



The brittle attraction: Women deprived of the custody of children

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Abstract

Based on interviews with 12 mothers, this article examines the meanings of mothering among mothers deprived of their children by a child welfare department.

Findings: Mothers construct their mothering on the basis of cultural notions. They perceive themselves as mothers. The deprivation gives them a sense of inadequacy and reduces their value as women. The mothering is confirmed in their relationship to their children, where the gap between ideal and reality leads to ritual modus operandi when they are with them. Four kinds of 'mothering' are presented: *network mothering*, *struggle for the child*, *symbolic mothering* and *the impossible solution: choose to be childfree*.

Key words: foster-care, mothering, children

Women deprived of the right to care for their child by a Child Welfare Department break with the deeply felt cultural belief that biological mothers raise their own child. This article examines the meanings of motherhood as revealed in interviews with mothers whose children have been removed by a child welfare department in Norway. All the women are mothers of children in foster homes. Even though they have scarcely had full responsibility for the child, the child holds a significant place in their life. One mother refers to this as "the brittle attraction". A key aspect of the analyses is how can this "attraction", which is not in harmony with the practice the mothers have had with the children, be understood. The literature contains little about mothering practice and the meaning of motherhood for mothers deprived of child care. The reactions of the women themselves and of their surroundings to the loss of parental care and its takeover reveal important norms on femininity and motherhood.

Society boundaries for practising motherhood

Over the last 100 years, the child has gradually acquired more importance as an equal-standing individual and member of society. The individualising processes in society help individual members of the family to gain a closer relation to the state and the marketplace (Ericsson, 1996). The family is subjected to public control. Children must be protected from abuse and lack of parental care within the family; this right is institutionalised through child welfare de-

partments. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989a) reflects a new vision of the child:

“Children are individuals. They have equal status with adults as members of the human family. Children are neither the possessions of parents nor of the state, nor are they mere people-in-the-making.” (UNICEF, 1989b)

The right of a child to receive care is laid down in article 20, 1:

“A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.”

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is ratified by 192 countries. Only two countries have not ratified: the United States and Somalia.

According to the Convention, parents can be deprived of the care of their children when the home environment is considered injurious to them. The state takes over the responsibility for caring for the children and delegates this to a foster home, institution or adoptive home, for example. In countries like Australia, New Zealand and Western Europe (except the UK), long-term foster care is the preferred placement, which implies that parents have right of access to their child provided this is not considered damaging, and also a right to express their opinion on important issues like education and religion. Adoption is strongly promoted in the policy of such countries as Canada, the UK and the United States. Whenever possible, children who cannot return to their birth families are placed for adoption (Selwyn & Sturgess, 2000).

When the state takes over the care of the child and places him or her in a foster home, the mother will retain parental responsibility but no longer has the day-to-day care of the child. It is the meaning and conduct of such women with regard to their mothering which is the subject of this article.

Theories on social understanding of mothering

A number of researchers have pointed out that maternal love is so strongly rooted in culture that it is looked upon almost as an instinct. They have recognised the necessity of analysing maternal love from a gender-based and cultural perspective (Andenæs, 1996; Badinter, 1981; Chodorow, 1978). The concept of mothering alludes to pregnancy, care of the child and its upbringing (Badinter, 1981).

It is a common notion that maternal love is strong and so widespread that there must be something innate behind it, even though it is refuted that maternal feelings have anything to do with instinct. The notion is that a psychological state exists in the mother that corresponds with the physiological and biological aspects of pregnancy and breastfeeding. That human beings require care in the first part of their life supports the notion that it is natural for the mother to look after her child (Badinter, 1981; Chodorow, 1978).

Maternal love, as a notion used in everyday speech, arouses warm feelings, appreciation and respect. Maternal love is portrayed through fairytales and literature as a warm, enveloping, altruistic love. It is something we pursue, value and esteem.

Badinter claims that maternal love is an emotion, not an inevitable aspect of the woman's disposition. She emphasises the social and cultural prerequisites for the emotion. Whether the women are good or poor mothers depends on their behaviour relative to the social norm for motherhood. Maternal love is therefore a historic phenomenon that changes in pace with social conditions. Badinter bases her thesis on historical French sources from the last four hun-

dred years. At the end of the 18th century, maternal love was thought to be a new concept, even though it was recognised that the feeling had existed everywhere and always. Maternal love was now looked upon as natural, like something with a social value. It was at this time the word love began to be associated with maternal. Love to the child was attributed much greater importance than authority and upbringing (Badinter, 1981: 99). Love is a *sufficiently good* reason to take care of the child.

