



Article

'I Think It's So Complicated Knowing What to Make of What Children Show': On Child Welfare Employees' Assessments of Children's Reactions to Visitation

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Abstract: The theme of this article is how child welfare workers understand children's reactions when they assess visitation between parents and children in public care in Norway. The data material consists of 35 transcribed, anonymised recordings of child welfare workers from different child welfare services across the country discussing visitation. The analytical approach is based on Sara Ahmed's perspectives on discourses on emotions and how the circulation of emotions creates reactions. This has enabled an exploration of child welfare workers' understanding of children's reactions as hierarchical, produced by stigma and adaptations. This article shows the complexity present when child welfare workers consider visitation between parents and children in public care. It shows how children's reactions to visitation can be interpreted and understood and how this affects the assessments that are made. The article provides an insight into how child welfare workers are influenced by societal discourses about what emotions are and what they do and how this is of significance when assessing visitation between children and parents.

Keywords: foster children; reactions to visitation; Sara Ahmed; emotional discourses; circulation of emotions; stigma



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1. Introduction

In this article, I study how children's reactions can be understood and given importance in visitation assessments made by child welfare workers in Norway. Through Sara Ahmed's (2014a, 2014b, 2021) perspectives on emotions, I show how reactions can be understood in different ways, by showing how social workers' interpretations of children's responses can be influenced by emotional discourses.

In an international context, Norway is considered to be a child-centred society (Hennum 2014, 2015). Within this framework, children are seen as rights-bearing individuals with an independent voice, recognised as competent and able to advocate for their own interests (Hennum 2015, p. 125). At the same time, children are perceived as particularly vulnerable and at risk due to their status as children, with special interests and needs (Hennum 2015, p. 130; Hennum and Aamodt 2021). This dual perception is particularly evident when dealing with children in public care. Furthermore, this child-centred focus has contributed to a societal discourse in which children's responses are given particular weight and where consideration for the child trumps all other considerations (Hennum and Aamodt 2021). As a result, this places a significant responsibility on parents to raise emotionally well-adjusted and compliant children. This means that in recent decades there has been a shift in how parenting is understood, from a primarily private concern to a matter of public and societal interest (Hennum and Aamodt 2024, p. 1). This also affects

the expectations child welfare employees have towards parents in contact with the system and how contact visit assessments could be influenced by these perceptions (Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2024).

Aamodt and Sommerfeldt (2024) found that parents who have been deprived of custody are often expected to engage with their children during supervised contact as if they were still involved in day-to-day caregiving. This expectation overlooks the fact that the nature of their parenthood has fundamentally changed. As a result, children's behaviours and emotional expressions—particularly if they do not indicate happiness or well-being—can carry significant weight in professionals' assessments, including in decisions regarding contact visits. In addition, the strong focus on children's needs and responses may result in less attention being paid to the parent's situation and role. In such cases, there is a risk that the parent-child relationship will be deprioritised in favour of a more one-sided child-centred approach (Clapton et al. 2022).

A care order triggers mutual rights to visitation for both children and parents. This is firmly anchored in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights' (ECHR) interpretation of this (Gerds-Andresen 2020, p. 126). Assessments of contact and what is in the best interests of the child are often complex and multifaceted. They must be individualised and rooted in the specific situation the child is in at any given time (McWey et al. 2010; Gerds-Andresen 2020). As the right to visitation is rooted in the biological principle, it is considered of intrinsic value for the child to be able to maintain contact with their parents. The exception is if the best interests of the child outweigh the right to contact (Gerds-Andresen 2020, p. 128). Although this is a principle in Norway, there have been different opinions. For example, a report (NOU 2012) was published in 2012 which argued that a psychological bond was more important than a biological one. This argument could have an impact on the social welfare system and practice in cases where children are in public care. How child welfare workers understand the best interests of a child may therefore have an impact on visitation assessments.

Research has shown that contact between children in public care and their parents is crucial to maintaining the relationship between them and that children yearn for a stronger connection with their family and relatives (Aamodt and Mossige 2014, 2018). Research has also shown that children and parents want to have a relationship, even if it is challenging (Ravn 2025). This also means that positive contact visits should be promoted, rather than just contact for its own sake (Pye and Rees 2019; Rugkåsa and Backe-Hansen 2025). In addition, recent research (Huseby-Lie 2023) has shown that children want more contact with their parents when the contact is perceived as positive. At the same time, a prevailing notion has been that contact with parents can involve difficult transitions and trigger painful memories and emotions (Sen and Broadhurst 2011; Stang and Baugerud 2018, p. 49). This can lead to challenges in settling down in a foster home and has thus been considered harmful to the child (Beek and Shoefield 2004). This shows some of the complexity and challenges that child welfare workers face in managing assessments (Taylor 2018; Korpinen and Pösö 2021).

