

Foster Family Images in Swiss Foster Care

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Abstract: This paper explores the mental images of foster families held by social work professionals in Switzerland and their impact on cooperation processes within foster care. Utilizing a broad and dynamic concept of images, the study examines how these images, shaped by biographical experiences and professional socialization, influence the practices and interactions of professionals with foster families. The research, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, involved nine group discussions with 47 foster care professionals across German- and French-speaking regions of Switzerland. The findings reveal a dominant ideal image of foster families as middle-class, heterosexual couples living in rural areas, which contrasts with the more diverse real images and marginalized images of foster families. These ideal images, often utopian and normative, serve as a model for professionals but may hinder the inclusion of diverse family forms and the effective support of foster families. The study highlights the need for a differentiated discourse in foster care practice that embraces diversity and moves beyond dichotomous notions of "good" and "bad" families. The paper concludes by calling for the development of professional orientations that recognize the resources within real foster families and address the complexities of foster care relationships. This approach aims to enhance the cooperation between professionals and foster families.

Keywords: Foster Care; Social Work; Family Images; Professional Practices; Switzerland

1 Introduction

People think and imagine visually, social phenomena are also perceived, imagined, and negotiated visually (Rahn 2023). Such mental images always contain social representations in which normative ideas and guiding principles of the imagined phenomena are mixed with biographical experiences and personal ideals. As mental family images, they have a special impact because they evoke connotations of the family in a condensed form. Also, social work professionals have their mental images of families. As a result, if not reflected, professionals' family images can be particularly powerful and due to the immediacy of the image, trigger automatisms and have a tendency to be self-explanatory. This, in turn, can render the legitimisation of professionals' actions obsolete and become per se legitimising (Bauer/Wiezorek 2021).

Family images are increasingly being researched in German-speaking socio-pedagogically orientated family research (see Bauer/Wiezorek 2017), similar to images of childhood and adolescence (Rahn 2023). The concept of images is proving helpful in examining the relationships between the biographical experiences of professionals, their images, and the practices of addressing family issues (ibid.). Little research has been done to date on images of foster families. This desideratum has been addressed with the project "Images of the Foster Family and their Effects on Cooperation Processes" (SNF funded, 2021 - 2024, ZHAW Zurich). The project analyses images of professionals, foster family members, and images in

print media. This paper focuses on the images of professionals in Swiss foster care. The first part provides general information on foster care in Switzerland, categorising the images and the context in which they are negotiated. This is followed by an introduction to the concept of images and the research methods used to collect and analyse the images of the professionals. The results of the analyses, (possible) functions of the images, and the significance of the results for foster care are also presented. Finally, the need for further development in this field is outlined.

2 Foster care in Switzerland

Switzerland has a population of just under 9 million, of which 1.74 million are children and young people (0-18 years) (Bundesamt für Statistik 2023). Few statistics are available for the child and youth welfare system in Switzerland as a whole, but it is assumed that around a third of the estimated 18,000 children in out-of-home care in Switzerland live in foster families (Seiterle 2017). In cantons for which statistics are available, between 30% to 50% of foster children are placed with relatives (e.g. canton of Zurich, Liesen et al. 2023; canton of Geneva, Reimer et al. 2023). Foster care relationships are framed throughout Switzerland by the so-called Foster Children Act (PAVO). However, the federalist system leaves the 26 cantons a great deal of freedom in implementing the legal framework and organising child and youth welfare. As a consequence, the recruitment and compensation of foster families and their support by professionals is organised differently (Reimer et al. 2023). Municipalities and cantons are obliged to authorise, supervise and support foster families, but there is no standardised procedure. In some regions, service providers (associations or private sector providers) can be involved in support. Foster parents may be pedagogically trained and paid employees (including social insurance) or laypersons who receive a (lower) fostering allowance or, as relatives of the foster child, do not have to be compensated at all (Art. 294 ZGB)¹. Accordingly, Switzerland has a system in which foster families are important for child and youth welfare, but are framed, monitored, and supported in very different ways (Reimer et al. 2023). Regardless of the professional framework, they are always considered as “families” (Reimer et al. 2025). For foster families, taking in a foster child goes hand in hand with taking over the day-to-day care of a child, which they provide in cooperation with state actors. In most cases, state authorities decide when biological parents cannot provide their child with adequate day-to-day care. At the same time, state authorities determine with screening processes and controls who is qualified to take over the everyday care of a child instead of the biological parents and whether this is implemented appropriately (Art. 316 ZGB; Art. 1 PAVO; Gassmann 2018). Foster families are therefore characterised, among other things, by the fact that they provide “better” temporary care for a child than the child's family of origin (Blandow 2004). This fact triggers visual associations among professionals as to what those foster families are and what they should be. To understand the meaning of these images, a sufficiently precise concept of the image is required, which will be shown below.

