Children and Explorations of Self-Perception: Life Stories Related to Moves Between Home and Foster Home

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1 Introduction

To be a child moved from home to foster home and back home again is one variety of childhood in Norwegian society today. Such children have experienced abuse or serious failure of care, lived with people in need of help, experienced material deprivation or chaotic family situations. Child protection services' interventions involve children moving and being challenged by having to adjust to new situations. This article examines whether and how children perceive and understand changes of self-perception – in relation to ways of being, thinking and acting – by looking at how they speak about their experiences when back home again.

In both national and international child protection research there is concern with how children moved back home after having lived in foster homes are coping (Stein, 2006, Kristofersen, 2005). Findings show that children who have been in the care of child protection services are less successful than other children (Kristofersen, 2005, Vinnerljung and Sallnäs, 2008). Research shows that children who have been in care often fall outside school and work, have a higher mortality and are more frequent users of health and social services than other children (Munro and Stein, 2008, Clausen and Kristofersen, 2008, Backe-Hansen and Bakketeig, 2008, Vinnerljung and Sallnäs, 2008). In the context of both child protection and social politics, these are important findings. At the same time, since low self-esteem is a risk factor for the development of psychic disorders and high self-esteem is a protective factor against such development, they invite questions about how the children actually perceive themselves (Bandura et al., 2003, Bjørkvik, 2009).

When working on my dissertation I became interested in children's self-perception through children's life stories (Angel, 2009). The study discusses what significance moves from home to foster home and back home again have for children's self-perception and their perception of their lives, how children relate to the moves and how they understand the procedures. The study is qualitative, based on the children's own life stories. The life stories made me aware of the stories that children construct about themselves. The material, which is thematically linked to the children's experience of their moves, is looked at from the point of view of the children's perceptions. The reason for this was a wish to see directly how they understand, interpret and create meaning in life.

Children and young people in general go through changes in how they perceive themselves. This article will be limited to the following question: *What changes in self-perception are talked about in the stories of foster children who have moved back home?* The purpose is to examine and illuminate how these children's perceptions, consisting of personal symbols (e.g. dialect and hygiene routines) and self-esteem, are affected by their history of moves. Children's self-perception and what affects it is a complex issue. The influence of societal

attitudes and that of school, peers and siblings would also be of interest, but lies outside the scope of this article.

The self-perception concept used in this article may be called a 'verbal self' (Stern, 2002). Self-perception is understood from what the children tell about themselves and from the experiences they reflect on: it is their subjective being. It is characteristic of the stories that they describe actions over time, and in this way they function as constructions of reality (Bruner, 1991). The memory constructs and reconstructs (Lian and Svartdal, 1997, Wetterberg, 2005). This article concentrates on what is called *explicit self-perception* (Angel, 2009), which means how children talk about what they associate with themselves (personal symbols), and the feelings they have about what they associate with themselves.

2 Theoretical Perspective And Starting Point

We find the basic social *Self* in the social-psychological tradition, with roots back to William James (1983), Charles Horton Cooley (1902/1967) and George Herbert Mead (1934). This *Self* is socially constructed (Gergen, 1985) in a continual interaction and dialogue with others. These theorists have made important contributions to the understanding of self-perceptions and self-refinement, and emphasise a perspective where human beings are seen as meaning-seeking. The perspective of, for example, Freud-inspired theorists present the child as an active co-creator of its social life in a quite particular way. When the child creates a self-perception, it is not only about imitating adults and passively adopting the thinking of the adult world, but about the child reflecting on and making the actions their own. With help from, among others, George Herbert Mead, with his concepts '*I*' and '*Me*', it became possible to examine the understandings expressed by children when they talk about themselves (Mead, 1934), which significantly moved forward work on self-perception. In this tradition, the *Self's* relation to our thinking, the interaction between the *Self* and its surroundings and our own perception of *Self* is in focus.

