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## European Kinship in the Age of Biotechnology

Edited by JEANETTE EDWARDS and CARLES SALAZAR

Interest in the study of kinship, a key area of anthropological enquiry, has recently re-emerged. Dubbed 'the new kinship', this interest was stimulated by the new genetics and revived interest in kinship and family patterns. This volume investigates the impact of biotechnology on contemporary understandings of kinship, of family and 'belonging' in a variety of European settings and reveals similarities and differences in how kinship is conceived. What constitutes kinship for different publics? How significant are biogenetic links? What does family resemblance tell us? Why is genetically modified food an issue? Are 'genes' and 'blood' interchangeable? It has been argued that the recent prominence of genetic science and genetic technologies has resulted in a 'geneticization' of social life. The ethnographic examples presented here do show shifts occurring in notions of 'nature' and of what is 'natural'. But they also illustrate the complexity of contemporary kinship thinking in Europe and the continued interconnectedness of biological and sociological understandings of relatedness and the relationship between nature and nurture.

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EDWARDS & SALAZAR

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**CONTENTS**

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Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction: The Matter in Kinship <i>Jeanette Edwards</i>	1
1. Knowing and Relating: Kinship, Assisted Reproductive Technologies and the New Genetics <i>Joan Bestard</i>	19
2. Imagining Assisted Reproductive Technologies: Family, Kinship and 'Local Thinking' in Lithuania <i>Auksuolė Čepaitienė</i>	29
3. Eating Genes and Raising People: Kinship Thinking and Genetically Modified Food in the North of England <i>Cathrine Degnen</i>	45
4. The Family Body: Persons, Bodies and Resemblance <i>Diana Marre and Joan Bestard</i>	64
5. The Contribution of Homoparental Families to the Current Debate on Kinship <i>Anne Cadoret</i>	79
6. Corpo-real Identities: Perspectives from a Gypsy Community <i>Nathalie Manrique</i>	97
7. Incest, Embodiment, Genes and Kinship <i>Enric Porqueres i Gené and Jérôme Wilgaux</i>	112
8. 'Loving Mothers' at Work: Raising Others' Children and Building Families with the Intention to Love and Take Care <i>Enikő Demény</i>	128
9. Adoption and Assisted Conception: One Universe of Unnatural Procreation. An Examination of Norwegian Legislation <i>Marit Melhuus and Signe Howell</i>	144
10. Fields of Post-human Kinship	162

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## EUROPEAN KINSHIP IN THE AGE OF BIOTECHNOLOGY

*Edited by*  
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## CHAPTER 8

**'LOVING MOTHERS' AT WORK:  
RAISING OTHERS' CHILDREN AND  
BUILDING FAMILIES WITH THE INTENTION  
TO LOVE AND TAKE CARE**

*Enikő Demény*

**Introduction**

There is a well-known saying in Hungary, *'anya csak egy van'* ('there is only one mother'), which is meant to express the exceptional value given to mothers. However, there are life situations when this saying is not true. For example, for the four-year-old boy who lives in the SOS Children's Village in Kecskemét, Hungary, it is the most 'natural' thing in the world that he has two mothers. As the little boy himself expressed it, he has one 'birth mother' (*'szülő anyja'*) and one 'loving mother' (*'szerető anyja'*). The 'loving mother' is an innovative term used to name his foster-mother and has been 'created' by this little boy to make sense of the realities of his life. His birth mother gave birth to nine children and all of them were left by her immediately after birth at the hospital, in the same way as the birth mother was herself left in the hospital by her own mother years before. The boy was placed in an orphanage and later on he was taken to the SOS Children's Village. In the imagination of this small boy it is normal that one mother gives birth to children, and another mother finds these children and will love and raise them. However, not all children who are not raised by their biological mothers can say that they have a 'loving mother'. In Hungary there are many children who grow up in orphanages or in other types of institutional childcare settings where they do not have a 'mother'. Children who are raised in SOS Children's Villages are given a 'mother' who is

women who work as full-time professional foster-mothers and are employed by the SOS Children's Village organisation.

The first SOS Children's Village was set up in 1949 in the Austrian Tyrol. The founder of the organisation, Hermann Gmeiner, realised that the Second World War had left behind, on the one hand, many orphans and, on the other, many widows and single women without children. His main idea was to bring them together and in this way to offer orphan children a mother and a family. Taking into account that all over the world there are many orphans or abandoned children and a number of women who would like to raise children, it is not surprising that the SOS Children's Village initiative became an international organisation. Currently there are more than one thousand SOS villages in more than a hundred countries on five continents.

