Foster youth’s sense of belonging in kinship, network and traditional foster families
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Foster youth's sense of belonging in kinship, network and traditional foster families
An interactive perspective on foster youth's everyday life
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Abstract


This thesis shows that foster youth can be active participants and agents in shaping their own lives, both in terms of developing and breaking relationships. The aim of the thesis is to examine the everyday lives of young people after entering various types of foster families, and to identify processes in various contexts that influence their sense of belonging. Three of the studies are based on in-depth interviews with 17 foster youth, and a fourth study also includes follow-up interviews with 15 of them. The study’s perspective views the family as socially constructed by means of interactive rituals in which both adults and young people are social actors. Study I demonstrates foster children’s motivation and aptitude for academic improvement, even despite previous severe problems in school. The study indicates that their satisfaction with school is related to both the quality of care they receive and their relations with peers. Study II illuminates the importance of both structure and warmth in foster youth’s everyday life. Routines normalize their daily life. Emotional warmth is created through doing things together. In particular, joking and laughing stand out as important inclusion practices. In study III the young people in kinship and network foster families are found to display the strongest social bonds to their foster families, and the young people in traditional foster families the weakest. Including network foster families in the study sheds light on the importance of adolescents’ active involvement in choosing their foster families. Study IV strengthens findings in the previous three studies about the importance of mutual activities and laughing together for the creation of social bonds in the foster family. Over time, adolescents in traditional foster families also have strengthened their social bonds to the foster family. Therapeutic support is found to be more common in the follow-up interview than one year before, and this unmasks the vulnerability of foster youth, and girls in particular. However, foster youth exhibit personal agency by still coping fairly well with their situation. Overall, this thesis shows that the sense of belonging in the family is strengthened if youth negotiate and take part in decisions concerning them and if the family is an ‘open foster family’ in its reception of the youth and their biological parents, but also that humour can serve as a door-opener into the foster family.

Keywords: foster youth, everyday life, interactions, rituals, social bonds, sense of belonging, foster family, agency, social work.

Lena Hedin, School of Law, Psychology, and Social Work
Örebro University, SE-701 82 Örebro, Sweden, lena.hedin@oru.se
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Västerås, November 2011
Lena
List of publications

The thesis is based on the following publications:

Article I:

Article II:

Article III:

Article IV:

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Introduction

The role of parents is crucial for children and young people’s well-being and mental health (Johansson, Brunnberg & Eriksson, 2007). However, sometimes children and young people, for different reasons, are not able to stay in their birth family. Then foster care has been and still is the preferable kind of out-of-home care for children and young people in Sweden as in many other Western countries (SOU 2011:9). Despite the rather large amount of foster care research, there is scanty knowledge about what it is like for young people to enter and live in a foster family (see Backe-Hansen, Egelund & Havik, 2010). However, we do know that foster youth’s relationships with their caregivers are important for their placement outcomes (see e.g. Farineau & McWey, 2011; Stott & Gustafsson, 2010), and that youth want security and continuity in relationships (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Schofield, 2002). This raises questions of how relationships between youth and foster parents are encouraged, and whether it makes a difference for young people to enter a foster family where relationships are or are not already established. National and international research reports that placements in traditional, non-related foster families have a higher rate of breakdowns than in foster families which are previously familiar, like kinship foster families (Sallnäs, Vinnerljung & Kyhle Westermark, 2004; Chamberlain, Price, Reid, Landsverk, Fisher & Stoolmiller, 2006), which says something about stability. Accordingly, foster youth’s dependence on their foster family relationships, which makes them in a sense vulnerable, and the difference in stability between varying kinds of foster families provide a background for the dissertation, and make it important to study what it is like for young people to enter and settle into various types of foster families, previously familiar or previously unknown.

The aim of the thesis

The aim of this thesis is to examine young people’s everyday life in their different contexts after entering various types of foster families, and to identify processes that influence their sense of belonging. The different types of foster families studied are kinship, network, and traditional foster families.

Definitions of some catch-all terms

This thesis concentrates on young people entering various types of foster care.

Young people refers to youth aged 13–19 during the course of the study.
A *foster home* is a private family which on behalf of the social services accepts children and youth into the home for permanent caring and upbringing (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2010a). There are three different types of foster families in which the thesis is interested: *The kinship foster family*, which is a family related to the foster child. *The network foster family*, which is a non-relative, previously known but not very close family chosen by the adolescent and usually also by his/her birth parents. It can be a former contact family, a sibling’s former foster family, a friend’s family, or just a family one has got to know. *The traditional foster family*, which is a previously unknown family, recruited through the social services.

*Belonging*, in this thesis, is a concept which is concretized as a family or people with whom one feels at home, to whom one feels close, and whom one trusts and turns to for support. *Everyday life* refers to the daily life one lives in various contexts, like at home, in school, etc., including both the trivial practices and routines and those on special occasions like for example holidays or birthday celebrations.

**The Swedish context of children’s rights and foster care – Some aspects**

A brief overview of some aspects of the Swedish child welfare system, especially concerning foster care, will be presented to serve as a contextual background for the dissertation.

In recent decades, growing attention has been given to the rights of children, and their legal status as individuals in their own right has been strengthened in Sweden as well as in many other countries (Elvstrand, 2009; Alanen, 2010). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has been of great importance in this development. In Sweden, a special organization has been established to promote children’s interests, namely the Child Ombudsman. Changes in Swedish law concerning out-of-home care have been made in line with the CRC. The right of foster children to be heard in all important matters concerning them has been stipulated in the Swedish Social Services Act (Socialtjänstlagen) since 1998, as has the regulation about serving ‘the best interest of the child’. Brannen (1999) regards some Scandinavian countries, Sweden in particular, to be forerunners in treating children as citizens with legal rights, unlike the UK, where she considers the implementation of children’s rights to have been slow.
In Sweden, 17,200 children and adolescents were placed in out-of-home care as of 1 November 2010, 12,100 of which in accordance with the Social Service Act (SoL) and 5,100 in accordance with the Care of Young People Act (LVU). Young people, 13–17 years of age, amounted to 8,100 of these. Foster care was the most common placement option; 70 per cent of those placed according to SoL and 67 per cent of those placed according to LVU were placed in foster care (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2011a). Of girls in placement, 13–17 years old, about 74 per cent were placed in foster care as of 1 November 2010; and for boys, 13–17 years of age, the corresponding figure was 54 per cent (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2011a). Out-of-home care according to LVU occurs in two main cases: the so called ‘home environment’ cases (71 per cent as of 1 November 2010), which are related to the parents’ incapacity to take care of the child, and the ‘behaviour’ cases (24 per cent) which depend on the child’s own destructive behaviour, with both reasons cited in 5 per cent of cases as of 1 November 2010 (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2011a). Voluntary out-of–home care according to SoL can be based on the environment in the birth home and/or the youth’s behaviour. The placement can be considered voluntary (SoL) even if conditions are severe enough for a court order (LVU) if the adolescent and his/her parents accept and cooperate with the measures suggested by the social services. In Sweden young people with criminal behaviour and/or other behavioural problems stay in various types of out-of-home care, including foster care.

The Swedish legislation prescribes maintaining contact between foster children and their birth family during placement. Furthermore, there is no permanency planning, like adoption of foster children, in the Swedish system unlike, for example, in the USA where adoption from foster care is common (Frasch, Brooks & Barth, 2000). However, after a three-year period of placement Swedish social services have to consider if transfer of custody from birth parents to foster parents is appropriate.

When it comes to leaving care, foster youth in Sweden usually have the possibility to stay in care until they are about 19, when they have completed their upper-secondary schooling, in the event that they have not returned to their birth family. An additional clause in the Social Services Act (SoL) of 1 April 2008 imposes an increased responsibility to provide social services to young people after leaving care (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2009).

In Sweden, all placements that are not temporary have to be regulated through the social services. This is also the case for kinship placements, unlike in some other countries, such as the USA and UK (see Strozier,
Mcgrew, Krisman & Smith, 2005; Broad, 2004). According to the Swedish legislation, the social services must consider placement in a kinship family as the primary alternative when a child or teenager is to be placed in a foster home. The number of placements in kinship foster families has subsequently increased. In 2003 they represented 12 per cent of new placements, and the expected rate of increase was thereby fulfilled (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2005). However, of all placements in foster families, the proportion of kinship placements had only increased by about one percentage point between 1999 and 2004 (Linderoth, 2006). Hence the increase was marginal. Linderoth (2006) observes that it is difficult to get relevant statistics concerning the change over time. However, the proportion of foster children aged 13–17 years placed in kinship families as of 1 November 2009 amounted to about 22 per cent, calculated from official national statistics (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2010a). This increase can be related to a 2004 change in Swedish official statistics, with ‘kinship family’ now being called ‘network family’ and including both families that are relatives and families with other close ties to the child. Accordingly, foster families, which are known, but not familiar to the child (in this thesis called network foster families), and traditional, previously unknown foster families, together amounted to 78 per cent of all placements (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2010a).

Immigrant children are overrepresented in out-of-home care in Sweden, as well as in other Western countries (Vinnerljung, Franzén, Gustafsson & Johansson, 2008). However, the research shows that this overrepresentation among first generation immigrant children is related to socioeconomic background factors, and that migration status alone does not have much of a statistical effect on placements. Unaccompanied/separated children are not included in that study. According to national statistics there has been a great increase in unaccompanied children applying for asylum during recent years; for example 398 in 2005 compared to 2,393 in 2010 (Brunnberg, Borg & Fridstöm, 2011). In 2010 most of these children were boys (n=1,929; girls n=464), with the majority of the boys aged 13–17 years. This may explain the increased number of boys entering out-of-home care, especially in institutions (HVB), in recent years, of whom mostly another person than a parent or an unknown person has custody (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2011a).

In Sweden, and in countries like Norway, Ireland, Iceland, Australia, and Canada, a rehabilitation process is initiated with children abused or neglected in their foster families (SOU 2011:9). Foster children’s vulnerable situation has been made evident in this recently published governmental
investigation of out-of-home care in Sweden from 1920 to 1990 (SOU 2009:99; SOU 2011:9). People who consider themselves to have been neglected and/or abused in foster and residential care, of whom 866 individuals were interviewed, tell about serious abuse and neglect in both residential and foster care during this period. The results show that children and young people with disabilities or behavioural and emotional difficulties, or who are placed far from home, are more at risk than others of being subjected to abuse. Other risk factors are being placed in a foster family with rigid methods of discipline, an isolated foster family which tends to avoid contact with other people, or a foster family with a large number of children with great needs (SOU 2011: 61). As a consequence of mistreatment, many interviewees have experienced feelings of shame and guilt throughout their entire lives, and a sense of having lost their childhood. Their suggestions for improving the out-of-home care organization include, among other things, maintaining contact with birth families (SOU 2009:99). The governmental investigation has also examined the present situation and found that abuse and neglect are still a problem, not just a matter of history (SOU 2011:9). Suggestions made in the publication are to admit wrongdoing and apologize to the people afflicted, to give them compensation for pain and suffering, and to take measures to prevent recurrences. Even though my thesis also concerns the same group, namely foster children, the participants mainly have a different experience of foster care.
Theoretical points of departure

In this section, the theoretical points of departure of this thesis are described. The family, or more precisely the new family, is regarded as the main context of the everyday life of young people entering foster care. As such, family life comprises the starting point for this section. The typical features of foster families are further described in the previous research section. Another main theme is that the young people are seen as social actors, in interaction with foster family members, but also in their other contexts, such as school. However, in order to understand the interactional processes that the young people are involved in and that influence them, some micro-sociological theories are included: one about interaction ritual chains and one about emotions and social bonds.

The constructions of family

In this thesis, I am interested in what it is like to enter a new family, a foster family. So, as a starting point the concept of family will be discussed. Silva and Smart (1999) suggest that family links are not being weakened; instead families remain crucial in the intimate life of individuals. An underlying concept in this thesis is that ‘family’ is socially constructed, which means that it is influenced by a wide variety of social and personal conditions (Coltrane & Collins, 2001). Constructions of family are products of human interaction and communication (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Holtzman, 2008), but also of the meaning that family members attach to these relations (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). Thus the present study takes an interest in the family interaction, communication, and ‘family practices’ – its way of ‘doing family’ (Silva & Smart, 1999; Morgan, 1999) – after the entrance of a new family member. The idea of ‘doing’ family instead of ‘being’ in a family is connected with participation and negotiations (Silva & Smart, 1999).

In the current thesis, with its focus on foster youth’s narratives about their lived experiences in their everyday life, these perspectives on family life provide a starting point. The perspective includes Morgan’s ideas about ‘family practices’ as an area of research where ‘the practice of everyday life’ in contrast to ‘the structure of the family’ is in focus (Bäck-Wiklund, 2001). The structure is static, while research about everyday life is directed towards actions, events, and flows that take place in the various relations within the family, where both adults and children participate and create meaning. Routines, rituals, and actions are negotiated and renegotiated among the members of the family. That the family is not static but instead the subject of an active process of negotiations and re-definition (Morgan,
may be especially characteristic of the foster family when a new family member arrives who is unfamiliar with the more or less trivial routines (see e.g. Höjer, 2001). The family practices can also take place outside the home (Morgan, 1999), for example foster youth’s leisure activities, family members’ engagement in foster youth’s homework, etc. Morgan (1996, 1999) asserts that family practices are constructed in two dimensions, one cognitive – the creation of meaning – and one emotional. Finally, the concept of doing family presupposes family members as actors, both children and adults. Hence, children are active parties in constructing the process of doing family (Halldén, 2007).