In Mead's theory, the *Self* consists of two parts, *I* and *Me*, with *Me* representing the *Self's* social role or expectations, and *I* the spontaneous and creative element. A dialectic reigns between *Me* and *I,* which leads to the human being consciously analysing themselves. In this way, the *I* becomes an object for itself. Furthermore, Mead has made an important contribution to the theory of the role-taking process in which human beings adjust their behaviour to their surroundings by putting themselves in another person's 'shoes' and looking at things from that other person's perspective. That is, imagining another person's world and seeing the world through another's lens (Levin and Trost, 2005). A human being's actions can be interpreted in many different ways, and it is essential for human beings to understand, as far as possible, the meaning and content of what is being said and done.

Mead (1977(1956)) claims that self-perception does not exist in people at birth but rather is developed through social experience. According to this understanding, self-perception is under continual development. Experiences are organised into a structured interrelationship and constitute one's self-perception. Mead (1934) thinks that we construct our own perception of ourselves by seeing ourselves through others' eyes. That is to say, our self-perception is formed directly through our perception of others' perceptions of us. From early childhood, we are socialised through interaction with people who provide our care and, moreover, are important to us – are our 'significant others' (Mead, 1934). Children who move into foster homes then move back home again may have two 'sets' of significant others. Children become aware of what people close to them think about them and their actions, and will after a while consider themselves and their actions through how adults close to them see them. In

other words, the child adopts the role of the other. Thus, we are socialised into the family and friend cultures we are part of. Through interaction with different actors we develop this ability to take the other's role (Mead, 1934, Mead, 1977(1956)).

Self-perception may be seen as consisting of different categories of personal symbols one identifies with or associates with oneself (Cooley, 1902/1967, James, 1983, Shibutani, 1961):

- Material things – for instance, connected to body, appearance, clothes and belongings

- Other people, reference groups and significant others

- Attitudes – thoughts, ideas and emotions (such emotions not being the same as self-esteem) – which one associates with oneself, for example, attributes and interests

- Conventional categories such as age group, gender, ethnic group (school/occupation)

- Behaviour or actions associated with oneself

Personal symbols can be further categorised depending on the context in which they occur. The thought of the *I* as an object has many consequences, one of which is that an *I*-consciousness becomes possible as people react to themselves or, as Mead would have said, to their *I*.

3 Participants

The study's informants have all experienced child protection services intervening in their lives, placing them in foster homes, and then returning them to their parents at a later stage. I got into contact with the children through the Department of Children, Youth and Family Affairs' foster home services in six counties (108 municipalities in total), in addition to directly contacting the child protection services in 14 of these municipalities. These services sent out the invitation, which also described the nature of the project, to parents who had got their children back home again. My address and phone number were included, in addition to a consent form with a stamped return envelope which parents and children could send me if they wanted to participate in the survey.

In the selection there are ten children – three boys and seven girls – the youngest just turned 11 and the oldest 17 years old at the time of the interview. The children had been removed from their homes against their own and their parents' wishes, and then moved back home in accordance with their own and their parents' wishes. That is to say, all of them had experience of being taken into custody by the child protection services by coercion, moving away from home, living in a foster home and then moving back home again. The move patterns are dissimilar, however. The children lived outside their homes for periods of about two to 12 years. When I contacted the children, they had all moved back and were living with their mothers. They had not been living with their fathers at the time of moving to foster homes, either.

A study like this requires informed and freely given consent by the informants (NESH, 2006, Backe-Hansen and Vestby, 1995, Hill, 2005). In cases where children and parents had not sent me a signed reply by post in advance to say that the children would agree to be interviewed, I collected a written consent the same day that I met the children and parents in connection with the interview. The children were informed of the purpose of the survey, that

the participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time; moreover, that sound recordings from the interviews when printed would be anonymised and erased.