The SOS Children's Village's family model is based on the figure of the foster-mother. Beside the figure of the mother, three other principles shape the ideology of the village: the brotherhood between brothers and sisters, the family house and the village. One of the often mentioned strengths of the SOS Village model is the possibility for siblings to grow up together, in contrast with some other types of childcare institutions, where they are often separated based on their age or gender.

The SOS mothers raise five to eight children in the family houses provided by the organisation. There are certain minimum standards for the professional profile of these mothers. According to these standards, a future SOS mother has to be aged between twenty-five and forty, she has to be single, widowed, divorced or separated and has to be in good physical and mental health. The SOS mothers are not prohibited from having a male partner, but they are required to live alone in the village (Gmeiner 1993: 27-47). It is up to them, however, how they spend their spare time outside the village. The SOS mothers may have their own older or adult children and in some cases SOS mothers are allowed to take their younger children with them to the SOS Children's Village, but this is not common practice.

In addition to the already mentioned criteria, there are numerous others that should also be met by an SOS mother. According to the job advertisements, the SOS mother should be resilient, patient, capable of building relationships, willing to learn, practical minded, independent, self-confident and good-natured. Furthermore she has to be prepared to get involved with children who in some cases face severe mental and emotional problems, and to deal with them in a loving and supporting way. To find out whether a candidate meets not only the formal, but also the additional desired criteria, she has to spend a period of practical training in the SOS Children's Village, working as a helping mother. The aim of this period is to enable both parties, the SOS Children's Village organisation as well as the SOS mother candidate, to come to a suitable decision. Following the selection procedure, the SOS mother candidates receive theoretical and practical training in preparation for their future tasks.

with the children's needs. The mothers' duty is to take care of children, to keep the house and to keep account of the money they use. The head of the village and the educationalist (both of them are usually men) have to live in the village together with their own families. They are not only indirectly the employers of the mothers but also in accordance with the ideology of the SOS Children's Village organisation, they provide the 'paternal element' for the children. The other male employees of the village, the gardener, the village master and the driver, have the same 'duty'. Therefore beside their daily job, they are supposed to act as male role models for the children (Gmeiner 1993: 48-54).<sup>1</sup>

### Identity and Relatedness, Discourse and Practice

This chapter is based on anthropological fieldwork carried out in the SOS Children's Village in Kecskemét, Hungary, where I conducted in-depth interviews with women who are working there as full-time, professional foster-mothers.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of my research was to get an insight into how professional foster-mothers in this SOS Children's Village construct, define and represent their identity as social foster mothers in relation to the dominant social, legal, and institutional 'discourses' connected with family, motherhood, relatedness and women's roles in society.<sup>3</sup> Through the analysis of the SOS mothers' narratives, my intention was to make visible how the naturalised and taken for granted realities about family and motherhood affect the lives of those particular subjects who occupy a marginal position in connection with the dominant discourses of family and relatedness. Although I was focusing on identity politics of professional foster-mothers, during fieldwork it became more and more clear that family and kinship thinking also has relevance in such institutionalised contexts. Taking into account that anthropological studies of kinship and family were not traditionally carried out in such kinds of institutional settings, my analysis can offer a view on how ideas about relatedness and family are employed in these contexts.

In the course of her/his life, each person develops a personal image of the family. This image (called social representation in social psychology) on the one hand, incorporates the individual's personal experiences and, on the other, is derived from information and thought patterns received and passed on as traditions in the course of education and social communication and interaction. It is an image that helps us to classify conditions, circumstances, phenomena and persons we come across, and the 'theories' that we can rely on (Moscovici 1995: 75-83). According to Foucault, the most authoritative systems of classification are those that are taken as natural rather than constructed, the 'Other' being incorporated into 'a natural order of disorder' (Foucault 1981: 44). Analysing the social

institutional forms and by the subjects' own life experience. It can also give us an insight into how dominant ideologies about motherhood, family and women's role in society shape the meanings that are attributed by these professional foster-mothers to different types of relatedness (genetic, biological and social).