3 Concept of image

The concept of the image in the context of research on social phenomena is seductively vibrant and at the same time unwieldy. The following considerations are based on the German-language discourse assuming that images always represent inner and outer images. They build on fantasies and socially formed mental images (Belting 2002). At the same time, images are constantly produced, reproduced, and transformed in and through social

¹ According to Art. 294 para. 2 ZGB, relatives do not have to be compensated as foster parents. However, some cantons offer compensation.

interactions (Rahn 2023). Theoretically, the concept of the image is difficult to grasp, as it is used differently in different contexts and is often not sufficiently differentiated from other terms that describe social phenomena. In general, a distinction is made between a narrow concept of the image, which understands the image solely as an image, and a broad concept of the image, which understands the image as a (mental) representation that can be dynamically changed and altered (Strehle 2011). We chose a broad and dynamic concept of the image since it is best suited for the research on images of foster families. Such a concept of image is also fit for capturing ambivalences and ambiguities. Rahn (2023) distinguishes between three theoretical approaches to a concept of image and a fourth attempt to integrate different concepts of image:

1. a semiotic concept of the image that refers to the production of images as signs in interactions. Accordingly, research on images is to be understood as a relational process of the creation and attribution of meaning that requires interpretation. Hence, images are created in interactions and analysis processes and depend on those who analyse them (ibid. p. 40).
2. a phenomenological concept of the image, which is located as a phenomenon outside of the person and is based on prior knowledge and perception. This concept is concerned with "what" is seen and "how" it is perceived, the latter being linked to biographical experiences and biographically acquired patterns of perception.
3. an anthropological concept of the image. In this concept of the image, the "place" of the image is the person. Anything "that comes into view" (Rahn 2023, p. 42) can become an image; the image is "the result of personal or collective symbolisation" (Belting 2002, p. 11). Images are considered to be central to people's relationship to themselves and the world (cf. Rahn 2023, p. 43). This concept of images also has biographical references, e.g., in the form of a biographical "image memory" with an orientation function (ibid.)
4. interactionist and integrative approaches, which assume that the image in the examination of social phenomena "is not an abstract entity, but arises in the interplay of the mental level, linguistic realisation, and analytical reconstruction" (Rahn 2023, p. 47). Images are formed in speech and analysis and are created in a constant interaction between humans and the environment. The interactionist approach also refers to the functional character of images.

The concept of image used in the following integrates the various dimensions of meaning and is orientated towards an integrative approach (4). It is defined as a concept that reflects the relationship of the subject to the world. It is assumed that the images - anthropologically - originate in the subject and are used, negotiated, and transformed as symbols in interactions. The process of understanding in interaction is based on a process of analysis. With a focus on family images, it is central that images have functions for those who verbalise the images and that images can imply expectations in the form of invocations (Knoll 2018, p. 58). In this functional sense, images can also become patterns of interpretation and orientation, albeit not causally, but always in a relational sense. The images are thus always put in relation to perceptions and social realities and are constantly (re)negotiated. The context of meaning, therefore, surpasses a purely interpretative and orientating function (Wiezorek/Ummel 2017). As a semiotic concept, images in the context of this research work are also based on the

analysis and interpretation of what is said and discussed by those involved in the discussions and, subsequently, by the researchers who analyse the data.

With regard to families, the concept of the image in the form of a guiding principle provides individual, collective, and social orientation (Schneider/Diabaté 2020). As biographically anchored images, family images are often vague and emotionally exaggerated, and the vivid, pictorial ideas are particularly effective when talking about family (Bauer/Wieczorek 2021). Family images therefore always contain ambiguities and tensions and are subject to negotiation and analysis.

