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The meaning of biology in the foster family narratives of young adults

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ABSTRACT

While biological relatedness has been an issue among anthropologists for some time, the topic has gained little interest in family sociology. Recent contributions exploring how *genetic thinking* – the process through which biological relationships are rendered meaningful in everyday family living – shapes family life, suggest that this is about to change. This article seeks to contribute to this area of research. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 26 young adults who grew up in kinship foster care, it examines when and how genetic thinking is made relevant in the young adults' family narratives. Particular attention is paid to how ideas about biological relatedness has shaped their relationships with foster parents and biological parents. The paper gives insight into the more challenging aspects of genetic thinking. It also shows the importance of taking into account the variation in understandings of and emphasis on biological relationships and heritage for children, youth and young adults.


KEYWORDS

Biological relations; genetic thinking; kinship foster care; social relations

Introduction

In the early 1990s, family sociology experienced what can be called a revitalization. Transformations in family life and relationships had called for “a rethinking of concepts, interpretations and theories concerning the family” (Leira 1993, 9), and the functionalistic paradigm was replaced by new approaches. In short, it involved a shift from a focus on the nuclear family, towards a conceptualization of family as a fluid and open-ended set of relationships that are created and recreated over time (Jamieson, Simpson, and Lewis 2011; Morgan 2011; Smart 2007). David Morgan's concept of family practices' has been particularly influential, shifting the focus from what family *is*, to what people *do* (Morgan, 1996; Morgan 2011, 2019). Thus, in some ways, we can say that the concept of family, at least in research, ‘has come to signify the subjective meanings of intimate connections rather than formal, objective blood or marriage ties’ (Silva and Smart 1999, 7).

While acknowledging the importance of exploring family as a set of activities, Petra Nordqvist has argued that the approach is less apt to capture more discursive dimensions of family life. Hence, we need to develop ‘a sociological gaze more sensitive to the relationship between activities and the feelings, imaginations, dreams or claims with which they are entwined’ (Nordqvist 2017, 878). Nordqvist asks us to pay particular attention to *genetic thinking*, a term set to capture ‘the different ways in which connectedness in and through the body (referred to as blood, pregnancy, biology or genes, or a combination thereof) operate to guide people's thinking’ (p. 868). According to her, genetic thinking is a salient part of contemporary family life, yet the ways in which tropes such as ‘genes’ and ‘blood’ are rendered meaningful in everyday life, and how it shapes and matters in

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family living, is under-researched in family sociology. Unlike Nordqvist, who has analysed genetic thinking primarily through interviews with heterosexual and lesbian parents of donor-conceived children, we direct our attention towards a topic that has gained little attention in family sociology, namely *kinship foster care*. The United Nations define kinship care as ‘family-based care within the child’s extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature’ (United Nations, 2010). In this paper we focus on formal kinship care families where children grow in their extended family. Hence, a more suitable definition is ‘children being cared for by non-parental relatives within child-protection jurisdiction’ (Holtan, Handegård, Thørnblad, & Vis, 2013: 1087). Traditionally, child protective services (CPS) in most countries have preferred foster homes *outside* children’s family and network, also known as non-kinship care. In recent years, however, many Western countries have introduced policies which favour kinship care (Winokur, Holtan, and Batchelder 2014). In Norway, new regulations were introduced in 2004 clearly stating that CPS ‘should always consider whether someone in the child’s family or close network could be appointed as foster parents’ (§ 4) (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2003). The regulations were enacted in 2018.

In foster care research, theories and concepts from family sociology has been used in order to study children’s relationships with their biological parents and foster parents (Holland and Crowley 2013; Skoglund, Thørnblad, and Holtan 2018; Thørnblad and Holtan 2011; Wissö, Johansson, and Höjer 2019), and the social integration of the child (Holtan 2008). What role ideas and assumptions about biological relatedness play in the shaping of foster families, has been given little attention.