According to Henrietta Moore, self-identity is established socially through a set of discourses that is both discursive and practical and which establishes the grounds for identity and the framework(s) within which identity becomes intelligible. There is a potential discrepancy between a set of discourses that is culturally available and the individual experience, interpretation and understanding of those discourses (Moore 1994: 53-58). Women come to have different understandings of themselves as mothers because they are differently positioned with regard to dominant narratives concerning motherhood, and take up different positions in those narratives. An interesting question is what accounts for the differences between women with regard to their self-representations as engendered individuals and as mothers.

Naming is also central to questions of identity. To name something means also to define an identity, while to ascribe characteristics to that identity is an aspect of political power (Foucault 1981; Ricoeur 1992:149). It is political because it will always have material consequences. I draw on Foucault's ideas on the power to name in analysing the consequences of the fact that the women working in the SOS Village are called 'mothers'. The differentiation of social identities is also connected with the exercise of power. It is on the basis of the naturalised differences between these identities that the rights and needs of particular individuals are established. Rights and needs are differentially distributed between different sorts of persons and the ability to define a social identity is the ability to ascribe appropriate rights and needs (Moore 1994: 57). I shall argue in this chapter that both naming and ascription of rights and needs have particular relevance in understanding discourses related to professional foster-motherhood in Kecskemét.

There has been a tendency in anthropology to see mothers and the mother-child unit as having a universal function. This approach encourages the view that domestic units everywhere have the same form and function, which are dictated by the biological facts of reproduction and the necessity of child maintenance. Feminist critiques directly addressed this self-evident quality and the naturalness of motherhood and stressed that the concept of mother is not merely given in natural processes of pregnancy, birth or lactation, but is a cultural construction that different societies build up and elaborate in different ways (Thorne and Yalom 1992: 3-23). Therefore it is important not only to pay attention to the culturally diverse ways in which women perform their roles as mothers, but also to see how the category of women and the attitudes towards them are linked to ideas about marriage, family, home, children and work. Schweitzer notes that one of the

out that feminist interventions played an important role in highlighting the inseparable links among the social fields of gender, kinship, religion and economy (Schweitzer 2000: 214). In my analysis of foster-motherhood, I also emphasise that people act not as detached from social discourse but as part of it. My aim is to understand and represent socially constructed knowledge about what it means to be a foster-mother in a specific social environment and for specific subjects and to interpret these representations.

The production of knowledge by discursive practices is a process through which power hierarchies are constructed, maintained and challenged in the social sphere of subjects living under particular historical circumstances. By disclosing the experiences of mothers who occupy marginal positions in connection with the dominant narratives about family and relatedness, we can point out how the discursive and practical attempt to maintain the status quo regarding the 'normal' structure of the family affects the lives of those people who at a certain point in their life history end up living in a different, alternative setting. In addition, we can observe how boundaries between people are not only constructed alongside categories like class, ethnicity or gender but also created through following different life strategies. I shall argue, in line with Foucault (1998: 51), that discourses not only are cognitive constructs 'out there', but have powerful effects on people's lives.

### The Social, Legal and Institutional Context of Foster-parenthood in Hungary

The dominant representations of motherhood in Hungary are linked to notions of the family, which represents a very important value for Hungarians. Surveys and opinion polls carried out during the last two decades show that for the majority of Hungarians the family is still the most important value in their lives; it is more important than any other area, such as work, friends or leisure.<sup>4</sup> According to various studies, the modern nuclear family, with a husband, a wife and their children still represents the 'ideal' family for the majority of Hungarians (Neményi 1995: 250–52, 2000; Lévai 2000: 185). Single parenthood is not considered an 'ideal' solution. (Kapitány 2003: 257–58). Ideas of women and motherhood are strongly correlated. Almost 95 per cent of the Hungarian respondents (both male and female) of the World Value Survey carried out in 1999 agreed with the statement 'women need children', while only 33 per cent of them agreed that 'men need children'.<sup>5</sup> In Hungary people do not think positively about remaining childless. Seventy per cent of the population reported that it is bad or very bad if there are no children in the family (Pongrácz and Molnár 1997: 97).

