

The language and policy of care and parenting: Understanding the uncertainty about key players' roles in foster care provision

Gregory Hollin ^a, Michael Larkin ^b,

^a University of Nottingham, UK

^b University of Birmingham, UK

Keywords:

Attachment

Foster care

Looked-after children

Discourse

Social work

Policy

Abstract

Recent debates about the care provided to looked-after children have been characterised by uncertainty about the differing roles and responsibilities of foster carers, birth parents, and social workers. To explore the assumptions underlying these uncertainties, we drew upon Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and compared the discourses used by professionals (social workers in a group discussion about foster placement breakdown) with those used by policy-makers (in the Governmental green paper 'Care Matters'). In both cases, a discourse based upon Attachment Theory was used to explain why placements succeed and fail, and to predict the repercussions of failure. However, there was a key difference in the way that professionals and policy-makers constructed the roles of key players in foster placements. The social workers constructed the birth parents as the parental figures for children in care, constructing themselves in a non-parental role. 'Care Matters' largely ignores the role of birth parents, and instead constructs social workers as parental figures. Neither source viewed foster carers as parental and 'Care Matters' positions this group as strictly professional. We discuss the incongruence of foster placements being understood through Attachment Theory, while foster carers are understood as non-parental figures, and also the repercussions of labelling a social worker as a parent, and the professionalization of the role of the foster carer.

1. Introduction

The standard and type of care received by looked-after children is a critical issue for policy-makers and professionals. The issue is frequently amplified by media reporting of individual cases of neglect and abuse, and by the occasional systemic failings of the social care provided by entire local authorities. The substantive long-term psychosocial costs are the underlying concern, however. Existing research suggests that generally, outcomes and life opportunities for children who grow up 'in care' are worse than for those who grow up in their birth families. Their difficulties may be connected to a number of familial, social and relational risk factors, such as early abuse and neglect, parental and family functioning, social disadvantage, and child temperament (Cairns, 2002; Meltzer, Gatward, Corbin, Goodman, & Ford, 2002; Rostill & Myatt, 2005). The task facing professionals and policy-makers alike is how best to moderate and protect against these risk factors.

Increasingly, the consensus has been to move toward foster care, and away from residential care. Despite recent claims of a crisis (Maluccio & Ainsworth, 2006), throughout Europe, the percentage of looked-after children placed in foster homes has increased substantially over the recent decades (Colton & Hellinckx, 1994; Colton & Williams, 1997). In the UK, the proportion of looked-after children in foster care has risen steadily from 36 per cent in 1979 (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987) to 68% of children in 2005 (Department for Education & Skills (DfES), 2006), to 73% in 2010 (Department for Education, 2010). At the same time, the number of children in residential care dropped from 35% in 1979, to 13% in 2005 (DfES, 2006).

Several reasons have been suggested for this move away from residential care and towards fostering. One explanation is that the change reflects not so much a pro-fostering stance as an anti-residential stance. Certainly, 'People Like Us' the influential report produced by Sir William Utting (1997) names this distrust of residential units as an important factor in the public consciousness, describing the uncovering of systematic abuse in residential units as "the area of greatest current anxiety" (Utting, 1997, p. 22) in the provision of services for looked-after children. From a similarly pragmatic school of thought is the knowledge that fostering is a substantially cheaper option for the State than residential care. Utting (1997) notes that to place a child in a residential unit costs seven times more than to place them in a foster home. This view of fostering as a cheap option must surely be influential in a Government's thinking, and it is an idea that is reflected in the literature (e.g. Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000).

Whatever combination of these factors has influenced the rise of fostering, foster homes do seem to be generally enjoyed by the children placed within them (Barber & Delfabbro, 2005). Perhaps this enjoyment is explicable as, according to Ian Sinclair and colleagues (e.g. Sinclair & Wilson, 2003; Wilson, Petrie, & Sinclair, 2003), the formation of an attachment relationship is at the heart of successful placement. A foster placement may, then, more easily allow a child to remain part of a home and a family within their community. Indeed, some authors (e.g. Butler & Charles, 1999) have suggested that the move to fostering reflects a Western belief that the traditional 'nuclear family' is the best environment in which a child can be brought up. That the nuclear family should itself be considered a social institution (Bengtson, 2001) with its own set of power relations (Jackson, 1999) does however mean that any effort by the State to 'deinstitutionalise' children by placing them in foster homes is surely misplaced.