Genetic thinking in everyday life

Since the 1980s, anthropologists have challenged the notion that biological linkages are the only basis of kinship and family, as well as the assumption that shared genes automatically give rise to a sense of bonding and belonging (e.g. Carsten 2000; Strathern 1992). Nevertheless, it seems that biological relatedness continues to have a powerful impact on ideas about the structuring of family and kin (Chambers 2012; Nordqvist 2017). According to Howell, ‘biological connectedness is paramount in Norwegian thinking’ (Howell 2019, 666) and ‘biology remains the model by which most people in this country approach kinned relatedness’ (Howell 2007a, 25). Moreover, Follevåg (2006) has argued that biological families have a similar position as the male and the white in andro- and ethnocentrism – a privileged position constituted at the expense of families based on social and psychological bonds. This biocentric way of thinking, he argues, can be understood as a dichotomic hierarchical structure where positive characteristics are ‘attached to’ biological families, while families based on social relations are defined in relations to what they lack in comparison to biological families (Follevåg 2006, 26–27). Terms such as foster family, adoptive family, foster parent and step-parent can be viewed as examples of such thinking.

What makes biological relationships so powerful can be related to what Schneider observed over forty years ago, namely that relationships created by birth are culturally defined as being an objective fact of nature. From this perspective, biological parents and children or siblings, have a bond that can never really be terminated. Thus, even though they have never lived together or maybe not even met each other, they are culturally and socially understood to be related because they ‘share genes’ to some extent (Schneider 1980, 24–25).

Questions related to how genetic thinking impacts on how family life is lived, has mostly been explored among families where one or both parents are not biologically related to the child. One example is adoptive families. According to Howell (2001, 76), ideals embedded in notions of biological relatedness function as an important backdrop in these families. In fact, she argues, adoptive families do indeed integrate and recreate such ideals in their family practices. However, as Howell also emphasizes, ideas about biological relatedness might be a ‘shadow hovering in the background’, but is not necessarily an issue at all times:

[T]he adoptive families do not operate a form of either/or as regards the constitutive and defining role of biology and sociality, but that in different contexts they foreground one at the expense of the other. They thus employ a dynamic model of kinship. (Howell 2003, 467)

Similar findings can be found in studies of other family constellations where one or both parents are not biologically related to the child. On the basis of her study of heterosexual and lesbian parents of donor conceived children, Nordqvist (2017) argues that genetic thinking is an important aspect of everyday family living in these families. One example is the distress many parents experienced about not being biologically related to their child; they felt that the other parent had an evident link to the child, while they themselves did not. Hence, the lack of a biological link can for some become a seed of doubt, for others a threat which needs to be overcome. Nordqvist's point is not that all non-biological parents experience distress about not being biologically related, but that they 'need to engage with the discourse of genetic thinking and navigate through it to stabilise their position as parents or neutralise the threat it poses' (p. 873).

Genetic thinking in child protective services

According to Eide (2018, 132), biological relatedness has been a topic in the Norwegian CPS since the very beginning, which can be dated more than one hundred years back. The meaning ascribed to biology, however, has changed radically. In the early 1900s, biological relations for children in care were often understood as a 'problem bearer' and a 'problem generator'. Hence, it was thought best for the child not to have contact with biological parents or other relatives (Eide 2018, 132). Today, however, most children in foster care in Norway have contact with their biological parents (Stang and Baugerud 2018). According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 9 (UN General Assembly, 1989), children who are separated from their birth parents have the right to 'maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests'. In line with the UNCRC, legislation in Norway and in other countries places a duty on CPS to facilitate contact between children and their biological parents. The right to have contact builds on an understanding that contact with biological family is of importance for the child, and that it has value in itself, and is closely related to the *biological principle*, which favours a child's biological parents as care providers. In Norway, the biological principle is one of the guiding principles in CPS, and, according to Skivenes, 'undoubtedly the most influential' (2011, 158). A change in the conception of biological relations is a central reason for why kinship care has been the prioritized service in CPS in past years (Thørnblad 2011).

In this paper, we explore how genetic thinking is expressed among 26 young adults (aged 19–29) who grew up in long-term kinship care in Norway, meaning they had lived most of their upbringing in foster care with relatives. More specifically, we examine when and how ideas, perceptions and assumptions about biological relationships are rendered meaningful in the young adults' family narratives. Our main concern is to gain a better understanding of how genetic thinking might impact how family life and relationships are understood and practiced. In doing so, we seek to contribute with knowledge that can benefit researchers in the field of family sociology and foster care research, as well as social work practice.

Using the term '*genetic thinking*', Nordqvist refers to what has been recognized as a growing genetization of society (2017, 867). Yet, as will be seen, most of the interviewees in our study still used the term 'biological', both in reference to heredity and biological relations. For this reason, we primarily use the term 'biological' in this paper.