**The child as an agent in need of belonging – In different contexts**

Another underlying perspective of this study, close to the previous one, is found within the sociology of childhood, which understands children as social actors shaping and being shaped by their circumstances. An interactive approach is evident. The young people are seen as active participants and subjects in cooperation with the surrounding world (see e.g. James & Prout, 1997; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Dencik, 1998; James & James, 2004). As such they are fully capable of telling about their life situation. One key feature of this perspective is that children are worthy of being studied in their own right. The focus can be on the social activities of everyday life, in line with this thesis. The young people are not only active in the construction of their own social lives, but also in the lives of people around them (James & Prout, 1997). Dencik (1999) asserts that this view of the young person as an actor involved in interactions with other people is applicable to family research as well as other kind of research. Dencik (1999:72) explains this as follows: ‘people become what they are through their socio cultural belongings, their social ties and relations’. The child’s need to belong to her various social contexts is therefore of great importance for the way in which she creates meaning in her existence. Children’s roles can be differently situated between cultures so that each child brings his or her own interpretation of these roles (James & James, 2004). For children placed in foster care, their entire context – like family, school, and friends – can be changed through the placement, something that might greatly alter their sense of belonging. Young people in particular are also dependant on peer relationships for their self-image and identity (Dencik, 1999; Dunn & McQuire, 1992). Their school situation has also been shown to be of great significance for foster children’s ability to adapt (see Vinnerljung, Öman & Gunnarsson, 2005; Kjellén, 2010). Accordingly, interactions in all these arenas, the entire socio-cultural context, are signifi-
cant for the foster child’s experiences and how he/she acts to handle different situations.

**An interaction theory – Interaction Ritual Chains**

According to Collins (2008) a theoretical (sociological) understanding is necessary to open your eyes to what is actually happening, and make you able to handle social problems. In this thesis, the theoretical understanding is a micro-sociological one.

A theory that can illuminate important aspects of the young person’s interactions within the foster family and in other social contexts is Randall Collins’s theory of Interaction Ritual (IR) Chains (1988, 2004). Collins has adopted parts of other theories like Goffman’s role theory and Mead’s symbolic interactionism theory.

Collins claims it is the culture of daily life which reinforces membership in informal groups, which for the purposes of this thesis can include foster family and peer groups. This can involve how people communicate with each other, what ideals they express, what they do, and so on. A person’s cultural capital is important and also includes her reputation. Cultural capital, or membership symbols, refers to ‘all items of culture charged up by interaction rituals, which shift in local significance with situational processes over time’ (Collins, 2004, 390). The basic idea of Collins’s theory is that successful rituals, based on a mutual focus of attention and shared mood within a group and with barriers to outsiders, create group solidarity, symbols of group membership, and feelings of morality, and charge the individual with positive emotional energy. The boundaries to outsiders give participants a sense of who is taking part and who is outside. The key process is participants’ mutual entrainment of emotion and attention, which gives them a shared emotional and cognitive experience. This mutual focus of attention can come about spontaneously. A feeling of morality means that adhering to the group – respecting its symbols – feels right. The symbols that represent the group can be visual icons, words, and gestures, for example family photos, or the way group members exchange greetings. The relation is maintained through the ritual. In everyday life, for example in a family, these rituals can be e.g. salutations, more or less stereotyped verbal interchanges, which on the surface may seem meaningless. However, these conversational routines mark the personal nature of the relationship (Collins, 2004). Failed rituals, called empty or forced rituals, deprive the individual of emotional energy. Signs of failed rituals can be ‘the feeling of boredom and constraint, even depression, interaction fatigue, a desire to escape’ (Collins, 2004, 51).
The emotional energy created through successful rituals is an emotional power permeating the individual’s actions, for instance self-confidence, enthusiasm, and warmth. Beneath the emotional energy are the specific emotions, for example anger, joy, fear, etc. Thus, the theory can explain why one can feel enthusiasm together with some people and sadness together with others (Dahlgren & Starrin, 2004). The emotional energy gathered for example within the foster family accompanies the young person when he or she later becomes integrated with others, like peers in school, and inversely comes from interactions with peers back to the family, thus continuing the IR-chain. Collins (2004) distinguishes between formal and natural rituals. Natural rituals are more unconscious and are included in ways of greeting, speaking, using body language, etc. These natural rituals are common in daily family life. Formal rituals generate categorical identities, status group boundaries, while informal rituals generate merely personal reputations. Collins (2004) is of the opinion that similarities in ways to behave in daily situations among members of the group reinforce their membership in the group. When a child enters a foster family, both the similarities in behaviour between the child and the foster family and their adaptability to each other must be of crucial importance. This can also apply to various peer groups. For children, it is to a large degree their behaviour that displays their cultural capital; for adults, it is above all their language (Collins, 2004). Teenagers, as in this study, have the capacity to verbalize what they want to express (Elkind, 1983). The cultural capital that the young person brings to the foster family and the surrounding milieu can therefore be of great importance, but the content of the young person’s cultural capital can also change and develop.

Collins (2004) refers to Scheff’s micro-sociological research on emotions as being compatible with his own theory. Scheff’s emotional theory will be further described below. Moreover, both theories are applicable to children and youth. Collins (2004) refers to youth in a discussion about status group boundaries, for example in school, and Scheff (1997) characterizes the structure of social bonds in the family, influenced by emotions, as the key determinant of child development.

**Emotions and social bonds**

According to the theory of social bonds, the personality and attitudes of human beings arise from the nature of their relationships with others (Scheff, 1997). In this theory, ideas about the importance of specific emotions – for example joy, love, fear, shame, guilt, and pride – for human behaviour and interactions are further developed by Suzanne Retzinger (1991) and Thomas J. Scheff (1994, 1997, 2006). These feelings of shame
and pride, that is to say, primary emotions, are connected with an individual’s social ties and influence the individual’s self-esteem (Retzinger 1991, Scheff 1994). They use this relationship concept, ‘social bonds’, by which Scheff means ‘deep mutual understanding and identification’ between persons or groups (2006: 142). This is also called ‘attunement’, which Scheff regards as a cognitive/emotional concept, connected to solidarity. Solidarity promotes trust and effective cooperation. Attunement is a mark of a secure bond, the sharing of thoughts and feelings (Scheff, 1997). Scheff argues that the structure of social bonds in the family is the key determinant of child development. Secure bonds involve a balance between the views of self and other. Scheff (1997) suggests that if there is mutual understanding and identification, then genuine love is possible. This understanding includes acceptance.

Scheff (1997) discusses openness and responsiveness as crucial in loving relationships, which may apply to all social relationships, such as between mother and child. Secure bonds in the family lead to responsible conduct, while insecure bonds lead to alienated relationships, bonds that are too loose (isolation) or too tight (engulfment). Isolated bonds imply that each party emphasizes his or her own point of view over the other’s, and engulfed bonds that each party emphasizes the other’s point of view over his or her own. To withhold thoughts and feelings is a primary indicator of the state of engulfment. The feeling of alienation may be so strong that it generates feelings of rejection (shame) which can be so overwhelming that they are bypassed, only visible in the form of aggressive and/or hostile behaviour. However, Scheff (1997) also recognizes that shame and anger may be frequent parts of all intimate relationships. If these emotions are immediately acknowledged they may be quickly dispelled, if not they can lead to conflicts. In close relationships, like in the family, nonverbal expressions are as important as words; that is, addressing others in a respectful manner is crucial to avoid generating feelings of shame (Scheff, 1997). The feeling of shame may however also be constructive when it is conducive to repairing social bonds, though it is destructive when it causes disintegration of social bonds (Starrin & Wettergren, 2008).

Retzinger (1991:37) states that the social bond has to be built, maintained, or repaired at every moment if it is not to be damaged. The state of the bond may be possible to detect in manners and emotions. Accordingly, shame is the opposite of pride, and signals alienation. While shame shows there is a threat to the social bond, pride indicates a secure bond. Retzinger (1991) clarifies the distinction between shame and guilt. Shame influences the whole self and makes one feel helpless. The reaction is to hide. Guilt concerns something that one does or does not do. The self feels in control,
and the reaction is to do or undo something (Retzinger, 1991, 41). These emotions are mirrored in people’s body language, mostly in the face (Scheff & Starrin, 2002). For example lowering one’s head and blushing can indicate shame, as well as words and expressions like being rejected, lonely, abandoned, hurt, etc. (Retzinger, 1991; Starrin & Wettergren, 2008). The concept of shame comprises a group of negative emotions and feelings you can experience when you see yourself through the eyes of the other. Just imagining the reaction may be enough to create these emotions of shame. In this process, such emotions such as interest and happiness are impeded, which disturbs the interaction with other people. Shame can result in different reactions to cope with the emotion, mainly admitting the feeling of shame, or defending and protecting oneself from it. As mentioned, shame obstructs the social bonds, even in disguise or hidden from oneself and others. Unacknowledged shame even has the potential to explosively disrupt the social bond (Scheff, 1997). Consequently, shame is a strong emotion and is the only one that affects a person’s entire self (Dahlgren & Starrin, 2004). In this context, foster children’s feelings about themselves and their birth parents, and especially the foster carers’ attitude towards birth parents, might be of special importance. Whether the young people’s feelings are close to shame, particularly not acknowledged, or pride, may be important in the adaptation process to the foster home. In particular as the foster parents’, but also other foster family members’, attitude may diminish or strengthen these emotions.

Scheff (2008) reflects about belonging with Maslow’s theory of human needs as a base. Belonging is about the need to have relations to other people. There is no clear definition of the word according to Scheff. As with attunement, he recognizes belonging as close to solidarity. Accordingly belonging is the opposite of alienation, and applies not only at a collective macro level, but also concerns human relations at a micro level. So, the concepts of attunement and social bonds are connected to the concept of belonging.

Dahlgren and Starrin (2004) discuss the importance of emotions in daily life taking theories by Maffesoli, among others, as a starting point. There is a ‘new sociality’ in which being together in everyday life, for example at tea time or when meeting friends, constitutes the base. The need for closeness is central (Maffesoli, 1996). When it comes to young people, and especially young people entering a new foster home, the importance of habits and emotions in everyday life is obvious for making new social ties/bonds both in the foster family and in peer groups. Accordingly, theories about interaction rituals, emotions, and social bonds are valuable for this thesis.
The described ‘new sociality’ is in line with the constituent ideas of this thesis, and consequently has also influenced the methodology.
The field of research
Recent research has revealed that children and young people in out-of-home care run a higher risk of a negative outcome than other children (see Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008). Accordingly, this gives cause to seek insight into the inner life of foster families, primarily from the foster youth’s point of view.

One main topic of interest for this thesis is adolescents’ everyday life in foster care, including life in the foster family, in school, and in leisure time, and also over a period of time. This concerns relations with foster family members, teachers, peers, birth family members, etc. Another topic is what it is like to live in different types of foster families – kinship, network, and traditional foster families – and the differences in stability among these. Finally, most of the research described in this chapter concerns adolescents. Some parts may also be described in the articles, but are further developed here to provide overall background for the thesis.

This thesis is concerned with the Swedish field of child social welfare, in particular out-of-home care and, more specifically, foster care. The Swedish Children in Crisis project can serve as a contextual starting point of the national research about Swedish foster care that developed during the 1980s. This large-scale research project included birth parents’, foster parents’, social workers’, and children’s perspectives (see e.g. Hessle, 1988; Vinterhed, 1985; Börjesson & Håkansson, 1990; Cederström, 1990). The researchers openly sided with a ‘relation orientation’ in foster care, which means that children need to maintain contact with their birth parents for the sake of their identity development (see Fanshel & Shinn, 1978), as opposed to an orientation focussing on foster children’s need for continuity and new, stable permanent relationships with their foster parents (see Goldstein, Freud & Solnit, 1973). At that time this opposition was a vital question in foster care research as well as in practice (see Andersson, 1998a; Höjer, 2001; SOU 2011:9). Subsequently the relation orientation has come to shape Swedish legislation and practice. However, today the debate is not as polarized, and maintaining contact with the birth family and stability in care are both considered to be important (SOU 2011:9).

The importance of the foster family
The Children-in-Crisis study most interesting for the current thesis might be Lindén’s (1998) doctoral dissertation that studied 27 adolescents, aged 13–16 years, two to three months after being placed in foster care and two years thereafter. She is interested, from an object-relations theoretical standpoint, both in how adolescents’ previous relationships with their birth
parents affect the way they handle the separation, and how adolescents relate to their foster parents. She suggests that the birth mothers’ emotional attitudes during the adolescents’ childhood are crucial for how their placements turn out, as are foster carers’ empathy and perseverance. She reports that situations where foster parents tend to have low levels of empathy are, for example, quick placements in inexperienced foster homes without enough time for preparation, an elderly kin foster parent who felt obliged to take care of the adolescent, and ‘professional’ foster parents with a fixed and inflexible model. She is surprised that the foster parents in the study show such differences in empathy, and suggests that this is of great importance for the adolescents’ behaviour. Lindén (1998) concludes that the entire project indicates some positive, yet moderate, changes in adolescents’ social situation after two years, however not in their emotional/relational situation. Lindén’s results about the importance of foster carers’ empathy leads up to a brief glimpse on the foster family.

In a Canadian research review of family resiliency, family protective factors identified are, among other things, warm family cohesion and supportive parent-child interaction with nurturing, involved parenting. These influence school performance, self-confidence, and relationship status with peers in a positive way (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). Another review about the mental health of current and former foster youth in the USA reports that many youth in care are coping with emotional or behavioural disorders (Pecora, Roller White, Jackson & Wiggins, 2009). Some of these data point to foster parents and staff as ‘agents of healing’ (Pecora et al., 2009, 141). However, in a recent Swedish study of young people’s access to resources in out-of-home care, researchers report a different picture, namely that foster youth only to a relatively small extent turn to their foster parents when they are worried about something (Sallnäs, Wiklund & Lagerlöf, 2010). On the whole, however, they conclude that Swedish foster families seem to have much more resources at their disposal than institutions. One resource, perhaps somewhat overlooked, is the contribution to fostering performed by sons and daughters of foster carers (Höjer & Nordenfors, 2006; Höjer, 2007). They see themselves as highly involved in fostering, even though it can also involve complications in their everyday life.

It seems that for families in general, and foster families in particular, parent/carer and child relations are important for the young people’s adjustment, not only in the family but also in their entire social context. These findings lead up to the more concrete level of what actually happens in foster children’s everyday life in different contexts, with school life being one of the most important of these.
**Foster children’s school situation**

The educational attainment of children in out-of-home care, e.g. foster care, in Sweden is lower when they leave school than for other children. There are considerable risks of an unfavourable development in their future lives, in which school is a key factor. Accordingly, good school achievement has a strong protective effect on these children (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2010b). These findings correspond to studies made in other Western countries (see e.g. Martin & Jackson, 2002; Berridge 2007; Fernandes, 2008; Vacca, 2008). The poorest educational outcomes are found among young people who experienced intervention during adolescence (Vinnerljung, Öman & Gunnarsson, 2005). Long-term foster care in its present state has just a small compensatory influence on foster children’s future educational options, and efforts to make improvements are necessary (Social rapport, 2010).

