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**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

**Foster children's experiences and expectations concerning the child-welfare officer role—Prerequisites and obstacles for close and trustful relationships**

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**Abstract**

The question of whether the Swedish social services are fulfilling their obligation to monitor and support children in foster care is attracting increasing attention. The importance of closeness and trust between children and their child-welfare officers has been highlighted in particular. The aim of this article is to study foster children's experiences and expectations concerning the role of the child-welfare officer, and how these constitute prerequisites for, and possible obstacles to the officers developing close and trustful relationships with the children under prevailing institutional conditions. Data from our evaluation of a national pilot project with supervision representatives provide the empirical basis. Our theoretical point of departure is that the relationship between the child and the child-welfare officer is affected by the officer's role—a role that is negotiated under the prevailing institutional conditions and in interaction with the children's experiences of and expectations about that role. The results show that most children emphasize that the relationship with their officer is negatively affected by a lack of time, availability, and trust. It is also weakened by the children's general expectation that child-welfare officers only act in their official role, a role that is associated with a formal and distanced relationship.

**KEYWORDS**

child welfare, foster care, interviewing children, professional ethics/issues

**1 | INTRODUCTION**

Foster care is one of the major child-welfare activities in Sweden. It involves approximately 20,000 children and young people every year (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2014). In the extensive research in this area several factors have been identified as crucial for the outcome of foster care, including continuity and stability in the placement (e.g., Ward, 2009), selection and matching of foster families (e.g., Orme, Cherry, & Rhodes, 2006), and the child's school and health situation (e.g., Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008). Relational aspects have also been highlighted as fundamental, such as the child's sense of being a part of the foster family (e.g., Schofield, Beek, Ward, & Biggart, 2013) and having contact with his or her birth family (e.g., Andersson, 2009). Several general studies within the field of social work emphasize that social care outcomes are also strongly affected by the existence of a close and trustful relationship between the professional social worker and the client (e.g., Hingley-Jones & Mandin, 2007; Knei-Paz, 2009; Munro, 2001). Even though there have been some studies in recent years that specifically focus on the relationship between foster children and their assigned child-welfare officer at the social services (e.g., McLeod, 2010; Winter, 2009), research on this relationship is still quite rare and/or underdeveloped (Backe-Hansen, Egelund, & Havik, 2010).

The formal responsibility for foster children ultimately lies with the child-welfare officer who is administrating the specific case. This task is regulated by laws, rules, and the organizational framework of the social services. Regulations require, for example, that the officer in charge of the case shall document how the placement is progressing and plan the continuation and future care (SOSFS, 2012:11). Since 2013, it is also specified in law that all foster children shall have a personal child-welfare officer who maintains regular and frequent contact with them. It has been stated in a Government Bill (2012/13:10) that the relationship between the child and the child-welfare officer shall be characterized by confidence and trust. The child-welfare officer shall play a clear supportive and protective role within the child's life situation and accordingly be a key person for the child's development and security. Despite this, the relationship between the child and the
child-welfare officer is not often taken into account in research on foster care. Research that highlights the children’s own thoughts and experiences of this relationship is even rarer (cf. Baylis, Collins, & Coleman, 2011). However, on a general level, the relationship between professionals and clients is a central issue in much social work research. For instance, it has been stated that when this relationship is based on trust and closeness; it may help relieve the client’s burden of distress (e.g., Knei-Paz, 2009). A close and trustful relationship is also often said to be necessary in order to obtain an adequate understanding of the totality of the client’s life situation, needs, and desires (e.g., Trevithick, 2003). Some previous studies even suggest that the relationship between the social worker and the client is the single most important factor for positive outcomes in social work (e.g., Hingley-Jones & Mandin, 2007; Knei-Paz, 2009; Munro, 2001). A precondition for establishing a close and trustful relationship is to understand the different factors potentially affecting it.

