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Battling parenting: The consequences of secure care interventions on parents

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Abstract

Secure care in Sweden is the most intrusive child welfare intervention, and children and their family members have restricted contact. For each child in secure care, there are at least twice as many affected family members and parents who must manage the consequences of this institutionalization. Clearly, it is just as important to understand how secure care affects parents as it is to understand how secure care affects children. To address this issue, we conducted in-depth interviews with 11 parents to eight children who had been placed in secure care during their childhood, focusing on the institutional and societal structures that affected these parents and their parenting. With a narrative approach, stories alluding to a metaphor of war are identified. These stories reveal how all parents (but especially single mothers) are affected by their diverse socio-economic positions and the rigid frames of family life presumed by child welfare interventions. In these narratives, parenting emerges as a social practice rather than a skill. Above all, the stories demonstrate a great deal of vulnerability and sensitivity of parenting. The findings raise critical questions about the meaning and overarching consequences of institutional interventions in a family life.

KEYWORDS
child welfare, ethnicity, gender, institutions, parenting, social class

1 | INTRODUCTION

In Sweden, every year, around 1100 young people are referred to secure care (locked institutions). Typically, the grounds for secure care referrals include various types of so-called anti-social behaviour, such as substance abuse, violent behaviour and criminal-like activities. Not only do secure care units, often located in remote rural areas, separate young people from their familiar environments in a physical sense, but they severely limit young people's contacts and relations with family and friends. Thus, for most of those 1100 young people placed in institutional care, there are at least twice as many affected family members, such as parents. In this article, we discuss the positioning of parents within the context of secure care with the objective of exposing the ways that parenting and parent–child relations are (re)shaped by the institutional placement of children.

Secure care has a special place in the context of the Swedish child welfare services (CWS). First, it is the only place with far-reaching restrictive measures, such as locked units, body searches, isolation and restrictions on contacts (e.g., family and friends). Second, placements in secure care have no time limits. The termination

of the placement is decided when the CWS consider that the child's care needs have been met. Third, secure care emerges as a hybrid intervention driven by competing logics of punishment, protection and treatment (Henriksen & Prieur, 2019). This tension is especially revealed through the voices of young people who struggle to make sense of their placement and, by the same token, their own identities (Enell & Wilińska, 2021a; Henriksen & Prieur, 2019; Vogel, 2018).

Secure care is also a deeply relational practice that intervenes into the relational landscape of young people (Enell & Wilińska, 2021a). Young people separated from previous relations are at the same time introduced to new relations with peers residing and staff working there. Similarly, family members and friends are faced with the physical absence of the young person and the challenge of maintaining relations when all forms of personal contact are hampered by the institutional restrictions. Institutional placement may severely affect family relations by interrupting, breaking and redefining the meaning of family and daily family practices. Secure care may therefore shadow on family lives and practices even years after the actual placement (Enell & Wilińska, 2021b).

The institutional and relational dimensions of secure care are visible and prevalent not only in the lives of the placed children. The families, and very often parents, are at the forefront of what has been identified as *collateral consequences*, which indicates the extent to which child welfare interventions into family affects parents and their lived experiences (Bennett et al., 2020; Broadhurst & Mason, 2017, 2020; Lewis & Brady, 2018). Drawing on that body of research, this article focuses on the institutional and societal structures affecting parents and their parenting practices during secure care placements. The experiences and emotions of those parents, featuring the stories presented in this article, were collected to answer the following research question: What does institutional placement of a child do to parents and their sense of self?

2 | PARENTING AT THE INTERSECTION OF INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIETAL STRUCTURES

We anchor our discussion in a conceptualization of family in terms of family practices and displays (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011), and we approach parenting as a social practice created by and enacted within a specific socio-cultural context. Parenting is thus not about certain styles that one has or does not have, but it is rather a complicated social practice that constantly changes and evolves along spatial, temporal and socio-cultural spaces. Above all else, parenting is an indication of relationships between parents and children that are dynamic, emotional and prone to changes. These relations are however filtered through societal structures, such as gender and class that operate on the level of social expectations placed on parents belonging to various groups and at the level of parents' own lived experiences (and various ways in which parents–children relations are enacted; Edwards & Gillies, 2011).