Despite this generally positive experience, foster homes do of course suffer from their own problems. While abuse still occurs in a small minority of foster homes (and at a lower level than in residential units, Utting, 1997), a more frequent concern is what happens when foster placements breakdown. A breakdown is defined by Berridge and Cleaver (1987) as:

“A placement ending that was not included in the social work plan, either in the ending itself or the timing of the termination.” (p. 30)

Numerous studies have found that around 20% of placements breakdown in their first year (Barber & Delfabbro, 2005; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Rowe, Cain, Hundleby, & Keane, 1984) with an increase to around 40% after 5 years (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987). Interestingly, there is little evidence to suggest that these percentages have changed substantially over the decades (Butler & Charles, 1999) despite the fact that we may expect more difficult children to be fostered now, given the increasing numbers of children residing in such placements.

Although there may be times when it is preferable for a placement to breakdown (Heller, Smyke, & Boris, 2002 and Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008), generally it is the case that placement breakdown is a distressing, and even traumatic, experience for young people (Unrau et al., 2008), foster carers (Wilson et al., 2000) and social workers (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987). In a study which brings together all three of these perspectives, Rostill-Brookes, Larkin, Toms, and Churchman (2010) describe how

“a strong sense of fragmentation and detachment dominates many of the accounts. The participants typically adopt conflicting group positions, characterised by discourses of mistrust and miscommunication. This means that reactions to the breakdown are suppressed or dismissed; resentments build-up and attempts to find a solution are thwarted by silence or angry recrimination. Division and splitting between the participant groups appears to limit opportunities for shared emotional processing, and consequently the experience of the breakdown remains unacknowledged.” (p.19).

This underlying uncertainty and anxiety about who is responsible, and what for, merits further examination and analysis. The socially preferred means of understanding foster care, and the assumptions which underpin them, have not previously been explored. Understandings of the function of foster care, and ideas about the roles of those involved, are connected to other prevailing discourses about childhood development (see Burman, 2007) and the meaning of ‘family’, however.

In these areas, discourse analytic approaches have been used to identify and unpack contested issues and to identify unexamined assumptions. Left unchallenged, these assumptions can cause conflict and misunderstanding. We might consider, for example, the linguistic connotations of ‘residential units’ or ‘foster homes.’ It is one of the functions of discourse analysis to draw our attention toward the constructive effects of such as language. Would we rather reside in a ‘unit’ or a ‘home’? What kinds of lives are lived in such places? In the form of discourse analysis which has been most clearly influenced by the philosophy of Foucault (Foucauldian Discourse Analysis - e.g. see Parker, 1999), we are also required to examine the implications of such language, in terms of their intimate connection to structures of power. Discourses are ‘structures of knowledge’ (ways of understanding something) which are directly linked to ‘ways of being’ and ‘rules for doing.’

In the developed world, there are some positions which are more easily occupied and defended than others, in relation to the role and purpose of ‘a home’ or ‘the family,’ for example. Such positions open up practical and political possibilities, and close down others. Decisions made about looked-after children, and about the foster families who care for them are no exception to these rules, and will be shaped by prevailing discourses. To understand the operation of these discourses, the dilemmas which they produce, and their consequences for young people and families, we must examine them ‘in action.’ Two particularly rich, and complementary sites for such work are in the language of policy, and the talk of professionals. In our study, we will apply some of the principles of discourse analysis to social workers’ accounts of placement breakdowns, and to the UK government’s green paper on social care, ‘Care Matters’ (Department for Education & Skills, 2006). We do this with the aim of enhancing understanding of some of the key dilemmas of social care policy and provision.

2. Methodology

2.1. Approach

In the context of work by Foucault, 1972), the term 'discourse' has a specific meaning, summarised by Hall (1995, p. 201) as "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic [...] The discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which a topic can be constructed."

For example, if we describe an acquaintance as "egotistical," "anal retentive," or having a "death wish," we could be said to be utilising a 'psychoanalytic discourse', because these words originate from the work of Freud. This would be the case regardless of whether we were aware that these words originated from Freud. The language has the effect of placing our acquaintance in a particular subject position – it identifies them as a particular sort of person - and a set of further ideas about this person, and actions which one might take, will follow on from this.

