biogenetics and emphasised the fact of a woman having given birth to a child. This emphasis is not surprising given that reference to biology is a fundamental component of Norwegian kinship discourse (Howell, 2001). In contrast, while a few French social workers used adjectives such as ‘natural’ and ‘true’ to qualify the parents (adjectives that clearly indicate a reference to biological kinship), most French participants did not speak of ‘biological parents’; instead, they used the terms ‘the parents’ and ‘parental authority’. Given that the stakeholders of parental authority are mostly the biological parents, references to

‘parental authority’ might conceal an emphasis on the rights of biological parents.

Furthermore, the French participants did not use the term biology but rather referred to ‘the tie’ and to ‘filiation’, one of the two basic principles (the other being marriage) on which French kinship is based (Cadoret, 2000).

Having presented some initial observations regarding differences in vocabularies, in the following substantive sections that report the findings from the study I examine in further detail how understandings of biological ties impact on child welfare practice and on depictions of the parent–child relationship. I focus successively on two pairs of contrasting accounts: first, beneficial attachments with the biological parent (theme i) and constructive ties with the biological parent (theme ii); and second, problematic ties to the biological parent (theme iii) and ties to toxic biological parents (theme iv).

### **Beneficial attachments with the biological parent (Norway)**

In the Norwegian participants’ accounts of beneficial attachments with the biological parent, the prototypical characters are an older child or a teenager and a biological parent who was unable to take care of the child but with whom the child has developed an attachment bond and who brings something positive to the child during contacts (i.e. visits). The children have contacts about once a month, something that the participants viewed as frequent.

According to the Norwegian participants, older children and teenagers, in contrast to younger children placed in out-of-home institutional and foster care, need closer ties with their biological parents. Ideally, contacts in these situations should be frequent, even when social workers do not foresee a return to the parental home in the near future. Participants justified the need for contact primarily by referring to a shared belief that when older children and adolescents had lived for a certain period with their biological parents, an attachment bond – even though of poor quality – existed, along with common memories and feelings of love and loyalty. For example, one participant explained: ‘If the child is 10 years old at the time of the placement, there is a relationship, there are feelings [...] there are 10 years of history here. If you take out the mother, you take out the history’ (N16). Another social worker said:

I think as a starting point that parents and children have a special tie, and I think that even though parents function badly and cannot take care of their children, in most cases they love their children, and the children love or have strong loyalty to their parents. (N20)

Norwegian social workers’ assessments of the adequacy of frequency of contact take into account not only the existence of attachment relationships, but also the parents’

ability to contribute to their child's development. For example, one social worker explained that

A mother is not positive in herself; it is what you do with this child, what you give the child when you have contact. Do you give the child experiences, do you give the child care, do you give the child closeness, do you give the child stimuli, do you give the child a response? (N4)

According to this social worker, 'biology is not what counts most', and she stressed the importance of considering parents' 'positive assets' that the child can 'benefit from' (N4). She told the story of siblings who had a talented parent who was able to provide his or her children with 'an insight into a world nobody else could give them', 'inspiration' and a 'way to develop oneself' (N4). Although the social worker reported difficulties in establishing cooperation with this parent, she considered that 'there is a lot here we cannot take from the child', and thus she strove to work with the parent despite his or her 'eccentricity', here referring to the parent being quirky and having called the caseworker and the foster mother derogatory names. She contrasted this situation with that of other parents 'who do not know what to do when they see their child' (N4). She mentioned a child whose foster mother had bought a second television

to help the child avoid disputes with his or her biological mother about which programme to watch when the mother visited the child, noting that ‘it has little value for the child to have each one watching their own programme’ (N4).