Recognizing parenting as a social practice in progress cannot brush away the impact of static and one-dimensional images of parenthood circulating in socio-cultural spaces. For example, research on 'unconventional families' illustrates the types of investments and strategies made by parents to prove that the families they make, and the parenting they practice, respond to the commonly-accepted standards and norms of what qualifies as 'good parenting' (Stoilova et al., 2017; Zartler, 2014). The extensive adaptability and changeability of parenting has been observed in studies following migrant mothers and fathers who, along with changing location, tend to revise and adapt their ways of being parents and their childrearing activities to fit the new context (e.g., Bergnehr, 2016, 2020). Similarly, research into the experiences of parents whose children have been placed in out-of-home care provides insights into the ways that those parents attempt to reject the stigmatized position of 'failed parents' and focus on exhibiting their qualities as loving and caring mothers and fathers (Bengtsson & Karmsteen, 2021; Järvinen & Luckow, 2020).

Parents are also greatly affected by the institutional frames of CWS that often perceive them through the prism of a problem. First, parents tend to be regarded as bearers of family life; hence, troubles in and with the family are immediately translated into parents' troubles. For example, interventions and programmes targeting 'troubled families' in the UK are mainly designed around the premise of parental skills and competences, and in so doing, these programmes emphasize the responsibility of parents for lifting up their families and rising to the political challenge of parenthood, which is defined in terms of rearing responsible citizens (Edwards et al., 2012).

Second, parents are most often culpable for family troubles. Structural impairments and hardships are often overlooked in social welfare responses to family troubles; instead, the focus is often on parents and their capacities (Lewis & Brady, 2018). Studies into state interventions in family life and the positions of parents exemplify the growing disparity between everyday worlds of parents and social welfare's assumptions about the sources of family troubles. Poverty (Bennett et al., 2020; Gupta, 2017), ethnicity and race (Gupta & Featherstone, 2016; Ribbens McCarthy & Gillies, 2018) are some of the major social factors that tend to be ignored in cases where parents are deemed incapable of attending to their own children.

Third, neither family nor parenting is recognized as created and practiced at the intersection of various societal structures. CWS tend to perceive families and parents in rather strict existential categories: there are good parents/families and bad parents/families, and any given family must be one of those two. Morris et al. (2017) posit that such images of families and parents can be seen as a form of backlash against previous child-oriented policies and practices. These policies and practices conceive of children as not only malleable but also uprooted from their social contexts (Morris et al., 2017). Structural forces conditioning family and childrearing practices are hardly recognized by social workers (Bennett et al., 2020), and even if recognized, these forces are not taken into account in social work practice (Walsh & Mason, 2018). For instance, social workers tend to privilege mothers over fathers by associating parenthood with motherhood (Morris et al., 2017; Walsh & Mason, 2018). Fathers are more often

excluded from case processing, which has its grounding in cultural norms but also in institutional frames designed to deal with family welfare (Walsh & Mason, 2018). Excluding fathers not only results in unequal treatment of parents, but also intensifies stigma placed on mothers involved with CWS (e.g., Broadhurst & Mason, 2020; Kenny & Barrington, 2018).

The moral loading attached to the idea of parents and parenting coupled with social structures of power and institutional framing of CWS creates a complicated web of relations within which parents and their relationships with children are construed. Thus, the understanding of parents and their parenting practices touches upon the questions of relations and structures as well as identities and emotions. Parenting becomes a site of inequality influenced by structural and institutional forces. In this, we conceive of parenting in terms of *lived social relation*. This notion, inspired by McNay's (2004) conceptualization of gender, is an attempt to merge the structural with the experiential in understanding agency by emphasizing that 'structural forces only reveal themselves in the lived reality of social relations' (p. 177). For parents participating in this study, their ways of parenting were shaped not only by relations with their own children but also by their relations with CWS. By focusing on those relations, we delve into the structural and institutional forces that define and make those relations possible.

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is part of an ongoing project exploring family practices and relations of young people who between autumn 2010 and spring 2011 were placed in secure care. Since their institutional placement, 16 young persons were repeatedly interviewed during and after time in secure care (Enell, 2016, 2017). In 2019, they were contacted again and 11 of them agreed to participate in the current research project.