How to improve the achievements of foster children is also the topic of a US research review (Vacca, 2008) which suggests an enriched curriculum, more coordination between schools and welfare agencies, and a caring environment. These findings are in line with results in a Swedish study (Kjellén, 2010) of how foster parents, teachers, social workers, and birth parents pay attention to foster children’s schooling and learning. Coordination between school and social workers, as well as foster parents’ encouragement of foster children’s reading, are important. Furthermore, the involvement of birth parents in the child’s schooling is also crucial (Kjellén, 2010). In Sweden, a school project with foster children, a pedagogic intervention, is going to be under evaluation until 2013 (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2011b). So far this project has shown that the cognitive ability of the foster children involved is on par with that of a normal group (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2008). In light of the UK conditions, David Berridge (2007) claims that previous explanations of foster children’s school problems are insufficient or simplistic. Socioeconomic risk factors such as social class and poverty have to be taken into account. A similar approach is taken in a Nordic review of European research about foster care (Backe-Hansen, Egelund & Havik, 2010), namely that it is not fair to compare outcomes for foster children with outcomes for a group of children not placed in out-of-home care without considering their problems before and during placement.

There are contradictory results about the importance of extracurricular activities in school. On the one hand, taking part in activities at school and in one’s free time makes it easier for foster children to socialize with peers (Pecora et al., 2006; Martin & Jackson, 2002) and develop their talents, e.g. in sports (Vacca, 2008). Thus, continuity in activities can minimize the
influence of disruption (Fong, Schwab, & Armour, 2006). On the other hand, recent findings suggest that greater involvement in extracurricular activities was associated with higher levels of delinquency and could not counter the negative consequences of weakened relationships with caregivers (Farineau & McWey, 2011).

Some studies, focusing on the young people’s own perceptions of school, have shown the importance of educational support and high quality care (Harker, Dobel-Ober, Akhurst, Berridge & Sinclair, 2004; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010), as well as emotional support and positive encouragement from significant others (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Foster children want to be accepted by their peers at school as ‘normal’ (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Hence relationships to friends are important to young people, and friends may be the people with whom they can be their ‘real’ selves (McMurray, Conolly, Preston-Shoot & Wigley, 2011). Improved school performance can also change their self-perception (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010).

To sum up, school is an important part of foster youth’s everyday life and has an impact on their situation after entering a new family, just as the foster family influences their school situation. However, the young people’s concrete experiences of their schooling and what it means to them need to be further explored, with regard to both learning and socialization.

Practices and rituals of everyday life and foster children’s belonging

The way everyday life appears to young people in vulnerable situations (like foster children) is a rather unexplored area in research (Andersson & Sallnäs, 2007). In a psychosocial model developed from Schofield’s (2002) empirical studies of alumni foster children, important aspects of belonging are all connected to relations and interactions in everyday life: family solidarity, including practical and emotional support, family rituals, family identity, family relationships, and family culture; norms; values; and aspirations. This concept is used in an Australian study of foster-family belonging in long-term non-relative foster care (Riggs, Augoustinos & Delfabbro, 2009) with a focus on family solidarity, rituals, identity, and culture, however from foster carers’ perspectives. Important practices mentioned are being there for the foster children to care for and talk to them; including foster children in family traditions and rituals, and maybe also their birth families; providing support from all family members, including other foster children; and engaging their existing interests, activities, and previous experiences.
Foster children enter a situation where their everyday situation is changed and new rituals and negotiations arise. In Gunvor Andersson’s comprehensive research about Swedish foster care, she is interested in foster children’s feelings about their situation in the foster family. She emphasizes the importance of the here-and-now situation for the child. In one study, where foster children, 10–11 years old, describe their situation, it appears that routines and the creation of meaning are of great significance in restoring a ‘normal’ childhood with an everyday life resembling that of everyone else (Andersson, 2001). Half the children feel a sense of belonging in the foster family, while the other half feel they belong in both the foster family and birth family, and want to continue having two families (Andersson, 1998a). In his doctoral thesis, Nordin (2003) found that those who in practice take parental responsibility, who take care of the children, are also felt to be their responsible parents.

The importance of family-life interactions for the socialization of the child is shown in a study of 14-year-olds and their parents; while the study does not look at foster parents, it may still be of interest. The focus is on the concept of monitoring, that is, on what parents know about the behaviour of their children (Kerr & Stattin, 2000). The researchers conclude that it is not the level of control, but of openness in the relationship between parent and child that gives the parent information about the child’s situation through the child’s spontaneous narratives. Higher levels of parental control give the adolescents a feeling of being controlled, which is linked with poor adaptation. This can be related to Höjer’s (2001) study about what happens in a family when it becomes a foster family, from the foster parents’ point of view. The study shows that foster families can be forced to find other ‘parental strategies’, which requires increased explicitness and may even lead to greater discipline and a more rigid atmosphere in the family, even for their biological children. Höjer (2001:222) discusses the question of how a foster child only has a conditional belonging in a foster family, something that creates ‘a special situation of impermanence for foster children, foster parents and foster siblings’. A question for reflection is whether there is a greater possibility for openness between foster parents and the placed adolescent in families which are previously familiar to the youth than in previously unknown families, because of their possessing ‘an unconditional belonging’ in the relationship, and whether this can make it possible to avoid strict parental strategies and a rigid family atmosphere. With reference to Amy Holtan (2002), who reports that foster children in kinship foster families are more often the only child than in non-relative foster families, these strains can be avoided, something that might influence the atmosphere in the foster home.
Nevertheless, while there are some studies about the concrete family life in foster care, such things as the interactions and practices after entering a new family, and what these mean to the young people from their own point of view are not a common topic, nor are their own contributions to this family life.

**Foster youth’s agency**

To find out about foster youth’s experiences in foster care, their perspectives need to be in focus in research. Holland challenges the suggestion that the research field of out-of-home care neglects children’s views (2009). In her review of 44 articles about young people in different types of out-of-home care, she reports that they all attempt to reveal the experiences or perspectives of the young people. Holland concludes, however, that some studies do not really let the young people’s own constructs of their experiences emerge, nor is there much discussion of ethical issues. A Danish researcher (Haudrup Christensen, 2004) studying children’s participation in ethnographic research argues that children’s social agency and active participation in research have led to a change in the position of children and a weakening of common taken-for-granted assumptions in child research. She recognizes the complexity of children’s practices and the dilemmas that this poses for research. Vivienne Barnes (2007) also discusses the complexity of young people’s situation. In her study of young people in foster and residential care who received advocacy services in the UK, she found that a pure individual rights focus may not take account of this complexity, and especially may miss the young people’s dependence on their carers (Barnes, 2007).

Children and young people in care wish to be informed about and involved in decisions about their lives to a greater extent than they think they have opportunities to be (Cashmore, 2002). These findings correspond to a Swedish study (Cederborg & Karlsson, 2001) of 20 children and teenagers in coercive care, which mainly examines the experience of participation in the process of being taken into care. Many of them feel they have not been informed about the measures concerning them decided by the social services, nor have they been asked their opinion in choosing a foster home. Furthermore the researchers found that more than half of them have feelings of alienation in the foster home, eight in relation to the foster parents and four in relation to the children in the foster home (Cederborg & Karlsson, 2001). Helplessness, low self-esteem, and poor confidence were also felt by four young people in a UK study (Leeson, 2007) when they did not have the possibility to make decisions about their own lives. The importance of information as well as involvement in decisions is also stressed in a
recent Canadian study of 20 children’s experiences during the transition into foster care (Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs & Ross, 2010). In another Scandinavian study of 24 children who have been in contact with child welfare and protection, school counselling, or the child psychiatric clinic, Mona Sandbaek (2004a) found that children’s influence can be increased by paying attention to their own ‘agenda’ for everyday life, by regarding information as a two-way process, and by listening to children’s own perceptions of problems and their solutions. Both their agency and their vulnerability have to be acknowledged (Sandbaek, 2004a). Even though just a few children in Sandbaek’s study were placed in foster care, the results are possible to transfer to a foster care context.

It seems that in research about foster children the complexity of their situation, both their vulnerability and their agency, from their own perspectives, have to be taken into account and further investigated.

The relations between foster family and birth family

The child’s and foster parents’ relationships with the birth parents are of central importance, especially with regard to the young person’s development of identity (Andersson, 2009). Sibling connections as well are crucial for providing support, love, and permanent relationships to children in out-of-home care (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Inclusive attitudes from the foster family towards the child’s birth family are essential, as these encourage continuity and a sense of security even when their situation is unstable (Andersson, 2009). Andersson concludes that this makes it easier for foster children to come to terms with their background and find their own way. Lindén (1998) also suggests that foster parents can function as a base from which the relationship to birth parents can be worked on. In a US study of youth in out-of-home care for at least one year (mostly foster youth) Chapman, Wall and Barth (2004) report that most youth feel like part of the foster family despite at the same time being happy to see their birth family and wanting more time with their birth parents and siblings. The researchers suggest that building strong relationships with foster carers and promoting continued relationships with birth parents are both important for practitioners. This can be connected to findings that supportive relations between foster parents and birth parents result in a more effective upbringing of the child (Linares, Montalto, Rosbruch & Li, 2006).

In short, relations between foster and birth parents are crucial for the foster child. This raises the question regarding kinship care of how the interactions between foster parents and birth parents are influenced by the fact that they are relatives, and if the interaction becomes more or less supportive.
**Kinship, network, and traditional foster families for children and young people**

In, for example, the USA, placement in kinship foster families has become an integral part of social work with children and families. Kinship placement has also become a more common way of meeting the needs of children in other western countries (Scannapieco & Hegar, 2002). Despite this, some researchers state there are few studies of kinship care (Dubowitz, 1994; Carpenter & Clyman 2004).

A brief overview concerning kinship and traditional foster care will be presented with the help of a few research reviews. Winokur, Holtan and Valentine (2009) conclude that children in kinship care do better than those in traditional care with regard to behavioural development, mental health functioning, and placement stability. Their results indicate that children in kinship care are less likely to re-enter out-of-home care than children in traditional foster care. This corresponds to what Schlonsky and Berrick (2001) report, that kinship foster families seem to promote the child’s satisfaction and involvement with the placement, which they consider very important for creating stability in the placement of young people with behavioural problems. However, another review (Oosterman, Schuengel, Wim Slot, Bullens & Doreleijers, 2007) of 26 studies, examining disruptions in foster care, comes to the opposite conclusion than most other research, namely that kinship care is not a protective factor.

Some studies contain testimonials from adult alumni of kinship foster care. A Swedish study based on national statistics found that adults who were placed in kinship foster care as children have managed just as well, or even better, than those placed in non-relative foster care (Vinnerljung 1996). Carpenter and Clyman (2004) report in an American study of adult women, former foster children in kinship care, that they feel more unhappy and anxious than women in the comparison group, who are the remainder from a National Survey of Family Growth, from which the data were collected. However, the researchers point out that the result does not in itself show that kinship care causes reduced emotional wellbeing. Rather, it may be the factors causing the placement that have the most impact on the result. Findings from another study of mental health of adult alumni of kinship care indicate that kinship care alone does not result in more positive mental health outcomes (Fechter-Leggett & O’Brien, 2010). Yet, the researchers suggest that those who build a strong connection where they feel supported and understood are benefited in their development into emotionally stable adults.
There are a few Scandinavian studies of kinship care from the young people’s perspectives. The importance of a close connection to other people is a recurrent theme in the mentioned foster care research. It is also the focus in a Norwegian study of children up to 12 years old in kinship care (Holtan, 2002). Amy Holtan concentrates on the importance of the kinship foster family for the social integration of the child. She states that kinship placements involve continuity, greater contact with birth parents, and more stable placements. The child seems to be integrated into the family through their mutual history, network, and life-long commitment. The child does not feel it to be as stigmatizing to stay with relatives; there is less of a sense of deviating from social norms. She notes that the relationship also provides continuity and stability between foster parents and birth parents, which is of vital importance for social integration. Tine Egelund, Turf Böcker Jakobsen and Lena Steen (2010) have interviewed Danish young people, 13–20 years old, some still in care, about their everyday life experiences and sense of belonging when placed with relatives. Most kinship families in the study are grandparents. The findings are in line with Holtan’s study, namely that placements in kin foster families bring about continuity and normality. Kin foster parents know a lot about the youth’s childhood, which makes the youth feel recognized and accepted during placement. However, it is interesting that the experience of being in the family to a great extent depends on the actors’ activities; in other words, the family roles are dynamic (Egelund et al., 2010).

Thus, kinship care is common when relatives have a history of support, often starting when the child was born (Brown, Cohon & Wheeler, 2002; Holtan, Rönning, Handegård & Sourander, 2005). Brown et al. (2002) found that kinship families are adaptable and flexible, and that youth can continue to rely on these networks after their official placement has ended. However, policies regarding kinship placements are not always in the best interest of children and families (Winokur, Holtan & Valentine, 2009). Kinship foster families have fewer resources and receive less training, services, and support than other foster families (Cuddeback, 2004). They have lower income and are less educated (Holtan, 2002), and in this sense reflect class differences (Holtan & Thörnblad, 2009).

Research about network families that are not relatives of the foster child is hard to find. Close network families are usually included in the concept of kinship families, and more distant network families in non-relative traditional foster families. One of the few studies found that mention some kind of network family is that of Sinclair (2005). He notices that the possibility to choose placement, like in a friend’s family, seems to make the start easier. Another is a follow-up report on former foster children produced by
the social services in a Swedish municipality; here it is suggested that if the young people are familiar with the foster home before placement, whether it be a kinship or non-relative (network) home, their placements are more likely to turn out happily (Hansson & Knutsson, 2000).