There is no expectation that we are aware of the discourses we use to construct people and objects. Indeed, speakers are not expected to be able to freely choose from a limitless range of discourses and their 'decision' may not be a personal one. Inherent in Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) is a focus upon power, and how power can be seen in language and talk. Accordingly, the discourses deployed may be expected to reflect the powerful and prevailing cultural and institutional understandings, rather than any personal choice. FDA seeks to uncover these discourses, and in so doing, to help us understand how we construct knowledge and experience (Parker, 1999).

2.2. Design

In the context of our own study, we take a comparative view. Given that there is confusion and uncertainty about the function of social care, and the roles of those involved in it, it is interesting to consider the construction and representation of these issues from the perspective of two of the more powerful stakeholders: professionals and policy-makers. Our professional perspective is supplied by a group of social workers. Our political perspective is supplied by 'Care Matters.'

2.3. Participants: Group discussion

Senior figures within the Children's Social Care section of a large, non-metropolitan county (henceforth referred to as 'the County') in central England were approached regarding the project. The County is a medium-sized county with a County Council catering for approximately 600,000 residents (Brown et al., 2007).

Five members of staff from the County took part in a single focus group session. These focus group members were:

- Participant 1: A female senior practitioner based in a unit covering the west of the largest town within the County (population approximately 60,000; (Brown et al., 2007).
- Participant 2: A female social worker based in a unit covering the east of the aforementioned town.
- Participant 3: A female social worker based in a town (population 30,000; (Brown et al., 2007) in the northwest of the County.
- Participant 4: A female social worker based in the same unit as Participant 1.

- Participant 5: A male social worker based in a town in the southwest of the County with a population of approximately 40,000 (Brown et al., 2007).

All participants were white and aged between 30 and 60 years-of-age. The discussion was facilitated by the first author; a white, 23-year-old, male, postgraduate psychology researcher.

The study received full ethical clearance from The University of Birmingham's School of Psychology ethics committee. Further, the study was approved within the County's own Research Governance Framework. All participants provided informed consent.

2.4. Governmental literature

'Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care' is a Green Paper presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Alan Johnson, in October 2006 (DfES, 2006). A Green Paper is not a policy commitment, but it is used to stimulate discussion and to indicate the directions which a government's plans and policies are likely to take. However, the 'Care Matters' Green Paper went on to be translated into policy via the 'Care Matters' Implementation Plan of 2007, and so the understandings laid out in the Green Paper are an important indicator of the policies of the last government.

2.5. Group discussion

A group discussion was chosen as the best environment to collect this data because it allows participants to debate issues among themselves and collectively make sense of their experiences, whilst also allowing the interviewer to remain relatively unobtrusive (Krueger, 1988), something that was seen as beneficial, given the research aims.

The recorded discussion took place in a meeting room at the headquarters of the County Council. Before the interview, a series of topics were identified by the authors as being of particular interest and these were brought up in the following, planned, order:

- The factors that are considered when placing a particular foster child
- The relationship between the social worker and the foster child.
- The relationship between the social worker and the foster carer.
- What factors make placements successful.
- What happens when placements breakdown.

- What resources are available to social workers to aid children in care.

The recording came to an end when these issues had all been discussed, and the participants appeared to have said everything that they wished to say, after around 70 min.

2.6. Analytic procedure

We established a procedure for our Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, based principally on the strategies described by Parker (1999) and Willig (2001):