The participating young adults were asked to designate family members who could be contacted for an interview about their lives before, during and many years after placement. Seven of the young adults nominated birth parents, two nominated foster parents and one nominated a sibling. One sister and one mother that had been nominated declined participation, and one mother and one foster father could not be reached. In all, five birth mothers, one foster mother, four fathers and one foster father to a total of eight of the young adults participated (see Table 1). To three of these young adults, both of their parents were interviewed and for two of those, the parents lived together.

The second author did all the interviews at places that the parents chose: at home (five parents), at a spacious restaurant (one mother) and by phone and videoconference (two fathers). The interviews were individual, but in one interview in a mother's home, her partner was both present and active in the interview. Most interviews lasted for 1 or 2 h, with one interview continuing for 3 h. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with the consent of the interviewees.

The open interviews were inspired by the teller-focused approach, which is a way to approach complex, sensitive and difficult issues (Hydén, 2014). The teller-focused interview aims at supporting research participants in telling stories, and it is built on the understanding of interview as a relational practice (Hydén, 2014). The interviewer had not interviewed the parents before but had contacted most of them in the previous research project. Those contacts provided a unique relational context and might have facilitated bringing up potentially sensitive issues during the interviews. The interviews revolved around the following main themes: meaning of family, family relations and family practices today and at the time of the placement and the implications of their child's placement for family relationships. To support parents in narrating their stories, questions beginning with 'Can you tell me …?', 'What does it mean to you …?', 'How do you feel about …?' and 'How would you describe …?' were used. These questions provided a safe space for the research participants to narrate their experiences on their own terms and conditions.

Our analysis is based on narrative approaches that conceive of personal stories as created at the intersection of individual life trajectories and socio-cultural contexts. Here, the focus of analysis is on understanding the experiences and how they come about, rather than recalling the exact events and placing them in some chronological

TABLE 1 Socio-demographic characteristics of research participants

Family role	Marital status	Number of children	Child in secure care, age and gender	Origin	Employment status
Father	Re-married	Nine	14, boy	Native	Unknown
Father	Re-married	One	14, boy	Native	Employed, construction industry
Father	Married	Three	16, boy	Native	Employed, finance sector
Foster father	Married	Three	18, girl	Native	Employed, non-profit sector
Father	Married	Three	14, girl	Native	Employed, construction industry
Foster mother	Married	Thee	18, girl	Native	Employed, non-profit sector
Mother	Married	Three	14, girl	Native	Employed, service sector
Mother	Single	Four	14, boy	Native	Employed, service sector
Mother	Single	Two	12, boy	Native	Salary allowance
Mother	Single	Four	16, boy	Foreign	Employed, service sector
Mother	Co-habitant	Three	16, girl	Native	Employed, service sector

order. Stories are therefore approached as practices of meaning-making providing insights into socially pronounced ways of understanding different experiences, identities and phenomena (Squire et al., 2013). Our analysis begun with identifying sections in interviews where parents spoke about their parenting practices and parenting identities. Such identities are established in narratives through the use of various cultural and social resources, such as language. Thus, when interacting with the selected sections in the process of analysis, we paid a particular attention to the language used. What became prominent was the emotional and morally loaded language used to narrate own positioning in relation to children and CWS. Notions of *battles*, *conflicts*, *struggles*, *negotiations* and *taking sides* seemed to dominate parents' ways of making sense of secure care and understanding of their own position in the whole process. In the process of further analysis, we identified four various stories of *broken*, *surrendered*, *suspended* and *resistance* parenting, each of which explicated different patterns of relating to both children and CWS. The emergent metaphor of war in the names of different stories of parenting illustrates therefore the emotional and moral terrain that comes forward in stories narrated by parents. In this way, it also pays tribute to the underrated impact of CWS on parents and parenting. Noteworthy, the identified stories were often more dominant in some of the parent's narratives and less in others; they should not however be seen as exclusive but rather as existing in the parents' talk about family and their experiences of having their child in secure care.