The previously mentioned study (Sallnäs et al., 2004) of breakdowns – cases where out-of-home care ends against the intentions and wishes of the child welfare authority – gives information about stability in different types of out-of-home care including foster families and even network foster families. The study is based on a national representative sample of adolescents, 13–16 years old, placed in 1991 in different kinds of out-of-home care in Sweden. The majority of the group had some kind of behavioural problems when the placement started (boys 78%, girls 59%), usually truancy or bad behaviour at school. Most of the placements (60%, n=467) are in foster families; 144 in kinship families, 103 in network families, and 323 in traditional foster families. Of the placements in kinship foster families about 17–25 per cent end in breakdown within five years; in network foster families the corresponding figure is about 38–43 per cent, and in traditional foster families about 40–50 per cent. Most breakdowns take place during the first year. Being placed with a close relative seems to be a strong protective factor against breakdown. In particular, for adolescents with behavioural problems the risk of premature breakdown is significantly higher in traditional foster families than in kinship foster families (Sallnäs et al., 2004). However, few factors are obvious predictors of breakdown of teenage placements (Egelund & Vitus, 2009).

From a gender perspective, some investigations show a better result for girls than for boys after completed out-of-home care (Vinnerljung 1996; Sallnäs et al., 2004), but at the same time some findings show a greater risk of placement breakdowns for girls in foster care than for boys, though not in other kind of placements (Vinnerljung, Sallnäs & Kyhle Westermark, 2002). Accordingly there are conflicting findings about the outcome of out-of-home care for girls and boys (see Andersson, 2002). Girls with serious behavioural problems such as antisocial behaviour were more often placed in traditional foster families than in kinship foster families. For boys with behavioural problems there was no sharp difference between the two kinds of placement (Vinnerljung, Sallnäs & Kyhle Westermark, 2001).

A follow-up longitudinal study of national register data on these young people in out-of-home care shows that placement breakdowns are indicators of a worrisome long-term prognosis (Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008). Breakdown of placement does not necessarily have to be something bad for the individual, as it might be a good choice to run away from a foster family where one is treated badly (see Egelund & Vitus, 2009). Yet the number
The importance of close connections to other people is a recurrent theme in foster care research independent of the type of foster family. However, kinship and network foster families, which are already familiar to the foster child, are favoured in this respect, which is probably reflected in the differing numbers of breakdowns. Prospective studies may be a way to study the complexity connected to everyday life and potential breakdowns.

**Foster children’s situation over time**

Many studies try to get an insight into foster children’s lives over time, though often with a retrospective design. However, there are some studies that follow children and young people in their here-and-now situation on several occasions (see Höjer & Sjöblom, 2011). An extraordinary example is Andersson’s previously mentioned longitudinal study, which follows the children from early childhood in a children’s home until they are 25–30 years old, with a total of seven follow-ups (see e.g. 1998a, 2005, 2009). Like other researchers with a longitudinal perspective, Andersson reports that foster children’s relationships change over time (Shofield, 2002; Merritt, 2008; Andersson, 2009). Schofield and Beek (2005) suggest that specific changes, like beginning at a different school or other events in a child’s life, can lead in new direction, for better or worse. Children’s own active role in maintaining or breaking relationships over time is pointed out (Schofield 2002; Andersson, 2009).

One of the advantages of a follow-up qualitative design in child research is the possibility to follow the young people’s life situation here-and-now on several occasions, to see the process in the individuals’ development in relation to their context. The described research has indeed made good contributions by illuminating the complexity of foster children’s lives, and the area is deserving of further investigation.

**The topic of this study compared to previous research**

Despite Holland’s (2009) statement that children’s views are not neglected in research on children in care, in Sweden this is still an area in need of further investigation, especially concerning foster children’s everyday life. Some years ago, Andersson (2001) commented that there is not much research about the everyday life of foster children. This is still valid today. In-depth studies about interactions, routines, and practices in foster family life, as well as daily experiences of school and peers, from the young people’s perspectives are still rather rare, and foster children and foster youth
are seldom seen as actors and agents in these contexts. Especially when it comes to their everyday life in different types of foster families, and in particular over a period of time, there is a lack of research, particularly in Sweden. Even though there is a growing body of research about kinship care (see e.g. Winokur et al., 2009), network foster families, which are not so closely related to the foster family, are rarely distinguished from other foster families in the existing research.
Research questions
Against the theoretical background and the mentioned scarcity of previous research, the following questions emerge, which contain both cognitive and emotional dimensions.

- What everyday practices and rituals in the foster family matter to the young people?

- What everyday practices and relationships have an impact on their school situation, both concerning learning and socialization?

- In what ways do the young people have the possibility to act as agents in their own lives?

- How do time (one year) and space (various types of foster families) affect the young people’s situation?

- What everyday life interactions and processes influence the young people’s social bonds and sense of belonging to family and networks?

By ‘network’ is meant foster parents, foster siblings, birth parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and social workers, however other persons important to the young person can also be included.
Methods
In this section the overall study design of this thesis will be described with some reference being made to the separate articles. The four articles, which focus on varying parts of the data collection, will then be briefly presented in the next chapter.

Design
The study described in this thesis has a qualitative interpretative design that focuses on the interaction between the young person in care and his or her foster family and birth family respectively. The ambition is to ascertain the young person’s own understanding of his or her lived experience (see Dahlberg, Drew & Nyström, 2001). The study was carried out with mixed qualitative methods and a comparative design. These mixed qualitative methods aimed to capture many different aspects of the phenomenon (Silverman, 2005). Not only was methodological triangulation used in the study, to a lesser extent data triangulation was also used with different data sources (Patton, 2002): young people, foster parents, and birth parents (article II). This kind of triangulation, combining methods and data, was intended to strengthen the study. Methods used are interviews, network maps, ‘beepers’, and video recordings.

This thesis mainly presents the perspectives of the young people placed in foster care, but to a lesser degree also those of the foster parents and birth parents. It is a question of a comprehensive body of data, partly having the character of a case study taking the different types of foster families as cases (article II), that is to say, an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). The study is prospective with a follow-up of the same young people after about one year (article IV). The first round of data collection took place in 2008 and the second in 2009.

Participants
The selection process was carried out via social workers in 10 medium-sized municipalities in Sweden. They were asked to invite every child placed in foster care, 13–16 years of age, who had stayed in his/her foster family 3–18 months, to take part. Most of the social welfare offices were visited (n=7) and the social workers received both verbal and written information about the study. The written information was intended to be passed on to the young people and their foster and birth families. The placement could be the adolescent’s first foster family or a transfer to a new foster family. The selection also included the young people’s foster
families and birth families. Hence their foster carers and usually birth parents were asked to give their consent. The exceptions with regard to birth parents could be if the adolescent was older than 15 and refused to have his/her parent involved, if the parent was in prison, or if the adolescent was an unaccompanied child whose parents were in another country. In all municipalities the social workers cooperated, and in seven municipalities they managed to find participants for the study. It took more than a year from the initial contact with the first four municipalities until the group of foster youth was considered to be complete after having contacted 10 municipalities. In particular, finding youth in kinship placements to include in the group was time-consuming.

The selection was strategic and at the beginning applied to young people placed in a kinship foster family or a traditional, non-related and previously unknown, foster family. There turned out to be a third group among the traditional foster families, namely ‘network’ foster families, that is to say, foster families with whom the young people, and usually also their parents, were in some way previously acquainted, for example, a sibling’s former foster family or a contact family. I expected the foster youth to have memories from the initial period in their foster family, and therefore required them not to have been there for more than 18 months. The age group was chosen partly because children at that age, according to Piaget’s theory, are normally capable of thinking realistically about their future, and can reflect on their thoughts, construct ideals, and understand metaphors (Elkind, 1983), and partly because the clients of the social child care services are predominantly teenagers (Vinnerljung, Sallnäs & Kyhle Westermark, 2001; Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2011a). Consequently this is an important group to investigate.

Social workers reported altogether about 84 potential participants: foster youth in their files that fulfilled the selection criteria at the specific point in time when I visited or called. However, I finally received 17 participants (from just seven municipalities) who agreed, and 17 (with one sibling-group of three) negative answers (from youth, their foster carers, or birth parents; distribution of the groups not available). About the remaining 48 youth, I received no clear information, except that some placements were suddenly disrupted before the young people had responded. As to the rest of the information about what had happened, a frequent answer was the social workers’ heavy burden of work.

When the group numbered 17 adolescents, plus foster parents and in most cases birth parents, it was considered to be sufficient for the aims of the thesis. This number of participants seemed to be adequate for in-depth analysis (Kvale, 1997). There were almost the same number of young peo-
people in each of the three different types of placements, six in kinship families, six in network families, and five in traditional foster families, as well as almost the same number of boys (n=8) and girls (n=9). Even though there are rather few participants for each type of foster family, there is a quantity of diverse data for each participant.

The participating adolescents were placed by court order due to their parents’ problems (n=6) or were placed voluntarily into care (n=11). The reasons for voluntary care were parents’ problems (n=3); own behaviour (n=1); both (n= 4); or the adolescents being unaccompanied children (n=3). Among the adolescents, six came directly from their birth family to the foster family in which they were then living. Four adolescents had experienced from three to nine placements (during 4–5 years, all placed by court order). Some had chosen to leave their last foster family (n=3), of which at least two were disruptions, and the fourth was a planned removal. Quite many had stayed in temporary foster families (2 weeks to 12 months) before the current placement (n=7).

Most of the adolescents in my study have a Swedish background (n=11), while some are born outside Europe, these being either immigrant youth who arrived with or re-joined their family (n=3), or unaccompanied children (n=3). Those born outside Europe could communicate in Swedish and were in a situation stable enough to enable their participation in the study. In my study I regarded it as important to be able to communicate with the young people without an interpreter, not least because of the various methods in which verbal communication is an important feature.

Considerations about the selection

There are two issues concerning the selection worth paying attention to: the missing 48 participants and the 50 per cent that dropped out.

The first issue concerns the lack of information about the remaining 48 participants, which can be understood in terms of the social workers acting as gatekeepers (see e.g. Masson, 2000), or never having had the time to question the young people. An example is one of the three municipalities with no participants. When I first visited them, the social workers reported 12 potential youth, but they ultimately recommended no participants, without being able to give any explanation. This can be related to a study of Egelund and Vitus (2009), in which they experienced that some social workers either did not return the questionnaires or answered them insufficiently. Reasons for access to be denied can be various, ranging from time pressure to perceptions that the research topic or research methods are inappropriate (Heath, Charles, Crow & Wiles, 2007). Video recordings may be a method that foster parents and youth find inconvenient, yet so-
cial workers were asked to inform them the recordings could be excluded. Furthermore in all municipalities in my study the social workers expressed an interest in the study. Anyhow, it is difficult to find out whether the social workers really did approach every potential participant or not.

The second issue is that as many as 50 per cent declined to participate, according to the social workers. This may be influenced by the fact that not only youth, but also foster parents and birth parents, were required to give their consent. Gate-keeping in this context can be a way to protect children and young people from harm, but can also imply that they are too protected and are not allowed to speak for themselves (Sallnäs, Wiklund & Lagerlöf, 2010). There is a fine line between protecting, on the one hand, and over-protection and paternalism on the other (see e.g. Heath, Charles, Crow & Wiles, 2007). It must not be forgotten that there were also many gate-openers (Sallnäs et al., 2010) among the social workers, foster parents, and birth parents. Moreover, that 40–60 per cent drop out in research about groups that are difficult to get in touch with, e.g. foster children, is something that can be expected, according to Sandbaek (2004b).

Consequently, it is unclear if there were any differences between the situations for adolescents who took part and who declined. A few adolescents first agreed and then changed their minds within a few days, and a few placements ended in breakdown before consent had been given, which reveals the uncertainty of their living situation. So it is possible that those who took part had a more stable living situation at the time of acceptance than those who declined. On the other hand, a motive for participating can also be to be able to tell others about problematic experiences, which seemed to be the reason in at least a few cases. So, participants in the study can be adolescents with a currently stable situation or with a problematic situation. Furthermore, it is known that many adolescents participating in this study had experienced serious difficulties, like school problems, and other kind of destructive behaviour or bad treatment, before the current placement. In any event, these circumstances have to be taken into consideration in the analysis.

Data collection

The interviews with the adolescents were low standardized, low structured, and focused interviews. The interviews were all done by me. The interaction between me and the young people was probably facilitated by my long experience of meeting children and young people in foster care, something that is pointed out as an advantage (see e.g. Hilte & Claesson, 2005). The themes in the interviews were based on the aim, research questions, and
stated theoretical direction: the movement into the new family (what it was like); family life in the new family compared to the previous one (what family members see as important, when they feel like a ‘family’, etc.); an ordinary day in the foster family (who is doing what?); an ordinary day in the previous home; family routines, rules, and upbringing strategies; conflicts and conflict resolution; how approval and disapproval are shown; influence over one’s situation (who decides what?); relations with other people; where one feels at home; situations where one feels good or bad; people one trusts and sees as supportive; relationships maintained for five years; and thoughts about one’s future (in five years). The emphasis was accordingly on how life is lived in the foster family compared to the adolescent’s previous family. This included emotions connected to different experiences, both in the foster family and the young people’s other contexts, like school (see Collins, 2004; Scheff, 1997). Altogether this should cover the teenager’s ‘lived daily world’ (Kvale 1997, p. 55), but also the meaning the young people attached to this daily life (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). Interviews took place in the foster home, except for one interview in a library, and lasted from thirty minutes to an hour and forty-five minutes. The shortest interviews were with the youngest participants. When I interviewed the adolescents, no one else was in the room. Almost all interviews started with a cup of coffee and some informal chatting, during which time the young people could form an opinion of the interviewer and ask questions. During the interviews the adolescents usually seemed more relaxed when talking about activities, for example their leisure time activities and progress in school, than about relationships. I tried to end the interview in a positive way to make them feel comfortable.