Freud's theories at the beginning of the 20th century also helped to consolidate the view of the mother's unique importance for the child. The development of his theories in psychology has emphasised the critical importance of the mother-child relationship for the child's development, and supported the idealisation of motherhood (Chodorow, 1978).

Maternal love is thus a key notion that is strongly integrated in our culture. It controls our feelings. Feelings are socially constructed, and cannot be divorced from what we expect to feel. Through these notions, we trade relations to others of who we ourselves think we are.

Method and material

The material for this article is drawn from a larger study of what kinship foster care means for children, parents and foster parents, conducted in Norway from 1999 to 2002. It includes in-depth interviews with children, biological parents and foster parents, and a survey of children in state custody. The qualitative and quantitative samples were drawn from two different populations. For the survey, a sample of 234 kinship foster parents and 192 non-kinship foster parents was asked to participate in the study. The final sample of the survey consisted of 124 kinship foster children, representing a response rate of 53% and 90 non-kinship foster children, representing a response rate of 47%. Twelve foster parents from the survey sample were also interviewed and included in the qualitative study.

For the qualitative study, a sample of 53 biological parents was asked to participate, 23 gave their consent, either for themselves, their children or the foster parents. Due to ethical considerations, biological parents gave their consent to ask the children and foster parents for interviews. The interview respondents were located through the child welfare authorities. The final sample consisted of 12 biological mothers, 2 biological fathers, 30 foster parents and 17 children.

This article draws primarily on tape-recorded and fully transcribed interviews with the 12 biological mothers of 4-12 year-old children in kinship foster homes, and to a lesser extent on interviews with the 30 foster parents, 2 biological fathers and 17 children. In the case of nine of the mothers, we interviewed their child and foster parent in the same placement. To a minor extent, we also use data taken from questionnaires completed by kinship foster parents and traditional foster parents (N = 214).

The Regional Ethical Committee and the Norwegian Data Inspectorate approved the study.

Material

The women ranged in age from the end of the 20s to the end of the 30s. Their social situation varied as regards family, economy, employment, health and abuse of alcohol or drugs. Most were more poorly educated than the general level of education among Norwegian women.

Four of the 12 lived independent lives. They had paid employment and had entered into cohabitation or marriage. One of the four was caring for a child she had got after being deprived of the right to care for her first child. None of them had contact with the child welfare authority voluntarily. One had fought a long struggle with the authority to have her child returned; another had attempted this earlier, but had resigned herself to the situation that the child would grow up in a foster home.

Five of the 12 were in a treatment or rehabilitation phase following drug or alcohol abuse and were receiving assistance from child welfare and other forms of support. They were financially dependent on public benefit. Four of the five were caring for children they had got after the first was taken from them. Two of the women had applied to have their child returned to them.

The remaining three women were active drug or alcohol abusers and lived an unstable financial and social life. One had had a child removed twice.

Ten of the 12 had had problems with drug or alcohol abuse and psychiatric ailments over a long period before the child welfare authority assumed responsibility for their child. Some had experienced violence from the father of the child and crime related to drug abuse. In rare instances, the women reported that their child had been taken from them because they lacked close support, or the child had exceptional need of care which they were incapable of giving.

All the mothers had lived with their child from its birth until it was taken into care. Most had been deprived of their child while it was still small, the youngest was newborn, the oldest 11 years. Four had had more than one child taken from them. The mothers had lived without responsibility for the care of their child for 1 to 12 years (average 5 years). They had experienced little day-to-day contact with their child, and in many cases this was a long time ago. One of the women had no contact with her child. The others were for the most part together with their child a few hours a month. One of the 12 mothers had specific plans, in cooperation with the Child Welfare Department, to have responsibility for the care of her child returned to her during the ensuing year. The others had no *concrete, dated* plans to demand their child back.