During the process of analysis both authors worked together, however, the initial selection and coding of the material were done separately. The analysis was also presented and discussed during two different research seminars with junior and senior scholars. The initial findings and analysis were also considered during a reference group meeting comprised of users (parents and young people) with experiences of secure care, CWS workers and experts in the field.

The study received research ethics approval from the regional research ethics board, Nr 2018/273-31. All research participants were informed about the study both orally and in written, were given a free choice to either accept or decline the interview invitation and were assured about the possibility of withdrawing from the ongoing project at any time.

4 | FINDINGS

Societal structures such as gender, class and age provide different resources that parents may refer to on daily bases and in contacts with the institutional context; at the same time, these same structures form a base for a differential treatment and approaches used by the CWS. At the intersection of these structural and institutional forces, the interviewed parents shared their stories of both involuntary and voluntary removals of their children. The parents to six of the children had, often after years of hardships, turned to CWS for help; parents to two children considered social services as their opponents from the beginning. Below, the stories reveal a great deal of variation and contextual framing of parenting in the face of secure care placements.

4.1 | Stories of broken parenting

The child welfare interventions into family life may fall onto families and relations that had been already volatile, insecure and vulnerable. In such cases, secure care with its restrictions regarding family contacts as well as condemning perspectives on parents may have heightened the already strained family relationships. In the below excerpt, Anna recounts her mental and physical weariness as a mother that have led her to the development of negative feelings towards own children. Exhaustion on the one side and shame for having negative feelings on the other side heavily imprint on the sense of self as a mother.

> I'm sorry, but I hated her. I did not like my own child. I hoped they would throw away the keys. Yeah, it's terrible to say that, but I was exhausted. I had not been sleeping for months. I only felt like, 'that piece of shit kid. What is she doing to us?' (Anna, co-habitant mother)

Anna's account begun with her contestation about parenting not being necessarily her own choice. She came from a typical middle-class family, but her teenage pregnancy distanced her from that life and its norms. Anna has been experiencing a sense of guilt and shame for what happened. The norms of standardized life course seem to have been haunting her ever since, inflicting also on her relationships with her children. Further, with no education, she has been mainly working in care settings. While engaging in care activities for professional reasons, she has experienced difficulties with caring for her own children, which troubled her immensely. She apologizes for her feelings because these are not feelings expected from parents and caring mothers especially.

The experiences with CWS have left Anna scarred and magnified her earlier doubts about herself as a good mother. That process of wounding the sense of self as a parent could have been also inflicted by other family members. Theresia, for example, recalls how her ex-husband's and his wife's attacks contributed to her sense of not measuring up to certain standards as a mother:

> … and I was simply trampled by both of them during the meetings, my ex-husband and his wife, a lot. And there were … social services had to get involved in the end. So, it had been a lot …. I simply shut down. And I cried [makes a sobbing sound] like that. Everything was so negative …. I was so sensitive. If I had been strong, I would have fought back. So, there was a lot of that and … no, I just could not handle it. (Theresia, single mother)

The stories of broken parenting are stories exposing parental vulnerabilities that result from institutional placement. Lack of strength, a sense of loss and an overarching feeling of not being able to do what is required from good parents are some of the key characteristics of

broken parenting stories. These stories are very often ones of situational despair that are told by parents who found themselves facing a great family drama alone.

Stories of broken parenting point to the escalating difficulties and struggles with embracing the role of a parent and engaging in child-rearing practices. These difficulties and struggles typically have a long-lasting history, and above all else, they demonstrate the tremendous meaning of social location. The identified stories were found predominantly among mothers who during the institutional placement were single mothers. Although, in general, the societal discourse surrounding single motherhood in Sweden recognizes positive qualities of such mothers, still single mothers remain to be portrayed as different (Bergnehr & Henriksson, 2021). Thus, single motherhood coupled with institutional placement may create an unbearable situation that may affect one's sense of self and may encroach on parenting practices.

Ultimately, such stories provide an important commentary on the institutional interventions and their consequences. As much as children need their parents to build their identity (either with or against them), parents need their children to qualify their own sense of selves.