- 1) A transcript was produced verbatim (semantic content, primarily, and some selected prosodic features) from a tape-recording of the interview. We opted to focus primarily upon the active content of the two texts, rather than to emphasise the social processes at work in the group discussion, so that analysis of each text would speak to the other. This choice is reflected in our choice of data extracts in the next section, which are, for the most part, relatively short quotations from individual speakers, rather than long sequences of interactions between speakers.
- 2) Upon this transcript, and the text of Care Matters, the authors marked each discursive object, and noted the way in which they believed them to be constructed within the texts. Discursive objects are usually simple nouns, but may be more complex on occasion (Parker, 1999). Examples within this text are 'emotional needs', and 'placement breakdowns'. Our aim here was to identify what the text was about – what were the main things which mattered, within it.
- 3) In a similar manner, subjects occurring within the text were labelled, as was the manner in which these subjects were positioned. Examples of subjects within this text include 'the foster carer' and 'the child.' An example of a subject position would be 'the social worker as caregiver.' Our aim here was to consider how particular people or groups of people were understood within the text.
- 4) Discursive objects, subject positions, and the manner in which they were constructed were tabulated. The tabulated analytic work was then organised into discourses, and each one was labelled. Our aim here was to organise our detailed coding of the texts, and then to merge and interpret these codes.

There is no pretence that the interviewer or the coder can be neutral in the process described above. The revealing and labelling of discourses is an interpretative action, and subjectivity brought to the text by the authors will almost certainly be of influence (Parker, 1999). This is a necessary consequence of the relativist epistemology adopted by FDA.

3. Analysis

3.1. Utilising a discourse based on Attachment Theory to understand children and their response to foster placements

Ideas about attachment proved to be central to the understandings of relationships between looked-after children and their caregivers which were preferred in our two data sources. Attachment Theory was developed by John Bowlby in the 1950s (e.g. Bowlby, 1951, 1956) and has been hugely influential upon contemporary understandings of human relationships, specifically those between parent (initially the mother; subsequently, the 'primary caregiver') and child. In childhood, a consistent, reliable and close relationship with someone who provides security

and comfort has been shown to be important for psychological development, and ultimately for wellbeing, personality and successful relationships in adulthood.

Both the social workers and Care Matters utilise a discourse which draws upon Attachment Theory to understand children's behaviour. The social workers are able to do this explicitly, as demonstrated by Participant 1 in the following passage:

“...they have been putting some good training on about Attach-ment Theory and about all the associated behavioural issues with that...” (Participant 1)

Within ‘Care Matters’, Attachment Theory is not given direct mention quite so frequently, but its presence is clear. In ‘Care Matters’ it is stated that carers should have “key competencies” that include a knowledge of “Child development; attachment, separation and loss” (p. 49). ‘Attachment’, ‘separation’, and ‘loss’ are the titles for Bowlby's seminal trilogy (1969, 1973, 1980) and it therefore seems that Attachment Theory is important to the understanding of a child's needs within ‘Care Matters.’ This is further demonstrated in the following passage where ‘emotional needs’ are framed by the key terms such as ‘attachment’ and ‘loss:’

“Both groups (social workers and carers) should be able to respond to children's emotional needs and immediate issues around attachment and loss related to entering care or changes of placement.” (p. 78)

As well as the use of an attachment discourse to understand the needs and behaviours surrounding children entering care, at other points it is noted that a lack of consistency is seen as “damaging” (p.32), further reinforcing the ongoing importance of attachments to a child's welfare.

3.2. Understanding foster placements through an attachment discourse

Implicitly and explicitly, an Attachment Theory discourse is used by the social workers to represent successful and unsuccessful foster placements, and to understand the key events that occur within them.

In the following passage Participant 1 describes a placement breakdown in terms consistent with Attachment Theory. Placements are understood to fail when the foster carer is unable to fulfil the role of primary caregiver and ‘cope with the child's needs.’ Such a breakdown is seen as particularly damaging to the child, again because of reasons associated with Attachment Theory:

“I think in my experience of placement breakdown has predominantly been around carers not being able to cope with the behaviours and emotional needs that the children present with and, um, unfortunately by the very fact of the placement breaking down it's kind of compounding the child's problems because it's yet another rejection, another breakdown of an attachment relationship for them and it makes their life that much more difficult as they move forward.” (Participant 1)

It seems clear from this account that the local authority is understood to be placing a child with the intent or expectation of an attachment relationship being developed. And, even in instances in which the foster carers cannot ‘cope’ (an event described in these terms by all five participants, at different points in the discussion) this understanding is maintained; for the child has suffered ‘another rejection’, a ‘breakdown of an attachment relationship’ and this makes their life ‘much more difficult.’ Thus, placements – even placements in which the carer has not bonded with the child – are situations in which attachments are understood to develop, and to dissipate upon breakdown.