The concept of foster family images used here is based on the concept of family images described above. While family images are generally characterised by the fact that everyone has their own biographical experiences with family, the foster family images examined in this paper differ in this central aspect: they are not always biographically shaped since very few people in Switzerland have foster family experiences. Foster family images do not so much represent personal experiences but experiences of others, including a collective memory. They possibly consist of images originated in the professional socialisation of professionals as well as images conveyed by the media. They are mixed with the professionals' own generalised ideas of family. As images, they therefore generate idealisations of foster families on the one hand and perceptions that may contain critical assessments on the other hand. In their function of providing orientation, images of foster families can be linked to the actions of the actors in foster care. It can be assumed that this takes place in tense, interactive processes. It is a challenging task to shape the relationships between the various actors during and beyond the foster care relationship (Reimer/Petri 2017). Those relationships are characterised by relations between professionals, members of the foster family (foster parents, biological and other children), the foster children themselves, and members of the family of origin. They are also complex concerning the context of a structural ambiguity in terms of duration, affiliation, and private vs. professional status (cf. Gehres/ Hildenbrand 2008; Reimer 2023a). The complexity requires constant balancing efforts (Gassmann 2018) from all actors. In the present context, foster family images of professionals are understood as external images, as an outside perspective on foster families, and it is assumed that those images shape the formation of relationships and structures.

4 Research design and method

For the above-mentioned study, nine group discussions were conducted with 4 to 8 foster carers each in German- and French-speaking Switzerland. The survey took place between May 2021 - April 2022, with a total of 47 professionals (19 m/28 f) aged between 27 and 68 years and with a 1-15-year professional experience in the field of foster care. One group consisted of foster care professionals who had recently retired at the time of the survey and who also took a joint look back at their work in the field of foster care. All other interviewed professionals still work together as teams of public authorities or private sector providers and are active in both urban and rural regions. The teams are responsible for the recruitment, assessment, authorisation, training, supervision, and/or support of foster families, with responsibilities varying from canton to canton. The initial theoretical contrasting elements include language region, work assignment, form of organisation, and seniority. Since our aim was to gain a broad insight into the foster care system, we strived for a diverse sample which means we included all kinds of groups of professionals working with foster families. During the evaluation process, further groups of professionals were asked to participate in an iterative-cyclical approach, hoping to gain new insights based on their denomination or form

of organisation. Foster care professionals were very interested in the study, and all the teams we contacted were willing to take part in a group discussion.

As a stimulus for discussion, the professionals were asked to create a picture of "how they imagine a foster family" using wooden blocks, stones, or coloured pencils on paper. Seven groups followed this stimulus, one group included their own design material, and one group refused this task and entered the discussion independently. After the design phase, the participants were asked to present their creation to the group. The two interviewers then used open guidelines to moderate the largely self-organised group discussions, each of which lasted around two hours and was recorded as audio file. The project research is based on the grounded theory methodology (Strauss/Corbin 1996). Following the group discussions, observation protocols were drawn up and the audio files were transcribed in full in German and French with fine-grained interaction features. The transcripts were coded openly, core categories were formed, and these were related to each other and compared across the group discussions. In this way, the images drawn and negotiated by the foster care professionals could be elaborated.

5 Results and analyses: ideal image, real images, and marginalised images of the foster family

Across all group discussions, professionals agree that foster families are a "very heterogeneous construct" (GInt9), emphasizing that there is no single definition of a foster family and that foster families are highly diverse. However, a dominant image of a foster family, reflecting an ideal from the professionals' perspective, consistently emerged in all discussions.

The image that emerges alternates between this dominant ideal image and accounts of professionals' experiences with foster families in their everyday work. These two perspectives are only partially congruent. Based on these observations, the images were analysed in each group discussion, leading to the creation of a typology of three different image types from the empirical material (cp. Kluge 1999). The comparative characteristics used to create the typology were: (1) homogeneity vs. heterogeneity, (2) narratives about foster families vs. family ideals, (3) tension-free vs. contradictory, and (4) dominant vs. subordinate. It is important to note that all three types were found in all group discussions.

In the first step of the analysis, the ideal image (homogeneous, tension-free, based on family ideals, dominant) was reconstructed in each group discussion. The coding tree proved extremely useful for this reconstruction. The analysis shows that the professionals' ideal image is dominant in the discussions, with various dimensions repeated across all group discussions with only minor variations. The ideal image is very clear-cut and tension-free, explained by its status as an ideal image, which has a utopian character and, as described by the professionals, cannot be found in its pure form in reality.

In the next step, each group discussion was analysed for possible cracks in the dominant ideal image. Cracks were identified throughout the group discussions in professionals' narratives of everyday work with foster families or situations of conflict between professionals and foster families. Accordingly, we analysed narratives of professionals' everyday and conflict experiences in detail. These cracks revealed ambiguities, inconsistencies, limitations, exceptions, and areas of tension in the professionals' foster family images. From this, more complex images emerged, referred to as real images (heterogeneous, contradictory, based on

narratives about families, subordinate). Real images were analysed that deviated from the ideal to varying degrees along a continuum.