Method

The study

The present article is centred on in-depth interviews with young adults, 15 women and 11 men, who grew up in long-term kinship care: 16 grew up with their aunt and uncle, and 10 with grandparents. At the time of the interviews (2015), the youngest interviewee was 19 years old and the oldest was 29.

The interviews were conducted at the third time (T3) for data collection in our national longitudinal research project 'Outcome and experience of foster care', approved by the Regional Ethical Committee and the Norwegian Data Inspectorate (see Skoglund 2018, Appendix I). All interviewees had been part of our research project also as children and youth, *directly* through interviews or *indirectly* through their foster parents' and/or biological parents' participation. Because of the children's ages at T1, the ethical regulations did not allow us to record personal identification, such as date of birth or names (see also Holtan 2002, 2008). We were, however, allowed to record their month and year of birth, and the foster parents' names, addresses and telephone numbers. Hence, the recruitment for T3 was conducted primarily through the foster parents (Skoglund 2018). Information sheets were sent out to all persons registered as foster parents for the children at T1, saying they would receive a call in the near future asking for contact information about the young adults.¹ After receiving their names and addresses, we sent out contact information sheets and asked if they wanted to participate. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by first author, at a time and place chosen by the young adults themselves. The interviews lasted between 60 to 180 minutes, with an average of 90 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the respondents, and later fully transcribed. Consent was obtained from all participants.

The interviews

The data we draw on in this paper was originally collected to answer questions regarding young adults' experiences and understandings of growing up in foster care with relatives. The interview approach can be described as less structured where the interviewees were asked to talk about three main areas: the background to why they grew up in foster care, their childhood and adolescence, and their life today (see also Skoglund 2018, 55–56). Specific questions regarding biology, for example family resemblance or genetic inheritance were not asked about directly.

To analyse with a 'new' gaze

One of the aims of interviewing these young adults was to get in-depth insight into their family life and relationships in adult life. This resulted in one paper exploring their childhood narratives (Skoglund, Holtan, and Thørnblad 2018) and another exploring how young adults' relationships with biological parents changed over time (Skoglund, Thørnblad, and Holtan 2018). As can be seen, both papers are widely informed by newer approaches in family sociology described above. After reading Nordqvist's paper we became curious about what new insight we could get by analysing the interviews once more, this time making genetic thinking the explicit focus of our analysis.

The first phase of the analysis involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, paying particular attention to when and how ideas, perceptions and assumptions about biological relationships were rendered meaningful in the young adults' family narratives. In the second phase, we worked more systematically, coding and recoding the data material using the software package NVivo. While using theory to guide the analysis is characteristic for deductive approaches (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), we did not simply look for the 'right quotes' to find examples of genetic thinking. Rather, our analysis can be better described as a circular process of moving between the interviews, our constructed categories and the theoretical concept genetic thinking. Hence, it shares

some of the elements characteristic for abductive approaches in qualitative research (Blaikie 2007). Through this process, we constructed six different instances of what can be categorized as genetic thinking in our material. All names, places and identifying details have been anonymized in the following accounts.

Genetic thinking among young adults who grew up in kinship care

It was clear that the young adults' accounts about family life reflected different emphasis on the importance of biological relatedness. This variation became particularly visible when the young adults talked about their non-biological foster parent. In one end of the continuum, we found interviewees whose accounts reflected a type of biological determinism. Here, the non-biological foster parent was portrayed as secondary to the biological foster parent, explaining this ranking with lack of biological link. In the other end, we found those who significantly toned down the importance of biology, emphasizing that the non-biological foster parent held an equal position as the biological foster parent. Most of the interviewees could be placed somewhere in the middle of the continuum.

Foster parents: 'natural' closeness versus uncertain positions

Most of the interviewees in our study grew up in foster care where only one of their foster parents was their biological relative. One example is Mia (21) who moved into foster care with her biological uncle and his wife when she was one year old, due to her biological mother's drug addiction. In the interview, Mia described her family, which also consisted of her two cousins, as a typical Norwegian family who did 'everything' together. According to Mia, she had never questioned her aunt and uncle's love for her. Both in her childhood and in adult life they had treated her as their daughter, no different from her two cousins. Similarly, she had always considered them her family. With that said, Mia was clear that the person she was closest to was her uncle. In fact, she told several stories about him, about how dedicated he had been as a parent in her childhood and that, after she moved out, he had visited her several times a week to check that she was okay. She went on to explain why:

He is my biological uncle, so that's why he has taken extra good care of me. Taken really good care of me, actually.