According to Stang and Baugerud (2018), there is a lack of good empirical studies examining the effects of contact and visitation with parents for children in public care. In addition, we know little about what kind of contact promotes or inhibits children's development (Gerds-Andresen 2020, p. 128) but that there is a need for greater facilitation to improve the quality of contact (Martínez et al. 2016). This research supports the ECHR judgements made against Norway. One of the reasons why the Norwegian Child Welfare Service was convicted by the ECHR was that they had not provided sufficient visitation between children and parents in cases where the child welfare services had been granted

custody of the child and that insufficient provision was made for possible reunification with the parents (Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2022). Recent research (Alvik 2021; Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2022) shows that the ECHR judgements have influenced practice in that the previous norm of limiting visitation to four to six times a year is now less normative.

Alvik (2021, p. 6), in her review of 37 decisions made by the Child Welfare Tribunal and 32 decisions made by the Court of Appeal, found that several factors are taken into account when assessing visitation between children and parents who have been deprived of custody. In most cases, assessments are made as to whether the contact would be too much of a burden for the child. These are linked to assessments of the best interests of the child. Although Alvik found that children's reactions are one of these assessment criteria, she questions whether there can be confusion in practice about where the threshold for reducing contact lies. Among other things, she relates this question to cases where the child has very strong reactions in connection with visitation. In their 2022 study, Aamodt and Sommerfeldt found that child welfare workers consider a child's reactions before, during and after visitation as relevant when making assessments of the extent of contact. Reactions are often interpreted to mean that the contact is not good, which in turn is used as a justification for reducing or not increasing contact visits. They also pointed to a lack of knowledge on the subject.

There appears to be different perceptions of the extent to which children's reactions are important in visitation assessments and how they are understood. Exploring how children's responses and reactions can be understood and interpreted is an important contribution to the field of practice. The aim of this article is to provide some nuances and perspectives on how to understand children's reactions. The analysis is based on the following research question: how can children's reactions be understood when assessing contact between parents and children in public care?

2. A Theory of the Influence of Emotions Between People and Society

Sara Ahmed is considered an affect theorist. Ahmed (2014b, p. 10) argues that emotions are neither individual nor purely social but are created and produced through their circulation and our reactions to objects and others, a process she calls *the sociality of emotions*. She describes how emotions move and can attach to people and things but may also slip past others (p. 8). By focusing on discomfort and spontaneous experiences, she offers new perspectives on interpersonal and societal interactions (Ahmed 2014b, 2021).

In this article, reactions are understood as emotional, behavioural and bodily responses to sensations and experiences. Ahmed (2021, p. 33) believes that it is the circulation of emotions and the effects of the circulation that do something to us. She is more concerned with what emotions *do* than what they *are*, seeing them as something that emerges in the interaction between individuals and their surroundings. She also highlights how emotions are valued hierarchically. Certain emotions are valued more than others; joy and happiness are seen as positive, whereas anger and depression are often labelled as negative. She (Ahmed 2014b) also argues that the dominant perceptions reward both the ability to control emotions and to respond and react with the 'right' emotions at different times and in different places.

By analysing the effect of emotions, Ahmed (2021, p. 13) sheds light on their bodily dimensions. She (Ahmed 2014b, 2021, p. 32; Mortensen 2017) argues that emotional pain is not just something we can feel in our bodies but is also a socially conditioned phenomenon. Ahmed (2014b, p. 8) claims that emotional pain is not just an individual experience but is also shaped by societal understandings of suffering (p. 9).

Emotions are intentional (Ahmed 2014b, p. 209). They have direction, shape our understanding of the world, and influence how we interpret experiences (Ahmed's 2014a,

2014b, 2021). Discourses around emotions and affects construct definitions of what is considered true and good, thereby influencing the power structures and political rhetoric in which emotions are made tangible and operationalised (Ahmed's 2014a, pp. 25–26). Ahmed (2014b) further argues that emotional pain is relational, yet inaccessible to others. As *pain witnesses*, we may acknowledge another's pain but never fully experience it ourselves. This can lead us to want to take the pain away, either out of compassion or because the pain we are experiencing makes us uncomfortable. Other people's pain can create doubt in us, because it can be experienced as incomprehensible and therefore beyond our control. (Ahmed 2014b; Mortensen 2017).

Ahmed (2004, 2014b, 2021) has also developed the concept of the economy of emotions, in which emotions function as a form of capital that produces social phenomena. *Affective economies* distribute emotions across cultural and linguistic contexts (Ahmed 2021, p. 35). The affective economy can be described as a household of emotions (Pultz 2021). The concept of the affective economy gives us new emotional interpretation possibilities and shows that emotions play a central role in how individuals and groups of people become visible through the way emotions circulate (Ahmed 2021, p. 30) and often stigmatise certain groups (Ahmed 2021, p. 14). These economies shape social orientations. In this way, emotions can be projected and define inclusion and exclusion, with negative emotions projected onto marginalised individuals and groups (Ahmed 2021, p. 14).