4.2 | Stories of surrendered parenting

Child welfare interventions are affected by societal structures and orders of gender, class and ethnicity (e.g., Edwards & Gillies, 2011). In this way, they represent a highly disciplining strategy of enforcing certain moralities of family life, which are largely white and middle-class. That enforcement may be met with resistance, yet, when lack of socially and culturally valued resources is coupled with structural racism and ethnic discrimination, it may lead to a total surrender of parenting. The story of Nadia provides a daunting example of how parental search for help from CWS may turn against parents.

Nadia: Ali did not listen. The first time [he did not], I made a decision, if Ali does not go to school, I will go to the social services. The second time, he did not listen to me. The third time, I went directly to the social services. So, I got there [and said] 'I need help'. / … /
/ … /After that, it did not go so well when the two men came. Ali is very gentle; he does not make much trouble. But [I was] very tired/ … /when he was back home [he asked] 'mum, what have you done?' The whole family got sad when they took him. I do not think it was good. When the staff came and knocked on the door and said 'come' and it was a very strong man [at the door].

Interviewer: Were you scared for Ali when they took him?

Nadia: Yeah, no, I was not scared. I just wanted my son to go to school.

(Nadia, single mother)

The vulnerability displayed here refers both to relations with children and with the CWS. Prompted by a neighbour who insisted that, as a single mother, Nadia should ask for help from social services, she initiated the contacts. However, her request became evidence of parental inability exhibited by a single, Muslim mother and resulted in forceful removal of her son and his subsequent placement in secure care. Institutional placement and interventions created a sudden rupture in family life and disrupted parenting practices. Nadia was made acutely aware of her failure as a parent and her ensuing loss of rights to have a say in issues regarding her own son.

> / … /After that, I asked them many times, please I want to see my son. I went to the social services to ask for help, I did not do anything wrong, I'm a very good mum.

When reporting on various encounters with CWS, Nadia consistently insisted on being listened to because 'I'm a mother, you need to listen to me'. She was seldom listened to, however. She was instead persistently reminded by the institutional context that her voice did not count, and her concerns were not important. In the eyes of the system, she effectively surrendered her parenthood when she called CWS for help. Nadia had neither cultural nor social resources that could help her to navigate the situation or the contacts with child welfare services. Simultaneously, her disadvantaged social location made her a perfect example of a failed parent who should not be listened to. The family logic Nadia employed to defend herself and her children occurred insufficient in the face of institutional logic following the orders of predictability, order and standardized practice.

A similar process of being silenced by the system is recalled by Marianne.

> Then suddenly, they said that there was no nutritious food or anything, but please … and that there was no fruit. No, but I do buy fruit and they [kids] eat them up right away. I cannot run down and buy fruits immediately, it's not for free. Yeah, you should have at least 10,000 [SEK] left after paying your bills. And I just, 'Jesus. What kind of salary should I have then? Shall I have your salary then or what?' I asked. 'Or should I be a lawyer?' There is no way in this world to have so much left. No, so they began counting and they said that they would take Liam and Louise away. 'Go to hell', I said, 'and get out of here if you plan to take away my kids!' (Marianne, single mother)

Although narrating from a quite different social location than Nadia, the story of Marianne demonstrates the same process of being questioned about one's parenting abilities. Her case is one of the few examples where issues of social class become central to the way in which parents and their homes are assessed by social services. Parental discipline enforcing the standards of middle-class families and their resources takes here a very bold form of assessment regarding quality of food and disposable household income. The only resources Marianne could mobilize to fight back were her anger and emotions; however, these were not found legitimate by the CWS.

The stories of surrendered parenting are hardly ever about voluntary choices, they rather indicate a process of being stripped of parental rights and roles. That process is deeply ingrained in societal structures that, when combined with institutional power, turn into a potent force that is very difficult to resist, especially when facing it alone, or when facing it in a foreign country or with very limited resources. Thus, from the point of view of the institutional framework, Nadia's cry for help and Marianne's anger could be seen as acts of surrender. None of those reactions are deemed appropriate and seem to be interpreted as a confirmation of unfitness for parenting duties.

4.3 | Suspended parenthood

The stories of broken and surrendered parenting demonstrate the turbulences in family life surrounding institutional placements. However, the stories narrated by parents can also show that institutional placement can be perceived of as a way of moving out of a difficult and unmanageable situation. It is not uncommon that parents initiate such placements or that parents see the placement as time for some relief and rest from everyday distress. Nevertheless, these stories are also inflicted with various emotions and moral dilemmas that testify to the enormous difficulty of facing oneself as a parent whose parenting is not enough.

