social sciences

MDPI

Article

The Foster Parent Role and Care Temporality: A Contrastive-Comparative Perspective on Norway and Japan

Iselin Huseby-Lie [1,*], Kayoko Ito [2] and Lisa Manabe [3]

[1] Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, Oslo Metropolitan University, N-0130 Oslo, Norway
[2] School of Education and Social Work, Osaka Metropolitan University, Osaka 599-8531, Japan; itokayo@omu.ac.jp
[3] Graduate School of Humanities and Sustainable System Science, Osaka Prefecture University, Osaka 599-8531, Japan; lisamanabe9@gmail.com
* Correspondence: iselinhu@oslomet.no

Abstract: This study discusses how cultural interpretations of the foster parent role might shape perceptions and practices related to the temporariness of care and reunification with biological families. Employing a contrastive-comparative approach, the study compares interviews with seven Japanese foster parents, with prevailing discourses surrounding the foster parent role in Norway. The findings suggest that the Japanese foster parents implicitly recognize the temporariness of their role. In contrast, the Norwegian foster parent role has typically been associated with an emphasis on the risks associated with separation from new attachment figures, which may be perceived as detrimental to children's well-being. We argue that this conceptualization, which frames children as inherently vulnerable, may shape the foster parent's role as one of protection, with a primary focus on shielding the child from disruption and fostering a secure attachment. This perspective, we suggest, could have implications for the temporariness of children's care placements and the process of reunification. The study calls for a critical examination of the values underlying current child protection practices and encourages openness to alternative perspectives, including those informed by different cultural contexts.

Keywords: foster care; child protection; attachment; Japan; contrastive-comparative method

check for updates

Academic Editors: Antonio Bova and Nigel Parton

Received: 30 January 2025
Revised: 9 May 2025
Accepted: 18 May 2025
Published: 26 May 2025

Citation: Huseby-Lie, Iselin, Kayoko Ito, and Lisa Manabe. 2025. The Foster Parent Role and Care Temporality: A Contrastive-Comparative Perspective on Norway and Japan. *Social Sciences* 14: 332. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14060332

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

Despite some socioeconomic similarities, such as high living standards and well-developed welfare systems, Norway and Japan differ markedly in their cultural contexts and approaches to social systems, including child welfare and protection. Both countries, however, have implemented child welfare practices aimed at aligning with international standards, such as the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UN General Assembly 2009). These standards emphasize the principle that the biological family constitutes the "fundamental group of society and the natural environment" for children (UN General Assembly, II.A.3). Consequently, the placement of children in foster care should be regarded as a "last resort" and a temporary measure (UN General Assembly, II. B.14).

Although sharing a commitment to uphold these international standards for foster placements, Norway has faced significant international criticism, particularly through European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings, for infringing upon the right to family

life, including its failure to facilitate sufficient contact between foster children and their biological parents, which undermines the feasibility of reunification and compromises the temporariness of placements (Stang et al. 2023; Søvig 2018). In contrast, Japan's child welfare system has been characterized as prioritizing biological bonds and potential future relationships with an absent parent over the everyday bonds children may form with alternative caregivers (Goldfarb 2021; King 2020).

In light of the international sociopolitical climate surrounding the reunification of children in care with their biological parents, and the temporariness of foster care systems (Jones and Jonson-Reid 2023; LaBrenz et al. 2023; Teunissen et al. 2021; Thoburn 2009), this study raises questions about how cultural understandings of the foster parent role may shape children's experiences of temporariness in care. By temporariness, we refer to the length of time children stay in foster care. Grounded in social constructivist ideas, the study posits that prevailing discourses and dominant perceptions of foster care within a society significantly influence its practical manifestation. The study discusses how this influence might give practical implications regarding family reunification and temporariness in foster care systems.

We are drawing on the contrasting cultural landscapes of Norway and Japan. By analyzing the perspectives of Japanese foster parents on their role, we develop a contrastive perspective that serves to critically engage with and challenge dominant Norwegian understandings of the foster parent role. The aim of the study is thus to draw on the Japanese contrast to shed light on underlying and implicit dimensions of the Norwegian foster parent role, and to discuss how these differing understandings may have implications for practice, particularly regarding temporariness in foster care.

The rationale for employing the contrastive-comparative method (Azarian and Petrusenko 2011) lies in the challenges inherent in exploring practices within one's own social context, which often involve implicit assumptions and taken-for-granted elements (Gregory and Ruby 2011; Sundnes 2018). The method is proposed as a strategy to overcome the difficulties associated with familiarity with a phenomenon by utilizing a different cultural context, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of one's own culture (Sundnes 2018). Unlike traditional comparative approaches, which typically involve a symmetrical analysis of two cases, the contrastive-comparative method uses cultural contrast as a lens to illuminate the underlying dimensions of the researcher's own context. It acknowledges the researcher's embeddedness in one of the settings and does not seek to evaluate or directly compare the two contexts on equal terms. Rather, it leverages the contrast to destabilize dominant understandings and open up new interpretive possibilities.

There has been a growing focus on the role of foster parents in the international literature in recent years, particularly in relation to themes such as stability (Bergman et al. 2024; Crum 2010; Pixley 2024). While recent research on temporariness in foster care has expanded, partly in response to Norway's international legal challenges (Gerdts-Andresen 2021; Köhler-Olsen 2019; Melinder et al. 2021; Sandberg 2023), explicitly contrastive perspectives have been largely absent from the literature. In addition, there is limited English-language research on Japanese foster care practices in general, particularly regarding the role of biological connections. This study posits that a contrastive-comparative approach can illuminate overlooked, nuanced cultural factors that shape how foster placements manifest in practice, specifically with regard to temporariness.