Finally, Ahmed (2014b) argues that emotional wounds and injuries should be acknowledged. She uses scars as a metaphor: they should heal, but instead of becoming invisible, they should remain as a sign of the injury and serve as visible markers of past experiences. Accepting emotional pain and the wounds it can cause may also help us to equate such feelings with emotions such as joy and happiness and by doing so change the social understanding of emotions.

In this article, children's reactions before, during and after contact with their parents are seen as emotional responses and circulations encountered in different relationships. Sara Ahmed's (2014b, 2021) perspectives are therefore relevant both to understanding children's reactions when they meet their parents in a visitation context and how this can influence social workers' assessments.

3. Methodology: Descriptions of and Rationale for Methods

3.1. The Empirical Material

This study is part of a larger research project studying decisions about visitation and contact between parents and children in public care (Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2022, 2024). As described by Aamodt and Sommerfeldt (2022, p. 85), an invitation was sent to 25 child welfare services in different parts of the country. Five of them from both urban and rural areas responded positively. They were given a Dictaphone, which the workers used when making assessments about contact visits between children and parents. The assessments were for actual ongoing cases. The audio recordings were made in 2020 and 2021 and resulted in a total of 37 recordings. They lasted between 20 and 120 min, and the cases discussed varied greatly. Between four and seven people took part in the discussions, and which employees took part varied. The data scope of this study is therefore extensive.

I was given access to 35 transcribed, anonymised audio recordings, which form the empirical data base for this study. This means that I do not know the workers' names, nor which child welfare service the discussions come from.

The starting point for this article was to analyse what child welfare workers express about children's reactions to contact, and how reactions are given importance in assessments related to visitations.

3.2. Ethical Considerations

It has been clarified with Sikt (the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research) that approval for the study did not need to be applied for through their channels, as the data material was already anonymised before I gained access to it. Nevertheless, general principles such as respect, ensuring good consequences, justice and integrity were applied to the study to ensure ethical conduct (DNFK 2016). Also, regarding the ethical issues that could arise because the research affects people, the project involves children and people in vulnerable positions (Johannessen et al. 2010, p. 90), so as a researcher I had an overriding responsibility to avoid harm (Berrick et al. 2000).

3.3. Analytical Strategies

In my analyses, I looked at how the employees expressed, communicated and understood children's reactions during their assessment meetings. When initially analysing the transcriptions, I identified statements about reactions. I realised that the employees did not always use the term reactions but could use other words to describe reactions. My first impression was that the children's reactions were rarely mentioned, whereas the focus was often on the parents or other issues related to visitations. Because of my many years of experience in this field, and because I can be said to be part of the dominant discourses and language used in such child welfare discussions, I did not initially get hold of any clear and obvious ideas about children's reactions to visitation. It was only when I re-read the notes that I noticed something in common between the transcripts, both concerning what they said and how they expressed themselves in terms of reactions and the meaning given to reactions. This became clearer when I looked analytically at the transcribed recordings, both individually and as a collection. It was only when I found the repetition of the same expressions that the analysis revealed some common features that could be understood as dominant discourses about reactions among the child welfare workers. It was at this point in the analysis process that I was able to see how these representations of children's reactions could be analysed using Sara Ahmed's perspectives on emotions and affective expressions. I found that Sara Ahmed's (2004, 2014a, 2014b, 2021) perspectives on emotions and how emotions influence, circulate and trigger reactions, gave a certain direction to the process, allowing reactions to be seen as emotional expressions. They also provided access to information about how society, in the interaction between the individual and the collective, influences and is influenced by different emotional discourses. Exploring which emotions and reactions were accepted and focused on or not provided me with information about how emotions were interpreted, understood and reacted to. Using Sara Ahmed's understanding of how emotions can circulate through discourses, I was now able to look for emotional reactions and how understandings of children's reactions can influence the assessments made. These included descriptions of how the child welfare workers understood both parents' and foster carers' understandings of children's reactions. This analysis strategy broadened my understanding of reactions. I became more aware that this could also mean affects and feelings, which made me look for statements that were in line with this. After this review, the statements and interpretations of the children's reactions were organized and grouped. This contributed to obtaining the results of the analysis.

3.4. Assessment of Data Material

I do not know whether the framework and situation for the discussions were as usual, but it appears that the employees met to discuss visitation. This can be determined at the beginning of many of the transcribed recordings. I am aware that there may have been good reasons for what was said in the discussions which I have not been made privy to

or do not know about, since I was not part of the situation and context in which the child welfare workers were involved.