On a few occasions, we could listen to stories of both parents to the same child. Their stories were similar, but also differed in drawing attention to the ways that gender and gendered notions of parenthood affected mothers and fathers and their understandings of what had happened.

Klara's dad: But as I said, we decided rather quickly that 'No, we will not be able to monitor her 24/7'. It is not possible, because we also need time for the other children. And then, that was the only option, so we had to call and say something. (Tomas, married father)

Klara's mum: It feels like it is … we did the right thing. And she has realized herself that we could not have done it differently.

Interviewer: When you say, 'we did the right thing', what do you mean?

Klara's mum: That it was us who contacted the social services, that we demanded that they would use LVU (The Care of Young Persons Act) so that we could … no, we could not handle it. We did not know how you should … no, we had no tools to figure it out ourselves. So … no, I do not see anything negative … I mean, about that, that are negative. There are some things that could have been better but … (Annika, married mother)

Klara's parents portray the initiation of institutional placement as a difficult, but a shared decision that was driven by parental concern and well-being of the whole family. However, the burden of the decision and the resulting emotional costs seem to be unevenly distributed between the two parents. While Klara's father describes the situation in detail and reports the ongoing reasoning, Klara's mother hesitates and tries hard to demonstrate that, as parents, they could not have done anything else. In this, Klara's mum becomes apologetic while at the same asking for understanding and forgiveness. In contrast, Klara's dad exhibits more confidence about the moral and social righteousness of their decision.

Accounts of other fathers who initiated institutional placement of their children displayed a similar level of calmness to that expressed by Klara's dad. They could see institutional placement as a time offering a break from being a parent and allowing them to find a distance to one's own child.

> … It takes—it involves the emotions to, uh—it brings up various feelings. Not necessarily that I was less [emotional], you get some distance, and you try to understand what it is, to understand him, and it was then when I understood him that I could feel empathetic again. (Lars, father)

Although Lars emphasized the importance of placement in the process of understanding his own son, still his story is filled with emotions and questions regarding the situation. However, these emotions are much more often directed outwards than inwards. In that sense, it becomes easier for fathers to recognize and admit that the institutional placement was the only viable option.

In the stories of suspended parenting, parents try to see the institutional placement as an opportunity to improve the situation rather than perceiving it through the prism of a personal failure. And yet the socio-cultural context that overwhelms mothers with parental responsibilities makes it much more difficult for them to come to terms with such reasoning. Thus, while suspended parenting may bring a sense of relief and rest to fathers, it more often leads to the feelings of guilt and regret among mothers who find it more difficult to take a break and stop blaming themselves for what happens to their children (see also Broadhurst & Mason, 2020). The experiences of parenting are not only created via relations with children, but they are also coloured by the structures of gender that place differential demands on mothers and fathers, which in turn afford them different types of resources.

4.4 | Stories of parental resistance

The stories of parental resistance are stories filled with negotiations and defending of parents' position during contacts with both children and CWS. The stories of parental resistance can be divided into two types: stories of symbolic resistance against the limiting scope for making family during institutional placement; and stories of physical resistance against the CWS, including lodging formal complaints or initiating court cases. These two types of stories magnify the complicated relationship between parents and CWS— the more parents agree with the institutional interventions, the more they need to mobilize

various resources to prove moral self-worth and resist the positioning as a 'failed' parent. In contrast, parents who resist the placement gain strength to do so from self- positioning as righteous and worthy.