In previous research, the relationship between the professional and the client is often dealt with in a somewhat clinical manner. The focus is on processes of an individual therapeutic character, and the relationship is often seen as a product of aspects such as the professional’s interactive skills. Examples of factors highlighted are the professional’s conversational techniques and whether meetings are carried out in such a way that a sense of mutuality and reciprocity arises (e.g., Alexander & Charles, 2009; Boer & Coady, 2007). However, this study starts from the assumption that the relationship between the child-welfare officer and the foster child is also affected by factors on an institutional level. The role of the child-welfare officer is formed by an organizational and institutional framework containing several different and complex tasks and dilemmas, such as exercising authority and monitoring the foster home situation, fulfilling official administrative responsibilities (documentation, assessments, and care plans), and also establishing closeness and trust in the relationship with the child. The role of the officer is also affected by the other party in the relationship—the child. Children’s views of their own officer, and child-welfare officers in general, form their experiences and expectations about what kind of relationship is at all possible within this institutional framework. Understanding these preconceptions about the officer role and why they arise is an important piece of the puzzle for identifying existing institutional constraints and determining what needs to be done to develop close and trustful professional–client relationships within this institutional framework.

The aim of this article is to study foster children’s experiences and expectations concerning the role of the child-welfare officer, and how these constitute prerequisites for, and also possible obstacles to, the officers developing close and trustful relationships with the children under the prevailing institutional conditions.

- How do the children describe their relationship with their child-welfare officer?
- What characterizes the children’s experiences and expectations concerning the role of child-welfare officers in general?
- What prerequisites and/or obstacles to the establishment of close and trustful relationships can be inferred from these role expectations on an institutional level?

The article is based on interviews with foster children conducted as part of the evaluation of a major national pilot project with so-called supervision representatives in foster care (see Oscarsson & Lindahl, 2014).

2 | FOSTER CARE IN SWEDEN—AN OVERVIEW AND SITUATION REPORT

In recent years, a number of deficiencies in the Swedish social services’ care of children have come under scrutiny. Among other things it has been stated that the social services fail to adequately monitor placements, that child-welfare officers do not gain a clear understanding of the children’s whole life situation, and that the children’s needs are not being met in areas such as education and health. Descriptions of these problems often focus on deficiencies in the relationship between child-welfare officers and children in placement (SOU, 2009:68; SOU, 2011:61). It was because of these problems that the Swedish government proposed the new legislation mentioned above, which emphasizes the need for children to have the same officer over time and the importance of establishing closeness and trust. The government bill for the legislative changes stresses that

... there should be frequent, continuous and trustful contact, in other words a good relationship between the child and the child-welfare officer. ... Trustful contact with the child-welfare officer can also give the child or young person access to supportive and protective circumstances in their lives. ... A good relationship with the foster child or young person is therefore important to enable the child-welfare officer to comprehend the child's situation and discover if something is not as it should be. (Government Bill, 2012/13:10, pp. 78–79, our translation)

The national pilot project with supervision representatives further highlights the problems in the relationship here discussed. The project was commissioned by the Swedish government and conducted during 2010–2013, and the authors of this article were contracted to evaluate it. The background to the project was the discovery of the difficulty that child-welfare officers had in establishing close and trustful relationships with foster children. The project aimed to examine whether an external adult could establish a closer and more trustful relationship with the child by being supportive and representing the child’s interests vis-à-vis various involved parties. The evaluation showed that in many cases it was easier for the supervision representative to establish such a close and trustful relationship with the child. A common reason for this was that the children did not perceive the supervision representative as acting in an official role, but rather as a close, trusted, and supportive extra adult in their lives (Oscarsson & Lindahl, 2014).

3 | ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS—THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CENTRAL CONCEPTS

A theoretical premise of this article is that the possibilities for close and trustful relationships between social workers and clients are basically...
determined by the current institutional framework. In applying an institutional perspective, the concept of role is especially useful. The child-welfare officer occupies a structural position with regulated assignments within the organizational framework. This position implies a certain framework to act within, one that among other things is determined by formally defined role characteristics (cf. Biddle, 1979). However, the role is not static; it is continuously reinterpreted and negotiated in social interaction between different involved parties with different expectations of what the role should involve and by changes in the social context (Goffman, 1999). Child-welfare officers are also part of a group of occupations that are often referred to as "street-level bureaucrats." Their task is to interpret and apply laws and regulations in the contact with unique clients. This often creates conflicts and dilemmas within the role, which in turn requires some room for maneuver to prioritize actions and to interpret and apply the rules in different cases. Therefore, the role of the child-welfare officer is formed in the frame of a certain discretionary space (Lipsky, 1980). This room for interpretation, negotiation, and action exists in the intersection between organizational control, one's own professional expectations and those of colleagues, and the expectations and actions of clients (in this case, foster children; c.f. Bruhn, 2015). Studying the latter—the children's expectations concerning the role of the child-welfare officer—is important for several reasons. First, these expectations are central to the possibility for the officer to establish close and trustful relationships. How children interpret the role is pivotal for the kind of relationship that develops. Second, these expectations indicate different kinds of institutional conditions that affect the officer's possibility to develop both the role and the relationship. Third, they may reveal how officers are able to interpret their role and develop it in different ways within the limits of their discretion. Such differences may also reveal possible alternative relationships that actually exist between child-welfare officers and children within this institutional framework. It is important to analytically distinguish between children's specific experiences and their general expectations concerning the officer role. For example, children may have own concrete experiences of a close and trustful relationship with a child-welfare officer while at the same time having a general expectation that relationships with child-welfare officers are characterized by distance and formality. This can be seen as an empirical support for the theoretical assumption that children's general role expectations are not only affected by their own specific experiences but also by commonly held institutionalized patterns of thought.