In the final step, images that appeared fleetingly during the group discussions or late in the discussions were identified. These images appeared in narratives as well as descriptions. Some of the narratives were based on professionals' hearsay knowledge rather than their own experiences. These images can be considered a specific feature of real images. They form the third type of images, the so-called marginalized images of foster care (highly contradictory, based on narratives or hearsay, heterogeneous, subordinate). They assign a marginal position to certain groups of foster families in professional practice. Yet, they are revealing for the Swiss foster care system, as their marginalized position in the discussions contradicts the realities of the Swiss foster care system.

In the following sections, ideal images, real images, and subsequently marginalized images are presented and discussed.

Ideal image

In the ideal image portrayed in the group discussions, the focus is on foster relationships in which the foster family members had no relationship with the foster child before being placed in care and which fulfil the formal criteria applied to foster family applicants: an impeccable record of debt collection and criminal record, valid residence status, good knowledge of the national language, good physical and mental health. The ideal of a foster family is thus characterised by families who are selected by professionals and in which a foster child is placed by professionals. The focus of this foster family image is on the foster parents, predominantly a heterosexual couple, childless or with two to three biological children, from a rural environment and living the male breadwinner model. The foster mothers have a central function in this image: they are portrayed as the driving force behind a foster relationship, they do the housework and family chores (cleaning, cooking and baking, childcare, social contacts also with the parents of origin) and act as the main contact persons for the professionals. Foster fathers appear in representative functions such as meetings with the authorities or for support in finding an apprenticeship as well as emergency functions, for example, if the foster mother is absent.

Professionals equate the care of a foster child to a full-time workload. In line with this model, there remain at most 100 to 120 job percentages to share between the foster parents for working outside the home, albeit initially or in the long term. In their ideal image of the foster family, professionals reject extra-familial institutional care, such as day-care, after-school care, or school lunches. They regard private care, for example by grandparents or neighbours, as an emergency scenario.

The professionals describe their ideal foster families as Swiss, westernised, Christian middle-class families. If foster parents are not Swiss citizens and have a migration background, then "just a bit of neighbouring countries up to Portugal and that would also be [...] Germans, Dutch, like that" (GInt2). Foster parents therefore come from a narrowly conceived geographical area and have a Christian religious affiliation.

Foster families who own their own home or farm also correspond to the ideal image: "With rural [...] families, it's more like house, garden, dog, cat" (GInt6). Animals are of particular importance here: caring for animals provides a daily structure, and animals offer a meaningful

occupation and foster responsibility. They are a connecting element between foster children and foster families and have an emotional, sometimes even therapeutic function. Fears and aversions as well as allergies to animal hair are mentioned, but only marginally taken into account; the positive effects of keeping animals prevail. An educational benefit is attributed to nature, or the rural idyll is associated with a healing idea. In addition, simplified controllability is cited for rural placements. Urban families in a rented flat do not tend to fit this ideal: "we actually have few foster families who now live in "rental.block.flats" like this." (GInt2). The staccato-like intonation of "rental.block.flats" can be read as a word-painting depiction of barrack-like accommodation with a negative connotation of this living environment. The objections to urban rental flats are multi-layered and linked to an overrating of rural home ownership and rural life in general: in the image of the professionals, owning a property is in line with economic and social stability. According to the professionals, a separate room for the foster child - a possible condition - is more likely to be provided in a large house in the countryside.

Accordingly, the image of the ideal foster family is characterised by a middle-class financial security. Lower-class families or very wealthy families appear less suitable as foster parents. One professional, for example, uses imagery to differentiate her ideal foster family from wealthy foster parent applicants:

"we have already had [...] applicants with huge estates [...] then you see this estate and feel [...] very small that you [...] have to check carefully, is the child allowed to move around freely there or are there any fragile porcelain figures standing around?" (GInt2).

The foster children and their parents of origin, as well as the foster parents biological children, are mostly depicted as stereotypes: The biological children are primarily portrayed as problem-free and successful at school and are contrasted with the foster children, who are generalised from demanding, academically weak, in need of therapy through to being petty criminals, who all carry a burden, i.e. "a rucksack" (GInt6). In contrast to the foster parents, the parents of origin are portrayed as unreliable, uneducated, in a financially precarious situation, unruly, mentally ill, addicted, violent, or criminal.