The consent process is very exacting when children are involved. Parents have juridical responsibility for children below the age of 18. In the national guidelines for research ethics (for social sciences, humanities, law and theology), it says that parental consent is necessary when children up to the age of 15 are participating in research (NESH, 2006). The project was reported to the data protection office at the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD, 2000).

4 Method

4.1 Data

Inspired by Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) and Thompson (1978), I constructed a life-story approach based on qualitative interviews. Qualitative research interviews produce rich data material. They enable interviewees' opinions and experiences to be explored in some depth. As Kvale (1996) puts it, one strives to cover both the actual level, through collecting descriptions of the interviewee's life world, and the meaning level, where the purpose is to interpret the significance of what is described.

Based on the article's research question and the desire for a qualitative approach, a semi-structured interview guide was used. This first challenged the children to formulate questions for children with similar experiences to themselves, then the children were invited to answer their own questions. The guide included further matters I wanted to explore, in the form of descriptive questions. The dialogue provided the basis for different contributions of thematic interest. As it was the informants' stories that I was after, they had to be allowed to talk about whatever concerned them, and they generally jumped from one topic to another. The interviews were conducted in the children's homes, except for one which was held in a café, as the child wished. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Recruitment to the study took place through self-recruitment, meaning that parents and children responded to the request by contacting me. That is to say, the informants went through a 'personal selection'. One has to be careful about transferring the results of a study like this to other cases in the child protection services. Nevertheless, it can reasonably be argued that the participants in the survey could stand as representatives for children with similar experience, and their experience may therefore be valid beyond their specific situation.

Within the frame of an article, only fragments of the existing data can be presented. I do this by using sequences which are representative of the material and which thereby illustrate the main findings. Kvale (1996) claims that thorough documentation of the data collection and a written presentation rooted in the empirical material strengthens the validity of the findings of the study.

4.2 Data Analysis

The interviews are analysed as life stories. To give an account of themselves, to tell their own life story with their own words, creates meaning and connections in their own lives (Denzin, 1989). By reflecting on themselves and their lives they *talk out* their self-perception and in this way life story and self-perception are linked (Thorsen, 1998). The 'truth' exists on different levels in these life stories. Even though the analysis is based on what was told, it is

also about revealing the implicit in the stories. It is about seeing connections and influences not necessarily acknowledged by the story-teller, and about exploring the common, the obvious and the unexplained (Schütz and Bengtsson, 2002).

The children's stories are analysed to make what the children talk about important. The analysis of qualitative data consists of posing questions to the material, and organising and summarising the answers in a systematic and relevant way. The self-perception work (i.e. the activity of reflecting on themselves and their experiences) the children do is developed in relation to thematic analysis of the material (Silverman, 2011). The analysis follows four steps: 1) creating a general impression, 2) identifying significant units, 3) abstracting the content and the different significant units, and 4) summing up the meaning of this (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The analysis concentrates on how the children talk about experiences in their perception of themselves and how children's self-perception – consisting of a number of personal symbols and self-perception, i.e. the children's reflection on their own symbols – are changed by moves to foster homes and then back home again.

5 Personal Symbols And Self-Perception
The children's self-perception work consisted of talking through the experience of changes in their own situation, what they saw as similar or dissimilar when comparing foster home and home, and what they saw as the reason for the changes. Clothes are a category of personal symbol that is considered important. Nora, who was 11 years old at the time of the interview, said:

At home I had just ordinary clothes, while there [the foster home] I had to wear such stupid clothes that they decided, … they used, like, such nicer clothes than us …

What is interesting about clothes is that one can quickly and easily change them, something that is not possible to the same extent with ones looks. When it comes to adjustment to the foster-home norm, two groups and one exception is shown: those who adjusted to the foster home's norm, those who were not interested at all in changing their style of clothes, and one child did not have any views about the matter. Those who did not adjust did not think the foster-home style was something to aim for. Theoretically, one could offer the explanation that the foster parents and their children were not a significant group of reference (Shibutani, 1961) and not sufficiently important in the children's imaginative world (Levin and Trost, 2005) for them to change.