The second interview with the teenagers was carried out about a year after the preceding interview. The intention was to follow the young person during the period of placement and any breakdown that may occur. Furthermore, recurring interviews have previously been viewed as positive by researchers because they make it easier for the children to speak out and also provide an opportunity to make corrections to information provided (see e.g. Andersson, 1998b). It was also the case in some interviews that they spoke about important matters they did not bring up in the first interview. On the other hand, a few adolescents were more talkative in the first interview than in the second one. The themes in these interviews were about the same as in the first interview, but instead of focusing on their life in the foster family compared to their life before placement, their present situation and what had happened since the last interview were the main areas of interest.
‘Beepers’, the Experience Sampling method (ESM), is a method for investigating the subjective experiences of individuals as they go about their daily lives (see e.g. Punzo & Miller, 2002). Beepers have been used in studies of children and adolescents to investigate different matters, such as ‘happiness in everyday life’ (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003), ‘a typical week in the life of an adolescent’ (Punzo & Miller, 2002), and ‘family interactions for adolescents with bulimia’ (Okon, Greene & Smith, 2003). In my study the young people received text messages by mobile phone investigating their here-and-now situation, what they were actually doing at a specific time. The method involved the teen being signalled four to six times a day by mobile phone, whereupon he or she each time answered a few simple questionnaire questions: where are you, with whom, what are you doing, how does it feel? This went on for six days (see e.g. Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter 2003; Glaser, van Os, Portegijs & Myin-Germeys 2006). These text messages were sent from a few weeks up to one month after the interview. The adolescents were verbally informed at the interview, and then again by letter about a week before it was going to take place. They were instructed to give short, distinct answers, immediately if possible, which they usually did. Of course they could give a more thorough response if they preferred to. They were also asked not to answer if there were occasions when they did not feel comfortable with it. They received a refill for their mobile phones to cover their expenses.

These text responses provided a kind of glimpse into the young people’s daily life; their feelings/emotions about being together with, for example, foster family members, birth family members, and peers in school and during leisure time; doing different activities together with them; or just being by themselves. The beepers illustrated the adolescents’ interactions with other people in everyday life and emotions connected to them (see Collins, 2004; Scheff, 1997). They offered the opportunity to capture not only what one says that one likes in the interview, but also what one actually does at a specific moment (Morgan, 1996). Text messages were sent on two occasions, with about a year’s interval, in connection to both interviews, which showed changes in everyday life over time. I called the young people after each period of texting and they all expressed that it worked fine. Some even appreciated it. This call gave me an opportunity to ask them to clarify any answers that may have been confusing. Some of them also wanted to explain why they had missed some responses.

The network map was drawn by the adolescent to show the strength and quality of various relationships with, among others, foster parents, foster siblings, birth parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and social workers (see Forsberg & Wallmark, 2002). The map was designed in advance with five
different parts: the family you live with, your other family/relatives, people in school, persons from the public authorities, and finally, other important persons. The young people filled in the names of the people they considered to be important to them, in either a positive or a negative way. The distances between these people and themselves (in the middle of the map) showed how close they felt they were to each of them. While doing this they described their relationships to these people, if they had not already talked about it during the interview, or if something new came up. I took notes afterwards. Sometimes this information made a large contribution to the data, both because the network map facilitated talking about their relationships and because the map visualized their feelings about people important to them (see Scheff, 1997). The network map was also made twice, once at each interview, which showed changes in relations over time.

Video recordings were made in six foster families; the other families (foster parents and/or youth) declined. These recordings of the teenager and the foster family in everyday situations were intended to capture the atmosphere and circumstances surrounding natural rituals, which may be unconscious for those involved (Collins, 2004) and therefore difficult to capture through interviews. The video technique makes it possible to study the social interplay in more detail than through direct observation (Brunnberg 2003), that is to say, who speaks with whom, how often, and about what; people’s placement, responses, and body language; the atmosphere; mutual topics of conversation, etc. These recordings are used in two of the articles about family life in the foster family (articles II and III). The video camera was left with the foster family, so that they together with the youth could decide how and when they would make the video recording. The instructions were to choose an everyday situation, like dinner, card-playing, or whatever they usually do, and film it for about 15–20 minutes, or however long they prefer. Most recordings were about that long, but one was shorter, and one was longer and had two recorded sections. In all recordings foster parents and the adolescent participated together, and in four of them one or more other people were also present: a birth parent, a girlfriend, foster siblings, or the foster family’s adult children. Later, I came by to collect the video camera.

Of the interviews with foster parents and birth parents three of each were used in this thesis, in a case study (article II). Three cases, one kinship, one network, and one traditional placement, were chosen to give a maximum of variation of foster families (Patton, 2002). In order to capture the concrete family communication and interactions, the cases were chosen from among six families that had made video recordings (see below). Finally, from this group, specific adolescents were selected as information-
rich cases (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Another reason for this selection was that, at the time of the interviews, these young people reported a relatively stable situation, despite their vulnerable situation prior to placement. This would make it possible to discover inclusion practices in the foster family, which was the aim of this particular study.

These interviews were half structured and focused upon foster and birth parents’ opinions about the changes the young people had undergone since entering the foster family, how life was lived in each family (description of an ordinary day, routines, rules, etc.), foster parents’ and birth parents’ internal relationships, their relationship to the adolescent, their possibility to act as parents, and their thoughts about the adolescent’s feeling of being at home. The intention was to become acquainted with the different perspectives on relations and the various family cultures, and how these cultures influenced the youth. Both foster parents were interviewed on the same occasion. The three birth parents were single. These were the birth parents with primary custody of the teenager, with one exception. In this case, the adolescent (15 years old) was disappointed in one parent and wanted the other one to be interviewed. All birth parents interviewed had regular contact with their child both before and during placement in foster care. They were mostly interviewed in their homes.
Table 1 Methods in the studies

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**Analysis**

The ambition in this thesis is to increase the understanding of the subject, not to make statements about the ‘plain truth’ about young people in foster care. The central focus is on rich data with various meanings, open to interpretation and reflection (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2007). Reflection can here be seen as an interpretation of the interpretation. It is important to consider the background/context to the interpretations. This thesis focuses on reflection on the micro sociological level, which means the youth in his/her family and in school. Scheff (1997) recommends a part/whole
analysis when trying to understand the particular meaning of words or gestures in context, which is a form of interpretation and reflection on the micro level. Single cases can be understood in comparison with the context, which in this thesis is the group of young people in each type of foster family, or the total group of girls and boys respectively, or this total group of young people in foster care. According to Scheff (1997) you can understand the single part/case in the context if you know a lot about the contextual circumstances, and vice versa. In this sense the different studies in this thesis are intended to enrich each other; from a case study (article II) to the whole group (article III), from one part of the youth's context like school (article I) to the whole context (article III), and finally the process over time (article IV).

This can also be a way to handle a comprehensive amount of data, namely by starting with a smaller part of the data (Silverman, 2005). I started with the young people’s school situation, which also gave insight into the importance, also for the school situation, of stability and support in the foster family (article I). This formed a basis for the following in-depth analysis of family life in three cases, considered to be stable placements, in which the birth and foster parents were also included, as well as video recordings (article II). By then some categories had emerged, which could be tested in the subsequent analysis of social bonds in the different types of foster families for the whole group of adolescents (article III). Finally, in the fourth analysis, data from the follow-up study of the young people were compared with data from the first interview session, and the important aspects identified there comprised a starting point for the analysis (article IV).

The reflection has to be explicit, both in the research process and in text production (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2007). This reflection also includes examining biases, meaning being aware of how subjectivity influences the study (Merriam, 1998). This reflection has mostly been done together with my supervisors but also with other colleagues. The ambition has been to be as explicit as possible throughout the course of this work. In the articles, quite a lot of raw data in quotations is attached to its context. Sometimes different possible interpretations are presented, for example from different theoretical standpoints.

More concretely, the tape recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, as were the text-messaged responses and the video recordings. In interviews and video recordings, pauses, laughs, and soft utterances like ‘mm’, etc. were also included, which gave a somewhat more authentic textual representation of the interviews (see Silverman, 2005). In the video recordings, body language, like who turns to whom, facial expressions,
etc., were also noted. This careful transcription contributed to the analysis. When transcribing interviews and video recordings, notes were made in the margins about reflections that came up while listening to the participants’ voices. The repeated listening while transcribing the recordings made the interviews rather familiar to me.

Some kind of analysis began already during the interviews, when some of the young people’s statements were interpreted by me and conveyed back to them to see if I understood what they really meant (see Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). After being transcribed, the adolescents’ interviews were read through to get a sense of the whole and then analysed through content analysis. The first step was to identify meaning units, which are ‘the constellation of words or statements that relate to the same central meaning’ through condensation, which means shortening while still preserving the core (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, 106). The condensation expresses the concentrated and concise meaning of each sentence (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The meaning units were coded with keywords to permit later identification of the statement. The coding and categorization of the interviews were mainly inductive, that is, data driven, and thus were based on the material in the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), even though the themes in the interviews, as previously mentioned, were influenced by theory. Accordingly, in these first stages of identifying patterns of meaning, coding, and categorizing, analyses were kept close to the raw data, the manifest meanings, before theory was used as a source of inspiration in a deductive analysis to identify themes and patterns to provide an understanding (see Patton, 2002; Graneheim, & Lundman, 2004). This method is close to abduction, using an empirical basis but combined with theoretical understanding in a process which develops the understanding of the phenomena (see Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2007). These categories could differ between the various studies (see articles). Categories and themes that emerged in each study will be presented below.

In study I, the themes and categories were: from a lack of interest to the creation of meaning (categories: school problems, change of attitude, vision of future); security in everyday life (categories: a well-functioning daily life, being together, participation, contact with birth family); school as an arena for learning and socialization (categories: being with peers, handling school, leisure time); to hang by a single thread (categories: the need for support, well-being, ambivalent feelings).

In study II, the themes and categories were: initial connection to foster family (categories: guided into the family, having a choice); meeting basic needs (categories: daily life routines, bodily care, understanding rules); participation in decisions (categories: negotiation, personal responsibility,
trust); creating a warm family atmosphere (categories: doing things together, talking, joking); managing ambivalence (category: conflicts); openness to birth family (category: contact with birth family).

In study III, the codes and categories were: agency (having a choice, gaining influence); everyday family life (actions, routines, rules); social bonds (relations, emotions). Themes outlined were: Between dependence and gaining influence; the urge for togetherness; feelings of safety and solidarity.

In study IV, the categories were: stability or removals; changing schools; changing peers; foster family connection; birth family contact; youth’s well-being. The overall themes outlined were: a changeable daily life; variations in relations.

The categories and themes from interviews then comprised a starting point in the analysis of text responses and network maps (articles I, II, III and IV), birth parents’ and foster parents’ interviews (article II) and video recordings (articles II and III). Network maps illustrated youth’s opinions about relations, while text responses conveyed their here-and-now situation from morning to evening. As such these methods complemented interviews and showed correspondence or non-correspondence between them which nuanced the overall picture. The six video recordings also served as a complement to the other data in the mentioned two studies (articles II and III). After being transcribed, the recordings were systematically analysed with a twin focus on aspects of their communication, verbal and non-verbal, and expressions of strong emotions. A comparison was made between the different data sources for each adolescent. This kind of triangulation, collecting different data on the same question, contributes to the overall credibility of the results, as corresponding pictures from different data sources emerge, and differences can be tested to bring out the ‘real-world nuances’ (Patton 2002). Then, in all the studies, the young people in each type of foster family were compared. Finally, in the last study, the situation over time was examined, which means that data from the follow-up interviews were compared with data from the first interview session (article IV).

**Ethical Considerations**

The project was ethically vetted by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala 2007-08-15, and has the registration number 2007/197. No obstacles were found to conducting the research program as described in the application.

The primary requirements for protecting personal integrity – the information requirement, the consent requirement, the confidentiality require-
ment, and the use requirement – were met in the following manners. The first step was to obtain consent from the social welfare committee in each municipality involved. Then contact was taken with parents and children primarily through the social case-worker, who informed the young people, birth parents, and foster parents about the project and asked whether they consented to their names and addresses being forwarded to the researcher. At this time, a hand-out was provided to each potential participant with information about the researcher, the goals of the study, etc. If the adolescent was younger than 15 the birth parent with custody of him/her had to provide consent. If interest was expressed, I held a personal meeting with all parties to inform them at more length of the purpose and structure of the study, that their participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to end their participation at any time. The reason for choosing this procedure, even though consent from the social welfare committee was provided, was to give the young people a possibility to reflect upon the matter before accepting that I contact them. It also seemed reasonable for them to be able to talk it over with their families as both foster parents and birth parents were included in the study at that time.

The birth parent and adolescent had to provide written consent if the adolescent was to participate. The foster parents also had to consent to participation according to the requirement of protecting their personal integrity. An ethical effect on the study is that the inclusion of both foster parents and birth parents in the design of the project made it necessary to get all their consent (with the exception of some birth parents), which might have resulted in some young people who would have liked to participate in the study not being able to do so. When it came to the video recordings, it was important for ethical reasons that the young people not only provided consent, but also were informed at length as to the context and purpose of the filming (see Brannen, 2003). Other family members were informed by the foster parents and could decide if they wanted to take part in the video recording or not.

A special ethical issue was how to handle the fact that in a few interviews participants told about severe experiences and bad feelings. However, when questioned about their resources for support they were found to have some kind of therapeutic support in whom they could confide (see Merriam, 1998).

The involved children, birth parents, and foster parents were guaranteed confidentiality at all stages of the study, as well as in future publication of the research results. Caution had to be exercised in handling the materials. Since there were just a few video recordings, and both foster parents and youth participated, how to describe these was a puzzling question. This
problem also related to other small groups of adolescents like the immigrant youth, unaccompanied children, and those who ended their placement. So, these descriptions are sometimes more general and/or not connected to the specific youth to avoid them being identified by, for example, their foster parents or social workers. This dilemma between clarity in the dissemination of findings and protecting the subjects from harm (Merriam, 1998) has been a frequent topic of discussion with the supervisors throughout the study and when writing the articles. To safeguard confidentiality, the selection was taken from several medium-sized municipalities. For the same reason, names and some details considered not important for the results have been changed.

**Validation and verification of findings**

To ensure the quality of findings, verification needs to be given attention during the entire research process (Kvale, 1997). Questions of validity and reliability need to be reflected upon. In qualitative research these concepts are closely interrelated. Validity is another word for truth; the extent to which findings represent the social phenomena they refer to (Silverman, 2005). Reliability usually refers to the extent to which results can be replicated (Merriam, 1998). In qualitative research, reliability concerns the degree of consistency of findings, the quality of data (Silverman, 2005). Reliability is closely related to the research process, especially that of interpretation. Therefore, to provide careful descriptions of theoretical starting points and of the procedures used throughout the research process – for example concerning participants, the selection process, and the social context – has been an ambition in this thesis. For the same reason, rather comprehensive descriptions as well as detailed data and quotations have been provided to allow the reader to understand the analysis and interpretations made. Sometimes alternative interpretations are also presented (see Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1987; Silverman, 2005).