The mothers had more contact with the day-to-day lives of their children than the fathers did. More mothers than fathers had contact with their child and such contact was more frequent for mothers than fathers. An exception was children who lived with the father's family. These fathers usually had just as frequent contact with the child as the mothers did. The same tendency was revealed in the survey. Whereas 90% of the mothers (N = 214) had contact with their child, the corresponding figure for fathers was only 57%. The survey also showed that children more rarely had visiting contact with their fathers than their mothers.

There may be certain biases in the selection. The child welfare authorities did not pass on our requests to women with no fixed abode. Nor did they contact women whom they assumed were incapable of carrying through an interview. This probably meant that women who were in a poor mental or social state at the time we submitted our requests were not included in the study. This may suggest that the women interviewed were in a more stable life situation than other mothers who had been deprived of the care of their children.

Having a child taken away – loss of appreciation

Having a child taken from you is associated with shame, loss of appreciation and strong feelings. When mothers recounted the feelings they experienced when a child was taken from them, they spoke of anxiety, uneasiness, panic and despair: *I am convinced I was very strong at that moment, managing to go through it, and I didn't go to the dogs afterwards, didn't commit suicide.* These strong emotional reactions reveal which costs, in self-esteem, are attached to being deprived of a child. Many tell in detail and vividly how they felt the day the child welfare people intervened and removed their child, even though the event had taken place many years earlier. The rich details in the stories and the powerful emotional expressions show that being deprived of a child has significance in their lives. The reactions may be expressions of genuine sorrow at losing the day-to-day care of their child, and for some mothers the child is present in their stories. They tell us what the child said and did at the moment the authorities intervened, and express empathy for how the child felt. They talk of the ambivalence felt prior to the takeover by the authorities between looking after their own needs and those of the

child. Some say that the takeover of responsibility gave the child a better life. In other instances, the child is in the background. Here, the accounts deal more with the confrontation with the authorities and the experience of being judged as inferior, both in reports and at meetings with child welfare officers. Many had gradually reduced their everyday contact with their child due to having an adult life filled with drug or alcohol abuse, psychological and social difficulties. The emotional expressions and the experience of shame at having their child removed were, nevertheless, prominent.

Being sentenced by society to lose the care of their child is worse for the women than if they make private arrangements for someone to look after it. It is important that they themselves still have the formal, legal care, even if the child lives in a foster home and will continue to do so. When private placement takes place, no-one has judged them as poor mothers. Our data contain examples of how they forestalled the child welfare authority and placed their child somewhere themselves. The mothers appreciate relatives taking care of their children. It is far easier to say that my girl "lives with my mother" than to say she "lives in a foster home". It is not just a matter of having her own relationship to the child; it is about holding on to her dignity as a mother. This can be compared with reactions against women who do not follow traditional expectations regarding motherhood, such as some mothers who have a guilty feeling because they are unable to breastfeed their child (Badinter, 1981), or the embarrassment of women who elect to leave their children when they divorce (Kaul, 2001).

Some mothers avoid telling people around them that they have had their child taken from them. They feel ashamed. They have a reflective relationship to how they present the foster home situation for those around them. Their close relatives also confirm the shame; they too may feel ill at ease when confronted with colleagues and friends because their daughter or sister is incapable of looking after her child. This comes out in interviews with the foster parents. The women experience mothering as important. When they fail in this respect, it immensely damages their self-esteem. It manifests itself from time to time on the personal front, even when the child is not directly involved.

If I should meet a nice guy, what shall I say to him? Because they'd just condemn me beyond all hope. But still, I'd know myself that if he really cared about me, when he got to know me better, he'd realise it wasn't really like that...

Relationships with sweethearts is just one of several situations where having been deprived of a child, or abandoning one, is an encumbrance for a woman. Irrespective of reactions from her surroundings, it seems as if the mothers themselves expect to be condemned:

Chance people you work with, they obviously condemn you. Of course, I've got good contact with all the boys, mutual respect in every way. They're pleasant and nice, but there are actually many girls there. None of those females have spoken to me. After all, I work in a small place where everyone knows everyone else, and all of them certainly knew before I got there that I'd had a kid, that she didn't live with me, 'cos in such a small place, that's gossip, of course. None of them came to see me. I'd worked there for more than three weeks before the first person took contact. That was a boy who asked whether I'd like to come and eat.