The pandemic was still ongoing when the recordings were made. Some of the discussions therefore took place digitally, due to restrictions and arrangements for working from home. It is not clear from the transcribed material whether this affected the discussion, but this was a situation that may have affected its flow and whether everyone had and took equal opportunities for contribution. In addition, for example, poor internet access may have caused interruptions in the meeting or made the conversation choppy or delayed.

Having an audio recorder present during the discussion might have affected the employees. There are examples of them pointing out that they were being recorded because they had forgotten about it and had said something that they perhaps thought was a bit sloppy or had been taking out their frustration. It is possible that this made them more aware of what they were saying than they would normally be. This may have had an impact on the dialogue and discussion and therefore on how the dialogue developed into the assessments that were made. It may also have meant that they were not as outspoken or participatory as they would normally be.

It could be argued that using Sara Ahmed's perceptions of emotions provides narrow and limited analytical results. If, for example, I had used trauma theories or behavioural theories to analyse the child welfare workers' descriptions, the result would probably have been different. Nevertheless, by analysing the transcribed material through the lens of Ahmed's perspectives on emotions and affective economies, this article provides an insight into how we can understand what the employees expressed as relevant reactions and how these reactions gained importance.

4. Findings: Child Welfare Workers' Understanding of Children's Reactions to Contact

In the child welfare workers' discussions about visitation, children's reactions are highlighted as an argument when they are making assessments related to the quality and extent of visitation. In the discussions, children's reactions are only one part of the assessment of visitations, but they are given great weight in the decisions about various aspects of visitation. In the following, I will present three categories that were analysed: *no* reactions are understood as better than reactions, parents are seen as the cause of reactions, and children's reactions are understood as an adaptation to a relationship or situation.

4.1. No Reactions Are Understood as Better than Reactions

The analysis shows that, in most of the discussions, the employees have similar understandings of what reactions are and what importance they are given. The children's reactions are described in terms of what was visible to others and are understood as something that needed to be acted upon. When the children's reactions are described, they are categorised as, for example, strong or weak or a lot or a little. On the other hand, *no* reactions, which are not visible to others, are understood as not requiring action, in the sense that the visitation is then considered to be good. Rarely is it asked whether there might be other ways of understanding this, or whether the child might have internal reactions. As the employees give reactions great importance in the assessments in connection with visitation, the analysis shows that reactions are divided into two mutually exclusive categories.

Furthermore, children's reactions are labelled either by using the word itself or by describing the child as having different emotional expressions, such as anger, crying or fear. Joy is rarely mentioned as an emotional expression. Behavioural expressions that the child might have had are described as, for example, physical agitation, hitting, acting out, clinging and rejection. In addition, the employees describes specific consequences; for

example, in the days before, during and after contact, the children could have had poorer or less sleep, found it more difficult to concentrate, not gone to school or ended up in conflict with others.

The example below is from a discussion where there are two parents who want more visitation. They have four visitations a year of three hours each. The siblings have supervised visitation with the mother, but visitation without supervision with the father:

Employee 1: And we think that 'the boy' is the one who has reactions. He gets really tired after visitation. But it's both with mum and dad.

Employee 2: Is it the eldest?

Employee 1: The youngest. Nine years old. And then he tells us that he is both looking forward to and dreads visitation. That's why he's anxious beforehand and doesn't want to know about the contact until the same day. He also describes how tired his body, legs, stomach and head are after contact. And he has trouble getting to school the next day.

This discussion shows how the employees emphasise the child's reactions before and after visitation in relation to assessments for increased visitation. The conclusion is that the mother is not granted increased visitation.

In the next extract, the employees are discussing a case where a father wants more visitation with his daughter. She is seven years old. There are three visitations a year with supervision. The girl has lived in a foster home for 4–5 years, and the placement is defined as a long-term placement. In other words, it is not intended for the girl to be returned to her parental home:

Employee 1: In our definition of a long-term placement, it is at least a long-term placement. So, I think three is enough to maintain the relationship with a biological parent. But it's difficult, because she doesn't have such clear reactions immediately after visitation and prove to the Child Welfare Tribunal that it's harmful to her. So, I'm not sure how I would have argued in favour of three if I was going to the Child Welfare Tribunal.

Here, we can see how the employee finds it difficult not to give the father more visitation, since the girl does not have clear reactions. This may indicate that if the girl had shown clear reactions after visitation, it would have been easier for the employees not to give the father more visitation.

The example below is from a discussion about a father who wants more visitation. The child welfare service had already increased the number of visitations from three to six per year. However, the father wants a further increase to 12 times a year. The outcome of the discussion is that the increase to six visitations is maintained.

Employee 1: Yes, this is the case we discussed a short time ago, with this dad that we doubled the visitation from 3 to 6. Do you remember it?

Employee 2: Can you say the age of the child?

Employee 1: Four years, it's a boy. There have been no reactions from the boy, the visitations are going well.

Employee 3: As long as he doesn't react to the visitations, the father becomes like someone else in the network. So, you can't say from what I'm hearing now that it will be detrimental to him. Or that he will react to it.