Regarding validation, the use of several convergent methods, as described, is intended to create a more complete picture of the young people’s daily lives and relationships (see Lundberg 2005; Tones & Green, 2004). This is also what actually happened. For some young people, the network map seemed to facilitate talking about, for example, relations to other people at the same time as they were drawing. The network map visualized their connections to important people, or lack of connections, more obviously than a verbal description might do. The two network maps also clearly showed differences in relations over time for each participant. The use of text responses seemed quite natural to the young people. Even though, as intended, their text responses about their present situation were
short, these responses usually gave good information about, for example, ups and downs during the day, as well as their feelings in various situations and with different people. Here-and-now situations in everyday life in the adolescents’ various contexts were shown. The six video recordings illustrated common family interactions and routines. The initial intention to capture the situation surrounding natural rituals was perhaps too optimistic. However, the family atmosphere was captured, and the importance of natural rituals such as small talk, joking, and gentle teasing was made obvious. Video recordings also have the advantage of making it possible to return to the situation to find new angles of approach. This triangulation concerns not only methods but also various perspectives; foster youth, foster parents, and birth parents (article II) (see Patton, 1987; Silverman, 2005). Mostly these different data sources provided a consistent picture, and when they were somewhat contradictory they became topics for reflection in order to understand why (see Patton, 1987).

Another aspect of validation was to verify data. As mentioned, this was carried out by checking with interviewees if statements were correctly apprehended, and by trying to understand contradictions between various statements or data from different methods. This includes the previously described reflection process and considerations about context, or in short, the part/whole analysis model used in the thesis. The way the work of preparing the thesis was carried out, with the various studies being based on each other, also made it possible to analyse almost all data, as well as to find categories which could be used as a basis for the following studies and in comparisons both between different groups and for the same group over a period of time, a way of validation (see Silverman, 2005). Other strategies for validating findings are to look for rival explanations or negative cases (Patton, 1987) or deviant cases (Silverman, 2005), which to some extent was facilitated and done by analysing all data.

The above description of how research findings match reality refers to internal validity (Merriam, 1998). External validity concerns generalizability of findings, the extent to which they can be applied to other situations (Merriam, 1998). In qualitative research the small sample size can call the possibility to generalize findings into question. However, the underlying assumptions in qualitative research are different from those in quantitative research. The qualitative researcher wishes to gain an in-depth understanding of the cases, not to find out what is generally true for many. One can say ‘the general lies in the particular’; what we learn in a special situation can be transferred or generalized to similar situations (Merriam, 1998, 210). A way to look upon this matter can be ‘reader or user generalizability’, which means that how findings apply to other situations will be as-
sessed by people in those situations (Merriam, 1998, 211). It is the reader who decides whether the findings are transferable to another context. To make this possible, a clear and distinct description of the entire research process is valuable, something that has been described in this chapter as a clear ambition. In qualitative research, trustworthiness of interpretations has to do with establishing arguments for the most probable interpretations (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Hence, another ambition has been to make these reflections explicit.
Summaries of the empirical studies

In this section, the results from the four studies will be summarized and discussed.

Study I:

*Why one goes to school: What school means to young people entering foster care*

I’ve noticed that since I moved here I’ve changed a bit. Yeah, I feel, I feel better since I... almost, a little. It feels like school is starting to go well. (...) Yeah, it has a lot to do with attitude and stuff like that. I’ve been, well, I used to be angry most of the time, before. It’s better now. I was almost always stressed out about something, though it wasn’t really anything in particular. (Interview with Robert, 16)

This study focused on the daily life in school for 17 girls and boys who had entered foster care as teenagers. The young people’s experiences of and attitudes towards school were explored, as well as whether these changed after placement in a foster home. Methods used were interviews with 17 young people in foster care, their text answers via mobile phone (beepers) and their network maps.

This study shows that school matters a great deal to these young people in foster care. Many of the adolescents have changed their attitude after placement and now consider school to be important to their future, often after being inspired by their foster parents. Succeeding at school gives hope for the future and a feeling of pride. This finding illuminates foster children’s motivation and ability for academic improvement, even despite previous problems in school, which is in contrast to most international research. Their educational improvement was based on their understanding of scholastic achievement as meaningful for their future, on stability in daily routines, and on the involvement and support of family, peers, and teachers. Even those four adolescents that have changed foster homes and schools several times have improved their educational performance. The study shows that the young people feel like active subjects in their own lives, but also that they are being shaped by circumstances they cannot control, at home and in school. The study indicates that routines like doing homework together and mutual talk become rituals that help bring the foster child closer to the family, giving him/her a feeling of security. This corresponds to some other studies indicating that young people’s satisfaction with school was related to the quality of care they received (Berridge et al., 2008; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010). The study shows the connection between interactions in the foster family and at school.
Access to peers in school is important, and group activities facilitate this. Because of their background, foster youth can also be exposed to bullying from peers. Both learning and socialization at school affect their self-esteem. Some of these teenagers from countries outside Europe place their trust in adults, foster parents, and teachers instead of peers. One explanation may be that they are acutely aware of their lack of a network and choose to rely on what they see as stable persons. It is obvious that the ability to speak Swedish is crucial for the self-esteem of the unaccompanied children and immigrants, both for learning and socializing with peers. This might explain their ambitious attitude towards studying, which also might be a matter of their cultural capital. In any case, it corresponds to what Jackson & Ajayi (2007) found: that asylum seekers tend to be more educationally ambitious than care leavers born in the UK.

Conclusions that can be applied to the practice of social work concern assessing foster parents’ attitudes to school and how they organize everyday routines related to school and spare-time activities. It is important that they be actively involved in the schooling of the foster youth. For young immigrants and unaccompanied youth in foster care, it is crucial to support their learning the language of the country where they live.

Study II:
*Jokes and routines make everyday life a good life. On ‘doing family’ for young people in foster care in Sweden*

There are moments when you can have some philosophical thoughts and think, I’m really well off. (…) It’s like it, it can happen when you’re taking the dog for a walk. When she looks really happy and is chasing all the birds, it can be really fun. And, like, when their grandchild comes and she bursts into the hall and wants to hug everybody and say hello and she’s really happy the whole time and, well, it can be things like that, or like when you’re sitting watching TV. (Interview with Karin, 15)

This case study focused on three foster families after the young people had entered the foster home, examining their daily life in terms of communication, interactions, routines, rules, and rituals. The aim was to identify inclusion practices of foster families. Research questions concerned the nature of everyday interactions in the foster family, and how these influence the young people’s emotions and relations with their foster parents and social network. The cases were placements in three different kinds of foster families: a kinship foster family, a network foster family (not relative, but previously known), and a traditional (previously unknown) foster family. Mixed qualitative methods were used in this in-depth study of everyday life.
in foster care: interviews (youth, foster parents, and birth parents), network maps, text answers via mobile phone, and video recordings in the foster home. Rather stable placements were chosen as cases to better illuminate inclusion mechanisms in foster care.

The results show that structure and warmth are both important dimensions of creating a wholesome everyday life. Daily routines like regular meals, getting enough sleep, and doing homework make life stable and secure. Jokes, laughter, mutual talk, and activities create a warm feeling in the family. Discussions and negotiations encourage the young people’s participation and responsibility. Good relations between foster parents and birth parents are important. Foster parents who are open to the birth parents make it easier for the latter to be accessible to the adolescent if needed, thereby facilitating the relationship between foster youth and birth parents (see e.g. Andersson, 2009).

What is not so evident in previous research is the way in which ‘warmth’ is created. In particular, joking, gentle teasing, and laughing, which in this paper seem to be important inclusion practices, are rather unknown aspects of foster care, as is to some extent the importance of doing things together in everyday life. It also appears that joking can be a strategy for avoiding, and maybe even solving conflicts. Joking, laughing, doing homework together, etc. can be seen as rituals generating positive emotional energy within the family, which may connect the adolescent more closely with the foster family. So too do negotiations, which make the young people part of important decisions, and may strengthen them as social agents. Collins (2004) argues that the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are manifested and re-created in the collective experience of laughing. This corresponds to findings in humour research that laughter and smiling are important social behaviours in everyday social interactions. They are ways to show interest, reduce tensions, and integrate a person into a special group (Foot & Chapman, 2007), and the most important group in our lives is the family (Newman, 2004). Altogether this may create an open family climate and make it possible to avoid a more discipline-oriented strategy in the foster family (see Höjer, 2001; Kerr & Stattin, 2000). The young people’s own capacity to adapt to their new environment and influence their situation is shown in the study.

**Study III:**

*Settling into a new home as a teenager: About establishing social bonds in different types of foster families in Sweden.*
Of course I feel bad deep inside that mum and dad are like that, but like I, I don’t care because now I’m big enough to manage on my own if I have to. Because I’ve done it almost all my life. (...) But now I’ve got two people supporting me (...) They feel like, I even call them mum and dad. I haven’t called anybody mum and dad except, well, my biological parents. So I think they are good, really good. (Interview with Wilmer, 16)

This study of the entire group of 17 adolescents is about the daily life that young people experience after entering a kinship, network, or traditional foster family. The aim of the study was to shed light on everyday family interactions that strengthen or weaken the social bond between foster youth and foster family after placement, from the young people’s perspectives, and to ascertain whether there were differences in their experiences that correspond to various types of foster families. The adolescents also reflect upon previous experiences of foster families and temporary foster families. In this study the similarities and differences between everyday life in the different types of foster families are more closely examined than in the previous two studies. Methods used are interviews with the 17 young people, network maps, and text responses via mobile phone (beepers).

The young people in *kinship foster families* report in this study the strongest social bond to their foster family, and the adolescents in *traditional foster families* the weakest. This is in line with previous research. However, that youth in rather distant *network foster families* also report strong social bonds, and in some cases even an active choice of foster family, is little known. Including network foster families in the study illuminates the importance of adolescents’ active engagement and agency in choosing their foster family, which Vinnerljung et al. (2001) pointed out as important in their study of breakdowns.

In this study it appears that influence over one’s situation, fair treatment by other family members, foster parents’ openness towards birth parents, and mutual talk and activities in the foster family are all factors that can facilitate young people’s adaptation in any foster family (see e.g. Riggs et al., 2009; O’Neill, 2004; Andersson, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2010), and strengthen their social bonds to the foster family. However, the importance of humour in everyday family life in foster care has not been given attention, even though it may be a natural conclusion (like in study II). There is an example in the video recordings of a humorous story from a holiday trip they had all taken together, which seemed to serve as a kind of ritual narrative that caused all of them, also the foster youth, to feel included and put them in a good mood.

Common routines like having meals together are important family interactions. That food seems to have some symbolic meaning in family life is
shown by, for example, the importance some adolescents connect with having access to the refrigerator. This may symbolize normality, being seen as part of the family (see Luke & Coyne, 2008).

Negative experiences of interactions, mostly in previous foster families, are also reported by the young people, for instance unfair treatment by other family members, being treated as younger than you really are, foster parents talking to other people above your head about delicate subjects concerning you, etc. (see e.g. Luke & Coyne, 2008; O’Neill, 2004). These adolescents eventually chose to move to another foster family, the present one. These behaviours are examples of a lack of respect, which Mayall (2008) points out as a crucial aspect in child-adult relations in family life. Narratives illuminate how these negative interactions cause feelings of sadness and shame, which may weaken the social bond.

**Study IV:**

*A sense of belonging in a changeable everyday life – A follow-up study of young people in different types of foster families.*

But they (social services) don’t believe, you know, that kids like us, they don’t believe that we can look after ourselves. But we can do really well. (...) Those of us who’ve been through some things know a lot more about life, what you should and shouldn’t do. (Interview with Emma, 15)

This is a follow-up study after about one year of 15 of the 17 young people that took part in the previous data collection (articles I, II, III). The aim of the study was to explore how young people’s sense of belonging among their families and friends has been influenced by their everyday life experiences since the previous study one year earlier. At that time, they lived in various types of foster families where most of them still live, but about a third have left. The different types are kinship (relative), network (non-relative, but previously known), and traditional (previously unknown, recruited through the social services) foster families. Research questions concerned their relationships, emotions, and understanding of their everyday interactions in the foster family and other contexts, e.g. school, as well as how they act to handle situations. Their situation in the follow-up study was compared with the previous study. Methods used were follow-up interviews with 15 young people, network maps, and text responses via mobile phone (beepers) which, as mentioned, were compared with the first data collection with the same adolescents about one year earlier.

What is striking in this follow-up study is the highly changeable everyday life that many of the young people have experienced. Changing schools and peer groups, birth parents’ problems, and shifting levels of well-being.
are all causes of worry for the adolescents. These changes may be especially hard because of previous changes in their lives such as entering new foster families and new schools. It is evident in the follow-up study that more young people than in the first study need some kind of therapeutic support, because they feel sad, depressed, or worried; show aggressive behaviour; or just need to talk to somebody. However, most adolescents reveal personal agency by still coping with their emotional problems, which is in line with previous research (Pecora et al., 2009).

In the first round of interviews, the social bonds the young people had to their foster families seemed to be stronger in kinship and network foster families than in traditional foster families. However, in this follow-up study some young people’s preferences about relationships have changed, which corresponds to previous longitudinal research (see e.g. Andersson, 2009; Schofield 2002). The adolescents in close kinship families still have the special situation of a natural sense of belonging. However, the differences between network and traditional foster families are not as salient as in the first interview. The young people in the previously unknown traditional foster families have also established a sense of belonging to the foster family after a rather short placement of around two years, even though the beginning was harder than in kinship and network foster families.

That many young people have experienced variations in their relationships to foster and birth family members is mostly for the better. However, in a few cases this has led to disruptions, initiated by the adolescents. Two disruptions, and a ‘light’ version of disruption, have occurred, in each type of foster family.