Several participants (N8, N18, N19) referred to the notion of ‘attachment that is supportive of development’ promoted by a recent official Norwegian report (NOU, 2012: 86). According to one participant,

Children will have it better if they have contact. If contact makes them regress, then I think I will reduce the visitation, but if the contacts make them happy and if they can become attached to the family at the same time that they are attached to the foster family... (N18)

The participant also shared her doubts about the usefulness of contacts with parents who do not have much to contribute:

[The children] can have drug-addicted parents who can be harmless, and they can meet under secure conditions without the child becoming damaged. But then again, is it supportive of development for a child to have the assignment of being nice to his parents? Also, whom is it good for? (N18)

## **Constructive ties with the biological parent (France)**

The French participants' accounts of constructive ties with the biological parent typically depicted the main characters to be a child in foster or institutional care and a parent who suffers from a wide range of issues such as mental health problems, learning disabilities or addiction. The children have contact with the parent every second week or once a month, something that French social workers considered to be very limited contact. When there is a risk of danger to the child during these visits, the contacts are supervised.

To illustrate this typical depiction of parent and child in the French interviews, one participant talked about a young child taken into care because of the parents' psychosis. The participant observed that 'when the father saw his child, there was a lot of warmth, a lot of love, and this was very precious for the child' (F16). Furthermore, she highlighted the importance of parental involvement in the child's development (in French, *construction*) 'both as a person and for his or her future' (F16). From the perspective of the French social workers, all children, whatever their age, need a relationship with their parents, even when a return to the parental home was not

foreseeable and when for various reasons the children had not developed a relationship with their biological parents.

According to these social workers, maintaining a parent–child tie of satisfying quality helps ‘ensure that the child is not too much impacted by the difficulties of this tie’ (F7) and that children ‘accept the idea that these parents are as they are’ (F10). Resorting to a psychoanalytical vocabulary, one social worker noted that children, to avoid reproducing the behaviour patterns of their biological parents, have ‘to assimilate [in French, *consumer*] this parental function that at some point was a burden’ (F15). Another participant resorted to the psychoanalytical notions of ‘illusion’ and ‘the false self’:

The issue is the illusion. The illusion is the fact that children always cling to the family ideal. [...] The idea is to not lead to situations where the child at 18 is set on just one thing, finding his mother or father because he or she feels he has been uprooted. (F11)

The social workers told dramatic stories of children who missed contact with their biological parents, despite the social workers’ efforts to mobilise the parents. One social worker discussed an adolescent who ran away from his foster home to find his biological mother, who had suddenly reappeared. This action had resulted in a



placement breakdown and in the breakdown of all relationships with his ‘family assistant’ (foster carer) (F10). Another participant reported that when ‘there is an absence of relationship with the parents for a long time [...], it produces devastating effects’ (F12). As long as the child is small, he or she shows no signs of unhappiness in foster care, but when the child reaches adolescence, ‘an explosion occurs’ (F12). This participant made clear that this scenario applied to nearly all children, including those who had been in foster care since infancy and had established attachment bonds with their foster caregivers.

The social workers expected foster carers to introduce a place for the biological parents in their relationship with the child. Moreover, they viewed it as their duty to ‘bring back’ (F8) the biological parents to ensure that the child stays alive in his or her parents’ minds, and to provide these parents with the support they need to be able to connect with their child, i.e. to remain parents. During contacts, these social workers expected the biological parents to display interest in their child. As one participant put it, they bring ‘what they can’: ‘interest’, ‘their presence’ and ‘some affection’ (F11). For example, if the children are of school age, parents could show interest by looking at their school books.

The social workers often used the term ‘desire’ to designate the ‘image the parent has of his or her child’ and ‘parents’ projections’ of their offspring’s future (F5, F15, F16). This term indicates a connection with sexual reproduction and love relationships: ‘some

parents experiencing lots of hardships have had a desire to have a child together' (F9). Yet desire is not reducible to biological value, but also refers to symbolic matters. In France, the notion of desire is commonly used in psychoanalysis in the tradition of Freud and Lacan, i.e. to mean the subject's quest for an inaccessible object. It is a powerful term in French social workers' understanding of the relationship between parents and their child.

In these accounts, Norwegian and French social workers supported regular contacts with biological parents because they perceived such contacts as positive. Nevertheless, what they defined as 'frequent contact' differed: once a month is frequent for the Norwegian social workers, but minimal for their French counterparts. Moreover, whereas the Norwegian participants were concerned with the parents' contribution to the child's development, the French participants viewed the maintenance of a relationship with their biological parents as necessary for all children to become balanced adults, and they viewed that relationship as valuable in itself.