Uni-directional attachment breakdown is understood to be damaging, then. It is therefore not surprising that breakdowns in placements which have lasted for a longer period of time, thus allowing for a mutual bonding to develop, are portrayed as particularly damaging:

“...once a child is there (in a placement) and perhaps settled reasonably well, you then want to maintain that placement because it is going to be disruptive to the child and damaging to the child to move them.” (Participant 1)

These placement breakdowns are ‘disruptive’ and ‘damaging’ to the child — terms again associated with a discourse based upon Attachment Theory. Participant 2 utilises the term ‘attachment’ itself and again describes the negative impact of placement breakdown, exclusively through terms associated with it:

“So then they build up attachments sometimes if they've been in that placement for quite some time. And then, you know, you've got to wrench them apart from that family, which then impacts upon the child's emotional needs, especially if they've build up a good attachment...” (Participant 2)

Participant 4 also utilises an attachment discourse in order to understand why placement breakdowns are negative events — with children ‘emotionally damaged’ by them:

“We have taken children into our care and for different reasons these children have ended up perhaps in their lifetime having a succession, not a succession, but a number of different placements that ended up emotionally damaging them to some degree.” (Participant 4)

However, Participant 4 goes further. Participant 2 described residential units as having “huge reputations” and a place where you “dread that child having to go there.” And yet, for Participant 4 these institutions may be preferable to foster placements, such is the emotional effect of placement breakdown:

“I think with very aggressive quite violent behaviour which is very hard for foster carers to cope with and I think that is the difficulty we have with foster carers. This generally means that we're putting these children into very confined situations and that's why sometimes there is an argument I can see for children's homes because there the children won't face the level of rejection that they may within a foster care and repeatedly going to different foster homes and a experiencing that level of emotional rejection.”

A discourse based in the terms of Attachment Theory then is essential in allowing the social workers to understand both the needs and behaviours of children, and why foster placements fail; carers are unable to form a sustainable bond (to ‘cope’) with the child. As demonstrated above, this behaviour itself is already understood as being caused by the breakdown of parental attachment relationships. Further, the negative impact upon the children is also understood through attachments – the breakdown constitutes another ‘rejection’, another ‘breakdown of an attachment relationship’ and further ‘impacts’ upon the ‘emotional needs’ of these already ‘damaged’ children. The consequences of these breakdowns are so severe, that Participant 4 recommends placing some children in residential units for the sole reason of avoiding ‘emotional rejection’.

Consistent with this view, the “best carers” are those who are constructed as being “child-focused” with “real stickability” (all Participant 1); namely those willing to bond with the child. These qualities were present in one particular carer, and this:

“...makes the world of difference to us as workers, but also to the child. The fact that someone is prepared to make that sort of commitment to them.” (Participant 1)

‘Commitment’ from ‘someone’ (note the singular, depicting the importance of a primary caregiver) is emphasised as making ‘the world of difference’ – and the importance of someone willing to be the primary caregiver to a successful placement is clear. A successful placement is not simply one in which a child has a place to stay, but one in which a consistent, perhaps permanent, attachment is formed.

As mentioned previously, the role of attachments in the success of a foster placement (Sinclair & Wilson, 2003; Wilson et al., 2003) and the degree to which placement decisions should consider the possibility of future attachments (Bullock, Courtney, Parker, Sinclair, & Thoburn, 2006) has been widely discussed in the literature. Nonetheless, it is of interest and significance that both policy makers and social workers are also able to draw upon this framework in order to understand and comprehend the workings of foster placements.

3.3. Constructing the role of 'the parent'

The role of the parent, and especially the mother, is clearly attributed great importance in Western culture, with images of the mother with her child frequently depicted as the physical manifestation of childhood security (Burman, 2007). This is especially the case within Attachment Theory, where the attachment between the primary caregiver (usually mother) and child is accounted for through the process of natural selection (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1993); the attachment exists because it enhances the survival chances of the child.

Given the strong presence of an attachment discourse within the arena of the placement, and given that the biological parents are no longer in immediate proximity to the child, the question arises as to which subject, if any, should be constructed in a manner consistent with a primary care giver.