Most members of the group of adolescents still living in the same foster home feel a sense of belonging to both foster family and birth family, especially where both families cooperate. Cooperation between foster and birth parents can take such forms as discussing important upbringing matters with each other, like for example the young person’s possibility to attend a music festival and how to arrange it, or just daily matters like visits to the young person’s birth home. It can also be expressed as openness to invite the birth parent to celebrations, for example the young person’s school break-up before summer holiday.

Mutual activities and negotiations in the foster family are found to be key aspects of family life for the creation of social bonds and belonging, which strengthens previous findings. Laughing and having fun together still seem to be crucial interactions which generate emotional energy in family members. There is a lack of these mutual practices before disruptions/unplanned removals. Accordingly, an absence of mutual activities,
and foster children not wanting to take part in these activities in a foster family, are important signals for social workers.
Discussion

The aim of this thesis is to examine the everyday life of young people in their different contexts after they enter various types of foster families, and to identify processes that influence their sense of belonging. The initial question about what it is like for young people to enter and settle into a new family – either one that is familiar, like a kinship family or a network family, or one with which they were not previously acquainted, a traditional foster family – has been scrutinized. The follow-up after one year shows changes in their daily life, whether staying in the foster home or leaving it, and how these changes are understood by the adolescents. How these changes and other aspects of their everyday life influence their social bonds and sense of belonging to their network is illuminated. The young people’s perspectives permeate the entire study.

I have tried to capture both foster youth’s common, shared experiences and their diverse experiences in their different settings to see the complexity of foster youth’s lives. One point of departure has been an interactive approach where foster youth are seen as active agents and participants (see e.g. James & Prout, 1997) in their family life and other social contexts, like school, leisure time, among peers, etc. Another interactive point of departure, the micro sociological one (Collins, 2004; Scheff, 1997), was useful for understanding everyday rituals and emotions and what these meant to the adolescents. These theoretical standpoints are valuable for understanding the variability of human beings, in the sense of how they are influenced by their various contexts and over time, a constructivist approach (see Dencik, 1999; Silva & Smart, 1999). These rather concrete angles of approach acknowledged the adolescents’ competence to reflect about and describe their experiences.

The research questions are dealt with in the articles. These concern routines, rules, and rituals in the foster family (articles I, II, III, IV), everyday practices which have an impact on their school situation (article I), the young people’s possibility to act as agents (articles I, II, III, IV), the impact of time (article IV) and space (various foster families) on the young people’s lives (articles II, III, IV), and which everyday interactions and practices that influence social bonds and a sense of belonging (articles III, IV).

A foster family open to both foster youth and birth parents

The ‘open foster family’, as used in this thesis, should not be mixed up with the concept of ‘open adoption’, which usually refers to maintenance of contact between adoptive and biological parents after the adoption of a child, e.g. a former foster child (see Frasch, Brooks & Barth, 2000). In the
different articles in this thesis, openness stands out as crucial in foster parents’ attitude, not only toward the youth they welcome into the family, but also toward the youth’s birth parents. A willingness to negotiate, to adjust their routines to suit the foster youth, and to invite the newcomer into the family jargon and activities are obvious examples of inclusion practices within the family. Openness to birth parents means that foster parents discuss important upbringing matters with birth parents, or can just touch on daily matters like visits to the youth’s birth home. It can also be an openness to inviting the birth parent to celebrations concerning the youth.

When a new family member arrives, the foster family reconstructs itself. Foster family members strive to find another way of ‘doing family’. As a new family member, the foster youth is part of this family alteration. The foster family’s practices, that is to say, what the family members are actually doing, comprise the foundation of an ‘open foster family’ (see Morgan, 1996). Negotiating about family matters concerning the foster youth, and thereby providing them with influence, is found in this thesis to be an important practice in foster families (see Mitchell, 2010; Gilligan, 2006).

Stable routines and some rules appear to be important for an overall feeling of stability and well-being (see e.g. O’Neill, 2004) or, in short, their capacity to cope with their everyday lives, particularly in school. At the same time some routines and rules, like having to come home for a joint dinner at a specific time, create occasions when everyone gets together as a family. The importance youth connect with common meals is obvious in their narratives, as is the symbolic meaning that is connected to food, as revealed in their wish to have access to the fridge. This may be a longing for normality (see e.g. Luke & Coyne, 2008). Another interpretation is that access to the fridge is a symbol of membership in the family, signifying that one is trusted and accepted. In a study of pre-school children, Dencik (1999) considers everyday activities like cooking and watching television to be crucial activities for family members to ‘charge up’ their sense of belonging. Dencik suggests that these mutual interactions in everyday life are connected with strong emotions. This is another aspect of the importance of doing things together in everyday life, which comes to light in the adolescents’ statements that having dinner together, viewing television together, etc. are the occasions when they feel really good in the foster family. What stands out as one of the strongest inclusion practices is to take part in a holiday trip with the foster family.

The young people seem to respond to the openness, at least after a while. The attitude of other children in the foster family, whether foster children, or biological children, also appears to be of crucial importance for how the placement turns out (articles III and IV). These foster siblings
can serve as guides into the foster family’s routines and rituals (see e.g. Höjer & Nordenfors, 2006; Riggs et al., 2009), but they may also treat the new foster youth in a patronizing way (article III). One might say that they position their new family member outside the family barrier instead of inside, which can exclude the foster youth from family rituals and make him/her feel like an outsider (see Collins, 2004).

The examples of being treated badly, mostly in previous foster families (article III) represent a lack of openness and also a lack of respect, which is an important feature in family interactions (see Mayall, 2008). That being treated badly can cause feelings of guilt and shame among foster children, even as adults and after a long time has passed, is also apparent in the narratives of people who have been the victims of abuse and neglect in Swedish foster care from 1920 until today (SOU 2011:61). The worst thing about it was the feeling of never have been loved and appreciated and not having access to emotional closeness with anyone. Some of these alumni foster children have blamed themselves for being taken into care. Despite these bad experiences many of them have coped with their adult life, however with varying degrees of success (SOU 2011:61). These narratives reveal the opposite of open foster families, namely closed, isolated families and environments.

Foster parents’ attitudes and ways of acting towards birth parents are also found in this thesis to mean a lot to the foster youth, which is in line with previous research (see e.g. Andersson, 2009). It can amount to the difference between being able to feel proud of one’s parents and being ashamed. It also offers the opportunity to develop strong social bonds with the foster parents and at the same time maintain strong social bonds with birth parents (see Scheff, 1997). There are even examples of adolescents who strengthen the social bonds with their birth parents during placement (article IV), which most likely has been facilitated by the mutual acceptance between their foster and birth parents, and by their receiving support to work through their feelings about their parents’ failings (see Andersson, 2009).

A thesis about adolescents’ role in family democracy (Persson, 2009) strengthens these findings about the importance of family openness and youth’s influence in family matters. If adolescents are willing to talk about their doings, parents can receive information without have to force them to tell (see Kerr & Stattin, 2000). Persson (2009) concludes that it is mutual open communication between adolescents and parents that is decisive for parental knowledge, and that it is also important that the adolescents think they are treated fairly by parents. Persson found that these aspects of ‘open families’ are also important for adolescents’ internal and external adjust-
ment. When the family climate changes over time, the adolescents’ adjustment also changes, while parents’ and adolescents’ behaviour combine and interact within families (Persson, 2009). These findings about the importance of family openness are certainly applicable to foster families and are in line with the current thesis (e.g. article IV).

In this thesis I have found this openness to be most self-evident in kinship families that are close relatives to the foster youth and his/her birth family, like grandparents or uncles. Foster parents and adolescents are already familiar with each other. Birth parents and siblings can come and go spontaneously. Network and traditional foster families can also show openness towards youth and birth families, albeit of another character, particularly at the beginning of a placement.

The changeable life that both children and adults experience demands flexibility and a capacity for reorientation (Halldén, 2007). This flexibility implies trust, which Halldén suggests can develop in close relationships. Close kinship families probably have the possibility to create a feeling of trust between foster parents and youth already from the beginning of placement. This can also be applied to some network foster families, especially those that the young people found and chose themselves. However, this thesis shows that in a kinship family as well as in a network or a traditional foster family, this can change over time. The change can be both for better or worse, but is mostly better, and is combined with more or less openness between youth and foster parents and more or less frequent common activities and shared emotions of joy in the foster family (see article IV).

**Humour as a ‘door-opener’ into the foster family**

That laughing and having fun are seen by many of these young people (and some foster parents, in article II) as such a crucial aspect of everyday life in the foster family is something that has been overlooked in previous foster care research. This may be because the importance of having fun together is a matter of course, but nevertheless it is important to emphasize it. This was especially evident in the first set of interviews. Humour worked as a door-opener to the foster family, and for some of the young people in particular, it helped them to overcome their initial resistance. Accordingly a humorous approach appears to be especially important when placement starts and social bonds are going to be established. In particular, joking and kindly teasing were visible in the family interactions in the video recordings, and were also a frequent topic in the adolescents’ interviews.

Theorizing shared laughter may shed some light upon what actually happens, making its importance more understandable. Shared laughter
presupposes a mutual focus of attention between the participants and leads to a natural ritual with a strong emotional component of joy, which in the recordings was apparent in their facial expressions (see Scheff & Starrin, 2002). Collins (2004) suggests that shared laughter is a high-intense interaction ritual generating feelings of solidarity, and with common symbols of pleasure representing these interactions. These symbols may turn out to be ‘sacred objects’ (Collins, 2004), which have the potential to remind participants of previous group interactions. An example is a video recording with a funny story from the holiday trip the previous summer (article III), and one should keep in mind that a holiday trip with the foster family is one of the most effective inclusion practices.

In humour research as well, social laughter is seen as having the capacity to maintain in-group relations (Lennox Terrion & Ashforth, 2002; Chapman & Foot, 2007). Even put-down humour, shared and regulated by implicit rules, can foster group identity in a temporary group, increasing trust and inclusion (Lennox et al., 2002). How humour, and even a kind of put-down humour, can create involvement, solidarity, and even intimacy in a family is studied by Elisa Everts (2003). She shows in a discourse analysis of one family how apparently aggressive humour like irony, imitation, etc. is used in the socialization to achieve a relational harmony and feelings of competence and hope (Everts, 2003). These examples reveal how various kind of humour can influence group and family interactions in a positive way. Laughter can also be used to ridicule others, usually amongst children, according to Chapman and Foot (2007), however this was not perceptible in my study. Social aspects of situations are crucial determinants of laughter, for example the way people look at each other. Chapman and Foot (2007) emphasize the relationship of laughter to joy, and claim this applies to much of children’s laughter. They even regard laughter and smiling as important ingredients of the everyday interactions of children, and therefore worth studying to understand children’s interactions; however it is not paid very much attention in research (Chapman & Foot, 2007). The importance of laughter and humour in handling embarrassing situations, in solving conflicts, and in creating a feeling of solidarity and well-being among the people involved is also pointed out (Chapman & Foot, 2007; Starrin & Wettergren, 2008). Examples of these functions of laughter can be found in this thesis (article II).

To sum up, considering all these positive effects of humour in people’s interactions, it may not be odd that humour and laughter were such conspicuous features of the young people’s narratives and in the video recordings.
Social bonds and sense of belonging among family and friends

The ‘open foster family’ may not be a necessary prerequisite for the creation of social bonds and a sense of belonging for foster children, but it can nevertheless play a vital role in this process. Scheff’s (1997) theory of social bonds and Collins’s (2004) theory of rituals shed light on the processes which lead to group solidarity. The natural rituals of family life influence people’s emotions and well-being. Emotions are also a crucial part of social solidarity and social bonds (Scheff, 2006). The concept of solidarity as mutual awareness can be the main component of shared context, consensus, and genuine love (Scheff, 2007). Scheff claims that belonging is a difficult concept to define, but that it is close to solidarity, and that its opposite is alienation. Love, friendship, and community/solidarity are different forms of belonging (Scheff, 2008), as well as being close to the concept of social bonds. Findings in this thesis show that after a period in care it is possible for adolescents to have strong social bonds with both foster and birth families in all types of foster families. This is possible even in previously unknown traditional foster families, even if it demands an ‘open foster family’.

What is not emphasized in previous findings, but is in this thesis, is that when there are signs of interactional interruption between the adolescent and his/her foster parents, doing things together also becomes more infrequent, which is most obvious before disruptions. However, a question is whether the lack of mutual activities in the foster family causes feelings of loneliness and alienation (see Scheff, 1997) in the foster youth or if the lack of mutual activities reflects the adolescent’s unwillingness to participate. In any case, the narratives of the adolescents who experienced disruptions reveal obvious impairments of the social bonds between them and their foster parents, which took the form of fewer mutual activities, negative emotions, and feelings of alienation. According to Scheff (1997) the practice of withholding thoughts and feelings, as these young people do, is a primary indicator of the kind of alienation called engulfment. Put another way, the level of foster youth’s willingness to confide in foster family members and peers reveals the strength of their social bonds. These adolescents with experiences of disruptions have recourse to their birth family and/or peers, including siblings. Even for adolescents still living in the foster home, siblings provide a connection to their birth family, when relations to birth family are strained.

A sense of belonging with peers in school and during leisure time is an important part of the adolescents’ life, and in exceptional cases peers may be the only people with whom one feels one belongs. This is a strong example of how young people strive to find a space to provide themselves
with a sense of belonging (Spånberger Weitz, 2011). Changing schools, something that almost all the young people experienced when they were placed in foster care, had once again occurred in the follow-up study, for example because many now attend upper-secondary school (article IV). These changes can be both for better and worse (see Schofield & Beek, 2005) and influence relations to peers. Activities in their leisure time, e.g. sports, music events, etc., are a way to find peers and a group to belong to (see e.g. Martin & Jackson, 2002). Besides, an interesting result in a US study about extra-curricular activities for adolescents in out-of-home care indicates that these activities do not in themselves prevent delinquency; rather it is the type of placement (foster care, kinship care in particular) and closeness with the caregiver that are significant for adolescents’ outcomes (Farineau & McWey, 2011). So, it may be a question of separating cause and effect, that close caregivers encourage and support leisure time activities, which enrich the adolescents’ everyday life and give access to peers.