Another interviewee who also said that he had experienced a stronger relationship with his biological foster parent while growing up, was Karl (23):

I was much closer to her, my aunt, who was family, than I was with him [non-biological foster parent]. There is an extra bond when it's biological. I didn't understand it then, but I do now.

As different studies on parenthood have noted, biological parenthood is often understood to give a natural bond between child and parent, and to give rise to a competent parent (see f.ex. McCarthy, Edwards, and Gillies 2003). From this perspective, a non-biological parent will be missing something; hence, he or she will have to compensate to gain the same status as a biological parent. While neither Mia nor Karl were talking about a biological parent in the examples above, it seems that it was from this point of view they interpreted and explained closeness and distance in the relationships with their foster parents during the interview. In doing so, they also created and maintained a hierarchy and a distance between themselves and their non-biological foster parent. One example of how such a distance can play out in everyday life, was found in the interview with Lucas (26):

I don't have that much contact with her [non-biological foster parent], because she married into the family (chuckles). So, but I do care about her. I just never call her. I always call him [biological uncle].

It is important to emphasize that not everyone ranked the biological foster parent above the non-biological foster parent. Lisa (25) is one example of this:

I have always felt special in relation to him [non-biological foster parent]. He was part of the picture from an early stage and was a good dad to my mum as well, but has always really supported me and he has said several times like – that he feels that he is my dad in a way. He has done all the practical stuff. He taught me how to ride a bike and has done all the dad stuff. And even though he doesn't have biological children of his own – well, he doesn't think about that. And that's a very nice thing to hear, stuff like that. And I feel the same way too – that blood doesn't matter, really. No, not when it comes to him.

While Lisa's account shows what we already know, that not sharing biological substances is no obstacle for developing close relationships, it also stands as an example of participation invested so that 'blood doesn't matter'. Hence, while Lisa did not say that one relationship is better, she gave insight into some of the steps involved before non-biological relations became equal to biological relations.

Biological ties – a repertoire of fixed relations

The above accounts on how biological ties created closeness, reflect the understanding that biological kinship is viewed as 'fixed', understood to be unbreakable. However, as anthropologists and sociologists have given insight into, fixity can also be created (Davies 2011; Mason 2008). It was in line with the image of the non-negotiable fixed family which Finn (28) portrayed his foster family in the first part of the interview. Finn grew up in foster care with his mother's sister and her husband due to his biological mother's drug abuse. His biological father had been unknown his whole upbringing. Like Mia above, Finn emphasized that he grew up regarding his foster family as his 'real family', 'not a foster family', and referred to his aunt and uncle as 'mum and dad'. While he had some contact with his biological mother growing up and today, Finn explained that he had never had an interest in his biological father; his foster father Jimmy was enough. However, when his aunt and uncle divorced, Jimmy moved out and the contact between him and Finn decreased rapidly during the first months. According to Finn "the absence of a father figure 'created "a vacuum"' in his life. Going into what he called 'an identity-seeking period', he started searching for his biological father 'to fulfil the need that had appeared'. When asked about this identity-seeking period in his life, Finn answered:

Finn: It [search for his biological father] confused me more than it gave me. That is, back then I tried, but then I started to have contact with him [non-biological foster parent] again, and so the need died completely.

Interviewer: Do you think about it now?

Finn: No ... I mean, he [biological father] doesn't exist to me. It might sound dramatic when I say that he is dead to be, but I mean, he has never existed to me.

This story illustrates that biology or genes can become meaningful at different points in life. For Finn, his biological father became a 'source' to seek fulfilment from at a point in life where he felt 'lost'. The example may suggest that biological ties can be a repertoire of fixed relationships to draw on under specific circumstances.

Curiosity and imagination related to biological inheritance

Similar to Finn's case, two other interviewees, Camilla and Sarah, had never met their biological fathers. They didn't know who they were or where they lived, but both wanted to meet them. However, for neither the reason was a lack of father figure. Camilla (21) said it like this:

I have a father, you know, I have a dad [non-biological foster dad]. But it would be nice to know where one comes from, in a way.

Camilla's wish to meet her biological father was related to knowing her origins. As emphasized by Howell (2007b: 59), knowing one's biological origins is viewed as a human right. The reason for this

can be related to the social and cultural understanding that to become a complete person, one *has* to know one's biological origin (Follevåg 2002, 81–82).