Being deprived of the right to care means a loss of appreciation. The task of the mothers is to attain dignity, and the path to dignity can take many forms. It concerns proving that she is *good enough*. The struggle for appreciation varies from proving that the child welfare authority was wrong, to building up a new dignity by mastering a socially acceptable everyday life through clean living, a new family and a job.

Mothers who lose the right to care for small children are a complex group. In many cases, it may mean life as a deviant, with drug problems and huge social problems. It seems as if mothers who are highly deviant have lost so much in other spheres of life that they do not experience shame in the same way as those who have a greater part of their social life intact. The

women who experience substantial social deviance express understanding for the condemnation to which they are exposed.

However, for a small group of mothers, the reason they were deprived of the right to care for their child was illness, loneliness and lack of support, or that the child had special needs which they proved incapable of mastering. These were women who were well educated and in employment. They felt degraded as people in an illegal manner; that the child welfare authority did not expect they would master other aspects of their life. One mother says:

The child welfare had got new caseworkers and I was called in. (...) When I got there, she said: "are you working"? I replied: "yes". They hadn't grasped that. Then they asked about alcohol and such like. I said: "I don't drink". So from what that person had read, I must have been someone who drank and was unemployed. (...) I feel that they drew a false picture.

When mothers are deprived of their child, they deviate from what are social norms for acceptable mothering to such a degree that they break the law. It is thus not only their own experience of falling short and having a bad conscience with respect to the child which such women have to tackle; society also legally deprives them of the care responsibility.

We can thus also understand the powerful emotional reactions as a consequence of failing to meet absolutely central social expectations, which is something that strongly affects their personality. Their powerful emotional reactions may show how fundamental the mothering norm is in our society.

The women who were deprived of the right to care put little focus on the pain and damage they may have inflicted on their child. This was also found in studies of motherhood in America based on interviews of drug-abusing (Baker & Carson, 1999) and imprisoned (Enos, 2001) women. Baker and Carson (1999) found that drug-abusing women avoided the cultural claim that they were poor mothers. They did this by asserting that they cared for and were deeply committed to their children even though they were addicts, although they admitted that their drug-abusing lifestyle had a negative impact on their children (Baker & Carson, 1999). Enos (2001) found that some imprisoned mothers struggled to keep their identity as "good mothers" separate from their identity as drug users. They maintained that mothers care for children in a way that only a mother can, and that much of the emotional work that only mothers can do was left undone during their incarceration.

Several of the mothers have had children in new relationships after they lost the right to care for their first child. Some have built up a more conventional life by obtaining employment, educating themselves, starting a new family and gaining control over any drug or drink problems. This gives them a feeling of new social recognition. They are valuable people. Nevertheless, having been deprived of a child is an encumbrance and reduces their value as women and mothers. Creating a relationship to a child which has been removed, where mothering is confirmed, becomes important.

Negotiations regarding motherhood: Contact between mother and child

When a mother and child base a relationship on rare interaction over a long period, as is often the case for mothers deprived of the right to care, the directly negotiated social relations will not be in accordance with the ideal of motherhood. Mother and child run the risk of drifting apart. Social conceptions form the basis for codified behaviour. The concept of codified behaviour refers to predicted behaviour by, for example, parents conducting themselves differently with regard to their own children than in other social relations (Schneider & Smith, 1973).

The myth of motherhood with the symbol of love as its core leaves an immense impression on the interaction between mother and child. One mother told us:

I'm almost worn out beforehand. I try to look after her a lot while she's here, and live up to expectations. It's very difficult, ... it's exhausting. Because I feel all the time that something or other is missing. When she returns home, then it's like something or other we haven't managed to do, that I haven't managed to say or..., something, even though I've never been able to put a finger on just what it is.

The idealised vision has a power that is revealed by the effort the women make to realise it. One mother referred to the relationship between herself and her child as "the brittle attraction". We can give this the interpretation that the feelings of love and intensity do not accord or are not understandable on the basis of the social interaction. The real life that is lived and the social practice give different messages about another kind of relationship. This is why the feeling is not understandable. At the same time, it is experienced as being more real than what the social practice indicates. It gives a direction for action. The ideal is a picture that may seem artificial, but which one nevertheless acts in relation to.