The process of these mutual practices in the foster family, when they work and when they fail, can be understood with Collins’s (2004) theory of Interaction Ritual Chains. The described activities/practices become rituals, which reinforce membership into the group – the family – and charge the individuals with emotional energy. Failed rituals may be due to some ingredients being missing, like when the entire group is not assembled or they do not have a mutual focus of attention and shared mood. It can also be that barriers to outsiders are loose, for example because of new family members, like in two of the disruptions, when new foster siblings had arrived. An interpretation is that the group (family) solidarity decreases. The young people then bring this emotional energy, or lack of it in case of failed rituals, with them into their subsequent interactions, and so the chain goes on. This theory makes the connection between people’s – foster youth’s – different contexts clear, and shows their reciprocal dependency on each other. The importance of the foster family for the youth’s school adjustment, not only for a stable daily life but also for the creation of positive interaction ritual chains, is elucidated in the thesis, as well as the young people’s own contribution to this process.

Foster youth’s agency and vulnerability

Foster youth’s agency is not a common concept in foster care research, even though their competence or resilience is explored in some studies (see e.g. Höjer & Sjöblom, 2011; Spånberger Weitz, 2011). Throughout the different parts of the thesis and the two sets of interviews, the young people’s agency is obvious, especially with regard to their school situation. In
school they usually work hard to improve their performance and to find friends, and they mostly succeed (article I). These findings are unlike a great deal of research about the school performance of children and youth in out-of-home care (see e.g. Vinnerljung et al., 2005; Berridge, 2007; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid & Epstein, 2008), which is probably due to their not being compared in my study with a ‘normal’ group but with their own educational progress. Other studies with a similar approach also have similar results indicating educational improvements after a period of time in out-of-home care (see e.g. Harker et al., 2004; Berridge et al., 2008; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010). Furthermore, in accordance with the ‘sociology of childhood’ point of view, the young people’s situation here and now, their present condition of being teenagers and not just future adults (see James & Prout, 1997), is the main area of interest in the study. However, the adolescents’ ideas about previous experiences and their future are also discussed. The teenagers in the study are somewhat occupied with their future, their becoming, as this is closely connected to school, a crucial part of their everyday life (see e.g. Hallldén, 2007).

In their leisure time they are all engaged in activities, mostly sports, but also cultural activities like music. In short, in these respects, these foster youth are like any other youth. However, they still have other experiences, conditions, and prerequisites that also influence their vulnerability. This is most evident in the follow-up study (article IV), which finds that quite many of the youth need some kind of therapeutic support, unlike in the first interview, even those who have a rather stable situation. Yet, the young people show they are not only objects but also subjects in their lives, in that they are taking advantage of this support and appreciate it. This agency perspective may be an uncommon way to look at foster youths’ experiences, but it nevertheless contributes to the overall picture of their everyday life. Clear examples of agency in the first interviews are a few young people who display strong agency in finding their new foster home (article III), and in the second set of interviews some youth who reveal their agency by just leaving or running away from the foster home (article IV). In particular, the inclusion of network foster families as a third type of foster families reveals the importance of agency when one is involved in choosing one’s foster family, which adolescents entering kinship families usually do, but adolescents entering traditional foster families do not. Especially in the early stages of placement, this agency seems to be a crucial factor in the establishing of social bonds to the foster family (article III).

Negotiations and participation strengthen foster youth’s social agency and probably also their democratic values. Accordingly foster parents and
social workers play a leading role in encouraging the young people’s possibility to be actors by involving them in decisions about their situation.

Some gender and ethnic aspects
A few gender differences are evident in this thesis. One is that all but one of the adolescents in network families, those who found their own family in particular, are boys and in traditional foster families they are all girls. To what extent this has influenced the results is difficult to determine (article III). In any case, one can say that the boys showed more agency in choosing and finding their foster family. In school there are no obvious gender differences in the first study (article I), or in the follow-up study (article IV). However, another difference is that in the follow-up study more girls than boys have some kind of therapeutic support, and those who think they do not need therapeutic support are mostly boys in network or kinship families. This may be because the strength these boys feel as autonomous actors when choosing their foster family validates them so they do not need further support, or because their previous social bonds to the foster family before placement influence their well-being in a positive way. Another angle of approach is that those girls who avail themselves of the therapeutic support, as mentioned before, show their agency by providing for their needs. However, the differences also correspond to previous findings that teenage girls are more vulnerable than teenage boys (Werner, 2003), and that more teenage girls than boys suffer from mental health problems (Sjöblom, 2003). An additional possible explanation may be that females and males have different help-seeking behaviours and that females can be perceived by social workers as more in need of assistance than males (see Kullberg, 2005). A gender theory about socially embodiment (Connell, 2002), which connects bodily and social aspects, can contribute to the understanding. Connell states that bodies both have agency and are socially constructed. He exemplifies this with gender patterns in health and sickness. As to the described differences between boys and girls, it is most plausible that these are both bodily related and socially constructed. All the mentioned conceivable explanations can have an impact: the young people’s bodily vulnerability or capacity for agency, whether they have a supportive environment at hand, and the social workers’ perceptions of boys’ and girls’ situations.

From the start I did not concentrate on ethnic aspects in this thesis. That quite many of the young people in the study were born in and have parents from non-European countries is just a coincidence and probably mirrors the already mentioned fact that immigrant and unaccompanied children are overrepresented in out-of-home care in Sweden (Vinnerljung, Franzén, Lena Hedin Foster youth’s sense of belonging in kinship, network and ... | 73
Nevertheless, it has been of great interest to look into their everyday life in foster care, both in Swedish foster families (network or traditional) and foster families originating from the same country (kinship or network). These young people have little or no contact with their birth families. Most of them cling to their foster families, whether with the same cultural background or Swedish. The unaccompanied children miss their parents, and either they do not know when they will see them again, or have no information about whether their parents are alive or dead. They try to find strategies to cope with their loss. The immigrant children have, in various ways, problematic relationships to their birth parents, for reasons which led to the placement. For most of these adolescents, both immigrant youth and unaccompanied youth, it takes quite some time to be admitted to an ordinary school class, because they have to learn more Swedish. Their school situation is described to some extent in the first study (article I).

**Strengths and limitations of the thesis**

In this study I wanted to look into a part of ‘real life’ in foster care, namely what the young people’s reality looks like from their point of view, something I tried to capture with various methods. An ambition of the study has been, bearing my previous experiences as a social worker in mind, to gain knowledge and insights that can be useful for social workers in providing for the needs of foster children and foster youth. The adolescents in the study took this ambition in and said they participated to help other young people entering foster care. An advantage of this thesis is that the findings may be possible to implement in practical social work.

The focus on time and space reveals the assumption of a changing reality. The interview provides an insight into the adolescent’s life on a specific occasion – at a specific time, and in a specific space/room (in fact more than one, namely foster home, school, and birth home). The text responses, however, present several brief glimpses into their everyday life, and in the follow-up interview one year later, changes have occurred, more or less, as have for example relations. This course of events, the process over time and in different contexts is elucidated. Accordingly, strengths of this thesis are that foster youth’s experiences and constructs of their everyday life have been illustrated, not only with a focus on their vulnerability but also their agency, and that this has been done with great concern for ethical issues. In a review of research about looked-after children’s perspectives, Sally Holland (2009) recognizes that some research designs did not let young people’s individual constructs of their experiences emerge. She sees a tendency to focus on ‘looked-after’ children as problems, which masks the
complexity of their lives, also when they are successful. Another problem pointed out is that ethical issues were hardly discussed in some papers (Holland, 2009). My thesis reveals a rather positive and nuanced picture of foster youth’s everyday life. The subtleties become more obvious when the adolescents are followed over a period of time, and it emerges that they also have to face severe problems connected to their situation as foster children. That many foster children have positive experiences of foster care is also evident in some previous research (see e.g. Andersson, 1998a; Schofield, 2002; Merritt, 2008), but also very tough experiences are exposed (see e.g. SOU 2011:9). Both of these different pictures of foster children’s experiences in care need to be recognized, and this thesis make a contribution in this regard.

A weakness of interviews, network maps, and video recordings (which applies to most research methods, by the way) is that they are rather situation dependent. What appears, especially in network maps and video recordings, is up to the participants’ feelings and mood at that specific time. This applies to interviews as well. So, one of the strengths of the design, as mentioned, is the follow-up study, that most methods are used twice. However, a problem with waiting as long as a year between the two interviews was that it was sometimes difficult to question the adolescents about contradictory answers in, for example, text responses and interviews in the first interview session, simply because they had forgotten. However, the study is also strengthened by the mix of methods and especially the method of ‘beepers’ with text responses, which also brings a kind of observation into the young people’s everyday life over a period of time. This method turned out to be especially suitable for young people, as they are used to text messages and appreciate this way of communicating.

There are limitations in what kind of conclusions that are possible to draw about the different types of foster families, keeping in mind that the sample in each group is small, and even smaller in the follow-up study after disruptions and removals. However, some tendencies can be traced, in particular in relation to the first study.

Most of the data has been used in the thesis, with one exception. Even though all foster parents and ten birth parents were interviewed, just three birth parents’ and three foster parents’ interviews are used in the thesis. These make a useful contribution as a complement to the adolescents’ interviews (article II) about relations, especially about the relations between foster and birth parents, and the changes the adolescents have undergone since entering the foster home.

To sum up, all the methods are used even though the interviews with the young people contained the most data and were the main source. The other
methods served as complements, and are consequently less visible in the results. Nevertheless, these methods provide essential new and deeper information. This triangulation (see e.g. Patel & Davidsson, 2003) of methods (articles I, II, III, IV) and different data sources (article II) contribute to a more nuanced and full representation than would have been the case with just interviews.

Conclusions

The foster youth in this thesis display vulnerability by being foster children, but also show that they can be active participants and agents in their own lives by finding, developing, and breaking relationships. This agency is strengthened by the possibility to negotiate and take part in decisions concerning their doings, and in this sense it is dependent on foster parents’ and social workers’ attitudes. Negotiations can also serve to coach them in democratic values. In particular, the importance of the adolescents’ active involvement in choosing the foster family, as with kinship and network foster families, is emphasized.

Mutual activities, for example having dinner, watching television, and taking holiday trips with the foster family make the young people feel good and strengthen their social bonds to other foster family members. These practices are suggested to be determining factors of inclusion of the foster youth in the foster family. A lack of these mutual practices is observed before disruptions.

All these mentioned practices are parts of a way of ‘doing family’ together. In finding the balance in the foster family after a new family member has arrived, the way these interactions and practices turn out influences the creation of social bonds between the foster family members and the foster youth, and his/her sense of belonging. All family members are involved: foster parents, foster youth, foster siblings, and indirectly also the young person’s birth family.

To cope with these challenges, an open attitude within the foster family is an advantage, what can be called being an ‘open foster family’. By that is meant openness to inviting the adolescent into the family culture and the described family practices and rituals, but also openness towards his/her birth parents and his/her siblings.

In this process kindly joking, teasing, and laughing together serve as a door-opener into the foster family. In all these rituals, sharing positive emotions generates positive emotional energy within the family and creates a warm family atmosphere, which connects the adolescent more closely with the foster family. Joking can also be a strategy for avoiding, and maybe even solving conflicts.
School is of great importance to the young people, and is considered by them to be meaningful for their future. Despite previous school problems, it is possible to make educational improvements in a rather short time. These improvements are connected to the stability and support they receive from peers and teachers. Conclusions that can be applied to the practice of social work concern assessing foster parents’ attitudes to school and how they organize everyday routines related to school and spare-time activities. This study shows the connection between interactions in the foster home and at school. The emotional energy gathered in the foster family follows the young person to the next interaction, for example in school, and vice versa according to the theory of IR-chains (Collins, 2004).

Most adolescents still living in the same foster home in the follow-up study as in the first study, feel a sense of belonging to both their foster family and birth family, especially when both families cooperate, as is most evident in close kinship families. However, foster youth even in previously unknown traditional foster families can develop a sense of belonging to the foster family after a placement of around two years, even though this was not the case in the first interview. The strategy to include network foster families in the study shows the importance of foster youth’s involvement and active role in choosing the foster family, which especially benefitted the initial period of placement.

**Future research directions**

What makes foster children feel at home in a new foster family is a crucial topic worthy of further exploration. What works as inclusion and exclusion practices from their own point of view could be the subject of several studies, studies designed to meet them on their own terms and with methods suitable for children and young people. First and foremost, foster children and foster youth need to be listened to regarding their own understanding and perspectives. To follow them over time provides a more fair and nuanced picture of their circumstances than just making a single landing in their everyday life and is a strategy which can be used more in future research about children and young people in foster care.

To some extent, this thesis has touched upon the situation for immigrant and unaccompanied children, which accentuates the need for further investigations. This is especially important because they are a growing group in Swedish foster care. In particular, the finding in this thesis that despite their high ambitions, most of these foster youth with a non-European origin stay a rather long time in a preparatory school class is worthy of attention. These foster children’s school situation needs to be further explored to determine whether educational shortcomings in the school or their spe-
cial situation as immigrant or unaccompanied children is what is having an impact. One can also reflect on whether they are in a sense held back in the preparatory class by teachers and administrators, or if they themselves are too cautious about when to leave and move on to an ordinary class. Another reflection is whether it matters to school performance what kind of foster family these immigrant and unaccompanied children live in. In my study these young people live in all types of foster families, both Swedish and with their ethnic background. Furthermore, the small numbers of immigrant and unaccompanied youth make such conclusions impossible to draw. Accordingly, obstacles and possibilities in this area are a subject for future research, in particular as previous research shows that foster children’s school situation is crucial for young people’s future life (see e.g. Höjer & Sjöblom, 2011).

**Sammanfattning på svenska**

Fler unga än tidigare, framförallt flickor, rapporterar vid uppföljnings-intervjun att de behöver stödsamtal eller behandling. Det visar på de fosterhemsplacerade ungdomarnas sårbarhet samtidigt som de oftast klarar av att hantera sin situation. Sammantaget visar denna avhandling att känslan av tillhörighet stärks av att ungdomarna i familjen får delta i beslut som rör dem själva och att familjen är en ’öppen fosterfamilj’ i mottagandet av ungdomen och dess biologiska föräldrar, men även att humor kan fungera som en dörröppnare in till fosterfamiljen.
References


Publications in the series
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*Doctoral thesis  **Licentiate thesis