> Unfortunately, what we heard was that there were not so many who went and visited for various reasons, like financial, geographical or they completely did not have contact. Unfortunately. So, many times when we were there, it was really great for some of the other who were there, they were also with us and talked to us and were very engaged when they saw that we always came. And if Annika could not, then it was me and one or both of our sons. (Tomas, married father)

Parental resistance can be seen as a story of denying and opposing the negative images of parents of children placed in secure care. It is also about investing in establishing responsibility, love and care—all the qualities that are said to be missing among parents of institutionally placed children (e.g., Bengtsson & Karmsteen, 2021; Järvinen & Luckow, 2020). Tomas, for example, achieves that by contrasting their own practices with practices of other parents who, according to him, did not or could not live up to the moral image of good parenting. While presenting himself and his family as engaged, he simultaneously pities those families and young people who did not act in the same way. Stories of symbolic resistance are thus not stories of parents resisting the placement itself but rather resisting the separation and the limited contacts with children who are placed and ensuing from that threat to a sense of self-worth and dignity as a parent.

The stories of parental resistance appeared in narratives of mothers and fathers who went through the process together. These stories seem to be related to the resources coming from couplehood if not nuclear family ideals. The normative image of nuclear family creates opportunities and resources that can be mobilized by parents to deal with institutional placements of their children. The idea of togetherness helps parents to establish themselves as respectful fathers and mothers who face challenges together and forms a united front to protect their children.

In contrast to the stories of symbolic resistance, the stories of physical resistance involve stories of actual fights and efforts to defy institutional interventions.

Mats: Hmm, no. So, I think that we got a … we got one or two child welfare managers fired alongside with few other case workers, and even then they were not able to admit that they were wrong.
Interviewer: No, no. Or apologize, then.
Mats: So that they got … no, exactly and they got a lot of criticism from the Parliamentary Ombudsman also. Because we reported them there too of course.

The stories of physical resistance illustrate the ways that parents mobilize negative emotions to fight the system that they perceive as harmful and dangerous to their children. Quite often, these sorts of stories are narrated by either couples or fathers only. While couples gain the strength from representing the socially appropriate type of family, men seem to be able to mobilize social resources and norms concerning ideals of traditional manhood, which privileges the use of physical strength, and the ability to act and counteract. As such, angry men cannot be easily dismissed, and they represent an acting force that others must relate to.

In such stories, CWS are portrayed as dangerous institutions that destroy lives without accepting any consequences even if their decisions and actions are based on faulty premises. These types of stories are dominated by negative emotions, such as disappointment, anger and sometimes outrage. However, these stories also include many references to human rights and citizenship discourses. In this, parents establish themselves as knowledgeable citizens who are ready to act in order to protect their family and in this way, to demonstrate their parental responsibility and worth.

5 | DISCUSSION

Any time a child is taken into secure care, there are always parents at the front line. Being socially and culturally constructed as the bearers of family life and children's welfare, parents of institutionally placed children are forced into a battle about their position both in relation to that child (and their other children) and CWS. In this, the analysis of parents' voices presented in this article demonstrate that the effects of institutional placements on parents are much more than mere collateral consequences as discussed in previous research (e.g., Bennett et al., 2020; Broadhurst & Mason, 2017, 2020; Lewis & Brady, 2018).

In discussing the positioning of parents in the context of secure care, we make three key arguments. First, child welfare interventions in family life tend to undermine social changes regarding relaxing norms that pertain to family life. Second, parenting in the context of secure care is highly affected by the relations of parents with CWS, and these are created at the intersection of social and institutional structures. Third, we revise the dominant welfare narrative concerning parents to children in secure care that portrays them as sources of danger and failure.

When parents meet child welfare institutions, their room for navigating among various positions and ways of doing family becomes more limited. Because parenting builds on relations between children and parents, when these relations are limited, so too is parenting. Furthermore, parents of children placed in secure care become more affected, if not disciplined, by the institutional context that is built around strict images of good parenting. Thus, what comes forward from the stories of such parents can be read as a process of opposing the overarching social trends of de-institutionalization, de-standardization and differentiation of family life (Brückner & Mayer, 2005). Instead, institutionalization, standardization and uniformity of family life are brought forward. In such cases, parenting ceases to concern only practices and relations emerging between parents and children, but it comes to equally concern the relations with CWS. We argue that the narrow and formal understanding of families must

be critically examined in practice—by social workers, staff at the institutions and by the decision makers at various levels. Nowadays, family life and family relations are freer and more informal than they have been previously. Although this freedom occurs within the frames of specific socio-cultural context, parents can discover their own ways of parenting and relating to their own children. Thus, we call for a greater acceptance and recognition of various types of family and family practices among welfare professionals who are in contact with parents to institutionally placed children.