Being mothers on the verge of motherhood and children of mothers who do not display care puts pressure on the self-esteem of both the mothers and the children. Mothers and children need each other's love if they are to have their own worth confirmed. By confirming the love relationship, they attach themselves to the life, and their status as ordinary, respected members of society is strengthened. This is also how mothers and children who live life on the margin of social norms confirm that motherhood is a reality. Corresponding findings have been made in studies of imprisoned women (Enos, 2001). Children of inmate mothers are valuable resources in that they are primary validators of their identities as mothers and as women. "*It qualifies an inmate as a 'normal' member of the world of females*" (Enos, 2001: 35). Goffman (Goffman, 1967) has analysed everyday interactions as rituals for cultivating the self-understanding of the participants. Not having custody, and being a child in care, leads them into a situation that is both emotionally and socially marginal. A form of contact where you strive after a practice associated with motherly care; eating good food, sharing a bed, experiencing something together and playing games, confirms that you are ordinary. That is how the periods of contact become rituals where mother and child cultivate their importance for each other. That motherly love is intact means they are ordinary. Rituals have the property that they can confirm something as an unequivocal truth. That is why they are, not least, employed under circumstances dominated by uncertainty. They reduce the uncertainty and attach the participants to a positive association (Album, 1996).

Through their interaction, it is intended that the mother and child will realise the collective meaning of motherhood; namely, that they have a close relationship. The activities are like rituals to strengthen a social self in parents and children. These rituals consist of actions interpreted as loving and positive. Such actions force you to show respect for your own and others self. Having a respectable self is a ritual demand, and by degrees it becomes personally and emotionally important to have a self that answers to the ritual codes. Referring to Goffman, Album (1996) points out, we feel shame if we do not live up to the ideals implicit in the ritual self-presentation, and pride when we are successful.

Different kinds of mothering

The material shows unequivocally that women deprived of the custody of a child experienced themselves as a mother, even though they also looked upon the foster mother as the mother of their child. Even though the mothering was based on contact that took place comparatively rarely, and periodically very irregularly, the child had a central position in their life:

The weird thing is I've often thought that for her it must be the others who are mum and dad even though she knows I'm her mother. You see, it's them who've functioned that way all her life, and yet it's that brittle attraction in a way. A sort of bonding that somehow doesn't agree completely with the situation. And it's odd. I've often thought that Ann [*her daughter*] must be more like one of my nieces, yet she's not. No way. Nor does she have the same relationship to me as she has to her aunties. There's something.

This mother is with her daughter about four times a year, usually for several days at a stretch. At the time the interview took place, the daughter was 12 years old, and she had lived in the foster home since she was a year old.

When a child moves into a foster home, the mother is intended to share the mothering with the foster mother. The mother still has the status of mother, whereas the carer has responsibility for the child. McMahon (1995, in Enos (2001)) argues that being a mother (the status) and doing mothering (the performance of tasks) are separate notions. The start of a foster home career usually means the start of an alien, unknown life. What place will the mother and foster mother have in the life of the child? How are they to be understood and referred to and what will the mothering practice consist of? What expectation does the mother have to the foster mother-child relationship and to their relationship with her? These questions are seldom explicitly posed. Usually, the mother, child and foster mother feel their way forward in a relationship filled with uncertainty as regards both how long the child will live in the foster home and what meaning the foster mother and mother will have for the child. The social, ideological and cultural notions regarding mothering serve as a model and are interpreted to the new practice.

One can imagine an axis for mothering actions where one extremity is actions aimed at a large degree of participation in the child's life while the other comprises few or no actions in the direction of mothering participation. Participation, here, means love actions, not authority, and not much upbringing. The mothers experience to varying degrees that foster parents provide space for them in the everyday life of their child. Some mothers experience that foster parents give them a legitimate place, opening the way for a sort of community round the care of the child. Others experience that the foster parents obstruct them in love actions, practical actions, responsibility and authority, and lay claim to the child as their own alone. The way the mothers experience the expectations of the foster parents towards them is important for the way they practice their mothering.

Based on how the women exercise their mothering, four mothering practices are presented here: 1. Network mothering, 2. Struggle for the child, 3. Symbolic mothering, 4. The impossible solution: choose to be childfree.

The women may change their practice while their child is growing up. A long struggle for the child may, for example, pass into a phase of symbolic mothering when the mothers strongly limit their contact with their child.