On the basis of existing rules and regulations—not least the above-mentioned legal changes—some different role aspects (or subroles) can theoretically be discerned. These role aspects also demonstrate inherent dilemmas that are characteristic of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980). The child-welfare officer possesses, to begin with, a formal "official role" and acts fundamentally according to the laws and regulations. He or she has to investigate, assess, take decisions about, and administrate the child's placement on behalf of the local social services authority. Furthermore, the officer shall represent the child's interests vis-à-vis different involved parties. This implies an "advocacy role." Recent calls that child-welfare officers should be particularly close and significant persons for foster children underpin and theoretically can be linked to an "attachment role." These three role aspects represent a latent dilemma in the occupational role, because they are not compatible in every situation; on the contrary, they may sometimes be quite contradictory. On the other hand, because they need to be balanced, they also leave room for interpretation—giving the officer personal discretion to act with support from formal regulations. The extent to which these role aspects appear in the children's expectations and experiences, and how they affect the relationship between the children and the officers are empirical questions in this study.

Svensson (2001) has developed a model containing four positions that represent different ideal-typical ways that the officers themselves may interpret and perform their occupational role. This is done within their discretionary space, in our case conditioned first and foremost by the above-mentioned role-aspects. The three role aspects should here be seen as structurally formed and Svensson's four positions are examples of negotiated interpretations of the occupational role. It should be possible to discern whether such positions are reflected in how the children studied perceive the officer role. The model is based on the relation between individualization and level of intervention. Individualization refers to whether the officer objectifies the child as a representative of a category or as a unique individual with special needs and requests. Level of intervention refers to the amount of time and effort the officer devotes to the child. Four positions are discerned: controller, administrator, supporter, and treater. The controller objectifies the child as a representative of a category and does not hesitate to intervene but does so solely on the basis of rules and regulations. The focus of the controller is to adapt the child to the goals of the authority. The starting point for the administrator is also objectifying but without an ambition to intervene. The client shall receive what is stipulated in the regulations but without any deeper efforts. The supporter sees the individual—listens and shows interest in the unique circumstances—but is unwilling to put a great deal of effort into the work. In his or her view, clients should take initiatives themselves. Finally, the treater sees the child as a unique individual, has high ambitions, and does not hesitate to intervene.

Because this article deals with the concept of role expectations, some semantic clarifications need to be made. In our empirical analysis, we will distinguish between expectations and desires. Theoretically, one can argue that these two concepts overlap. However, in this article expectation refers to what the children expect of a child-welfare officer as such, or more specifically, what they believe. "Desires" here refer to wishing for a specific sort of contact with the officer. Several children expect one thing but express a desire for something else. Separating expectations, understood as a "belief about what will be," from desires "for what should be" will prove to be important here.