The current realities of the Hungarian family, however, differ from the ideal image of it. During the last quarter of the last century the Hungarian

positive attitude towards children is less and less reflected in the actual practice of having children.<sup>6</sup>

The number of children raised in institutions in Hungary is high and many of them cannot be adopted.<sup>7</sup> The main aim of the child protection system is to integrate or reintegrate these children into their biological family. For those children for whom this integration or reintegration is not possible, the law intends to assure a 'family-like environment'. In order to achieve this aim it prescribes the deinstitutionalisation of the child care system for abandoned or orphan children and offers two possibilities for doing this. A first possibility is to fragment the already existing, huge and depersonalised childcare institutions and to transform them into so-called 'child homes' where no more than forty children are raised together. The second possibility is foster-care. The Child Protection Act of 1997 establishes the legal framework for a professional foster-parent network. While according to previous regulations only married couples were allowed to be foster-parents, the Act on Child Protection no longer connects this activity with the marital status or the gender of the candidate.<sup>8</sup> The condition to become a foster-parent is to attend and successfully pass the professional training required by law. By this means foster parenting has become a legally recognised profession in Hungary.

However, there are not many couples or persons in Hungary who would like to become foster-parents and raise the children of 'others', and the number of those who will assume the responsibility of raising children with disabilities is even smaller. In these conditions, many orphan or abandoned children are growing up in institutions. One would think that in these circumstances Hungarian society would realise the importance and value of the SOS foster-mothers' work, as the majority of the children raised by these mother do. The spontaneous remark of a five-year-old boy to his SOS foster-mother, 'Mom, it is so good that you were born for me', expresses how important the existence of the foster-mother and the care they bestow is to the children they raise. However, though it may seem surprising, instead of being appreciated for their work, the SOS foster-mothers are often labelled as deviant, and the SOS Children's Village organisation has been blamed in public discourses for creating incomplete families. While being a mother is highly valued in Hungary, being an SOS foster-mother is often looked upon with suspicion, or at least this is the feeling and the experience of those SOS mothers I came to know at the SOS Village in Kecskemét.

### Living in an 'Incomplete Family'

Due to their particular social position, the women working as foster-mothers in the SOS Children's Village have to interpret and reinterpret the cultural meanings that are linked to motherhood in order to define

single women and single mothers in the framework of an institution – the SOS Children's Village – that is different from marriage. Secondly, they have to position themselves in the discourse about the biological and social aspects of motherhood and to interpret their mothering not (just) as an innate duty (or maternal instinct) but also as an acquired skill and a profession.

The SOS Children's Village organisation is often blamed in different public forums for creating 'incomplete' families. It is not difficult to guess that it is the 'ideal' image of the nuclear family that the SOS families are compared with, and that it is exactly this comparison that leads to the verdict 'incomplete'. Two main problems are identified in connection with these families. The first is the women's 'lack of a male partner' and the second is the children's 'lack of a father'. Due to these 'deviations' from the norm of the nuclear family, the activity of the SOS organisation and the work of the SOS mothers are very often looked upon with doubt and disapproval. Even their mothering abilities are questioned and they quite often have to face questions such as how they can be good mothers if they are not living with a male partner, in which case their sexual life is not 'balanced'.

The women's struggles with what it means to be a single 'mother' to the children they raise are shaped by the exclusions and silences of a patriarchal discourse on the ideal family. In the framework of such a discourse there is no place for an emotionally charged connection between mother and child that is not already prefigured by a 'moral' law in which a woman's husband has a key place. As Fineman notes, 'the legal story is that a family has a "natural" form based on the sexual affiliation of a man to a woman' (Fineman 1995: 145). This 'sexual family ... simultaneously exists in our social imagination, both as a legal institution and as a cultural ideal with divine credentials. The nuclear family has an assumed "naturalness", venerated in law, institutionalised as the appropriate form of intimacy and secured against defamation or violation by unsanctified alternatives' (Fineman 1995: 150).

This image of the sexual family becomes relevant in the context of new reproductive technologies and surrogacy contracts that make possible the separation of reproduction from the heterosexual relation. It is exactly the naturalness and normality of heterosexual reproduction that people refer to when they argue against the use of reproductive technologies by single women. The second argument is related to the question of acceptability of deliberately creating children who will not have a father. Having a father is considered as normal and natural as heterosexual reproduction and a heterosexual relationship. In the case of SOS Villages, the blame is not about deliberately creating children but about deliberately creating families that do not have a father and hence are *incomplete*. These families are judged this way for two reasons. On the one hand, there is the 'lack of male partner' for the women and on the other, the 'lack of a father' for

The discourse on the 'missing father' certainly contributes to SOS mothers' feeling that their families are somehow not 'normal'. I was able to observe this from the way in which they spoke about different problems related to their family life. They very often used the sentence: 'but this is the same in normal families too'. What surprised me was that the women internalised the discourse about the 'missing father' to such an extent that in some cases they felt guilty and responsible for this 'lack', as if they were to blame for this situation.