Network mothering

In some foster home placements, the mothers experience that the foster parents ascribe them importance based on reasoning regarding biological roots and an emotional, innate attachment between mother and child. Their experience of the understanding of the foster parents lays a basis for an open place for them in the life of the child, irrespective of how they perform their tasks in practice. In such cases, the mothers experience that the foster parents join forces in maintaining the understanding of the biological order. One mother put it like this:

The kid says mum to me, yes. He does, and has done the whole time. I suppose because they thought he ought to, and I want him to, of course, and that he should do because then he would always be conscious of whom I am and who they are.

The mother feels she has a place in her child's life without being actually present. In her communication with the foster parents and the child, she feels they maintain her biological, legitimate place in her child's life, providing an opportunity for mothering with a minimum of basis in the actions of everyday life.

In return, the mothers put priority on having regard for the foster parents, as one mother put it:

Really, she should be with me once a month. But it's a bit less frequently. Suddenly, mum and they stand there and they haven't got her at all, because if the father's also going to have her, then.

The mother is staring straight at the foster parents, her own parents. It is their point of view and not that of the child she is expressing. Indirectly, she is putting emphasis on the importance of the child having a stable everyday life. She expresses an understanding of mothering in a network, where the child is a "network child".

Network mothering particularly occurs when the child lives with the mother's parents, where the mother's ties to her own parents are based on a long history marked by solidarity. The symbolic meaning of kinship relations in western societies is that they contain diffuse, lasting solidarity (Schneider & Smith, 1973). Solidarity gives a direction for negotiations on relationships based on mutual trust, help and support. Kinship relations, in common with family relations, are socially constructed. Kinship support is not a reflex action, but rather something weighed and judged in given circumstances, and which the parties negotiate. Genealogical placement in a kinship network is important for how kinship relations are constructed and negotiated (Finch, 1989). However, how the relationship is understood varies from one foster home placement to another.

Over time, less and less practical mothering will be performed by mothers deprived of the custody of their child. In the case of network mothering, the love existing between the foster parents (the mother's parents) and the mother helps to maintain the tie between mother and child. One mother expressed her love of and gratitude to her parents as follows:

I was and still am very fond of my mother, and have always had very good contact with her. I can talk to her about everything.

Another mother says:

Without THEM, I don't think I'd have managed particularly well.

The mother's acceptance of her child belonging in the foster home is of great importance for the child. She does not demand a return of the custody. The involvement of the foster parents in the child and the mother's involvement in her parents are two processes which back up the social order and the agreement on the foster home contract. This gives the foster parents and the child space to be able to evolve more binding relationships and for the mothers and foster parents to support one another.

Network mothering is a practice where the cultural meaning of mothering is upheld, but accommodated to the absence of the mother. Children, foster parents and mothers share the understanding of the mother's emotional importance. The foster parents do not challenge the mothering. Network mothering resembles Latina Transnational Motherhood. Owing to financial hardship, many Central American and Mexican women leave their young children with grandparents and other carers to go to the United States in search of employment. They improvise new mothering arrangements due to their financial struggle. Their definition of motherhood is elastic, including long spatial and temporal separations from their children, emphasising the quality rather than the quantity of time spent with the child (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). Network mothering is a form of family life with long traditions in many parts of the world and describes the situation where relatives take care of children in place of their mother.

Struggle for the child

In some foster home placements, mothers experience that the foster parents ignore them, make it difficult for them to be with their child or obstruct them in their mothering practice. They consider themselves mothers, and feel their motherhood threatened by foster mothers who try to usurp them.

Mothers who wish to maintain as much as possible of their former mothering practice find being cut off from participation in the life of their child extremely painful. In some situations, it may be most important for the mother to be with the child. These may be one-off situations marking changes in the life of the child, like his or her first day at school. Perhaps they are milestones during the year, such as birthdays and Christmas. These are situations that are looked forward to, talked about and remembered; they help to create common traditions and common history. One mother says:

Occasionally, I've thought of committing suicide because they're always standing in the way of me and the kid.

Not being able to materialise expectations they feel are part of being a mother may be important for their experience of their own dignity as well as the loss they may feel for their child. Such mothers seek to maintain their intimate, loving relationship with their child.