2. Background

2.1. Cultural Logics of Care in Japan

Unlike many countries in the Global North, which have shifted toward prioritizing foster care over institutional care, Japan has predominantly placed children in institutional

settings (King 2020). This trend has been linked to culturally specific understandings of foster care and family bonds within Japan. According to King (2020), foster care perceived as "anything other than professional" is seen as potentially undermining a child's biological ties. King further describes a prevailing discourse in which children in Japan are understood to form only a single, primary family bond, and that introducing new family relationships, such as with foster parents, may weaken existing or potential biological ties. Such cultural emphases on blood relations are thought to shape Japan's child welfare policies and practices significantly (Goldfarb 2021). For instance, studies suggest that Japanese child protection social workers may prioritize the preservation of relationships between children and maltreating biological parents over foster placements, based on an understanding that the biological family bond outweighs potential risks to the child (Goldfarb 2021; King 2020). As a result, institutional care has often been favored, in part because it is seen as posing less of a perceived threat to the continuity of the biological family.

In response to increasing international attention to foster care practices, particularly concerning alignment with global standards, the Japanese government introduced a new vision for alternative care in 2017, a policy framework intended to encourage a shift toward foster placements over institutional ones (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare[MHLW] 2017). These policy changes have increased foster placements to some extent; however, scholars note that foster care placements remain relatively uncommon in Japan. Goldfarb (2021) identifies the concept of parental rights (shinken, 親権) as a factor that may limit the expansion of Japan's foster care system. Shinken encompasses seven rights concerning child care, including rights to custody and maintenance, education, residence determination, discipline, employment approval, inheritance management, and legal representation (Goldfarb 2021). Goldfarb describes how social workers reportedly experience discomfort with foster placements, which may relate to cultural norms, particularly the notion of katte (勝手), which implies taking liberties or overstepping boundaries in ways that might be seen as infringing upon parental rights. Foster placements may be considered by some as encroaching on parents' rights, thus rendering them inappropriate, while institutional placements are generally perceived as less intrusive (Goldfarb 2021).

In sum, while Japan's official policy increasingly supports foster care, underlying cultural understandings, particularly the prioritization of biological ties, continue to shape its practical implementation. Alternative care in Japan has largely retained a focus on the biological family and family bonds, described by King (2020, p. 103) as "the most important value that underpins the alternative care system in Japan".

2.2. Norwegian Foster Care: Between Temporariness and Permanence

The child welfare services in Norway operate on the principle that foster home placements are intended to be temporary. According to sct. 5–7, Subsection 1 of the Norwegian Child Welfare Act (2023), the Child Welfare and Health Board is required to revoke a decision regarding custody transfer "when it is overwhelmingly probable that the parents can provide the child with adequate care." However, Subsection 2 of the Act allows for exceptions to this requirement, specifying that the decision cannot be revoked if the child has become "so attached to people and the environment in which they are, that moving may lead to serious problems for the child" (Norwegian Child Welfare Act 2023, sct. 5–7 Subsection 2).

Statistics from 2017 to 2023 show a significant increase in re-integrations of children to their biological homes in recent years, probably reflecting social policy debates following the judgments against Norway by the ECtHR. Although the number of reintegration cases handled by the Board decreased during this period, the outcomes shifted significantly, with the majority of cases in 2017 resulting in the child not being returned to their parents,

whereas by 2023, the majority led to reintegration (Bufdir n.d.). However, it is worth noting that reintegration accounted for only 2.3 percent of the total number of children in foster care in 2023, while the most common outcome remains long-term placement (Bufdir n.d.). This low percentage suggests that despite increased numbers of reintegration in recent years, reintegration remains a relatively rare outcome for foster children, further indicating that the exceptions outlined in Subsection 2 are, in practice, the prevailing norm.

The low rates of reunification between foster children and their parents have been associated with a lack of contact between them. Norwegian child welfare practices have been criticized for employing standardized approaches in determining contact arrangements between children and biological parents, often limiting contact to 4–6 meetings per year. This practice has been described as lacking individual assessment as well as evaluations concerning the potential for increasing contact over time (Gerdts-Andresen 2020). However, because of the legal judgments against Norway, the child welfare services aim to shift away from a standardized approach. However, it is noteworthy to consider the 2023 data referenced above, where only 2.3 percent of children were reunified with their parents. This shows that regardless of efforts being made to make individual assessments on contact, few children end up reunited with their biological parents.

2.3. Impersonal Social Forces in the Construction of the Foster Parent Role

This study adopts a social constructivist perspective, which posits that social phenomena, such as temporariness in foster care, are shaped by societal constructions, including the way the foster parent role is conceptualized. Therefore, the analysis centers on how the foster parent role is constructed in order to discuss its potential implications for the temporariness of foster placements.

According to the social constructivist framework, the construction of the foster parent role must be understood as embedded within the social world (Burr and Dick 2017, p. 59). However, this social world is not static or uniform across cultures; it is fluid and varies depending on context (Burr and Dick 2017, p. 60). To comprehend how the foster parent role is manifested in the Norwegian context, it is essential to explore social constructs. Although multiple social constructs may influence this role, this article focuses on impersonal social forces, such as the normative logic of child welfare services, cultural values, and societal perceptions. These forces shape how the foster parent role is both understood and implemented in Norway. The goal is to illuminate the dominant discourses and societal perceptions that inform this construction, allowing for a comparison with Japanese perspectives as revealed in the interviews.