The 'missing father' discourse shows clearly the effects of confusing the desirable situation (it is good for the children to have two parents) with the real situation (these children were abandoned by both parents and were raised in institutions where they had neither mother nor father; in the SOS Village they have at least a mother). Even though originally the children raised in the SOS families were born to a 'complete biological family' (meaning that they were born from a heterosexual couple who, in many cases, were either married or cohabiting) for various reasons these families either split up or the biological parents were not able to fulfil their parental responsibilities.<sup>9</sup> Therefore the children ended up in institutions. Thus, it is clear that what is claimed to be the 'normal' structure of a family does not necessarily on its own guarantee the proper functioning of the family.

In many cases the SOS mothers connected the lack of the father with the fact that they are raising these children alone, i.e. that they do not have a male partner with whom they live. Basically, they connect the lack of the father with the lack of a 'husband'. They have to legitimise the fact that they are raising children not only for others, but also for themselves. The fact that most of the mothers make great efforts to supplement the 'missing father' by involving their own family members in the life of their SOS family shows that they somehow feel responsible for this lack and try to correct it. This attitude has been observed by other authors writing about mothers who deliberately decided to become single mothers by giving birth to their children through assisted reproduction or by adoption (Coontz 1992; Bock 2000; Hertz 2002: 26; Jones 2003: 433). From this, I suggest that the ideal image of the family with men and women and their (if possible) biological children is not only a dominant discourse 'out there' but is internalised during socialisation and works through people's unconscious, which is why it has a strong effect on their lives. This explains why the image of the 'ideal' family has a powerful effect on people even in countries where the law and the general public accept, as legitimate, alternative family forms.

It can be concluded that 'the lack of a partner' and 'the lack of a father' problems are internalised by the mothers. They are compelled to legitimise for themselves and for others the fact that their maternal abilities are not linked to their sexual life and that they are also able to play the roles that are generally associated with a male parent. I argue that

in the SOS families: it is neither the sexual partner of a woman, nor a father to the children, but rather a 'man' as the head of the family.

### Raising the Children of 'Others'

When analysing what family means for these mothers, we cannot keep the domains of 'the biological' and 'the social' intact, since the distinction between these two aspects is not clear-cut. We can see that once a woman decides to become a foster-mother she often involves her family, who actually support her in raising her foster-children. Many of the foster-mothers try to integrate the foster-children into their own families. The parents of the foster-mother may act as grandparents to the children, while the sisters and brothers of the foster-mother often take the role of the uncle or aunt. Through the affiliation between foster-mother and her children, the children become part of the foster-mother's family of belonging. This process is similar in a way to the process of 'kinning' described by Howell (2001: 208) in the case of adoption, but in some other aspects differs from it. It differs because in the majority of cases the foster-children cannot be adopted by their foster-mothers, so they will never belong formally to her family; for example, they will not transmit the family name, and so on. Yet, in some cases, in everyday life practice, 'grandparents', 'uncles' and 'aunts', the foster-mother and the children act and perceive themselves as a family.<sup>10</sup>

As I have pointed out in the previous section, Hungarians value children highly. However, their attitude towards the SOS mothers' activity suggests that it is not children in general who are valued but only one's own offspring. If this were not the case, the SOS mothers who offer permanent care for children who are 'deprived' of their own families would be appreciated. However, the day-to-day experience of the mothers reveals a different attitude. They claim that many people, and especially men, cannot understand why someone would raise children who are not their own. In the words of one SOS mother:

It is not the child in itself that is the value, but one's own child. I can see this in my own family: my father is so child-oriented and he loves us so much, but when we grew up and my mother said that we should take a child from the orphanage, he did not even want to listen to her. All the men have the same attitude to this: that another person's child, no way; they say: 'If I could raise my children, other people should do the same; if they decided to have a child, they should also raise it.' (SOS mother)

The higher value of biological ties in comparison with social ties is present not only at the level of social attitude but also at the normative level. The Parliamentary Act on Child Protection, by emphasising the importance of biological ties, reinforces the already existing

and maintaining the connection between children and their biological parents.<sup>12</sup>