3.3.1. Social workers' construction of 'the foster carer'

The first candidates of immediate note are the foster carers. Indeed, foster carers are referred to as (foster) "parents" on numerous occasions by several respondents (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4) and indeed as a "full-time parent" (Participant 1) in one instance. Despite this, the term is still used in the minority of instances, with 'carer' preferred by a frequency of around 8.5 to 1. It should be noted, that if we compare this with the usage of the group facilitator (without forethought) then this difference becomes stark. In this role, the first author used the term "foster parent" in almost every incident, perhaps reflecting wider cultural discourses. Despite this significant preference for the word 'carer,' foster carers and the placements over which they preside are seen as important and in many respects, familial. For example, Participant 5 suggested that one of the signs of a successful placement was that the child receives "the benefit of a good family life." Further, as demonstrated above, a placement is constructed as a place in which emotional needs are catered for and attachments are formed.

Despite the presence of such terms, another more dominant discourse runs through the descriptions of the foster carers and their roles. The carers are positioned as having a "job" (Participant 4) or having "a job to do" (Participant 1). It is also made clear that this 'job' is not to be a surrogate parent with complete control over any child placed in their care. In fact, foster carers who adopt this stance are seen as problematic; foster carers have a "role" (Participants 1 & 5) that is defined as being within (rather than at the head of) a hierarchy of roles. When attempts are made to exert more power than this role allows, conflicts arise:

"The children have had enough trouble as it is and some foster carers seem to have the ability to want to, umm, take over the role which to some extent is far and above what their actual role is, er, and that can cause difficulties, especially when you have to challenge it..." (Participant 5)

Here, Participant 5 is depicting foster carers who attempt to adopt a powerful role with control over the child, as 'difficult'. The opposite is also true, with foster carers who know their 'role' viewed in a far more positive light:

"(When you are assigned a certain) foster carer you breathe a sigh of relief because you know that you can work with them, that they understand what their role is, what some of the expectations are, erm, and it just tends to go a lot more smoothly in those situations." (Participant 1)

While the foster carers are undoubtedly constructed as important personnel for the child during their time in care with certain parent-like qualities, there is little to suggest that the role is equivalent to a parent per se. The social workers construct foster carers as having significantly less power than parents and with a clearly defined role – apparently determined by the State.

3.3.2. The construction of the foster carer by 'Care Matters'

Like the social workers, the terms 'foster parents' and 'foster carers' are used interchangeably within 'Care Matters'. However, there is a strong tendency towards 'foster carers', preferred by a frequency of 16 to 1.

The recognition that there may be "issues around attachment and loss related to...changes of placement" (p. 78) indicates an acknowledgement that significant attachment relationships, perhaps akin to parental relationships, can develop within placements. This is further confirmed by the statement that:

"...where they work well, placements meet children's needs extremely well, enabling attachments to develop which can build resilience and help sustain children through life's difficulties." (p. 42)

While this does not suggest that the purpose of a placement per se is to allow an attachment to be formed, attachments do occur when placements 'work well' and attachment relationships in turn are presumably therefore seen in a positive light.

Despite this recognition that important attachment relationships can be developed within foster placements, foster carers are not constructed solely, or even predominantly, as parent figures. The role constructed for foster carers within Care Matters is laid out in the following passage:

"This tiered model (of child needs) would be structured around the needs of children, with carers being trained and skilled to a greater or lesser degree depending on children's individual requirements. The model would offer a ladder of career progression for carers who would have the option of developing their skills to enter higher tiers [...]. The model would be underpinned by: A new framework of skills and qualifications incorporating the principles of social pedagogy to support the tiered approach, set out in national occupational standards; A new Foundation Degree in working with children in care to ensure that care is seen as a key part of the children's workforce. Successful students would attain the status of "children in care expert practitioner" which would be available also to other professionals including designated teachers; A degree-level qualification as an extension of this foundation degree for those wishing to build on it; Revised National Minimum Standards for fostering services and residential care linking explicitly to this new framework; A revised framework for fees building on the national minimum allowances for foster care and setting out the level of fees which might be associated with each tier; A mandatory national registration scheme for foster carers, putting them on a par with their colleagues in social work, residential care and other parts of the children's workforce." (p. 48–49)

While a tiered system would retain a 'needs' led service, we can see that the role of the carer is also being moved away from familial and towards professional. Carers would now have a 'career' and a clear emphasis on promotion ('ladder', 'progression', 'higher tiers'), incorporated are 'skills', 'qualifications', 'occupational standards', 'degrees', 'fees' and 'registrations'. Foster carers are a key part of the 'workforce' and are included with other 'professionals' such as social workers and teachers.