2.4. Construction of the Norwegian Foster Parent Role

In many of the cases in which Norway has been found in violation of the right to family life by the ECtHR, the argument by the child welfare service has been made in favor of the child's best interests, often interpreted as remaining with new attachment figures (the foster parents), in line with the exception outlined in sct. 5–7, Subsection 2 of the Norwegian Child Welfare Act (2023, sct. 5–7). However, concerns have been raised in the research field regarding this interpretation of the child's best interests (Forslund et al. 2022; Melinder et al. 2021). This interpretation relies heavily on attachment theory and has been criticized for being overly narrow in scope (Forslund et al. 2022; Melinder et al. 2021). The strong emphasis on attachment between children and caregivers has been characteristic of Norwegian child welfare practices, which have been described as being deeply rooted in attachment theory (Kvello 2012; Picot 2016). Moreover, the tendency to conceptualize attachment as a fundamental need for children extends beyond social work, resonating across disciplines such as psychology and health sciences (Helle et al. 2017; Henriksen and

Thuen 2012; Kvello 2012; Zachrisson 2005), reflecting a widespread perspective within the broader Norwegian context. Within the framework of attachment theory, relational experiences are understood to be generalized into internal working models, influencing interpersonal relationships throughout an individual's life (Bretherton and Munholland 2008). Given that the understanding of attachment is so deeply embedded in both Norwegian child welfare practice and societal attitudes (Kvello 2012; Picot 2016), it is reasonable, from a social constructivist perspective, to conclude that it significantly shapes the conceptualization of the foster parent role.

A recent parliamentary report on foster care, accepted in 2024, supports this assertion (Meld. St. 29 (2023–2024)). Chapter 2 of the report outlines the primary objectives, presenting them as the government's goals for the Norwegian foster care system. Notably, the aim of facilitating a stable attachment between the child and the foster family over time is emphasized (Meld. St. 29 (2023–2024)). This further underscores the centrality of attachment in the construction of the foster parent role in Norway.

In this context, where the foster parent role is framed by attachment theory, concepts such as "separation" and "secure base" become particularly relevant (Bowlby et al. 1992). For children who do not have a secure or satisfactory attachment to their biological parents, and in cases where the child protection service considers a break in this attachment unavoidable, foster parents may assume the essential role of bridging this gap by acting as the child's "psychological parent." Attachment theory highlights the importance of a primary caregiver as a source of security and safety, and the interpretation of this theory has led to the assertion that the principal caregiver should be prioritized over other relationships (Forslund et al. 2022).

Consequently, we argue that the primary role of foster parents in Norway has been constructed as attachment figures (Kvello 2012; Meld. St. 29 (2023–2024); Picot 2016), conceptualized as psychological parents who are tasked with meeting the child's need for a secure attachment by functioning as a secure base and minimizing the potential for separation (Kvello 2012; Forslund et al. 2022; Meld. St. 29 (2023–2024); Picot 2016).

3. Methods

This study draws on qualitative in-depth, face-to-face interviews with foster parents in Japan. By analyzing their perspectives on the foster parent role, the study aims to develop a meta-perspective that illuminates the contrasts between Japanese understandings of foster care and prevailing discourses surrounding the foster parent role in Norway. The data collected from Japan, alongside the construction of the Norwegian foster parent role discussed in Section 2.4, form the central elements for the analysis.

The interviews are employed as a contrastive analytical strategy, not to enable direct comparison or generalization, but to create an analytical distance that allows implicit Norwegian assumptions to become more visible. The study thus follows an asymmetrical design, contrasting empirical material from Japan with a contextually constructed understanding of foster parenthood in Norway.

3.1. Recruitment

Foster parents in Japan were selected as informants for the study due to their role in implementing the foster care mandate. A convenience sampling approach was employed, with the only eligibility criterion being prior or current experience as a foster parent. Participants were contacted via email by the second author through Osaka Metropolitan University, drawing on the author's professional network. Seven individuals were invited and all agreed to participate. All participants were located in the western region of Japan. The sample size was guided by the study's qualitative design, which aims to illuminate how

foster parents understand their role. A small, focused sample was considered sufficient to allow for in-depth insights, though it is important to note that the findings are not intended to be generalized.

3.2. Procedures and Analysis

A total of seven interviews with foster parents were conducted over a four-week period in July 2024. Due to language barriers, both the first and second authors were present, with the second author facilitating translation between Japanese and English. The interviews took place either in the participants' homes or in office settings and lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. A semi-structured interview guide was developed in advance to ensure alignment with the main topics. These included questions about foster parents' perspectives on their role, their views on biological ties following foster care placement, and their opinions on contact between foster children and their biological parents. However, the narrative of the foster parents was also followed throughout, to ensure that they could share their thoughts and experiences in their own words and address what was important to them (Bouma et al. 2020). All interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were thematically analyzed using the NVivo 14 software. Six steps were followed in the analysis process. The first five steps adhered to Braun and Clarke's step-by-step guide for thematical analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), while the sixth step incorporated the contrastive-comparative analysis method by Azarian and Petrusenko (Azarian and Petrusenko 2011).

In step one, all interviews were thoroughly read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data, and initial ideas were noted. In step two, the material was systematically coded across the entire dataset, with attention towards the understanding and perspectives of the foster parent role. In steps three and four, the codes were collated into potential themes and reviewed in relation to both the codes and the dataset as a whole. The specifics of each theme were further analyzed and refined before being named in step five.

Finally, in the sixth step, the contrastive-comparative analysis method was applied. The perspectives and understandings shared by Japanese foster parents were used to compare and contrast with the Norwegian attachment-based perspective on the foster parent role, which informed the discussion on how these differing viewpoints might influence discourses surrounding temporariness in foster care.