What the children do is described in my material in relation to their *own interests* or *to what happens* in the foster home or at home. The children could say: 'I play computer games' or 'I am cuddling my cat', or they could say that they *like* to cuddle the cat, and then their feelings are expressed. In their descriptions we can find numerous evaluations of the content of their upbringing or how they were treated. These were expressed in the form of, for example, statements such as: *I liked my foster mother because she would give me a second chance,* while *my foster father didn't do that.* They might also be expressed as: I am *what I like to do* versus, I am *what I perform.* Gro, who was 11 years old at the time of the interview, produced examples of both *being and doing:*

Gro: *Well, I was in the mood for most things, I think. Maybe I was a little bit too restless now and them and … made some noise maybe as well. Protested, maybe, I think.*

Interviewer: *How are you as a person today?*

Gro: *… Well, restless, no sports and such. Yes, well, music too.*

Interviewer: *Is there anything else about yourself … as a person?*

Gro: *I love animals. I also have a horse, I am very interested in that, that interests me quite a lot.*

Interviewer: *Yes, so you have a way with animals?*

Gro*: Yes*

Interviewer*: What do you like the most, to care for the horse or to ride it?*

 Gro*: That is to care for it.*

Here we can observe that while my questions look for *I am*, Gro often answers *I do*. Social comparisons, relating to competence and skills, have significance for a child's view of themselves (Mead, 1934, Harter, 1999, Ogden, 1995, Angel, 2009).

In this talk about themselves in relation to moves to foster homes and then moves back home again and as a person today, there is a time aspect consisting of changes. Change may occur at any point along the time axis stretching from home to foster home and back to home again. The texts illuminate a slow and continual way of putting the past in motion. In my material there are three ways of talking about change. The first way is to talk about something that has become *more visible, more competent* in relation to: a strengthened self-perception. Another way is to describe something there has become less of, something that is *more subdued* in one's life: a subdued self-perception. And the third way is for children to talk about themselves as *relatively unchanged*: an unchanged self-perception. The children also describe having *two arenas, where they are different*. The children's experience of change can occur at different points on the time axis from home to foster home and back home again. The same children can describe both changed and unchanged conditions.

5.1 Strengthened Self-Perception

Acquiring a strengthened self-perception involves becoming more visible, more competent and less shy (or letting people know more); becoming more conscious of one's belongings/personal symbols. I use this term because some of the children in their self-perception work speak about growing social competence. Geir was 17 years old at the time of the interview and he exemplifies it like this:

Interviewer*: Are there some things you know just because you have the experience you have?*

Geir*: I learnt a lot in the foster home as well. I learnt to ride a bike, I learnt to fish, I learnt to swim, I even … raced around in a 9.5-horsepower speedboat on the sea, when I lived there. So we did quite a lot of different stuff, they had such a sea life, and I eat most types of food and such. It has been a good time there. The only minus was that they didn't teached me enough about some things.*

We see here that while my question asks for what he knows, Geir answers by reflecting on what he has learnt. It became clear to him that there were some things he had not learnt enough about in the foster home, even though he had had a good time there. He continues:

He [his foster father] was an electrician, but he, he did not teach me anything about electronics, for example. Some may have difficulties over things they have learnt too little about, and that they have to learn about in other places. Some are fine because somebody teaches them stuff. Not all know how to do such things. I had to learn everything, tax forms, rights processing and such stuff. When I lived at their place, I was old enough to have learnt about this from when I was 16 or 15. I was barely allowed to wash the car.

Geir had to learn many things after he moved back home, even though he had lived in a foster home for 12 years. Geir got a strengthened self-perception through increased awareness about what he could manage and what he could not manage both in and after the stay in the foster home.

Siri, who was 17 years at the time of the interview, also touches on the subject of competence.