Another central concept in this article is that of a relationship. As discussed in Section 1, previous research emphasizes that the relationship between social workers (and other similar professionals) and clients is particularly important in social care and therapeutic work. This relationship is often referred to as a working alliance or therapeutic alliance. Here, research stresses the importance of factors such as shared goals, equal contributions, and mutuality in such relationships (e.g., Bordin, 1979; Duncan, Miller, & Wampold, 2009). However, as mentioned above, these perspectives tend to entail that the relationship between the professional and the client is described in an almost clinical manner. The focus is often solely on processes in the
immediate context, such as the professional’s conversational techniques and other practical approaches. Therefore, the concepts of working alliance and therapeutic alliance tend to be related to an understanding of the relationship at an individual level. This study does not focus on such individual factors. In order to prevent confusion, we, therefore, avoided these concepts here. Instead we are using the concepts close and trustful relationship and formal and distant relationship (sometimes with slight differences in wording). The former concepts mentioned (denoting individual factors) does not help to clarify how institutional factors affects relational work, which is the aim of this study. However, close and trustful relationship versus formal and distant relationship should not be understood as theoretically developed concepts, but rather as categories that have evolved from our qualitative analysis of the empirical material.

4 | METHOD

This article is based on a rereading and recontextualization (see Danemark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2001) of a subsample of our previous national evaluation of supervision representatives in foster care, conducted during 2010–2014. The foster children were recruited from 20 smaller and larger municipalities, which were selected to cover different regions across Sweden. For the article, we have selected all the children who were 11 years or older. This is partly because the focus of our study can be difficult to capture in younger children’s answers and partly because several questions that are central to the article were only directed to children older than 11. The sample came to include both children who were placed in foster care on the basis of the Social Services Act (SoL) and children in coercive care, regulated by the Care of Young Persons Act (LVU). Further, it concerns children in so-called traditional foster homes. Children living with relatives are excluded. This gave us a sample of 53 children, divided into three age groups: 11–13 (38%), 14–16 (45%), and 17–19 (17%). Forty-five percent were girls, 55% boys. Seventy-four percent were placed on the basis of SoL, and 26% were in coercive care. We have not observed any clear differences, and it is not the aim of this study to make deeper analyzes whether there are any dissimilarities between any of these groups. However, information about age, gender, and SoL or LVU is presented adjacent to each quote in the results section.

Each child was interviewed on three occasions during a year. The interviews were based on a relatively structured interview guide. All questions were open for further discussion, however. Questions concerned the children’s experiences of their placement and their experiences and expectations concerning different persons involved, for example, supervision representatives and child-welfare officers. Initially the interviews were analyzed separately by each of us. In the next step, findings were further analyzed in dialogue between us. The method of analysis has followed the principles of meaning categorization (see Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). Different interpretations have been based on the theoretical perspectives presented above. At the same time, we have tried to be explorative, that is, to remain open to aspects that our theoretical concepts do not capture (Layder, 1998). This method of analysis has created the categories found in Section 5, such as time, availability, and trust. As mentioned above, the concepts close and trustful relationship versus formal and distant relationship are examples of categories that have emerged from our qualitative analysis. However, because the theoretical concepts used (the three subroles and the four positions) are perceived as not being on a high level of abstraction, these are also used as qualitative categories in the analysis. In a big sample like this and especially because the aim is to reveal widespread and institutionalized patterns of thought among the respondents, we have in an early step in the analysis, noted the commonality of certain ideas and conceptions in our sample.

Because the evaluation contained more than 400 interviews with foster children and other respondents, the interviews were not recorded on tape, but are instead based on written notes of the interviewer. This may be seen as a limitation of the study, but several direct quotes from the children are literally quoted in the notes from the interviews. In Section 5, extracts from these notes are presented, and direct quotes are marked with quotation marks. Further, in the absence of a recording device, we intended to enable a more open conversation. This was considered of particular importance in interviews with children. Moreover, each child was interviewed on three occasions, and at each follow-up, the notes from the previous interview were reviewed together with the child to ensure that the notes were an accurate rendition of the child’s experiences. With a more restricted sample, we could have recorded the interviews on tape and by that enabled a deeper analysis of the children’s statements. However, because the article aims at exploring the institutionalization and thereby the extent of certain experiences and expectations, the size of the sample and the current methodological procedure also has its strengths.

The interviews are based on the written consent of each child and the methodological procedure has been reviewed by an ethical board. For ethical reasons, it was important that children who were invited to participate were assessed by their child-welfare officer to have a relatively well-functioning situation in their foster home. This could be seen as a too narrow selection, which in turn may raise questions about the representativity. However, several of the children have experienced different problems in their placement after the selection phase; some have even been moved to another foster home. The children and different responsible actors were, therefore, repeatedly asked whether it still was appropriate to continue the participation. In previous research, on instability in social care, it has been stated that even placements that seem to be well functioning can suddenly deteriorate or collapse (i.e., Ward, 2009). Knowing this, the selection of this study appears to be less problematic concerning the representativity—and the need for close and trustful relationships between the children and the child-welfare officer is emphasized even in cases that initially seem to be well functioning.