4. Findings

The study included a diverse group of Japanese foster parents in terms of their gender, age, and the number of children each participant had cared for, with figures ranging from 2 to more than 40 children. Some participants were unable to recall the exact number due to having cared for so many. Notably, the majority of participants reported having cared for more than 10 foster children over multiple years.

4.1. The Japanese Foster Parent Role

The analysis suggests three overarching themes pertinent to the foster parent role, derived from the references collected in the third step of the analysis, where the data were organized according to thematic associations. The first theme was titled "Fostering independence" the second "Significance of biological ties", and the third "Raising children together".

4.1.1. Preparing for the Future: Fostering Independence

A key theme identified through the analysis concerned foster parents' understanding of their role in preparing children for the future. Foster parents generally described their

role as guiding foster children toward independence. They emphasized the importance of raising and nurturing children to help them become self-reliant, with the dual goals of fostering independence and supporting emotional healing. Words such as train, raise, educate, and discipline were used to describe their responsibilities. This preparation was also linked to the eventual reunification with the child's biological family, as illustrated in the following example:

> *"We are trying to educate the children so that the same thing doesn't happen again when they are returned to their birth parents' home. If the children are young, they should be able to change their clothes by themselves, and if they are able to take care of themselves, they should be able to do so without the help of their birth parents."*

In addition to fostering physical independence, the development of emotional and mental independence was also a focus. Several foster parents expressed concern about how children sometimes idealize their biological parents, especially after being separated from them. This idealization, they noted, can lead children to internalize guilt, blaming themselves for the abuse or neglect they experienced. Foster parents emphasized the emotional toll this misplaced self-blame can take on children, underscoring the importance of helping them develop emotional independence from their biological parents. One foster parent further reflected on how fostering this independence is crucial for enabling children to build healthier, more balanced relationships with their parents in the future.

> *"If he or she is able to build a relationship with the mother as one person and not as a dependent person, it would be good for him or her. […] If you're forever glorifying your parents and thinking it's your fault and wanting to go home to your mother as soon as possible and dreaming of the person you were when you were little and being looked after, you'll only get hurt. So, to a certain extent, they should say, "I'm going to live well on my own" […] I don't depend on my parents, but my parents are my parents, and I want to love them. That's how you build a relationship with your parents."*

In addition to fostering physical and psychological independence, foster parents also saw their role as bridging the gap between life in foster care and life in the biological home. They spoke of adjusting their caregiving practices to better align with the routines and lifestyle of the biological family, with the goal of easing the child's eventual transition. Some foster parents expressed a desire to visit the biological parents' home to gain a better understanding of their lifestyle, acknowledging that birth parents possess important information about the child's history, information that could help fill in gaps and be incorporated into the child's daily life.

> *"I have to do things in a way that is closer to their way of life."*

> *"I can adapt to life over there [biological home]."*

Moreover, foster parents highlighted their responsibility to maintain a connection between the children and their biological families. They spoke of sharing photos and personal items with the biological parents as a way to keep them informed about the children's development, reinforcing the bond between parent and child to ensure it was not forgotten. Contact visits between the children and their biological parents were also viewed as an important preparation for reintegration. Seeing the parents was described as a way for the children to get an idea of what life would be like when they move back home, and that it is necessary to see the parents on a regular basis in order for life to be transferred smoothly from the foster home to the biological home. Many described a gradual progression of visits, beginning with daily contact, followed by overnight stays, and eventually extending to longer periods, such as summer or winter holidays, based on the success of each stage.

4.1.2. The Significance of Biological Ties

Another theme interpreted from the data, which seemed to inform foster parents' understandings of their role, concerned the perceived significance of biological ties. Foster parents described the bond between children and their biological parents as inseparable, emphasizing that the natural place for a child is with their birth family. These ties were portrayed as essential and never to be severed. Biological parents were referred to as the child's "own parents," integral to the child's identity.

> *"I can't replace their own parents, and I don't have to."*

> *"I think that having contact with these people is a very positive thing for the child's emotional stability, because they are the birth parents and the child's own parents, so it is a part of their identity."*

The foster parents also expressed a sensitivity to their role in fostering a positive image of the biological parents. One foster parent, for instance, noted that birth parents will always want to be seen as the ideal mother, someone the child can be proud of. The foster parent emphasized that they too wanted the child's biological mother to embody that ideal, and that they put effort in to make sure the mother did not forget the child. Additionally, it was mentioned that it serves as a form of self-affirmation for the child when they can speak positively about their biological parents.

The understanding of biological ties appeared to play a crucial role, as several foster parents expressed specific views regarding their role in relation to the birth parents.

4.1.3. Raising Children Together

While many foster parents described limited opportunities for direct contact between themselves and the children's biological parents, several expressed a strong desire for increased interaction. They viewed such contact as crucial in creating a sense of security for the birth parents, which in turn could foster a more trusting environment for the child's upbringing. Despite limited contact, many foster parents seemed to uphold ideals where both foster and biological parents collaboratively contributed to raising the child. Several voiced that raising the child as a unified family, with foster- and biological parents involved, would be optimal, reflecting an understanding of their role as deeply interconnected with that of the biological parents:

> *"I think it's very good that the birth parents and foster parents love the child together and want to raise the child together. I think it's very good for the child to know that both the mum who gave birth and the mum who brought you up love you and will watch you grow up together."*

> *"The child sees how well the birth parents and I get along and sees that we are really raising him together."*

> *"I think it would be good to bring them up with their birth parents and foster parents."*