Intimacy of relationships is a feature of modernisation (Sennet (1992), Giddens (1991, 1992). Parenthood as an institution based on obligations has been transformed into a relational parenthood based on love (Giddens, 1992). To create a binding relationship and develop a shared history a person has to give him or herself to another. If a mother-child relationship is to have chance to succeed, a commitment is necessary (Hennum, 1999: 7-9). The mothers who struggle for their child will create a relationship to the child that complies with the cultural notions about the unique, irreplaceable bonds of a mother's love. They experience that the surroundings block their possibilities for realising their obligations towards, and their love of, their child.

To struggle for their own worth may be tantamount to struggling to get their child back. When they feel exhausted, it may be difficult to see the child's point of view. One mother said it was not before she had won the appeal to get her child back that she managed to place focus on the needs of the child. She said she thought:

you've won the case, you can decide yourself, but all the same, think just a bit about the kid... By handing him over to my brother, the kid shifted from being the family idiot to become my mother's grandchild.

The mother expresses how relatives in their disparagement of her also consider the child worthless. When the child moves to other people, she herself is still an outcast, but her child is taken in from the cold. The child becomes worthy.

When mothers perceive themselves prevented by foster parents from practising their mothering, their strategies may be to demand the return of custody, or more frequent contact. Such strategies may reflect that they are unable to reconcile themselves to having had their child removed, but they may also occur where foster parents obstruct their contact with the child.

Symbolic mothering

In some placements, mothers experience that children and foster parents do not look upon them and treat them as mothers. They are denied almost all contact, and all authority. Nevertheless, they themselves feel they are mothers:

I am mum, even though he looks upon Nina and Tom [the foster parents] as mum and dad. That's how it is, and that's how I feel it. When Thomas [the child] is away from me so long, I differentiate very well between what he seems to think and I accept that one hundred percent. (...) but no-one has the right to hit at my emotions. (...) I know he has a different everyday life, (...) where Nina is mother. She wakes him, she gives him food, she consoles him when he falls down, so that is mother, and that is what a mother is supposed to do. But I feel myself as his mother. It has no significance for him, because he can't go around thinking, well, I've got another mother. (...) it's a bit odd when I talk to him on the phone: "just a moment, you can speak to mum" (...) and you just beat about the bush.

This mother seldom sees her child. Generally, they just meet at other family events, about every other year.

Even when contact is very seldom, the mothers do not cease to feel they are mothers. What is it that keeps their feeling of being a mother alive?

It is difficult to separate the feelings from the social expectations one has about feelings. Feelings may be understood as sociocultural constructions more than an inner state. They uphold a certain understanding; we feel what we think we should feel, and what we receive confirmation of from our surroundings. This is an interpersonal relationship perspective on feelings (Hochschild, 1979; Lutz, 1990). Feelings can be understood as activity. They require energy and effort. Feelings are activity that in turn gives favourable conditions for future actions.

Cultural conceptions have many sources. Even though a mother does not win emotional response in her negotiations with the child, literature, media and daily drips in contact with other sources may uphold her emotions. Maternal emotions are linked to cultural and social conceptions where mothers are understood as being created to take care of the child. These are cultural views the majority of people within our culture consider valid. They indicate what mothers should feel, and add fuel to the specific negotiations that take place between mother and child.

Mothering is characterised as symbolic in situations where the women do not practice mothering, where the children do not construe them as mothers, but where the women consider themselves to be mothers for their children.

The impossible solution: choose to be childfree

The last category of mothering we present is practised by women who want less responsibility and participation in the life of the child than that which the authorities, the foster parents and the child expect of them. These mothers experience that their surroundings expect them to take their child when they have the possibility to do so.

A new time comes to some mothers, a time when they are once more assessed to see whether they are fit to care for their child. They may then be challenged regarding their wish to be a full-time mother, as this mother put it:

The child welfare and the psychologist were completely set on me having her back. So I got high that one day and came to the meeting, and THEN they realised that really I'd been tremendously strong. I'd tried to give signals the whole time that I'm really not fit and motivated for it, even though I very much want to take her back. But it is postponed: "we'll see how she is managing".