When the employee says 'as long as he doesn't react to the visitations', it could mean that having no reactions is considered preferable. Furthermore, it may mean that when the child does not show reactions, the child is considered to have no reactions, and since reactions are considered harmful, no reactions can be understood as something good. No

reactions are equated with the consideration that the contact between the child and the parents is good.

This last excerpt is from a discussion in which the employees are deciding whether the parents should have more visitation. The boy is four years old, lives in a foster home and has lived there since he was a baby. He has visitation with his parents that lasts for one hour, three times a year with each of them. The foster parents are supervising the visits. The parents are satisfied with the boy living in the foster home, but now they want more visitation:

Employee 1: And then mum and dad want more visitation. There have not really been any particular reactions from the boy after visitation. But the last time he spent time with his mum, it was clear that he needed his foster mum to be much more involved in his interaction with his mum. He had told his foster mum 'I just want to play with you'. And afterwards, he had been much more sensitive and hurt.

Employee 2: But if we concentrate on the father first, what do the rest of you think?

Employee 3: Does the boy have any reactions after visitation?

Employee 1: They don't report any reactions in the boy after visitation with his father.

Employee 3: I think so too. If we consider that it is good for the boy to have more visitations with his father and there are no reactions . . . The father is good with him and plays with him and follows his initiative.

Here, we see how the staff use the child's lack of reactions as a basis for granting more visitation, while also discussing the change in the boy's reactions after visitation with his mother. It seems that the reaction is understood to mean that something had arisen in the contact with the mother that was difficult for the boy. The result of the discussion is that the father might be given more visitation.

As the example above shows, it is also the case that in most of the discussions, the employees talk about reactions without explaining or describing what having reactions can mean. It appears that they have a common understanding that having reactions is something that is not desirable and that it is something that is considered harmful to the child. This is reflected in the fact that reactions to visitation in many of the discussions trigger a limitation of or no increase in visitation, while no reactions are understood to mean that contact is good for the child, as shown for the boy in the extract above.

4.2. Parents Are Seen as the Cause of Children's Reactions

When the child shows reactions in connection with visitation, the discussions are primarily about the conditions of contact with the parents and thus the effect of visitation. It appears that the employees consider the reactions to mean that the visitation is not in the best interests of the child. In the discussions where the child's reactions are described, the most common view is that the contact visit is too demanding for the child or that contact with the parents is too difficult.

The extract below discusses visitation between a boy and a mother; the mother wants more visitation. It is reported that the boy had not had any reactions so far, but that there had been a change during the last visitation:

Employee 1: I thought that the boy might be reacting to mum's instability, that he can sense it, while the father is stable and gets good visitations. So, we also must look at what it does to the boy to increase visitation when he has reactions to the visitations. I think that this should be one of the reasons in relation to the best interests of the child.

In this extract, the reason for the child's reactions is attributed to the mother's instability, and it appears that the staff consider that visitation cannot be increased due to the

boy's change in behaviour. During the discussion, the employees do not mention any other factors or circumstances that might have caused the boy's change in behaviour.

There are several discussions in which the employees put the child's reaction in the context of factors related to the parents' state or situation. It is expressed that children's reactions vary depending on how the children experience and understand this. The following excerpt shows how the staff discuss whether visitation should be increased after the parents have requested it. This concerns a pair of siblings. The employees discuss an increase in visitation for the individual children, but the assessments are also made regarding the siblings as a pair:

Employee 1: 'The boy' is 13. He's the eldest, and he also has reactions. At times he is quite disruptive in the foster home. And the foster home sees that it fluctuates in line with concern for the parents' and their mood.

Employee 2: Do you have many examples of this?

Employee 3: Yes, it happens at times.

Employee 1: He can bite the foster parents, he can hit them, he can throw bottles at the foster father's head.

Employee 3: He's physically abusive, he's hit and hung himself over the foster mum, leaving her with bruises.

(...)

Employee 1: The boy stated when the mother had to cancel because she had a cold, that 'mum didn't want to see us.

Employee 4: I think the professional argument is the children's unrest when visitation doesn't take place, because for the children the cancellation is linked to their parents being worse off. If we organise many more visitations, there's a good chance that the mother won't go through with it. If we give more visitation and the mother doesn't manage to follow through, it will send a signal to the boys that she doesn't want to see them, that she doesn't care, or that she can't manage it now. Because now she's sick.

Even though the parents want to increase the amount of visitation, the staff consider that this cannot be accommodated due to the mother's functioning. The discussion emphasises the conditions and instability of the mother and that this is what causes the boy's reactions. The decision is made not to increase visitation.