One foster parent also reflected on how interaction with biological parents could offer a more natural form of guidance for the biological parents than formal interventions by child protection services. In cases where foster parents were older and the birth parents were younger and less experienced, the foster parent suggested they could act as a grandparent figure, offering guidance from a "parental standpoint", in more natural situations. Such interactions, the foster parent believed, would enable them to provide concrete suggestions on handling specific situations, helping biological parents better understand the child and facilitating a shared caregiving approach:

> *"If we take care of the child and the mother often comes to see her, or if we have dinner with her and say, "Let's have dinner together", we can say to her, "This child has good*

> *points" or "Let's be careful of each other", and the mother, the parents and we can bring up the child together. If we could have more exchanges like that, we would be able to raise the child together with the mothers and parents […] I'm old enough now, so I think it would make a difference if I could be more like a grandparent and have dinner with the parents, saying, "Mother, don't be upset and listen to your children".*

This understanding of the foster parent's role as connected to that of the biological parents was further reflected in another foster parent's perspective on their role:

> *"I don't really think of myself as a foster parent. The foundation of relationship is between people, so I don't really think of them as birth parents or anything like that. […] The parent is a person who happened to not be able to raise its children well, and happened to need someone else to raise them […]".*

4.2. The Contrastive-Comparative Approach

Considering the collected data from Japan within the context of dominant understandings of the foster parent role in Norway highlights several compelling contrasts. Notably, Japanese foster parents seem to view fostering children's independence as a central responsibility within their role. This emphasis suggests an underlying perception of children as capable and self-reliant individuals, capable of taking on the responsibilities associated with independence. In contrast, the Norwegian context, with its strong focus on attachment theory within the framework of child welfare (Kvello 2012; Picot 2016), tends to emphasize the child's vulnerability. This inclination to view children as vulnerable may influence how the role of foster parents is conceptualized, often portraying them as protective figures whose primary responsibility is to shield the child from disruptions and establish a secure attachment.

While attachment has been extensively emphasized in Norway's conceptualization of the foster parent role, Japanese foster parents referenced their relational bond with the child less frequently. Instead, they appeared focused on their long-term mandate to prepare the child for a stable future, with less emphasis on immediate relational attachment. In addition, an intriguing contrast emerges in how Japanese foster parents perceive their role in relation to the biological family. Japanese foster parents appear to view their role as more closely connected to the child's biological family, both in recognizing the importance of biological ties and in supporting an ideal of raising children with ongoing involvement from their birth family. In contrast, the Norwegian foster parent role is constructed around the idea of foster parents as a new secure base for the child, with foster-parent relationships prioritized over other connections (Forslund et al. 2022). Japanese foster parents, however, seem to regard the biological parents as retaining their status as the child's primary family, even after the child has moved to foster care. This perspective emphasizes the birth family as the child's natural environment, reflecting significant respect for the biological parents' status. This understanding appears to shape how Japanese foster parents interpret their own role, as they maintain a commitment to honoring the relevance and identity of the biological family in the child's life.

In Norway, by contrast, the status of biological parents appears to shift more significantly once a child is placed in foster care. With the change in primary caregiver, the role of the attachment figure also shifts, from biological parent to foster parent, diminishing the perceived importance of the birth parent. Following attachment theory principles, the foster parent might assume the role of the "psychological parent," with the attachment relationship between the foster parent and child prioritized. Consequently, the biological parent's role might be understood as less significant, given they are no longer the primary caregiver.

In Japan, the role of foster parents appears more integrally tied to the child's biological home and less detached from it, as it tends to be in Norway. Based on the findings of this study, Japanese foster parents seem to regard the biological family as essential to the child's identity and perceive it as their responsibility to minimize the gap between the foster home and the biological home.

5. Discussion—Implications for Temporariness

This section discusses the findings on foster parent roles in Japan and Norway within the broader context of the debate surrounding temporariness in foster care. Previous research has problematized the tension between permanence and reunification in foster care (Akin 2011; Sitjes-Figueras et al. 2025), yet few studies have explored how role conceptions of foster parents contribute to these tensions.

While the Norwegian foster parent role's strong emphasis on attachment has been critiqued for being overly narrow (Forslund et al. 2022; Melinder et al. 2021), contrasting this role with the Japanese foster parent role, as reflected in the interviews, provides insights into how attachment-focused frameworks may as well influence conceptions of temporariness in foster care. The Japanese foster parents interviewed in this study appeared to recognize an implicit acknowledgment of temporariness within their mandate. In contrast, the Norwegian foster parent role, underpinned by attachment theory, posits that separation from an attachment figure poses significant risks to children (Kvello 2012). From this perspective, where a child's attachment is considered a protective factor integral to their development (Anke 2007), and disruptions in attachment are believed to impact the child's long-term ability to form bonds, disruptions in attachment from foster parents would likely be perceived as highly detrimental. This understanding may eventually lead to the perception that a second disruption: separation from foster parents following reunification, should be avoided, potentially reducing the likelihood of reunification.

The association between reunification and perceived risks aligns with previous research indicating that children reunified with birth parents often face more negative behavioral and mental health outcomes (Taussig et al. 2001). Behavior problems have also been linked to reduced likelihood of reunification (Bellamy 2008). The emphasis on attachment thus creates a paradox: temporariness in care inherently involves separation from foster parents to enable reunification with the biological family. For Norwegian foster parents operating within the logic of attachment theory, fulfilling their role is intrinsically linked to addressing the child's need for secure attachment. Consequently, temporariness and reunification may appear to contradict the responsibilities associated with this role.