Another example can be found in the interview with Sarah (22). According to her, she had fantasized about her biological father everyday as a child:

I thought about him [biological father] day and night, and like, what would he say to me, who is he and . . .

Growing up, however, she had realized just how difficult it would be to find him, as her biological mother had almost no information about him. While she knew that she might never meet him, she still thought about what it would be like to meet him:

I often think like, or not often, but sometimes, what my family looks like and stuff like that. Because I know that I have, I mean, I'm pale now, but I get a really dark tan. And I know I have that from him. Or his side.

As Kramer's (2011) study show, genealogy offers a resource for identity-work. Sarah's account illustrates that not having seen or met her biological parent, did not stand in the way of this practice. It exemplifies that even though one's biological parent is unknown, he or she can play a role in one's life.

Claiming and disclaiming biological relationships

I was really proud when I found out that I have a brother . . .

In line with cultural and social understandings of biology and genes, two people who share DNA share a connection. For some, such knowledge can emerge at later stages in life. This was the case for Sebastian (27) (quoted above), who had recently learned that he had a brother through a DNA test. While Sebastian was excited about getting to know his brother more closely in the future, this was not Oliver's reaction when he, some years ago, became aware of that he had a biological sister on his father's side. Oliver (20) grew up in foster care with his aunt and uncle and two cousins, due to his parents' drug addictions. According to Oliver, he had never wanted to meet his biological sister, or have any contact with her; he 'had enough' family as it was. The past few years, however, his biological sister had tried to get in contact with him several times, but he had responded that he was not interested in meeting her. A couple of years ago, however, he suddenly found himself in the same location as her when she appeared at a family gathering:

Two years ago, she just showed up at one of our family gatherings. No one knew who she was, and everyone was like . . . "Who's that? Who are you?" And it turned out that Thomas [biological father] had invited her. And she was nice and all, but . . . I don't really need more siblings. Not now. Maybe if we had grown up together it would have been different.

Based on how Oliver portrayed the meeting with his biological sister, we interpreted his experience of the situation as not only unexpected, but also as an intrusion into his personal life. A similar example can be found in our interview with Filip (27). Because of his parents' drug abuse, he had moved into foster care with his aunt and uncle and their child (his cousin) when he was less than two years old. A short time later, both his parents died from overdose. In the interview, Filip emphasized that he couldn't remember anything about his biological parents, and considered his foster family to be his 'real' family. Because his foster mother was the sister of his biological mother, he had always had contact with that side of the family. According to Filip, this contact had been natural to him. The visits to his biological father's relatives had not. According to him, he had never known them well or recognized them as family. Nevertheless, once a year during his childhood, his aunt would 'drag' him to visit his biological grandmother and his older half-brother on his father's side. While this was, according to Filip, against his will, he emphasized that his aunt had only tried to do what was right; to maintain the contact with the other side of his biological family. For him, however, it had been strange, because he did not consider them his family. Hence, as he got older

and could decide for himself, he stopped the visits as well as any contact. He explained it like this during the interview:

I don't relate to them [biological family on father's side] anymore. It's like there's that part of it, the part which I have decided is reality, and then you have the biological part which I ignore. Biological kinship or not, at one point it just becomes real. And that's how I feel it has been for my family. That we just accepted that that's it . . . that's how it is now. And that's a good thing.

In both Oliver and Filip's narratives, someone else have deemed their biological relationships meaningful in ways that the two men did not. Oliver's biological sister's insistence to speak with him, as well as Filip's foster mother's insistence on him meeting his other biological side, exemplify just how important biological relationships can be interpreted.

Loyalty towards biological parents

In the Nordic countries, long-term foster care, rather than adoption, is the preferred option when children cannot live with their biological parents. Hence, very few children who grow up in foster care in Norway are adopted but grow up in long-term foster care. Nevertheless, adoption is a meaningful concept for some. One example is Glenn (26) and his family. Glenn moved into foster care with his aunt and uncle when he was one year old, due to his biological mother's alcohol abuse. When describing his family during the interview, Glenn emphasized that he viewed his aunt and uncle and cousins as his 'real family'; they were his parents and his siblings and he was their son and brother. His biological mother was, according to Glenn, more like a relative, 'like a cousin' whom he met once a year on family gatherings. His biological father, on the other hand, had been more or less absent his entire life. Some years ago, he had learned from his aunt and uncle that they had tried to adopt him, but his biological mother had refused. When asked about his thoughts on the matter, Glenn first said that it wouldn't make a big difference. He had been a part of this family as long as he could remember, they considered him as 'real family', he said, and vice versa. Being adopted would just be an issue about surname, according to Glenn. But then he added:

Adoption would involve some regulations and demands (chuckles), in that sense. I would become a part of the family in a legal sense. That would be fine by me. I wouldn't mind being a Gundersen [foster family surname], I feel like one anyway.