The next extract concerns a girl who had expressed a wish to see her father more often. The father was not granted access by the Child Welfare Tribunal, but guidelines were laid down that visitation should be organised on the girl's terms. The dialogue with the father is perceived as positive, but the employees express that they have lost contact with the father and that it is difficult to get hold of him. For example, the father does not have a telephone. The employees say that they have to contact the father's partner to talk to him. They also describe how he doesn't always turn up for visitation:

Employee 1: In my mind, I think that there is the minimum visitation that we set up, and then we can always stretch beyond that as well. Because what can be challenging is to get ... what can I say?

Employee 2: Completed it

Employee 1: Yes, because one thing is if we set up something permanent, and he doesn't turn up, and doesn't come. The girl was really disappointed in the father too. She hadn't received a reply to a letter, and he hadn't turned up for her birthday, and so on.

Employee 2: And he also refused to come if we didn't pay for his partner, and that she should be part of it. So, it's not entirely unproblematic.

Employee 1: The father also has a long way to travel.

In this discussion, several factors related to the father emerge that are considered difficult and make it a challenge to increase visitation. For example, it is expressed that he is difficult to get hold of, that he does not always turn up, and that he does not communicate when he would not be coming to the visitation. The discussion also emphasises that the father has a long distance to travel and that he demands that his partner is also paid for travelling. The conclusion from the visitation discussion is to allow minimal visitation to prevent the girl from being disappointed, even if the girl wants to see her father more often than she does at present. This can be understood as the child welfare workers choosing not to allow more visitation because the employees want to avoid the girl being disappointed.

4.3. Children's Reactions Are Understood as an Adaptation to a Relationship or Situation

A third finding is that a child's reactions are understood to change depending on who the child is in contact with. In the following extract, the staff discuss a boy's reactions as a response to how his foster mother interacts with him. According to an employee who supervises the visitation with the parents, the visitation is perceived as something that the child appreciates and there are good visitations between the child and the parents:

Employee 1: But I'm a bit concerned that the foster parents are negative towards the parents, and that can't control the visitation (. . .) the foster parents handle this in a way that causes the child to have these reactions. . . it's just a hypothesis, but what's a bit difficult is that we interpret it to mean that many of the statements the boy makes, about his feelings in relation to visitation or in relation to the mother and the father, are not his statements. They are the foster mother's statements. She may say when she meets him after visitation: 'Oh, I can see you're tired now. Or, oh, are you upset now? Has the visitation been difficult? That's the first thing she says.

Here, we can understand the extract as the staff interpreting the child's reactions after visitation as a change from having no reactions in the meeting with the parents to showing reactions in the meeting with the foster mother. How the foster mother shows her perception of the parents through words and affective expressions affects how the boy interacts with her. This can be seen as an example of how children can show different reactions depending on who they are in contact with. As the workers see the child's reactions as an adaptation to the foster mother, these reactions do not influence their assessment of the contact. If one of the employees had not attended the contact visit, it is possible that they would have interpreted the child's emotional expressions as reactions to the visitation, rather than as they do. As well as showing how children can adapt to carers' responses, this may be an example of how intertwined and complex the factors are when staff make assessments in relation to contact visits.

In summary, the analysis shows that child welfare workers consider children's reactions to be relevant information and give it importance when making visitation assessments. When children have reactions, they want to reduce them because they are seen as harmful, and it is believed that children should be spared and protected from them. Furthermore, the analysis shows that child welfare staff consider *no* reactions to be better than having reactions. The analysis also shows that children's reactions are primarily linked to the visitation and to their contact and relationship with their parents, except for in the extract above, where the boy's reactions are linked to the foster mother's negative attitude towards his parents. The analysis also shows that in most cases the discussions lead to a reduction in the number of visitations or that the number of visitations are maintained rather than increased.

5. Discussion: Seeing Reactions in Light of Sara Ahmed's Perspectives on Emotions

The analysis indicates that the majority of employees consider visitation as a burden when the child shows reactions. As described in the findings, reactions are seen as changes in behaviour and emotional responses that occurs before, during and after visitations. Reactions are seen as something the child welfare workers want to reduce. In this way, the analyses show how reactions can be interpreted as being painful and hurtful for the child. The solution to reduce reactions is to regulate visitation. In addition, it appears that reactions are primarily seen as harmful. Reactions such as showing joy are rarely talked about. This may be an example of a hierarchical definition of painful emotions not being equal to or as desirable as good emotions. Reactions are seen as emotional pain and something that should be avoided. Thus, the argument is that children should be protected from reactions. A hierarchical view of emotions and reactions can influence practice and create normative judgments. Regarding so-called negative emotions, a society can construct a truth about the expression of emotions and what are considered healthy and appropriate forms of expression. An example can be anger. It is accepted if it is controlled and does not cause discomfort. Fear that persists over time can be understood as anxiety, and long-term grief can be defined as complicated or as depression. With such a view of emotions, we can understand employees' need to do something about the reactions and prevent the reactions from developing beyond what is considered the norm. The employees see a reduction or no increase in visitation as the solution. Following [Ahmed \(2014b\)](#), we can interpret the results to mean that the employees are part of a hierarchical emotional discourse. If the employees were part of a different emotional discourse, bad feelings and emotional pain could possibly have been seen as harmless and as part of the human experience. The reactions could have been interpreted as being the most appropriate in the situation and thus solutions could have been provided other than reducing or not increasing visitation.