The repeated judgments against Norway by the ECtHR may reflect the practical implications of culturally ingrained understandings of the foster care mandate. While attachment theory has become influential in child protection in many Western countries, (Forslund et al. 2022), the judgments against Norway may potentially suggest that Norway's application of this framework may extend further, prioritizing foster parent-child attachment over biological contact to a greater extent than other countries. This prioritization seems to have shaped practice, indicating that attachment-based understandings may influence aspects of temporariness in care and reunification, such as the frequency of contact between children and their birth parents. This is consistent with previous research identifying attachment theory as a core conceptual foundation for permanency planning (e.g., research review by Tilbury and Osmond 2006).

The ECtHR judgments, however, represent an international critique, highlighting the need for adjustments in practice. While Norway has implemented measures to address these critiques, such as amendments to the Norwegian Child Welfare Act (2023), altering deeply embedded cultural understandings and societal values remains a complex and

gradual process. The inclination to equate the child's best interests with attachment theory does not change overnight. Social workers, who are important decision-makers in questions regarding contact between children and birth parents might face difficult choices between adhering their practice to ECtHR rulings or acting in accordance with their cultural values and judgments.

This tension between legal mandates and professional beliefs may be challenging for practitioners. The repeated judgments against Norway may suggest that social workers continue to act in alignment with culturally ingrained values. Nonetheless, evidence indicates that practices have evolved in response to these rulings, with children now experiencing more frequent contact with their birth parents compared to previous years (Alvik 2021).

Our concern, therefore, lies in the potential impact on children. As children are shaped by the same cultural logic and societal values, they may face adverse consequences when practices and values fail to evolve in harmony. Their understanding of what foster care entails is also influenced by these shared cultural frameworks. We question whether a significant disconnect between the practices they observe and the values they have internalized may result in confusion or distress, making them unintended victims of the misalignment between evolving legal frameworks and deeply ingrained cultural practices.

We argue that the ideal scenario would involve a gradual alignment of practices and values, avoiding abrupt or forced shifts. A return to the underlying values that inform the preference for stability in foster care may provide a foundation for this change. We believe that insights into alternative perspectives and values are essential in challenging existing assumptions about the child's best interests. It is crucial to recognize that implicit cultural interpretations linking attachment to the child's best interests represent only one of many possible frameworks for understanding children's needs.

Exploring the values and practices of other cultures might be a way to enlighten underlying values in one's own culture (Gregory and Ruby 2011; Sundnes 2018). The Japanese context offers a compelling alternative understanding of the foster parent's role and the child's best interests. In contrast to the Norwegian model, the Japanese foster parent role appears more integrated with the biological family, maintaining less emotional distance despite limited physical contact. Previous research has highlighted the importance of collaboration between biological parents and foster carers in facilitating reunification (Ankersmit 2016; Kemp et al. 2009). This study therefore suggests that fostering closer relational ties between foster and biological families and recognizing the biological family's significance for the child's identity, may facilitate a more realistic path toward reunification. In contrast, the Norwegian foster parent role, which emphasizes the bond between foster parents and children, and where reunification efforts are rarely seen as integral to the role, may unintentionally heighten the emotional distance between foster and biological families, thereby diminishing opportunities for reunification. Over time, the growing emotional separation may weaken the child's sense of belonging to their biological family, further diminishing the likelihood of reunification as well as compromising the children's family identity.

In summary, we will argue that it is reasonable to assert that cultural values and interpretations, such as those shaping understandings of the foster parent role, play a significant part in influencing practices related to temporariness in foster care and the likelihood of reunification with biological parents. This study contributes to existing knowledge on permanency and reunification (e.g., Ball et al. 2021; Lockwood et al. 2015; Luu et al. 2022; Sitjes-Figueras et al. 2025) by offering a contrastive-comparative perspective on how cultural understandings of the foster parent role may not only inform but actively shape the practice of temporariness in foster care. While earlier research has highlighted the tensions between permanence and reunification (Akin 2011; Sitjes-Figueras et al. 2025), limited at-

tention has been given to how culturally embedded role conceptions may influence these dynamics. Although the findings are context-sensitive, the perspectives discussed may offer relevant input for both theory development and practice design in a broader welfare context.

Limitations

The limited number of informants constrains the potential for generalization, suggesting that a larger sample might provide additional nuances and insights into how the foster parent role is understood. Nonetheless, one of the key advantages of utilizing a contrastive perspective is its ability to illuminate aspects of one's own context. Therefore, while the limited sample may restrict generalizability, it does not diminish the value of the insights gained, which have illuminated potentially implicit understandings within the Norwegian context.

Additional limitations of the study include the potential for misunderstandings due to language barriers. Since most participants did not speak English, the interviews relied on real-time interpretation, which could have resulted in the omission of key information or the misinterpretation of participants' responses.

6. Conclusions

This study has highlighted how cultural values and understandings of the foster parent role might have practical implications on temporariness for children in foster care and the process of reunification. We have argued that aligning practice with international standards and expectations requires an approach that avoids placing social workers in conflict with their values, thereby preventing a misalignment between practice and deeply rooted cultural beliefs. Furthermore, we argued how this is particularly important for children who face the consequences of this misalignment in practice. Achieving this requires a critical examination of the values that underpin current practices and an openness to alternative perspectives, including those informed by other cultural contexts. By contrasting Norwegian understandings of the foster parent role with insights from interviews with seven Japanese foster parents, this study has demonstrated how Norway's attachment-oriented framework may deprioritize reunification efforts with biological families. In contrast, Japanese perspectives, which emphasize the importance of biological family in a child's identity and development, appear to foster more realistic and collaborative pathways toward reunification. These findings illustrate the importance of challenging and broadening prevailing assumptions about the foster parent's role and the child's best interests.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, I.H.-L. and K.I.; methodology, I.H.-L.; software, I.H.-L. and K.I.; validation, I.H.-L., K.I. and L.M.; formal analysis, I.H.-L.; investigation, I.H.-L. and K.I.; resources, K.I.; data curation, K.I and L.M.; writing—original draft preparation, I.H.-L.; writing—review and editing, K.I. and L.M.; project administration, I.H.-L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (protocol code 312500 19 April 2024).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets presented in this study are not available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Acknowledgments: The authors gratefully acknowledge the participants for their contributions to this research. ChatGPT (OpenAI, version GPT-4) was used to improve language and ensure grammatical accuracy during manuscript preparation. The content remains the authors' responsibility and complies with MDPI's Guidelines on Artificial Intelligence and Authorship.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