The SOS mothers' experience of being a foster-parent convinced me that it is not easy to be a social parent in an environment where only the biological family ties are the ones that are highly valued. The interviews revealed that the issue of social support is very important for the mothers. Although they receive this support from their family members, they are still concerned with the fact that their work is not accepted and valued by the wider society. They emphasised that, while in Hungary their work is not appreciated by many people, in 'Western' European countries the SOS mothers are respected and their work is highly valued. They told me that, unlike in Hungary, in other countries there is a totally different attitude towards raising children who are not your own:

In Hungary, even if one adopts a child he or she tries to find one that resembles him or her. In the Netherlands, for example, it is very common for people to raise other children beside their own or, after they have raised their own, to take care of others who for some reason don't have their own family. And, as different as these children may be, for them they are valuable. This is because in that society raising and taking care of children who are not your own are valued by the society, not like here. (SOS mother)

One SOS mother pointed out that in Hungary many people would say there was only one motivation for raising another's children: an economic one.<sup>13</sup> There is, indeed, an unfortunate history of foster-care in Hungary, since it was once a widespread practice to take children from institutions and to use them for work on family farms. The same happened to children of poor families from large cities who were 'given away' to foster-parents in the villages. Hungarian novels, biographies and poems portray the sad stories of such children. With this tradition behind them, the foster mothers try hard to convince people that money is not the reason for choosing to become SOS mothers. Their reaction clearly shows that, in the social context in which they are living, to be paid for being a 'mother' is condemned. This attitude implies that a woman can be a good 'mother' only if her mothering fulfils her 'maternal instinct'.

The fact that the women working in the SOS Children's Village are named 'mothers' has its own significance. If the name of their 'occupation' were, for example, permanent caregiver, it is unlikely that their work would be condemned to the same extent. Women work for a long time as professional caregivers and also get paid for it, but people do not find this provocative in the same way. The name of the professional 'mother' evokes the following problem: if some women get money for doing the 'job' of mothering, would other women go on being 'normal' mothers and continue to consider mothering their duty? Or would they rethink their rights and needs? What appears to be offensive for many



it has become a legally accepted profession and a source of income for some women.

### **An Imaginary Line of Demarcation: SOS Mothers With or Without Their Own Children**

Based on the SOS mothers' narratives one can notice a division between them. I could see after a while that the mothers were divided into two groups, but it took me some time to figure out the lines along which the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion were constructed in this community. Although the mothers were usually friendly with each other, I found that none of the mothers had a close relationship with a mother from the 'other' group. I realised that this division had a particular significance for the women and came to understand that the line of demarcation between the women coincided with whether they had a child of their own or not.

The background of having or not having their own biological children influences the way in which SOS mothers construct and define their understanding of motherhood. Those women who have no children of their own told me that they love the children they are raising, as they would love their own. However, they are often told that their feelings are not what a 'real' mother, that is, a biological mother, feels:

I think that even a foster-child can be loved in the same way as one's own. But I don't have my own child. I was always told – by schoolmates, friends – that it is different to have one's own children. I asked why it is different. They said, it is different, believe us, it is different. We couldn't agree because I kept saying that the child becomes my own since I take care of it, I am at his or her bedside if she or he is ill, I am there when there are problems, and this is what matters. They say that it is the nine months, the giving birth that makes it different. (SOS mother)

This SOS mother did not want to admit that being a biological mother is a different experience from being a social one. Our discussion revealed that the reason for her insistence on the denial of the difference was not connected with her inability to be aware of the difference itself, but was related to a broader attitude in relation to differences, that is, that difference always implies a hierarchy. Knowing the social context in which this discussion took place, it is not difficult to see that once the difference is admitted, one of the two kinds of motherhood would be assigned a lower status and this would not be biological motherhood. When I suggested to her that a difference would not necessarily imply a hierarchy of value, thus pointing out that the difference between biological and social motherhood should not mean that one is more valuable than the other, she told me that this somehow had never

'new' insight empowering and she thought it would help her to come to terms with the problem.