Interviewer*: Can you describe yourself compared to your friends?*

Siri*: Maybe I am a little more independent than others of my age, maybe. I would think so … they couldn't* live alone at the moment*, and such.*

Siri says that she has a different competence from her friends, since she would have mastered living alone, if that was the case. In their reflections, both Geir and Siri get confirmation of their attitudes, thoughts and feelings (personal symbols). In this way they discover their attributes and their experience, and their self-perception are strengthened.

Tuva, who was 13 years old at the time of the interview, speaks about the change from being quiet to being able to speak and oppose adults. To speak in addition to opposing can be placed in the category of behaviour/actions one associates with oneself.

So, when I was rude and such, I felt quite proud and such. That it was, like, ha ha, see. Then it was 'Pack your bag, you must take everything you need for school.' 'No, I don't want to.' And then it went, 'No, okay.' I never did what she said and such, and then I was very happy.

Tuva made a radical connection she became attentive to her own critical attitude, something she had not been aware of previously. Her account of the moves from home to foster home and back home again were about how this had interfered with her relationships and capabilities, and how she handled this. She describes further how she now does her best to help at home in her mother's place:

And now I do what I am told, and then I try to be better, kind of, I skip school now and then and such, am rude with the teacher and don't bother to do homework now and then, and then there are consequences. I kind of try to do better than when I lived away from my home.

What she does is also a way of talking about and confirming and strengthening her self-perception. Tuva creates new symbols by "getting herself together" and maybe doing things that do not really suit her. She describes the development of daring to speak out to adults. She said that she almost pitied her foster parents, as it was not really them who had decided she was to move from her home. The reason she gave for the changes in her way of being was

that strangers should not decide over her and that she belonged with her mother and had a family.

5.2 Subdued Self-Perception

Another form of self-perception that is talked through in my material is the development of a subdued self-perception, related to the becoming less of something. This can arise when a child describes how they hold things back, how they are now more careful compared to earlier. Svein, who was 15 years old at the time of the interview, describes himself as having been lively and talkative before, but now he talks less and is quiet and calm. Trude, who was 15 years old at the time of the interview, says:

Sometimes I perceived myself as stupid. I did not totally understand and was a bit outside what they [the foster parents and their children] said and told … at home with my mother I could laugh and be happy.

The experience of feeling stupid and not understanding what was going on led to Trude holding back; she became more reserved and defensive in her interactions with the people in her foster home.

Talking about oneself as someone who appears quieter and calmer – a state one now associates with oneself – also represents the creation of new symbols. In addition, this self-perception work is related to breaks in the past, contrasting the now with the then. Gro's sister Berit, who was 12 years old at the time of the interview, is another who describes herself as a girl who talked a lot, even to strangers, something she does to a lesser degree today.

Berit: *You just asked me if I had learnt something else. I study people before I decide to talk to them.*

Interviewer: *What are you looking for then?*

Berit: *I am checking whether they are nice.*

Berit is more careful now. Become more subdued can also be described as becoming quieter after, for example, being uneasy and restless, or having a subdued mood, as Svein recounts. Berit also says that she could have changeable moods and could be angry and difficult in the foster home. Today, home at her mother's place, she describes herself as more subdued, less changeably moody and a bit less talkative. However, she knows that her mother notices if she is in a bad mood when, for example, she has to tidy up and does not feel like it. We saw in the extract above that Berit now studies people before she makes up her mind to talk to them. She continues:

I am very careful about people.

Berit describes herself as having been quite open and talkative before she moved to a foster home. She thought she was no different from the children she met out in the street or at school. Others describe something of the same. The transition from home to foster home involves a break and a change of culture, with new school, class, adults responsible for daily care and (foster) siblings. In the foster home and its milieu, Berit had to get to know everyone anew.

I didn't know anyone there, had no friends from before. Luckily, Gro was with me. It was very tiresome, everybody asking about everything. So I kept away.