Akin, Becci A. 2011. Predictors of foster care exits to permanency: A competing risks analysis of reunification, guardianship, and adoption. *Children and Youth Services Review* 33: 999–1011. [CrossRef]

Alvik, Ingunn. 2021. Samvær etter omsorgsovertakelse—En undersøkelse av praksis fra fylkesnemnder og lagmannsretter. *OsloMet Skriftserie*. Available online: https://skriftserien.oslomet.no/index.php/skriftserien/article/view/753 (accessed on 15 July 2024).

Anke, Teija. 2007. Tilknytning mellom fosterbarn og fosterforeldre: Et behandlingsperspektiv. *Tidsskrift-Norsk Psykologforening* 44: 1230.

Ankersmit, Leon. 2016. The Reunification Partnership: Engaging Birth Parents and Foster Carers as Collaborators in Restoration Casework. *Australian Social Work* 69: 273–82. [CrossRef]

Azarian, Reza, and Nadezda Petrusenko. 2011. Historical comparison re-considered. *Asian Social Science* 7: 35. [CrossRef]

Ball, Barbara, Lalaine Sevillano, Monica Faulkner, and Tymothy Belseth. 2021. Agency, genuine support, and emotional connection: Experiences that promote relational permanency in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review* 121: 105852. [CrossRef]

Bellamy, Jennifer L. 2008. Behavioral problems following reunification of children in long-term foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review* 30: 216–28. [CrossRef]

Bergman, Ann-Sofie, Miia Bask, Kristina Engwall, and Ulrika Järkestig Berggren. 2024. Factors associated with stability for children in family foster care: A study of case files in six municipalities in Sweden. *Child & Family Social Work. Early View*. [CrossRef]

Bouma, Helen, Hans Grietens, Mónica López López, and Erik J. Knorth. 2020. Learning from parents: A qualitative interview study on how parents experience their journey through the Dutch child protection system. *Child & Family Social Work* 25: 116–25.

Bowlby, John, Mary Ainsworth, and Ian Bretherton. 1992. The origins of attachment theory. *Developmental Psychology* 28: 759–75.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 77–101. [CrossRef]

Bretherton, Inge, and Kristine A Munholland. 2008. Internal working models in attachment relationships: Elaborating a central construct in attachment theory. In *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, 2nd ed. Edited by Cassidy Jude and Phillip R. Shaver. New York: The Guilford Press, pp. 102–27.

Bufdir. n.d. Statistikk og Analyse. Available online: https://www.bufdir.no/statistikk-og-analyse/barnevern/Omsorgsovertakelser#section-576 (accessed on 12 December 2024).

Burr, Viv, and Penny Dick. 2017. Social Constructionism. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Social Psychology*. Edited by Brendan Gough. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 59–80. [CrossRef]

Crum, Wes. 2010. Foster parent parenting characteristics that lead to increased placement stability or disruption. *Children and Youth Services Review* 32: 185–90. [CrossRef]

Forslund, Tomine, Pehr Granqvist, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, Avi Sagi-Schwartz, Danya Glaser, Miriam Steele, Mårten Hammarlund, Carlo Schuengel, Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, Howard Steele, and et al. 2022. Attachment goes to court: Child protection and custody issues. *Attachment & Human Development* 24: 1–52. [CrossRef]

Gerdts-Andresen, Tina. 2020. Fastsettelse av samvær ved omsorgsovertakelse. *Kritisk Juss* 46: 125–53. [CrossRef]

Gerdts-Andresen, Tina. 2021. A Childs' Right to Family Life when Placed in Public Care; an Analysis of Whether Current Norwegian Practice is in Systematic Contradiction to Human Rights. *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 29: 563–88. [CrossRef]

Goldfarb, Kathryn E. 2021. Parental Rights and the Temporality of Attachment: Law, Kinship, and Child Welfare in Japan. *Positions* 29: 469–93. [CrossRef]

Gregory, Eve, and Mahera Ruby. 2011. The 'insider/outsider' dilemma of ethnography: Working with young children and their families in cross-cultural contexts. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 9: 162–74. [CrossRef]

Helle, Jorunn, Mari-Janne Oosterman Boonstra, Kirsten Runeberg Broch, Bernt Ingve Rød, and Jon Vøllestad. 2017. En god sirkel. *Tidsskrift for Norsk Psykologforening* 54: 546–57.

Henriksen, Roger Ekeberg, and Frode Thuen. 2012. Tilknytningsteori anvendt på parrelasjoner. En litteraturgjennomgang. *Tidsskrift for Norsk Psykologforening* 49: 560–65.