### **Problematic ties to the biological parent (Norway)**

The Norwegian participants' accounts of problematic ties to the biological parent typically involved a foster child who has a 'harmful' parent (N16, N19). The participants defined the harmful parent as 'heavily problematic' (N8, N17, N19), most

often suffering from drug or alcohol addiction, violent behaviour and psychiatric illness.

In such situations, the contacts are sparse: four meetings a year are not uncommon.

While Norwegian social workers acknowledged that preserving relationships might have some value, they insisted that contacts with a ‘harmful’ parent were detrimental to a child’s development (N16, N19). These social workers emphasised children’s need for rest, noting that such contacts interfered with this need: ‘in order to be successful in managing the outside world, go to school, manage everyday life, have friends [...] children have to clean up the chaos, and sometimes parents represent the chaos’ (N4). The participants spoke of biological parents who criticised foster parents, made their children worry by dwelling on their own problematic lives, told their children that they ‘will move back home soon’ (N19, N20) or ‘cried all the time’ (N13). Social workers underlined that these behaviours caused serious loyalty problems for the children and jeopardized the stability of the foster care arrangement.

In placements involving young children in foster care, the social workers perceived such contacts as especially disruptive: ‘we have experienced that when the children are small, it is a big burden for them, a loyalty burden’ (N17). Drawing on attachment theories, the social workers expressed their concern with the impact of contact on the establishment of attachment bonds with the foster parents. One social worker explained:

We think it is important to have an attachment to one place. We are afraid that if you have very frequent contacts, you will not get the good attachment to the foster home, so you get neither one nor the other. (N8)

The Norwegian social workers agreed that babies taken into care shortly after birth have not yet developed an attachment bond with their biological mothers. Although placements of very young children naturally are in a minority, their situation can tell us something more general about the participants' 'kinship thinking' (Edwards, 2000: 34). The participants clearly differentiated between the child's maintaining a relationship and accessing knowledge of his or her biological origin. They agreed that the purpose for having some contact in such situations was not to maintain or develop a social relationship with biological parents, but merely to gain some knowledge of their biological origins.

One social worker commented that these children did not need a relationship with their biological parents because they would develop attachment bonds to their foster parents: 'They will not have a relationship because they will have parents whom they view as their parents' (N16). According to one participant, these children 'have never had any relationship [with their biological parents] beyond the purely biological' (N8).

Furthermore, by noting that 'the psychological parents – those around the child each and every day, for better or worse, throughout life – are the most important, not

biology' (N8), the participant established an explicit hierarchy between biological and social parenthood. Several social workers explained that they prioritised following up children in their foster homes and giving guidance to foster parents, rather than working with biological parents to help them create positive relationships with their children.

Norwegian social workers emphasised the need for children to have a few contacts with disruptive parents, so that the children gain some knowledge of their biological origin, something the social workers viewed as essential for the development of personal identity – 'to know who you really are' (N16). One participant explained that 'all children need to have knowledge and understanding of where they come from. It is a question of identity, or roots, and who I am, so it is important for all, small children as well as big children' (N20). In addition, the participants noted that a few contacts allow children to understand why they cannot live with their biological parents and prevent these youngsters from creating 'dream pictures' (N8, N19). According to one participant, children who have little contact often 'glorify' their biological parents (N17). However, if the children were opposed to having contact, the social workers were willing to take that view into account. One social worker spoke of a school-age child who did not want visits from her biological mother, explaining that as the child's social worker, she needed to 'take the child seriously' (N4).

### **Ties to toxic biological parents (France)**

In the accounts of ties to toxic biological parents, French social workers described the parent–child relationship as toxic, i.e. harmful. They argued that toxic biological parents invested in their relationship with their child more for their own needs and did not leave room for the child’s autonomy. Contacts in these situations were supervised, taking place once a month or even less.