In addition to formal criteria and socio-economic dimensions, characteristics relating to character traits and values represented in foster families are relevant for professionals and shape their ideal image. Three groups of characteristics can be differentiated: social, emotional, and functional character traits, as well as a set of values that can be described as following educated middle-class principles, being Christian and being committed to sustainability. Professionals see foster parents as being well-embedded in social and, above all, family networks and committed in a variety of ways. Foster families are described as being supported by relatives, neighbours, colleagues, and friends:

"These foster families, [...] it's easier if they have a neighbour that the children can contact. [...] being networked, it also has to do with the family network. Or you have friends around, you have colleagues, you also have families in the background where you can perhaps vent." (GInt3).

In the professionals' accounts, relatives, friends, and neighbours provide relief and have a supportive function in childcare, either in family work or for the psyche of the foster parents. For some of the professionals, close social relationships with relatives are a characteristic of an "intact family" (GInt1). Foster parents are socially involved in various leisure activities:

They are politically active or members in clubs, "guild masters" (GInt2), in the "fire brigade, Samaritans [...] or in the women's association" (GInt1), they go to the gymnastics club or play music. Nevertheless, foster parents are expected to limit voluntary work and leisure activities in favour of family time.

These social characteristics are complemented by emotional ones: foster parents - especially foster mothers - are caring with an emotionally positive attitude, and the ability to build relationships and closeness. The latter is central and explains the advantage of a foster family over a residential placement, which is metaphorically reflected in "nest warmth" provided by the foster families (GInt8). Through emotional sensitivity and affection, it is possible to give foster children a sense of belonging. Emotional closeness and successful integration of the foster child into the foster family is seen as an achievement of the foster parents. From the perspective of the professionals, ideal foster parents have low expectations of the foster child and treat the family of origin with respect.

Furthermore, foster families have functional characteristics. In the ideal images of the professionals, foster parent couples see themselves as a working team with "core competencies" or characteristics that are assessed as "the relevant [soft criteria]" (GInt8), e.g. consensus-oriented, able to communicate, structured, capable of development, open, strong in organisation, flexible, able to reflect, able to deal with conflict, calm, humorous, very courageous, motivated, full of energy, curious, financially generous. They are also considered to be persevering, "grounded" (GInt5), or "robust" (GInt1), and, if they are religious, particularly "stable". Foster families who comply with the ideal image do not use physical and psychological violence and do not practise any forms of extremism, whereby extremism ranges from political right-wing extremism to religious extremism and rigid diets.

It is more difficult for professionals to describe the values of ideal foster families. In the professionals' ideal images, foster families tend towards regular daily routines, active leisure behaviour, regular shared meals, controlled media consumption, Christian practices, an authoritative parenting style, and sustainability in clothing, nutrition, and medicine.

Following on from the discussion on the question of the (orientation) functions of images, it can be assumed that the ideal image drawn by professionals has certain functions for the field of foster care and for the work of professionals, and in some cases acts as a model. It is linked to several images that are established concerning the family and the successful upbringing of children:

- in form, to traditionally normative middle-class family ideals that are still widespread in Switzerland today (Bundesamt für Statistik 2021)
- in the thematization of space, to enlightenment ideals of the positive interaction of humans for the upbringing of children, nature, and animals and nature as an educationally beneficial force (Pestalozzi 1799)
- at the relationship level, to attachment psychology ideals of sensitive relationships (Cassidy/Shave 2016)
- from a social network perspective, to resources from network relationships (Gamper 2022) and the ideal of social integration

These various dimensions, which interact normatively, refer to ideal family concepts that attempt to strictly differentiate foster families from foster children's families of origin and ensure the status of the foster family as a "good" family that can guarantee a good upbringing for children.

On an organisational level, it can be assumed that the ideal image is a model for professionals with a complexity-reducing function in many respects: The socio-economic status of the foster families reflects the one of the professionals. The functional characteristics and values of the foster families serve to ensure successful and smooth co-operation with only minor problems, which in turn means a reduced workload. Social commitment and good networking among foster families can be seen as a guarantee of informal support and can serve as a protective factor against hostility and exclusion. The attribution of resilience ensures that foster parents are mentally-resistant and possibly relieves professionals of the need to provide additional support. Finally, the competent, networked, and committed foster parents described in the ideal image can act as paragons and role models and thus recruit new foster parents. The ideal image can be read as a clear indication that foster care, in general, is far less modernised and based on newer professionalised orientation patterns than is sometimes assumed in the scientific literature. The dichotomies of good vs. bad families, difficult foster children vs. unproblematic biological children still prevail.