Jones, Dylan, and Melissa Jonson-Reid. 2023. Child protective services reports after reunification: An examination of the risk of being rereported to child protective services after returning home from foster care. *Child Maltreatment* 30: 136–49. [CrossRef]

Kemp, Susan P., Maureen O. Marcenko, Kimberly Hoagwood, and William Vesneski. 2009. Engaging parents in child welfare services: Bridging family needs and child welfare mandates. *Child Welfare* 88: 101–26. [PubMed]

King, Michael Rivera. 2020. Child Guidance Centres in Japan. In *Alternative Care, Social Work, and the Family*, 1st ed. London: Routledge. [CrossRef]

Köhler-Olsen, Julia. 2019. EMD: Strand Lobben med flere mot Norge–Betydningen for norsk barnevern. *Tidsskrift for Velferdsforskning* 22: 341–46. [CrossRef]

Kvello, Øyvind. 2012. Tidlig barneverninnsats med utgangspunkt i tilknytningsforskning. *Tidsskriftet Norges Barnevern* 89: 116–34. [CrossRef]

LaBrenz, Catherine A., Lacey Jenkins, Hui Huang, Scott D. Ryan, Lisa S. Panisch, Yeonwoo Kim, and Philip Baiden. 2023. State-level policies and reunification: A multi-level survival analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 146: 106502.

Lockwood, Susan Friedman, and Cindy Christian. 2015. Permanency and the foster care system. *Current Problems in Pediatric and Adolescent Health Care* 45: 306–15. [CrossRef]

Luu, Betty, Susan Friedman, and Cindy W. Christian. 2022. A systematic review of common elements of practice that support reunification. *Children and Youth Services Review* 133: 106342.

Meld. St. 29. 2023–2024. Meld. St. 29: Fosterheim–ein trygg heim å bu. Oslo: Barne-og familiedepartementet. Available online: https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-29-20232024/id3046020/ (accessed on 17 May 2025).

Melinder, Annika, Malin Albrechtsen van der Hagen, and Kirsten Sandberg. 2021. In the Best Interest of the Child: The Norwegian Approach to Child Protection. *International Journal on Child Maltreatment: Research, Policy and Practice* 4: 209–30. [CrossRef]

Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan [MHLW]. 2017. *Annual Health, Labour and Welfare Report 2017*; Tokyo: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan. Available online: https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/wp/wp-hw11/index.html (accessed on 17 May 2025).

Norwegian Child Welfare Act. 2023. Lov om Barnevern (LOV-2023-06-09-30). Lovdata. Lov om barnevern (barnevernsloven)—Kapittel 5. Omsorgsovertakelse, Fratakelse av Foreldreansvar og Adopsjon—Lovdata. Available online: https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2021-06-18-97?%20q=barnevernloven (accessed on 1 August 2024).

Picot, Aurélie. 2016. Child Protective Services and Family Cultures: A Comparative Study of Norway and France. Ph.D. thesis, Høgskolen i Oslo og Akershus, Oslo, Norway.

Pixley, Jeanna T. 2024. Foster parent factors associated with placement stability: An umbrella review. *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 18: 832–69. [CrossRef]

Sandberg, Kirsten. 2023. Barns og foreldres menneskerettigheter i barnevernet—Er disse alltid forenlige? *Tidsskriftet Norges Barnevern* 100: 102–16. [CrossRef]

Sitjes-Figueras Lorena Maneiro, Marta Garcia-Molsosa, and Mónica López-López. 2025. Pathways to Permanency: A Systematic Review of Factors Associated with Family Reunification After Foster Care. In *Child & Youth Care Forum*. New York: Springer US, pp. 1–29.

Søvig, Karl Harald. 2018. Avgjørelser fra EMD i saker om vern av privat-og familieliv fra 2017: Nærmere om barnevernssakene mot Norge. *Tidsskrift for Familierett, Arverett og Barnevernrettslige Spørsmål* 16: 123–40. [CrossRef]

Stang, Elisabeth Gording, Gunn Astrid Baugerud, Elisabeth Backe-Hansen, and Marianne Rugkåsa. 2023. *Samvær i Praksis: En Forskningsbasert Undersøkelse av Samværsordninger i Barnevernet. Main Report from the Project «Samvær etter omsorgsovertakelse»*. OsloMet Skriftserie no. 1, 2023. Oslo: OsloMet–Oslo Metropolitan University.

Sundnes, Anita. 2018. Developing a Context-Sensitive Understanding of Infant Toilet Training: Cleanliness Regimes Adjusted for Eve-ryday Life Considerations. *International Journal of Early Childhood* 50: 279–96. [CrossRef]

Taussig, Heather N., Robert B. Clyman, and John Landsverk. 2001. Children who return home from foster care: A 6-year prospective study of behavioral health outcomes in adolescence. *Pediatrics* 108: e10–e10. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Teunissen, Mirte S. L., Anouk Goemans, Frank Van Holen, Johan Vanderfaeillie, Harold T. Nefs, Huub M. Pijnenburg, Harm Damen, and Paul H. Vedder. 2021. Family reunification decision-making in Dutch family foster care: A dual perspective approach. In *Child & Youth Care Forum*. New York: Springer.

Thoburn, June. 2009. Reunification of children in out-of-home care to birth parents or relatives: A synthesis of the evidence on processes, practice and outcomes. In *Expertise für das Projekt: Pflegekinderhilfe in Deutschland*. Munich: Deutsches Jugendinstitut, pp. 1–51.

Tilbury, Clare, and Jennifer Osmond. 2006. Permanency planning in foster care: A research review and guidelines for practitioners. *Australian Social Work* 59: 265–80. [CrossRef]

UN General Assembly. 2009. The United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. Available online: https://www.unicef.fr/sites/default/files/userfiles/guideliness.pdf (accessed on 4 July 2024).

Zachrisson, Henrik D. 2005. Stabilitet og forandring i tilknytningsmønster. *Nordisk Psykologi* 57: 303–22. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.