Those women who have their own biological children 'admitted' that they love their own children more and emphasised the importance of biological ties. One of the mothers, for example, thinks that a foster-mother has to be very aware of the limits of her parenting:

I would lie if I affirmed that I don't love my own children more. Blood is thicker than water ('a vér nem válik vízzé') I always say that.<sup>14</sup> A lot depends on blood relations and I told M. [her foster-child] as well, if I slapped you that would be totally different, you would never forget it, it would be very humiliating, especially at this age; if your mom slapped you, you would forget all about it in a week's time. These children can condemn their own parents, but I know that I cannot say a single negative word about them; I can scold my own parents, my own children, but nobody else can do it; and I know this very well, that is how it works. (SOS mother)

It is not easy for any of the SOS mothers to define their identity and to position themselves within many, often contradictory, discourses. However, I found that for those women who are both biological and social mothers, it is a more difficult task. While those women who are not biological mothers emphasise responsibility as a determining feature of being a good parent, those who have their own children emphasised the importance of biological ties. Nevertheless, they find themselves in a difficult position. On the one hand, they affirm that there is something important in the biological act of giving birth that also influences one's parenting. On the other hand, their actual job requires them to be a good parent for their foster-children. But how can they be a 'good parent' of a foster-child if they are convinced that one's parenting abilities are determined by the act of birth?

This uncertainty of SOS mothers in defining their position in the discourse about the biological and social aspects of motherhood can be observed in their narratives. There are several levels that can be traced in our discussion. First of all, every biological mother 'confessed' that she loved her own children more and that the relationship with them is 'special'. They also seemed to believe that giving birth is the determining factor of being a 'true' parent. However, when talking about their foster-children's biological mother, one SOS mother said with genuine surprise and wonder:

If she was a 'real' mother, if she had any maternal feelings, she would never do this [abandon her children]. There was not even a flash in her eyes or any kind of emotion on her face, no nothing. She just sat there [when once she visited her children in the SOS village]. She cannot be a real mother. (SOS mother)

We can see the contextuality of emphasising one or the other element of motherhood, biological or social, in the narratives of the SOS mothers.

of kinship' (Edwards, this volume). Those mothers who claim that 'giving birth' is what makes a woman a 'real' mother find themselves in a difficult position when they have to explain the basis of their foster-parenthood. If they believe that true parenthood is determined by biology and that giving birth is what constitutes real motherhood, how do so many 'real' mothers end up abandoning their children?

The 'presence' of a birth mother is discomfiting for many foster-mothers. In a society 'where legal rights might be lost, but the blood relationship cannot be lost' (Schneider 1968: 24) and where the legal system prioritises biological ties over social ones, the existence of a birth mother is a constant reminder to the foster-mothers that their tie to their children may not be such an enduring tie as the ties of blood. This could be one of the reasons why some SOS mothers have difficulties in accepting biological mothers.

But what does a biological tie mean for these women? When we try to find an answer to this question we have to take into consideration that in the context of this fieldwork it was not assumed that the genetic and biological aspects of motherhood could be separated. For these women, giving birth to their own child meant also giving birth to a child who is genetically connected to them. It is evident that some of the mothers strongly emphasised pregnancy and giving birth as the features of biological parenthood, but this happened because they were not speaking about parenthood in general, but about motherhood specifically. Interestingly, these women mentioned the genetic connection when they discussed general attitudes towards raising their own or other people's children, or when they pointed out that it is more important for men to have their own children. While it might happen that biological fathers would emphasise that genes are transmitted to their children when defining what it means for them to have their own child, the mothers emphasised what is specific in being a biological mother: and this specificity is not sharing genes but pregnancy and birth. However, this does not mean that sharing genes is not important for them. What can be concluded is that based on the women's narratives, for them a biological tie means both notions of sharing genes and other forms of biological bonding, such as giving birth, and it is impossible to differentiate between the two.

Ultimately, the mothers' narratives lead us to debates on the determining features of parenthood and to questions such as what makes someone a real mother or what it means to have your own child.<sup>15</sup> Is the real mother the one who gave birth to the child, or the one whom the child resembles, or is it perhaps the one who takes responsibility for raising the child? Is there only one real mother? A monistic account of parenthood, based on the principle that one and only one thing – genes, gestation or intention – can be the basis of parenthood cannot account for all categories of motherhood.<sup>16</sup> Parenthood is always embedded in a

to this contextual embeddedness of meanings and interpretations of parenthood and relatedness. According to such an account, depending on the context, any of the above-mentioned factors – genetics, biology, care and responsibility – can constitute the basis for parenthood (Bayne and Kolers 2003b).

## Conclusion

Due to the specifics of their situation, SOS foster-mothers have to interpret and reinterpret the cultural meanings linked to motherhood in order to define their own identity. As noted above, they have to construct, define and legitimise their identity as single women and single mothers within the framework of an institution which is different from marriage. At the same time, they interpret their mothering not (just) as an innate duty, but as an acquired skill and a profession.