The results show that the employees see *no* reactions in a child as good. *No* reaction appears to mean that the child is satisfied, and the visitation is considered as positive. This can be interpreted to mean that child welfare workers, as part of their emotional discourse, have a dichotomous perception of showing or not showing reactions during visitation. There is a hierarchical definition and a valuation. *Not* showing reactions is considered better than showing reactions. The analysis also shows that it is no problematisation in the discussions when the child does not show visible reactions. Not a single example is found of a discussion in which the employees discuss or wonders whether there might be other possible interpretations than that *no* reactions are good. How can we understand such an interpretation? [Ahmed \(2014b\)](#) believes that affect reactions are a constant social process and that they are always *doing* something. Doing involves action. The body is needed for action. At the same time, the body is more than what we see externally. Reactions can also be what we do not see. Ahmed points out that although reactions come from the influence of other subjects or objects, thoughts and experiences are formed in the body, in the person. This means that although emotional reactions are a product of contact with something or someone, they are not always expressive. They are not always visible. This means that *no* reaction does not necessarily mean that there is *no* reaction. The results do not show that the employees ask questions when the child does not show reactions. We do not know whether the children in these data had internal reactions, but it could be a possibility. It is even likely. So, why does the employees not look for them? One interpretation could be that the predominance of the focus on reactions as harmful, because of the hierarchical interpretation of reactions, means that the employees do not focus on non-visible reactions. This may have the effect of depriving them of important information that they should be aware of when assessing contact visits.

Ahmed's (2014b, 2021) theory offers new perspectives on reactions and interactions between people. It provides a new way of seeing emotional discourses, even for me, coming from the field of practice. The employees in this study can be contextualised as part of an emotional discourse. The discussions and the focus on so-called negative affections can also be understood as a consequence of the social movements and hierarchical perception of reactions. They are produced, circulated and influenced by both historical and contemporary perceptions in society's political, religious, professional, linguistic and value-based activities (Ahmed 2021, p. 13). Through the perspectives of the circulation of emotions and how discourses in a society or a system affect and shape the exercise of practice, Ahmed (2014b) also shows how negative emotions and understandings can stick to individuals and groups. From the analysis, it emerges that the child welfare workers mainly believe that it is the conditions around or associated with the parents that create the reactions in the children. There are few discussions where other perspectives or interpretations are given. Instead, the perceptions of the parents are doubly negative. Reactions are seen as harmful, and parents are given responsibility for them. In these cases, there has been a care order, and one might think that the parents have been deprived of custody for a reason. This will most likely also affect the interpretations of the parents and thus the reactions of the children. In their study, Aamodt and Olkowska (2022) found that parents who are deprived of custody carry a stigma in society. These parents are often one-sidedly referred to and portrayed in the media as abusers and child molesters, which means that they are marginalised and excluded from society. Such stigmas are examples of negative sticky feelings. This may be an explanation as to why staff see parents as the cause of children's reactions. In addition, this could maintain a hierarchical understanding of a child's emotional reactions to visitation. The effect can be a loop that means that assessments about visitation will continue on the same track.

Ahmed (2014b, 2021) points out that people generally want to get away from discomfort. We can assume that this also applies to child welfare workers. Removing their own discomfort may therefore be another possible interpretation of why the solution is to reduce or not increase visitation. They have the decision-making authority to find solutions. In most of the discussions, the solution is to remove what they understand to be the cause of the reactions: contact with the parents. When children show reactions and emotional pain, it can be perceived as difficult and intangible for child welfare staff. The discomfort that comes from the intangible makes them react. This does not mean that employees are incompetent or unprofessional in their assessments. Everyone is affected by their emotions. In addition, the assessments to be made are complex. There are many factors and concerns that child welfare staff must always consider. People may have a need to simplify the complex, because the complex can make us perplexed (Ahmed 2014b). In this way, we can understand why the employees do not explore different interpretations of the reactions but choose less visitation as the solution. The focus on the practical fact that the assessments are about the number of visitations causes their outcome to be perceived as more tangible and thus contributes to making the complicated assessment work easier, in turn making it easier to make decisions. At the same time, it can be understood that there is a circulation of emotions from descriptions of children's emotional pain reactions. They spill over into discomfort among the employees (Ahmed's 2014a). Seeing the staff as pain witnesses to the children's emotional reactions makes it easier to recognise the relational aspects of pain. The data support the idea that people are affected by the pain of others. The emotional pain that emerges here shows that pain cannot be seen as merely private or individual, but as social and relational (Ahmed 2014b).