Real images

The real images are on a continuum that can be either relatively close to the ideal image or deviate more strongly from it. In contrast to the ideal image, the real images have five dimensions that distinguish them from the ideal image:

Firstly, there are a few statements that differentiate the stereotypical statements about children and parents of origin. For example, biological children can react with jealousy to a foster child, and foster children can make their foster parents proud because of their (academic) competencies and their integration into the family. Parents of origin are sometimes also highly educated, considerate, and/or love their child.

Secondly, the ideal of the heterosexual couple opens up to diverse foster parenthood models: In the discussions, there are statements and stories about same-sex foster parent couples showing a range between an open, resource-emphasising attitude down to great scepticism. There is disagreement as to whether foster parents are only up to this task as a couple or whether single carers can also take in a foster child. Some professionals only consider couples to be suitable, whereby the restriction is justified by the "burden" (GInt2) of a foster child. However, if the couple separates, the aim is usually to continue the fostering relationship and, as a rule, the foster mothers take over the care of the children alone after a separation. Single carers – especially foster mothers – can be accepted by professionals but are sometimes confronted with gender-specific prejudices. While single foster mothers are characterised as needy and weak, single foster fathers are under general suspicion of paedophilia, or it is doubted whether they can be the main caregiver for a child.

Thirdly, in addition to the ideal image, which emphasises the ability to build closeness and relationships as key emotional character traits, professionals allow for other realities: For instance, the hoped-for love for a foster child does not always materialise with foster parents. A distinction in emotional feelings between children related by blood, grandchildren, and foster children is also a reality in foster families.

Fourthly, professionals concede that foster families are exceptions to the much-cited functional characteristic of openness in the sense of philanthropy: There are reports of foster parents demanding choices regarding the age, gender, religious affiliation, skin colour, or ethnic origin of the foster child before a foster child is placed and of professionals granting these choices. For example, foster parents would "want a young child" (GInt9), or prefer a certain gender: "there's a [...] foster family [...] they have young men in the house, and they don't want girls of the best age in this household" (GInt7). Furthermore, some foster families "cannot imagine caring for a Muslim unaccompanied minor" (GInt6), or potential foster children are excluded because of their dark skin colour:

"Sometimes there are a few who say, 'no dark-skinned children'. But there it's not [...] that they don't want dark-skinned children, but mostly because [they live in a] very conservative village [...] where they say it's tough for the children to get a fair chance from the start [...], and our children should not stand out like a sore thumb." (GInt1).

These at times discriminatory restrictions are habitually accepted by professionals.

Fifthly, with regard to transparency and adaptability, two further functional characteristics can be omitted as criteria for foster families, which are inherent to the ideal image: Professionals mention foster parents who they consider to be less transparent than desired, others prove to be unadjusted or over-adjusted. One professional for instance reports a foster father who misbehaves at meetings with professionals and parents of origin:

"I have also experienced a foster father, again and again, [...] how he loses his temper and starts yelling. And then I have to say, this is so derogatory towards these parents that I then must intervene. That's not acceptable. because this child is then in the middle of it, [...] at these status review meetings and hears that ((murmuring in agreement))". (GInt3).

The foster father's recurring "losing his temper and yelling" can be understood as a demonstration of power against the professionals' positions. The behaviour is tolerated due to the system's dependence on the foster family and professionals obviously intervene with little success.

The striking distinction made by professionals between ideal and real images seems to permeate and characterise the field of foster care. The ideal image can in turn be understood as a model that provides orientation when assessing foster families. Professionals consider deviations from the ideal as a challenge in their day-to-day work. They feel challenged individually and as an organisation, which could impair the quality of foster care.

This distinguishes the practice discourse significantly from the academic discourse. Winkler (2019), for example, proposes understanding family normality as a normality that is characterised by permanent crises and deviations from ideal states, even in families that are fundamentally devoted to children. He assumes that it is precisely this deviation from ideal states and the associated ability of the actors in families to cope positively with crises that makes foster family placements effective. Similarly, Helming (2011) concludes that it is precisely the non-ideal family that initiates resources for the children placed in foster care, despite all the associated challenges.

Marginalised images

In addition to the ideal image and the real images, two further types of foster family images are detected in the group discussions, representing a special form of real images. These images of foster families are discussed in such a way that they have little impact on the professionals' everyday work and/or are deliberately marginalised. The marginalised images of foster families are characterised by the structural features of social or kinship relationships with the family of origin or religious affiliation.