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | The children’s experiences of their child-welfare officer

Several of the children highlight a number of negative experiences in the contact with their child-welfare officer. To begin with, this
should be understood in light of the knowledge that 22 of the 53 children have had to change officer once or more during the period. Some of the children have changed officer up to four or five times.

Many children highlight both positive and negative experiences, which illustrates how complex the contact often is. The small number of children with mainly positive experiences report being able to talk to the officer about things that are important to them, having a relaxed relationship and spending time with the officer in informal settings.

N.N. thinks that the child-welfare officer is good. They usually get together about once a month. N.N. says she’s never visited the social services office. Once she went bowling with the officer. They also plan to play laser tag together. N.N. thinks that she can talk with the officer about important things. (Girl, 11–13 years, SoL)

The children who emphasize negative experiences of the contact underline shortcomings in the personal and informal parts of the relationship. These children experience a lack of crucial preconditions for creating a relationship that could be categorized as close and trustful, such as seeing each other frequently and regularly. Furthermore, dissatisfaction is commonly expressed about decisions made by the officer. Alongside these statements, general disapproval of the social services is frequently expressed.

“I don’t know her at all.” N.N. says that he can’t remember when he last met with his child-welfare officer. N.N. would rather not speak about important things with the officer. “Only some things, I don’t tell her everything. It’s a stiff relationship.” (Boy, 14–16 years, SoL)

“Don’t talk about her. I hate her.” N.N. says it has been a long time since they last saw each other and that they haven’t had any contact by phone or mail. N.N. says that when they get together she usually remains silent. “It’s like the officer talks with herself. Everything is bad. I don’t like them because they ruin everything.” (Girl, 14–16 years, SoL)

Thus, in the children’s overall descriptions of the contact with their child-welfare officer, perceptions of distance and a lack of personal contact are emphasized. To study this further, a more specific question was asked about how the children believe the relationship has changed over time. The children’s responses show that as long as the officer does not commit obvious mistakes, the relationship will not deteriorate. Perhaps more noteworthy, however, is that several of the responses indicate that the relationship will not improve over time either, even though the child has had the same officer for the entire period. This suggests that the children believe there are limits to how close they can get to a child-welfare officer.

N.N. thinks that the relationship with the officer is still formal and stiff. “It feels like it’s always been like that.” N.N. says there are some things that you’d rather not speak with a child-welfare officer about. (Boy, 14–16 years, SoL)

5.2 The children’s general expectations about the child-welfare officer role

Their own experiences, but also those of others, affect the children’s general expectations about the role of the child-welfare officer. The expectations are also based on how they perceive the institutional conditions that the officers work under. To specifically capture the children’s general expectations about the role, one question was formulated: What do you think of when I say “child-welfare officer”?

Only a few of the children describe child-welfare officers in a way that can be indicative of an advocacy or an attachment role. One girl (17–19 years, SoL) says that a child-welfare officer is someone who “arranges accommodation and meetings with my parents,” but also that a child-welfare officer is “an extra support.” The vast majority of the children, however, highlight expectations that relate to the official role. Some of these statements clearly relate to the position of the controller. These highlight the risk of “opening up” to someone with the power to intervene whenever something you have done can be considered improper.

No good pictures come to mind, I think of words like “bad” and “boring.” … You have to keep some things hidden. Otherwise they’ll make bad decisions. For instance, if your friends have done something wrong. You can’t tell child-welfare officers because they’ll report it. They’re a bit like the police. (Boy, 14–16 years, SoL)

A child-welfare officer is a horrible person that will take me away from my mother. Unfortunately, I think that many have that view of the social services. … I don’t talk with them about private stuff. … It doesn’t feel like they need to know about that.” (Boy, 17–19 years, SoL)

In other cases the administrator emerges. Some of the children say that they think of someone with a pen, paper and a notepad who can direct you to other forms of assistance.