In the foster home, Berit's experience was that she was treated differently from her foster parents' own children, as they were allowed to do things forbidden to her. When she pointed this out, she was – as she understood it – reprimanded. She remembers being very much by herself during her stay at the foster home. She cuddled the cats a lot as she did not like horses like her sister.

Since Berit and Gro moved back home to their mother, Berit has not had much contact with the foster family. She is very concerned about her sister, and feels strongly that they have to succeed socially at school. Berit does not have anyone she considers a friend, but one evening a week she attends an activity where there are many other young people. Sports and the like do not interest Berit. She describes how she attends 'responsibility' group meetings where she can talk about what she has experienced, and thinks that she has become better at telling things. Berit describes herself today as open and someone who likes to get to know new people – but she has to consider them first. For this reason one could say that Berit has got a subdued self-conception and that her personal symbols have changed.

5.3   Unchanged experience of oneself

The third form of self-perception work is about perceiving oneself as basically unchanged. This is talked about by emphasising continuity rather than change – remaining over time principally the same person. It is a way of being that does not attract very much attention. Alf, who was 17 at the time of the interview, expresses himself this way:

Interviewer: *How were you as a child at home before you moved to the foster home?*

Alf: *I think I was quite … calm and such.*

Interviewer: *What about in the foster home, then?*

Alf*: No, I don't know, I didn't make any noise there either, even though I didn't like it there…*

Interviewer: *How are you today then?*

Alf: *Er, today. I suppose I am, don't know really … the same as before.*

In Alf's retrospective account of himself both at home and in his foster home, he pictures himself as quiet and calm, not really standing out in any way. According to him, there was not much difference in how he saw his appearance or style of clothes; he dressed as he always had. At the beginning of his stay in the foster home, he interpreted the attention he received there as respectful: he was well adjusted. His foster parents' attitude towards him did not correspond to how he had imagined he would be perceived and treated. He interpreted their behaviour from his own perspective rather than their perspective: he supposed his understanding of the situation reflected reality, that they shared his imaginative world. He did not check at the beginning whether his perceptions were correct. After some time in the foster home, however, his view of his foster parents changed when he discovered that their own children had keys to the house, which he did not. The ordinary situation then became a problem situation. He understood that his *I*-perception was after all not significant in the foster home context, because it was not shared. It could be said that, for him, the dialogue did

not become meaningful. He identified and absorbed the foster home's imaginative world and a new significant symbol appeared, the symbol *foster child*. This resulted in his changing his perception of how the foster home saw him and how it treated him. However, this did not alter how he looked at and perceived himself.

6   Discussion

This article has presented and contextualised children's perceptions of themselves after moving back home following periods in foster care. Through the medium of the interviews I introduced to the interviewees' imaginative worlds a new perspective, that of reflecting on oneself in relation to the experience of moving from foster home back home again. In one way it can be said that I started the *I*'s reflexive process by asking the informants to study themselves as objects. The children tell of changes in their perception of themselves in connection to the moves. They talk about who they are, how they understand the changes, what they see as similar or dissimilar and what might be the possible reason for change.

The study does not examine all the personal symbols the children associate with themselves but concentrates on those that the children referred to during the course of the interviews. There are probably numerous other symbols, both altered and unchanged, that have not been discussed.

Characteristic of the children's life stories was that their description of themselves in their foster homes was more conscious and detailed than their descriptions of themselves at home. It seems as though the children are more aware of themselves in their foster homes than at home. This could be connected to the fact that at home they are in a situation where their self-perception is taken for granted and not problematised. At the same time, they have 'identification work' to do when they return back home, which is a new challenge. To be home is not as it used to be and they are no longer known within the community: they have to define themselves afresh.

In the foster home, the children were aware of the fact that they were in a so-called 'problem' situation. They knew they could not take things for granted. This showed itself in different ways. Some of the children became more reserved, less contact-seeking, less open to new people or ideas. Others developed an uncritical openness. The point is that they became conscious that nothing could be assumed. They reveal themselves as performing like acting subjects (Ulvik, 2005, Sommer et al., 2010, James and Prout, 1990). The children thus participate in societal discourse and appear as self-reflecting individuals through their picture of milieus and relationships that unite the outer and the inner, the collective and the personal.