This mother tells how the experts take it for granted that she wants to take the child back when she becomes capable of doing so. She has tried to hint that she is not motivated for this, but has not been understood. Even though drug abuse is a breach of social norms, she chooses to get high rather than state outright that she does not want the day-to-day responsibility for the child. Yet, the understanding that "*she very much wants to take the child back*" continues to be maintained. In negotiations with people around her, the mother tries to create a socially

acceptable self-understanding. Her interpretation of the event is that she is strong and is respected by everyone round her.

The mother stands in a dilemma between having consideration for her own autonomy and taking mothering into account. These are two norms modern women strive to combine. Norms vary across cultural circles. In some circles, being voluntarily childless is beginning to be more accepted (Gillespie, 2003). However, women with low social status, poor education, financial dependence, who are unfit to work and who have been deprived of a child are expected to put priority on mothering rather than their own individuality if they can possibly do so. In such an environment, drug abuse can be more socially acceptable than choosing not to take care of a child. To choose to be childfree may be seen by others as unfortunate, selfish and deviant (Gillespie, 2003).

The incompatibility between individual autonomy and parenthood seems to be dependent on gender. The impossible choice for women is an accepted choice for men. Fatherhood gives space for more open interpretations of cultural opinions. Father can define himself out; mother cannot within socially acceptable forms of action. The surroundings do not have the same expectations towards fathers of children under the care of the state:

When we were at the child psychiatric clinic and so on, no-one ever asked about the father (...). The only thing they asked was his name.

The father remains completely unmentioned in both the psychiatric treatment of the child and the child welfare authority reports on his care, without anyone questioning this situation. The same happens in the case of residential homes for young people with conduct disorders; owing to their absence from the youth's life, the father is not assessed as a carer and, unlike the mother, avoids being defined as a poor father. When talking about parents, the staff refer to mothers rather than fathers (Hennum, 1999). Fatherhood normally requires a certain participation before a father is defined in as part of the foster child's family. For men, biological facts alone are insufficient to define fatherhood.

Conclusion: Parenthood with a weak foundation

Not loving your own child is a departure from the normal. It is a deviance that scarcely any of the mothers will expose themselves to. Nor are there any who say anything about not loving their child. The mothers construct their parenthood within an understanding where maternal love still gives meaning. They construct an understanding where they are either incapable of looking after the child, or they allow the child to live in the foster home because it is best for the child. Society expects them to love their children, and for the sake of love they refrain from taking them over. In this way, they stick to the idea that failure of parental care does not affect maternal love. It is love for the child that causes them to let him or her go.

When responsibility for care is taken over, mothering is given clear limitations which complicate the image of maternal love. The ideal of maternal love derives from another social reality. Limited activity in time, space, function and content is a framework that bears witness to negotiations of more remote relationships. It destroys the possibilities for maternal love in the form collective opinion understands it. At the same time, the ideal is living; it is upheld in everyday life and does not fade.

The gap between ideal and reality enforces a ritual pattern of action when mother and child are together. The rituals promote actions with concentrated cosiness and intimacy. The purpose is to realise an ideal under meagre practical circumstances. The ideal is to a lesser extent a result of negotiated relationships over time than a confirmation of a socialised image created by society, which both mother and child work together to uphold. The image can be disclosed because it is weakly founded on concrete social practice. Mother and child risk becoming alien

to each other, even though they are socially defined as emotionally intimate and close. This is a risk that hits strongly at their self-esteem, and which the women therefore make a great effort to avoid. The feeling of being a loser is nevertheless a constant threat.

Many mothers deprived of custody labour with their obligation towards their child, and with feelings of guilt, shame and lack of self-respect. They strive to realise their notions of a close and intimate relationship with their child even though they experience distance and ambivalence. This hinders them in negotiating relations with their child in keeping with the actual situation they are in. Their understanding of their motherhood may have significance for the child's self-understanding and its relations to parents and foster parents. Mothers deprived of custody seldom have anyone in the same situation to share experience with, and usually have little contact with the child welfare service. There is a need to develop and test out measures whose aim is to give the mothers acceptance of their real motherhood and understanding of how they can handle relations to the child, the foster parents and the rest of society. Such measures may be individual (consultation and guidance), self-help groups with professional moderators, or groups of mothers and children. This is an area requiring research and vocational development. The research must take into account internal variations within the group.

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