A child's reactions to contact can also be seen in the light of the child's context. Social organisation (Ahmed 2014b), such as foster care, affect the conditions in which a child

grows up and the child's development. Among other things, this organisation influences the conditions of the child's contact with their biological family. This organisation will therefore affect the child's reactions and opportunities for action. Living in a foster home is also a situation few children experience. Growing up in such a context can be argued to be outside the norm for how most children in society grow up. In many cases, this type of upbringing can present greater challenges and complications because it involves several carers with different expectations and different relationships with the child. The results show how a foster mother's negative feelings towards the parents circulate and affect the child. Her performative reaction demonstrates her attitude to the parents. This may explain how emotions are produced in the child. The child is dependent on and needs to bond with his new carers but feels that there is no room for his parents or that his parents are difficult or dangerous. There is an economisation of the affects. The child adapts to the sticky feelings in the meeting with the foster mother in order to maintain the relationship. As it appears based on the employee's discussion, the child shows something different in the meeting with the foster mother than during visitation with the parents. Reactions are adapted to what is most appropriate for the child. One possible risk, however, is that the foster mother's sticky feelings are circulated to the child to such an extent that they can make the child's contact with his parents more difficult.

Visitation is also a form of social organisation. This organisation affects how visitation between children and parents can be understood and carried out. It thus also affects how children and parents interact. This study indicates that the employees have a hierarchical perception of emotions and reactions. It is possible to imagine that this also creates a certain behavioural repertoire of affects and emotions for children and parents when they meet and interact. It may appear that there are certain criteria for how parents show emotions and react in visitation with their child and how the child reacts in a visitation with their parents. Some things are accepted, some are not. Affective optics occur; we see what we are looking for (Danbolt et al. 2013, p. 11). This contributes to the fact that affects and feelings have different conditions for circulation and stick to some very specific bodies and objects more than others (Ahmed 2014b, 2021). In these data, this applies, for example, to how we view parents and how we understand children's reactions. As some feelings and reactions are considered more acceptable than others, it also makes sense that the employees feel the need to reduce or not increase visitation when parents behave and react in a way that is not considered the norm or what is accepted. From this perspective, we can also understand the need to focus on what can be performed and what child welfare workers can assess. For example, foster homes placements can be seen as a type of organisation that includes many factors that must be considered. The solution may be to focus solely on the child–foster parent relationship. The effect may be that the complex is simplified, and that other ways of understanding reactions and relationships receive less focus.

Considering the results, a child's reaction can be understood as something that is created between the child as a subject and others as emotional objects. Emotions involve a kind of economic accounting and affect a child's relationship to something and someone. This understanding makes it possible to identify specific affects and expressions in the child as being the most appropriate for the situation the child is in. It is about recognising that emotions neither have the child as a starting point nor as an end point, but as one of many points between which emotions circulate. As the results show, we can see how emotions circulate further and produce perceptions and effects that are beyond the child's reaction to visitation. Negative attitudes and emotions such as disgust and anger are attached to the parents as objects through repeated language acts and are reinforced through circulation. The circulation binds the emotional reactions and the social aspects together (Ahmed 2021, p. 14).

6. Summary of Reflections

The results of this study have shown how we can understand the importance that child welfare workers attach to children's reactions to visitation. Using Ahmed's (2014b) theoretical framework for emotional discourses and how emotions circulate between individuals, groups and societies, the analysis shows how child welfare workers appear to have a hierarchical understanding of reactions. No reactions are better than reactions. Based on such a discourse, we can understand why the employees want reactions to be removed, as these are interpreted as harmful.

In addition, the article shows that emotions are not only individual or social but also a product of a society's political discourses about different groups and individuals, here, birth parents. The results of this study indicate that this may affect the perception of children's reactions (Ahmed 2004; 2021, p. 13).

The point here is to contribute, as Ahmed (2014b, p. 210) does, to an understanding of how different kinds of perspectives on emotions and reactions can lead to what we see being coloured by what we look for. This article sheds light on how emotions can be defined hierarchically, how different emotions have different values, and how circulating emotions affect how we as a society interpret and accept each other. In this way, it may be possible to explore new ways of understanding children's reactions and affective expressions in encounters with their parents and carers that extend beyond the expectations of what is accepted (Danbolt et al. 2013, p. 17).

As a final thought, Ahmed's (2014b) use of the term scar may be an appropriate understanding of children's strong reactions and painful emotional expressions. If children's reactions are accepted, rather than being removed, and we create conditions and circumstances that help the child to tolerate the situation they live in, we might be able to contribute to a change in the child's reactions.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the recordings during data collection. However, as the data I was given access to had already been anonymised, consent was not required and not possible.

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