By becoming clients of the child protection services the children were placed in a simple category, 'foster children' (as opposed to 'children'), the kind that Shibutani (1961) terms a *conventional category*. The personal symbol 'child' became, for example, more apparent in the foster home than at home in their mother's place. The children's explicit self-perception is shown through their memories of their experience and the emotions these stir. The children in my selection revealed three patterns of change: the first relating to *strengthened self-perception*, the second relating to *subdued self-perception*, and the last relating to *unchanged self-perception*.

The material shows that the children's moves led to the creation of new personal symbols and the redefinition of existing symbols. Unconscious symbols were made conscious and conscious symbols became unconscious. Many of the children started seeing themselves in a

different way. For example, the symbol *foster child* was created in the move from home to foster home. Tuva, for instance, perceived herself as oppositional and critical in the foster home, but not before. Trude regarded herself as shallow and in some situations stupid in the foster home. Furthermore, one can identify personal symbols that exist both at home and in the foster home but which are defined differently in each place. Styles of clothes and appearance are examples of this. Then there are personal symbols that are employed at home but not in the foster home, significant at home but insignificant in the foster home. These symbols did not disappear, they still existed in the informants' imaginative world, but were not used in the foster home: they became unconscious, or latent. Gro and Trude, for example, thought they were happier and funnier at home than in the foster home. Berit and Svein described themselves as open and talkative at home, but not in the foster home. Another difference is how certain symbols that have only a peripheral role at home are rediscovered in the foster home: they become conscious, or manifest. The symbol 'child' is redefined and at the same time given a particular role in the foster home, different from the relatively unimportant role the informants ascribed to it at home. A development of the imaginative world presupposes role-taking, and it is important to point out the multiple interpretative processes that characterise human beings' perception of their surroundings and situations. What we perceive is an interpreted perception of an already interpreted perception.

There is variation in how these children solve tasks and how they construct meaning in relation to themselves both as foster children and as children who have moved back home again. What is clear and has significance is how children who have contextually anchored subjects create connections and express opinions about events and phenomena. The children's stories about themselves can change and take new directions: they are not completed products. The children construct and reconstruct their personal symbols and their lives. The stories we are engaged with here in the article are part of a continually developing process.

The new personal symbols and the redefined symbols the children constructed during their moves from home to foster home and back home again will not vanish. They will lie latent in their *Me* until a new situation brings them out again – for example, another stay in a foster home or being asked to reflect on their moves. In their life stories the children more reveal their resourcefulness than the problems which dominate the child protection services' accounts. The children in my study managed to hold on to a view of themselves as acting subjects, in spite of powerful societal presumptions about the damage resulting from their parents' lack of care and their not having grown up with their parents. This indicates that the assumptions underlying the concept of the 'looking-glass self' (Cooley, 1902/1967) – that the self is formed from our perception of how others evaluate us – are not completely accurate. Our self-perception and identity is also bound up with how we actively reflect on these responses from our own imaginative world.

7 Conclusion

Children who are placed in foster homes by the child protection services have already been exposed to a series of risk factors. There are then factors related to being in the care of the child protection services: getting a new family on dismissible contract, having complex family relations, relating to a public service which has the authority to interfere in daily matters. From a welfare perspective, how the child thinks about him or herself is significant. A positive self-perception protects against unfortunate development. People act out the self-perception they have in order to confirm whether it is positive or negative. Thus, children with poor self-perception will behave in ways that make others treat them badly, and for this reason they will find themselves on the receiving end of more abuse and more serious abuse

than those with a stronger self-perception. This means that child protection services must make arrangements for the children in their care to actively reflect on themselves, and they must support the children through processes that help strengthen their self-perception.

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