Our interpretation of Glenn's account here is that an adoption would formalize his family understanding. When asked if he himself had considered adoption, something he could initiate since he now was an adult, he said that he had thought about it, but put his mind to rest after a talk with his biological mother:

She told me that . . . she looks at me as the real, as 'her real son', and I am. And she didn't want me to get adopted, because she . . . I'm hers in a way. So, she doesn't want to lose me . . .

This is one of many examples among the interviewees where 'bodily connectedness' is given as a reason for being loyal to their biological parent, in this case for not getting adopted. Other examples can be found in the interviews with Paula and Lilly. While both told stories about how their parents' actions had hurt them growing up, they both still had their biological parents in their lives. When asked about what made them continue their relationships, they said:

Paula: When you're tied by blood, I think you just continue. It takes quite a lot before you would reject in that line, up or down, parent or child.

Lilly: It's probably because it's the closest family one can get. It's your mum, you know. I don't know. It must be that . . . We have, like, shared a body (chuckles). Yeah, I don't know. But it must be something about that mum thing. It's . . . I don't know.

Avoiding biological heritage

As we have already touched upon, genes and identity are often understood to go hand in hand; to understand who we really are, we have to know our biological lineage or ‘roots’. From this perspective, kinship care is desirable for children who cannot live with their biological parents, because it gives them access to their biological heritage. In fact, some of the interviewees felt bad for those who had grown up in non-kinship care. One of those were Astrid (24):

If a child grows up in an unknown family, you only get to know that family and not your roots. And then you won’t have good contact with your biological family; it will take years to get to know each other. Everyone knows that. And that’s why I think it’s nice that children who need foster care should end up with grandparents, uncle or aunt, sister or someone else.

Among the interviewees, we found others who also emphasized that growing up with biological family was important, it was best for children. One of them is Sophie (23), who grew up with her grandparents on her father’s side. According to Sophie, she had been interested in genealogy since she was a child, and during the interview, she told longer stories of the family tree on her father’s side and described which relatives she resembled. When asked about her mother’s side, however, she shrugged and said she didn’t bother with that side; many of them struggled with drugs and mental health issues and she wasn’t ‘fond of it’. For children in foster care, cultural understandings that biological traits are passed on from parent to child, can be challenging, as most have parents whose way of life is often regarded as deviant. According to Christine (24), this was not a problem for her, because she was more like her grandmother than her mother:

It [genetic heritage] has kind of jumped over a generation, because mum was very . . . very naïve, very gullible and . . . nice and . . . thought well of everyone. And she was tricked time and time again, and I think that might be a main reason for why she got into the drug environment, because she was so naïve and believed the man on the street, that it was all right. I am much more like grandma, I’m much more selective when it comes to friends. I choose to have fewer close friends than to be part of a big group.

The interview with Christine was the only one where a foster parent, her grandmother, participated. When Christine expressed that the genes had ‘skipped a generation’ her grandmother nodded and smiled, expressing that it was not the first time they had talked about family resemblance. Another example of an interviewee who said he resembled other relatives than his parents, was Noah (22). According to him, he was much more like his aunt:

Noah: We [the family] have many times said that one would almost think that it’s my aunt who is my mum, instead of my real mum (chuckles).

Interviewer: In what way?

Noah: It’s really about behaviour and personality and . . . Yeah, how we behave, really.

For Christine and Noah, resembling a different relative not only connected them to that relative; it also created a distance to their biological parents. Moreover, as is partly visible in Noah’s account above, it seems as if this selective aspect of relating had involved other family members, for example by saying that he was more like his aunt. In a time where ‘the gene’ is given a salient place in Western societies, this might be one way for these families to create an alternative identity for children who grow up in foster care.