Parents' relations with CWS, and their ability to negotiate their place and position in the process of institutional placement of their children, are highly embedded in intersecting social structures (e.g., Bennett et al., 2020; Gupta & Featherstone, 2016; Ribbens McCarthy & Gillies, 2018). This study draws attention to class, ethnicity, and gender and the ways that these systems of power relations impinge on the parents' ways of managing the placement of their child and the subsequent contacts with CWS. By the same token, societal structures also affect parents' own self-images and understandings of the relationships they have with their children. For example, single mothers with low socio-economic status may experience many more difficulties in creating a distance between themselves and what has happened to their children. In comparison with fathers, mothers seem to have fewer resources that can be mobilized to manage the high moral expectations that are placed on them. In a similar vein, single parents appear more vulnerable than couples, who, by the institutional standards, fulfil the idea of an appropriate family type. The advantages afforded by couplehood compared to 'singlehood' can be observed at various levels of contacts with institutions, and the various resources that are mobilized to manage various consequences of institutional placement. Further, the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and social class may also create another vulnerable position for parents who may struggle to be recognized by the CWS as legitimate and responsible guardians. The findings strongly indicate a need for active engagement with questions pertaining to the persistence with which class, gender and ethnicity inflict both parenting and child welfare practices. The positioning of parents within child welfare is always filtered by the surrounding social structures. Not only must CWS learn to recognize that but also actively work to meet resulting from those various resources that different groups of parents have access to. One size does not fit all.

The stories of broken, surrounded, suspended and resistance parenting contradict the commonly spread constructions of parents to institutionally placed children as both failed and culpable for children's problems. Instead, a more complicated picture is painted here. Vulnerability, societal exposure, and struggle with protecting and redefining relationships to own children are emphasized. Pressed by the societal norms and expectations coupled with institutional constrains and restrictions, parents to institutionally placed children engage in daily battles to preserve their sense of self, to exercise their rights and to form meaningful relations with their children. CWS must not only recognize these battles but also support parents in going through the process of rebuilding the moral and emotional self-worth that regardless of the intentions is always shaken by the institutional placement.

This article demonstrates the importance of family-minded practices that recognize the impact of such interventions on the lives of whole families and especially parents (Morris et al., 2017). In this, we draw attention to the notions of therapeutic residential care based on the ideas of active engagement of parents that serve the positive outcomes of such welfare state interventions (McNamara, 2020). Even though such forms of care are still under development, we see a need for further investments in activating the potential of parents and parenting in the context of secure care. Furthermore, these voices and their stories of parenting unveil structural forces that cannot be brushed away when dealing with child welfare interventions. The various social positions of parents affect their abilities to establish contacts with institutions and to act on their decisions with need. All these considerations raise a critical question about the meaning of secure care to the lives of children and families, and the extent to which the overarching consequences of such institutional interventions can be effectively managed.

The voices presented in this article could be seen as a call for not only redefinition of family images enacted by CWS but also a call for social services to gain new knowledge and revise values related to the position of parents during the institutional placement of their children. The critical eye on secure care has been previously raised mainly in relation to children and young people. This article adds to such critique by bringing forward the voices of parents and their experiences of family life, parenting and social services during institutional placement of their children. By far, this article reveals the inherent assumption of institutionalized forms of CWS about the culpability of parents for the situation and problems experienced by their children. In this, parents to children placed in secure care become not only socially exposed and vulnerable, but also extremely lonely in their attempts aiming at maintaining and renegotiating their family relations.

The voices of parents presented in this article articulate a sense of urgency by exposing dangers and risks resulting from neglecting the emergent complexity of parenting. Without appropriate responses, CWS become a risk rather than a protective factor to family life. The narrated stories demonstrate that parenting conceived of as 'lived social relation' is formed only partially by what happens between parents and children. The parent–child relations become overshadowed by relations with institutions, formations of identities, and the use of resources afforded by various social positions. With limited exercise of critical reflection, CSW may therefore actively deepen social inequalities and resultant form that marginalization (e.g., Fylkesnes et al., 2018).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article due to ethical reasons.

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