The French social workers considered the parents as ‘toxic’ (F3, F9, F10, F12), ‘greatly sick’ (F3, F6), ‘perverse’ (F3, F6, F16) or ‘completely mad’ (F3, F10). ‘Toxic parents’ were viewed as ‘unpredictable in their attitudes and discourses’ (F10). According to these social workers, contact with a toxic parent is harmful for the child, resulting in suffering, learning difficulties and difficulties (including madness) in other relationships: they ‘render the children mad even though they see them every third week’ (F3). One social worker related a situation in which the father reacted in paranoid ways and portrayed himself as the victim of a plot, with contact with this father leading to autistic behaviours in the child. The social worker noted that ‘every time there is contact, it causes a catastrophe in the following days, weeks, months’ (F7). In some cases, the social workers perceived the toxic parents as so threatening that they themselves feel endangered when they have to meet with them.

When confronted with a toxic tie, the child welfare workers usually asked the children’s judge to order supervised contact and to ensure visits were spaced apart. Several participants argued that even in the case of toxic parents, maintaining the tie is

important: one explained that ‘a child who does not see his parents [...] will absolutely want to see them again or idealise them; he will not know them, and he will not be prepared to deal with them’ (F16). Another participant, speaking of a toxic mother, explained that ‘it was better to have contact than not’ (F12). He viewed it as important to ‘work with the children on the idea that this mother was not the mother who would help them to grow up’ (F12).

However, several social workers acknowledged that there were situations in which they were willing to break the child–biological parent relationship. One social worker said: ‘There are indeed families that are very toxic, what we call toxic parents. And with the toxic parents we will limit [contacts] as much as we can’ (F10). Another social worker explained that ‘at some point there may be an argument in favour of breaking the tie [...] when systematically, the parents implement something destructive in the ways they relate to the child’ (F7). This participant immediately underlined that such a situation was exceptional: ‘It is almost never a breakdown at the legal level; I mean, the judge always maintains something. This something may be about two hours of supervised contact every month’ (F7). When the children’s judge ordered them to implement contact that they viewed as clearly not in the child’s interest, the social workers ended up in a difficult position. A few reported using their leeway in the timing of visits, i.e. making it difficult for parents to be present, thus suggesting both a double agenda and a

gap between the legal frameworks and institutional guidelines and their actual implementation.

In both countries, the social workers underlined the usefulness of maintaining some contacts with harmful parents, to keep the children from idealising such parents. The frequency of contacts in these situations again differed: in Norway, very infrequent contact means up to four times a year. But in the French child protection system, the suspension of rights of access was exceptional, even for toxic parents, making the French norm closer to once a month. Moreover, while the Norwegian social workers justified limiting contact by referring to the children's developmental needs and attachments to the foster carers, the French workers invoked the ties to toxic biological parents.

## **Discussion: Differences in perceptions of biological kinship ties**

### **(Norway and France)**

Both Norwegian and French social workers viewed biological kinship ties as important for the children's development and well-being, albeit in different ways. References to biology appeared in very explicit ways in the accounts of the Norwegian social workers. The Norwegian participants distinguished between attachments on the one hand, and biology on the other. They viewed all children as needing, and being entitled to,



knowledge of their biological origins and their biological parents. By isolating the biological component parts of kinship from its social component parts, they contributed to making biology visible. However, biological kinship ties had an ambivalent status in these accounts, as they were alternatively emphasised or downplayed. Although the Norwegian social workers acknowledged the value of biology, they did not grant it a predominant role in the constitution of kinship relationships, especially for babies in long-term care. Backe-Hansen's (1994) study of contact in cases involving young children in long-term care in Norway showed 20 years ago that, for most children under two years of age at the time of the placement, contact was either terminated or not maintained. Breaking the parent-child relationship for these children did not appear to be a problem in the eyes of the Norwegian social workers as long as the children had access to knowledge about their biological parents and were allowed to develop secure attachment bonds with their foster carers.

References to biology were present in the French accounts as well, but were less explicit. The participants seldom isolated biology; rather, references were subsumed under the broader notion of a 'tie'. Moreover, the French social workers assigned a high priority to the preservation of a relationship with the biological and legal parents, even in situations where these ties were weak. These findings point to an implicit privileging of biological kinship ties, as opposed to purely social relationships as developed with foster families (Cadoret, 1995). Thus the lack of explicit reference to biology within

their interview accounts does not mean that the French social workers failed to grant importance to biology in the constitution of kinship, but might instead indicate that they took biology for granted.