Discussion

In this paper we have explored when and how ideas, perceptions and assumptions about biological relationships were rendered meaningful in the family narratives of young adults who grew up in kinship foster care. On the basis of the six instances of genetic thinking we have presented we find it reasonable to argue in line with previous research; that genetic thinking is a salient aspect of

contemporary family life (Nordqvist 2017). This was perhaps particularly visible in the accounts of young adults where one foster parent was a biological relative and the other was not. Kinship care families based on both biological and social bonds, most likely an aunt and uncle, give opportunity for comparison of the impact of genetic thinking. It seems that biological relationships are acted upon as originally stronger, emotionally closer and more evident than social kinship relations. From this perspective, the foster parent who is not biologically related to the child have to 'work' to *achieve* a similar position as the biological foster parent, to overcome what is 'missing'; a biological link. Hence, we can say that it illustrates a biocentric view (Follevåg 2006) where biological relations have a privileged position at the expense of social relations. Moreover, we have seen examples showing that biology can become highly influential also in families where non-biological foster parents are ranked emotionally closer than biological parents. Glenn, who accepted his biological mother's wish for him not to be adopted by his foster parents, is an example of this.

Glenn's case brings us to what we regard as an important finding in our study, namely *variation* in terms of the importance ascribed to the biological aspect of relations. As we have shown, some interviewees accounts reflected a type of biological determinism, while others significantly downplayed the role of biology, for example by equalizing their relationships with both the non-biological and the biological foster parent. It indicates that the significance given to biology not only vary with time and context (Howell 2003), but also at an individual level. Among the few studies exploring the significance of genetic thinking in family life, this point has been given less attention. This means that we know little about what give rise to different perspectives and the role of factors such as family types, gender, educational level etc. While our study does not contribute to this question, it suggests that biological determinism can be a challenging perspective for children in long-term foster care where a goal is to create close and long-lasting relationships. For this reason we find it important for future research to focus on what it is that shapes different understandings.

According to Nordqvist (2017, 868), one of the specific ways in which genetic thinking is rendered meaningful in social life is through its cultural associations with ownership and claims about belonging. Moreover, referring to previous empirical research (for example Edwards and Strathern 2000; Nordqvist 2010), Nordqvist emphasizes that claiming links and connections is experienced as a pleasurable part of family life. Our analysis indicates that this is not always the case. We saw for example how Sophie ignored her biological mother's side of the family in her genealogical research, and Christine who 'jumped over' a generation, claiming biological inheritance from her grandmother rather than her biological mother. It might come as little surprise that someone who grew up in foster care because of their parents' abuse and/or neglect, might reject or challenge claims about resembling a parent. In a time when biological inheritance is understood to play a central part in the formation of one's personality and adult life, such connections can be experienced as challenging or simply unwanted. However, through Oliver and Filip's accounts, we also saw examples where sibling relationships were disclaimed. For some, such relationships might not fit into one's own understanding of or wishes for family life and relationships. These stories not only challenge assumptions related to the pleasure of relating to biological relatives, they also challenge the biological principle where biological relations are favoured at the expense of other relations. Moreover, they point towards greater caution in CPS' and other authorities' operationalization of the biological principle, as well as other expressions of biocentric norms and ideals.

It has been argued that a conceptualization of family as a set of activities can help social work practitioners better understand the lives of children in care (Holland and Crowley 2013), and to better meet the diversity of needs among foster care families (Skoglund & Thørnblad, 2018). This study adds to this research, but, like Nordqvist, it shows the necessity of also exploring how ideas about biology shapes and matters in the 'doing' of family life and relationships. A relevant question, then, is how the concept of genetic thinking can be of relevance to social work practice. Our study shows the importance of giving children and youth in care the opportunity to express and reflect on their thoughts and feelings about biological relationships and inheritance. Some would argue that this is a somewhat obvious point to make. However, in a time and place where biological relations

are preferred and considered best for children, it is not a given that the meaning children themselves ascribe biology is a concern. For CPS such knowledge might give important input when adapting measures for the individual family.

Finally, it is important to note that the interviewees who participated in this study were not asked direct question about how they viewed biological relationships. What might we discover if we focused more specifically on genetic thinking in studies regarding foster care? What knowledge would we gain if we explored the impact of genetic thinking for the social integration of children in different care settings? How might ideas about biological inheritance shape children and young adults' relationships with biological parents as well as their identity construction? In a time when biology and genes are given importance, these are some of the central questions deserving further attention.

Notes

1. Foster parents have a duty of confidentiality. Before the recruitment process the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Tribunal of the Ministry of Children and Equality (Skoglund 2018, Appendix II) had absolved this duty, and they could freely give us the contact information we needed in order to send out information sheets.

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