“I think of a woman sitting and writing.” N.N. says that you don’t talk about “personal stuff. Because it isn’t their job to know about such things.” (Girl, 14–16 years, SoL)

The interviews clearly show how intimately the children’s expectations about the role of the child-welfare officer are linked with how they perceive the character of their relationship. The majority of the children expect child-welfare officers to have an official role, which includes the idea of an administrator or a controller. They believe that this entails a relationship of the kind that we here categorize as formal and distant. Notably, children who believe they have a close and trustful relationship with their officer tend to emphasize that the current officer is atypical and that he or she has, therefore, somehow deviated
from the role expectations. Despite having experience of close and trustful relationships with child-welfare officers, these children cling to the general picture of a distant relationship.

“She [the officer] is a person, like you or me. Not just someone who’s at the social services and only wants to do her job. But someone who wants to help you for real. ... We can laugh and joke around. Almost like two friends. ... She’s not a typical child-welfare officer.” (Girl, 17–19 years, SoL)

5.3 | What the children desire from the relationship

Thus, the children expect the child-welfare officer to have an official role, and their relationship to be characterized by distance. However, when comparing the children’s expectations and experiences with what they believe a good child-welfare officer should be like, we find a clear discrepancy. When the children describe what they want from such an officer, values and aspects related to an attachment role are emphasized. They stress a close and trustful relationship, and want the officer to act within the framework of what is expected of a supporter or even a treater. It is often expressed that the officer should support the child and do their best to help him or her, as well as being accessible and a good listener. The officer should “care,” be understanding and well versed about the child’s situation. Most children also describe what personal qualities the “ideal” child-welfare officer should have. Terms such as kind, nice, happy, and funny are commonly used. The children also stress the importance of being honest and authentic. Some forms of interaction with the child-welfare officer are also desired, such as different ways to associate in an informal manner. A common feature of the children’s responses is that they both explicitly and implicitly emphasize the importance of a close and trustful relationship and that they wish that the officer would have a clear attachment role.

“They should above all try to build a good relationship, like a relationship between friends. This is important to being able to open up.” N.N. says that he previously had an officer who spent time with him outside working hours. N.N. says that this led him to see her not as a child-welfare officer, but as “a close and important person.” (Boy, 17–19 years, SoL).

Almost every child states that it is important to have the same officer over time. Many specifically mention that continuity is necessary for the development of a close and trustful relationship. One boy (14–16 years, SoL) stresses “It’s as if I would ask you if you want to see the same friends all the time.”

5.4 | Time, availability, and trust

It is obvious that most of the children see the child-welfare officer as someone occupying an official role, believe that he or she acts as an administrator and/or a controller, and consider their relationship to be characterized by distance. However, they desire a close and trustful relationship and want the officer to have a clear attachment role. But what is the difference between a close and a distant relationship, according to the children? In almost all interview sessions, and regardless of whether the children feel that the relationship is positive, negative, or nonexistent, they refer to the importance of the categories time, availability, and trust. The following quote demonstrates how the time aspect relates to the importance of continuity and how this in turn is linked to the importance of trust:

“I think it’s sad that the officer is going to quit. ... It will take time for me to trust the new officer and to let her into my life. ... It takes time to open up to someone new.” (Girl, 17–19 years, LVU)

Partly related to the time aspect is the importance of availability. Many children say that it is important for the relationship that they have frequent and close contact with the officer. Availability involves both how often the officer initiates contact and how easy it is for the child to get in touch with the officer. Both the time aspect and the question of availability are key prerequisites for the development of trust. The importance of trust is expressed in different ways, including whether the children feel that the officer listens and if the relationship is characterized by openness. The children appreciate the officer being someone you can trust and someone with whom you can talk about important things. In most cases, however, clear indications of a lack of trust are at hand, for instance, that they do not talk about sensitive topics with their officer. In the few cases, where the relationship is described in positive terms, factors that clearly relate to trust are emphasized.