To understand the different meanings attributed to biology in child–parent relationships, a look at which theoretical understanding of these relationships is hegemonic in child protective services in these two countries is critical. In other words, one must ask which particular theories and set of truth claims sustain, and even construct, accounts of biological kinship ties in each country.

While the Norwegian social workers extensively applied the concept of the attachment bond, the French social workers used psychoanalytical concepts such as ‘desire’, ‘assimilate’ and ‘false self’. Developmental psychologies and attachment theories have acquired a hegemonic position in the professional knowledge package of Norwegian child welfare workers (Havik et al., 2004; Hennem, 2010). Drawing on attachment theories, child welfare policies and child welfare workers assign parents a specific role to play when interacting with their child: that of fulfilling their child’s needs and shaping ‘attachment that is supportive of development’, as promoted by the Raundalen Committee (NOU, 2012: 86). Norwegian social workers are taught that attachment bonds exist independently of a biological relationship, and that the nature of care is critical to the development of attachment bonds of good quality. Given that inadequate attachment bonds place the child at risk of future social maladjustment, if the parents

cannot meet these expectations, their relationship with the child will be an issue for child welfare agencies.

In contrast, French child welfare professionals have mostly superficial knowledge of attachment theories and only marginally implement them (Savard, 2010). In France, attachment theories represent only one of a number of theories, and certainly not the most prominent (Savard, 2010). Instead, since the 1960s, psychoanalysis has become a central reference point in French social work with out-of-home placements (Fablet, 2008). In addition, in a report coordinated by psychoanalyst Didier Houzel (2007), he underlined the long-term dangers of an early breakdown of the parent–child tie for children’s mental health. Houzel also argued that contacts are useful for preventing the repetition of psychic disorders in the next generation. The French interviewees’ insistence on the usefulness of maintaining the tie to allow children to develop a healthy personality is very much in line with Houzel’s conclusions.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the central role that social workers play in the maintenance of biological kinship ties in out-of-home placements, social workers’ perceptions of biological kinship ties are significantly under-researched, especially cross-nationally. This investigation of cross-national variation in perceptions of biological kinship ties in out-of-home

placements has shed light on important differences. The Norwegian and the French child welfare workers depict biological kinship ties in very different ways. While the Norwegian participants clearly isolate attachment bonds and biology, the French participants use the notion of tie to designate both the emotional connection and the biological connection.

These differences translate into very different approaches to child contact and distinct modalities of work with biological and foster parents. The French social workers endowed biological parents with a central role in the lives of their children and were willing to go to great lengths to obtain their involvement. In contrast, the Norwegian social workers tended to prioritise the child's well-being in foster care and the development of attachment bonds to foster carers.

Given the frequency of contacts reported in the interviews, the French child welfare agencies may need to reassess the frequency of parental contacts, notably in situations involving young children in foster care and in those situations in which the social workers view contacts as toxic. In addition, the findings raise the question of whether the Norwegian child welfare agencies grant enough priority and resources to social work with the biological parents for the rebuilding of post-placement family ties.

As Gullestad and Segalen (1995) have noted, the semantic contents of the terms '*famille*', '*familie*' and 'family' vary across European countries. As this observation

may apply to biology as well, differences in semantics and languages constitute a key limitation of the study. Moreover, there may be a gap between social workers' understandings as reflected in these accounts and their actual practices. Investigating these practices calls for more research relying on alternative methodologies such as the study of case documents or ethnographic observations. Future research could also shed light on a wider range of cultural differences by including different countries, for example non-Western European countries.

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**Notes**

<sup>i</sup> The perceptions of kinship care and ties with siblings and extended families are beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>ii</sup> The project was cleared by the Data Protection Official for Research, Norwegian Social Science Data Services, and by the French Commission Nationale de

l'Informatique et des Libertés, which are responsible for assessing privacy-related and ethical dimensions of research projects in their respective countries.

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