On the one hand, the professionals describe foster families that differ from the ideal. This applies to families that already have a connection with the foster child and/or the family of origin even before the foster relationship. This is raised in a group discussion in which the "other form of foster family [...] that we haven't even mentioned yet" is only mentioned after an hour, referring to "intrafamilial placements, i.e. grandparents, uncles, aunts" (GInt9) – that means: kinship foster families. When the interviewed professionals discuss kinship, network, or milieu care, it becomes clear that these types of care differ considerably from their ideal image of the foster family in terms of the way these families work and in terms of controllability. In some cases, kinship carers completely reject cooperation with professionals. Professionals consider them as "next next level" (GInt9) due to their often complex social relationships. They find them challenging to support, and support rarely happens. One group mentions that kinship carers do not consider themselves as foster families at all and therefore make it difficult for professionals to access them:

"A: the related foster families, they don't see themselves as foster families. They have, they see themselves simply as family as relatives as the child's grandparents or so – and afterwards they somehow have to participate in the status review meetings [...] They are not a traditional family they can't actually escape that [...] B: yes, "I was at the birth of the child why would you like to supervise and control here" ((inhale))" (GInt6).

Kinship care relationships in cultural sub-milieus are seen as even more complex, with one professional mentioning a "black box" in this context (GInt6). Another professional reports a lack of transparency:

"we have quite a lot Tamil or Sri-Lankan those have always been kinship placements and they have been very untransparent." (GInt6).

From the professional's perspective, access to these families is difficult due to subscribed cultural discrepancies. This also includes that professionals assume that there are more informal, i.e. unauthorised, officially unregistered foster care relationships, which presumably originate from the relationship context of the parents of origin.

On the other hand, foster families belonging to non-Christian religious communities appear as a marginal image. Mention is made of Hindu, Buddhist, or Jewish foster families. When asked directly about Muslim foster families, their existence is denied in the group discussions. At the same time professionals acknowledge, there are individual Muslim foster mothers or fathers in religiously mixed marriages with Christian partners, as well as kinship foster care relationships with Muslim foster parents, but little is known about these.

In general, non-Christian foster families and kinship, network, or milieu foster families are discussed by professionals as a marginal phenomenon in their day-to-day work. Subsequently, the empirical material shows a striking discrepancy concerning the few available statistical data on foster care in Switzerland. While kinship foster care is strongly represented in Swiss foster care (30-50% in cantons for which data is available), it is treated as a marginal phenomenon by the interviewed professionals. This discrepancy requires an explanation, possibly at different levels.

A simple possible explanation could be that kinship care relationships are marginalised because they receive little support, especially in German-speaking Switzerland (Reimer et al. 2023). As the marginalisation is not only evident in the group discussions with professionals who directly support foster families, it can be assumed that there are other reasons for this marginalisation.

One possible critical perspective could be that kinship care relationships are marginalised because they call into question the strict dichotomy of good foster family vs. bad family of origin and accordingly question the legitimacy of the foster care system. It can be assumed that this dichotomy persists in many places based on what Blandow (2004) describes as the pattern of placing children "From the bad [=family of origin] to the good family [=foster family]", reflecting the rescue philosophy of social work from the 1960s. The stereotypical and marginalised portrayal of families of origin as deviant and problematic, which we analysed in the group discussions, corresponds vividly with this.

The marginalisation of families with religious affiliations other than Christian shows that foster care is also located in a traditional context that ascribes better conditions for children to grow up in the so-called Western Christian culture than in other environments. In an increasingly religiously diverse society, this raises fundamental questions about the efficiency and legitimacy of a social system.

6 Discussion

In its complexity, the concept of the image is perfect for recognising and acknowledging the multi-faceted social phenomenon of the foster family.

The analytical distinction between ideal and real images, made here by the professionals, reveals that the professional practice in foster care has so far been dominated by an ideal of the foster family as described above – middle class, hetero-normative with clear gender assigned roles, rural, homeowners, value driven. This ideal may serve as a model for professionals as it aligns well with family ideals and norms broadly accepted in Switzerland. At the same time, it fits with many professionals' own biographical and family backgrounds. In the group discussions this image was presented in an exaggerated and dominant way. It was also evident, that foster care professionals use the ideal image as an orientation, for example when recruiting new foster carers or working with foster families. Consequently, a gap is emerging between the professionals' orientation on the ideal image and the more diverse realities of foster families revealed in the so-called real and marginalized images. Compared to the real images, the ideal image seems utopian. Therefore, the orientation on the ideal image has little potential to serve as a solid foundation for the practice of working with foster families in everyday and conflict situations. This unaddressed gap is compounded by the fact that professionals do not use professional justifications for their ideal images but argue mainly on a normative-biographical basis (Reimer et al. 2025). Subsequently, there is a vacuum regarding professional orientations. This points to a more profound issue with