“N.N. thinks he has a close relationship with his officer. N. N. describes the officer as ‘someone you can trust.’ N.N. says that what is good about the relationship is that ‘you can say anything.’” (Boy, 17–19 years, SoL)

In sum, time, availability, and trust are intimately related aspects that jointly contribute to the children’s experiences of the relationship with the child-welfare officer. The development of a trustful relationship generally requires time and availability, in the same way, as availability often is a question of time and trust. In cases where the relationship is characterized by frequent and open and trustful contact, the officer can be said to possess an attachment role in relation to the child. In these cases, the officer’s role is linked to the expectations placed on the supporter and/or the treater. If, on the other hand, the relationship is limited by too little contact, difficulty getting in touch with the officer, and uncertainty about what one can say, the officer is reduced to only an “official person”—occupying the position of an administrator or controller—which creates distance and also reinforces the children’s negative expectations of child-welfare officers. With regard to the children’s experiences and expectations, and the prevailing working conditions of today, questions should be raised whether the child-welfare officers, really have the ability to combine the contradictory expectations of the official, the advocacy, and the attachment subroles (c.f. Lipsky, 1980).

6 | CONCLUSIVE DISCUSSION

Several of the children highlight a number of negative experiences of the relationship with their child-welfare officer. These experiences
are variously related to a lack of time, availability, and trust. The interviews with the children reveals that the officers’ working conditions are clearly affected by time pressure and high staff turnover. Many children have had to change officer once or more during the current period. However, even children who have had the same officer state that the relationship has not improved over time. The vast majority of the children generally expect child-welfare officers to be representatives of the public authority and nothing else. Because of this the children expect their relationship to be characterized by distance and formality. This general role expectation is mostly strengthened by the children’s own specific experiences of contact with child-welfare officers. The children’s expectations and experiences create and sustain an institutional obstacle to the development of close and trustful relationships. This is particularly empirically supported by the children’s recurrent statements concerning the general limitations of how close they can get to a child-welfare officer.

The study reveals several factors that point to the impact of different institutional preconditions. Therefore, the study contributes with several arguments on why the relationship between foster children and their child-welfare officers should not only be understood at an individual level but also on an institutional level. First, the large number of children (in this study and in previous research) that highlight deficiencies in the relationship with their officer can hardly be explained by factors such as a lack of skill and qualifications on an individual officer level. Rather, it points to these deficiencies being products of currently problematic organizational and institutional preconditions. Second, the children’s explanations of why the relationship does not improve over time strongly indicate existing institutional limitations for how close the relationship with a child-welfare officer can become. The officer does not have time for fraternization. He or she is an official person doing paperwork, one that potentially takes bad decisions and who is best kept at a distance. This is a strong general preconception about the child-welfare officer role, indicating that very little of the advocacy and especially the attachment roles are experienced by the children. Third, children who have experience of close and trustful relationships with child-welfare officers (present or past) still do not generally expect child-welfare officers to have an attachment or an advocacy role. Even these children express the general (and in this way institutionalized) belief that child-welfare officers are officials and nothing more, people “to keep at arm’s length.” Because these children often have experienced both close and distant relationships with child-welfare officers, one might expect them to express that the relationship only depends on the actions and attitudes of the officer. Yet this is not the case. If an officer deviates from the general picture, it is this individual officer that is an exception to the general rule, nothing else.

The children’s expectations are presumably a product of several institutional and organizational factors. Of great importance may be the prevailing conditions of workplace stress and lack of resources, which prevent child-welfare officers from developing other role-aspects than the official one. In addition, and as becomes clear in our study, staff turnover is extremely high at the child-welfare units. These kinds of conditions have become entrenched over a relatively long period of time and are well known to practitioners and researchers in this field. They should therefore be expected to contribute to the internalization by the children of the general picture of this occupational role, which is mediated to them by parents, friends and the media.

The legislative changes emphasizing the importance of continuity and closeness in the relationship are an example of good intentions, and there is no reason to believe that child-welfare officers have different opinions on this point. However, it seems obvious that to create a better practice, changes in legislation have to be combined with extensive institutional and organizational changes. In addition to the extra resources that are necessary to increase officers’ time and availability, there is a need for comprehensive internal and external dialogue and policy development on how the different role aspects should be balanced and what kind of relationship that should be developed with the children. The authorities’ duty to sometimes take decisions that are painful for the children is a fundamental part of the street-level bureaucracy and will not change (c.f. Lipsky, 1980). The latent need for such decisions should be seen as an argument for cultivating closeness and trust rather than maintaining distance and formality. As long as the children generally expect the contact with the officer to be characterized by distance and formality, this in itself will constitute an institutional obstacle to closeness and trust. In order to challenge and change these role expectations, and their causes and consequences, further research on the child-welfare officers’ experiences and perspectives is needed, something we will deal with in a coming article.

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