One of the most interesting features of the foster-mothers' narratives is the controversial schism in women's perception of biological and social motherhood, along with their unawareness of it. The schism is clearly based on the underlying dualistic nature of the discourse on motherhood (as well as any other existent discourse) and the lack of awareness of the implications such dualism creates. First, these women cannot accept this duality because the rigid exclusion and hierarchisation of one concept over another is inherent in our 'dualistic' society. Secondly, to accept that the difference of the biological motherhood experience does not imply more value than social mothering is discouraged by the hierarchisation of values. Thirdly, the ambiguity is located in the implicit presence of an 'other' mother in the life of their children. Foster-motherhood constitutes therefore a space where the experience of identity and connection and the experience of contingency and separation converge powerfully providing in this way compelling insights that connect with current debates about biological and social aspects of relatedness.

The SOS foster mothers' narratives of motherhood, family and relatedness show us that different ways of imagining kin connections are readily mobilised by these mothers. Their narratives reveal that intention and agency as well as non-intention and the lack of agency are both present in the making, breaking and sustaining of intimate social relations, highlight the indeterminacy of 'biological facts' and disclose diverse strategies of making kinship. Kinship from this perspective is made up of a number of heterogeneous elements, and the context and intention determines which of them will be deployed and put to the fore in a particular instance.

Analysing the professional foster-mother's experience on motherhood and family in Hungary, we can see that the dominant discourses about family, parenthood, relatedness and gender identity are not only cognitive

these marginal experiences visible could represent a first step for recognition and support for diverse family arrangements in everyday life, in public policy and in law and could contribute to the rethinking of some of our ideas on relatedness.

### Notes

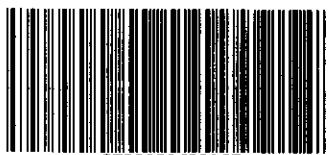
I wish to express my gratitude to Judit Sándor for suggesting the SOS Village to me as a good site for research about motherhood. The fieldwork was carried out with the support of a Central European University Gender Department Small Grant programme. The article was further developed in the framework of the 'Public Understanding of Genetics' (PUG) project. I would like to thank all PUG colleagues for the interesting exchange of ideas on new ways of looking at kinship, and the editors of this book for their useful and indeed constructive comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. Last but not least, special thanks to the SOS mothers from the SOS Village of Kecskemét; without their willingness to share with me their experiences of being a foster-mother this chapter could not have been written.

1. For more information about this organisation see the web page <http://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/>, accessed on 14 October 2005.
2. Kecskemét is a city located 85 km from Hungary's capital, Budapest. There are three SOS Children's Villages in Hungary. The first village was set up in 1986, and that in Kecskemét in 1988. This latter SOS Children's Village is located in a residential area of the city and consists of twelve family houses, a community house and the house of the village directors. Each of the eleven SOS mothers who were working in the village during my fieldwork had her 'own' house, where she raised four to seven children.
3. In line with a Foucauldian understanding, I define discourse not only as text (language), but also as social practice.
4. For more information see World Value Survey, Hungary.
5. See *ibid.*
6. These statements are based on the data of the Census of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2001.
7. The number of children and young adults placed in children's homes and foster-care in 2003 was 21,122. See *Yearbook of Welfare Statistics* (2004) p. 51.
8. See Hungarian Act No. XXXI of 1997 on Child Protection.
9. It is also interesting to note that the majority of those SOS mothers who have their own biological children gave birth to their children in the framework of marriage and a 'normal' family. But all of them got divorced and ended up raising their own children alone.
10. This is not happening, however, in every case. There are foster-mothers who get involved more in raising the children, while others keep more of a distance. My point here is that where there is an intention to integrate these children in the mothers' family this can be achieved.
11. A similar tendency has been noted in the case of Norwegian legislation and

12. This was not always the case. The organisation changed its policy regarding the relationship with the biological mother based on the children's right to know their families (Jeddi 2003).
13. The economic reason for taking children into foster-care is mentioned by Cadoret in her ethnography on foster-parenthood in the region of Morvan, France (Cadoret 1995: 83–86).
14. 'A vér nem válik vízzé': the literal translation into English is 'the blood will never become water'.
15. See more on the topic of 'having one's own child' in Melhuus (2007) and Bestard (this volume).
16. For a philosophical account of parenthood see, for example, Bayne and Kolers (2003a).

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