professionalism in Swiss foster care: there seems to be a lack of valid theoretical and practical orientations for professional social work in the field of foster care. To fill this vacuum, a differentiated discourse in Swiss foster care practice is needed, addressing the extent to which family normality – real images of foster families – beyond (utopian) ideals represents a resource for children's developmental and educational processes and how these resources relate to the professionals' work with foster families.

On a different level, the ideal image initiates a dichotomy between “good” and “bad” or “deficient” families. Typically, foster families that feature characteristics of the ideal image are considered “good families,” while families that do not feature characteristics of the ideal image are considered “bad” or “deficient.” This dichotomy highlights a simplification and normativity of foster care in relation to family images on several levels: First, it makes it difficult to open foster care to diverse family forms and milieus, with its single, very homogeneous idea of the ideal family in mind. Other families, such as single-parent families, families with non-traditional role distributions, non-Christian families, and families with other than Swiss ethnic backgrounds, economically disadvantaged families, or rainbow families, are critically viewed by professionals and potentially excluded as foster families. However, these families represent a large number of families in Switzerland. Excluding many families as foster families per se proves highly problematic when it comes to recruiting new foster families and establishing a foster care system that features diversity.

Second, the idea of the “good” ideal foster family sets the “good” foster family in stark contrast to foster children’s families of origin, which in this perspective are often considered “bad” or “deficient” (see also: Finckh 2025). This dichotomy impairs further development towards more inclusion of the family of origin by solidifying the idea of the good foster family and the difficult/problematic family of origin.

From an even more general perspective, the dominant ideal foster family image can have a detrimental and limiting effect on all actors in foster care: Foster mothers and foster fathers are cemented in their traditional roles (Reimer/van Oordt 2024) because these traditional roles are part of the ideal family image; foster children are labelled as “difficult” because the ideal foster family needs the “difficult child” for its own legitimation, leading to potentially difficult identity processes for the children; biological children in foster families are supposed to play the role of model children, impeding their autonomy development; and families of origin remain in their socially stigmatized position.

It is therefore important to work on the further development of foster care in practice, with the objective that foster care practice not only reluctantly allows diversity in foster families but welcomes it as a resource, and frees itself from dichotomous ideas of good/bad families and outdated ideas of rescuing children from “bad” families into “good” families. This development entails an orientation towards classic concepts of social work, such as the empowerment of all those involved, especially the families of origin, and working with the obstinacy of all those involved (Thiersch 1992). A certain interest in this in practice appears when professionals self-critically note in some group discussions that their personal values distort their assessment and that the “professional field should be better [professionalized],” that professionals in foster care lack “reflection” due to insufficient specialist knowledge or that “their values, [...] their family images should be questioned,” to avoid “attributions [...] towards the [foster] family” (GInt5).

Conducting the discourse would include taking a critical look at the ideal image in practice, as an image linked to traditional and middle-class family concepts, particularly in terms of external characteristics, which are known to not only promote but can just as well impede positive child development (Richter 2013). To conduct this discourse with the professionals in practice, it is necessary that the organizational and structural conditions in foster care allow sufficient scope for professionals to discover resources in the real images and, where real foster families create stress, to compensate for this with resources from the professional network (cf. Wolf 2007).

The presented study points towards the problematic effect ideal images have on the cooperation between foster families and professionals, especially if foster families are repeatedly measured against the professionals' ideal and judged accordingly. If images imply expectations (Knoll 2018), this can trigger a pressure of expectation among foster parents, which they may counter with strategies of concealment, thus making cooperation with professionals more difficult and preventing effective support in the event of problems (Reimer et al. 2023). There are indications from other studies that particularly foster mothers are exposed to considerable pressure of expectation (Reimer et al. 2023; Reimer 2023b). This is also confirmed by interviews conducted with foster family members in the present study (Reimer/van Oordt 2024).

Further studies with other methods (e.g., ethnographic methods, cp. Finckh 2025) could aim to describe in detail the interplay between the ideal image, real and marginalized images, and professional social work in the field of social work. The concept of the image proved to be able to capture the complexity and could be further explored to better understand dynamics in the field of foster care.

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