3.3.3. The construction of the social worker by 'Care Matters'

Within 'Care Matters' it is the State, or the 'corporate parent' (see Bullock et al., 2006, for a discussion of this term), which should adopt the role of parent, given that the foster carer is constructed predominantly in professional terms:

"Children have told us that the lack of a consistent adult in their lives is a major and harmful feature of being in care. Chapter 3 sets out in detail how the corporate parenting role should be carried out in order to address this gap." (p. 7)

The individuals identified from within the State, who are expected to be 'good parents', putting 'their own' child first, and embodying the role on a 'day-to-day' basis – much like a primary caregiver – are the social workers:

“As the corporate parent of children in care the State has a special responsibility for their wellbeing. Like any good parent, it should put its own children first. That means being a powerful advocate for them to receive the best of everything and helping children make a success of their lives. Children's social workers embody this corporate parenting role on a day to day basis...” (p. 31)

The role of the social worker is consistently constructed as that of the parent and primary caregiver within an attachment discourse. Thus they are positioned as the 'stable' adult in a child's life:

“What children need more than anything is a stable, confident parent able and willing to be vocal on their behalf. This is the role of the social worker” (p. 31)

They are also positioned as the person best able to appreciate a child's needs and act in their best interests:

“They [social workers] should be able to build strong and lasting relationships with children and their families, and act as a strong advocate for the child's interests.” (p. 34–35)

To further reinforce this construction of the social worker as the parent of a child in care, it is suggested in 'Care Matters' that the foster carers are not so well placed for this role:

“The reality is that because placements do – and sometimes should – change, the social worker is generally the best person to take on this consistent parental role.”

We may note, of course, that social workers too sometimes change. Social workers get promoted, change career, or move location. And yet while the 'reality' is that placements do change, a social worker who leaves their post is constructed as an “inconsistent parent” (p. 31).

Indeed, the discourse illustrated above constructs the social worker quite differently to the foster carer. While it is never denied that social workers are in employment – the term “job” is still used – this aspect of the social worker is depicted negatively. 'Care Matters' recommends the introduction of Social Care Practices, “autonomous organisations” which would be “commissioned by but independent of local authorities” (p.35). The introduction of Social Care Practices is an attempt to remove social workers from an employment structure, featuring “policies”, “practices,” and “structures” which come with an “inherent tension” (p.35) — presumably with the role of the parent.

While 'Care Matters' takes active steps to move the construct of foster carer away from a familial discourse and towards a discourse of paid employment, the opposite is true of the social workers; the portion of the role associated with work is diminished and constructed in a negative light, the familial side is lifted into a primary location, with the social worker taking over the role of the parent.

3.3.4. The social workers' construction of 'the social worker'

There is evidence that the social workers construct themselves as figures with whom the children develop and emotional relationship and in some senses an attachment. For instance, Participant 4 describes the positive effects of her 'consistency' on the well-being of a teenager, an effect that would be associated with the attachment figures in Attachment Theory:

“I can think of one particular teenager that I had to work with for three and a half years and she was, umm, very challenging, but I think, the consistency there, when she later left care, and I met her, she actually said that she found having the same social worker helped her, you know, helped her a lot.”

Similarly, Participant 2 constructs the loss experienced by one of the children after a change of social worker in very similar terms to those suffered after a placement breakdown:

“I think it impacts upon the children as well if you get a child say, 6 or 7, that you go into proceeding with, or if they come in on Section 20 and you have that child for 2 or 3 years they become to trust you and when you have to hand them over to somebody else, it really does affect their emotional needs because they've told you things and built up a relationship and that trust is just taken away”

Despite the fact that this relationship between social workers and foster children is constructed as both important and central to the child's wellbeing, there is good reason to believe that it is not constructed in a way entirely akin to that of a parent.

The construction of a non-parental relationship is evident in various forms. The social workers do not, for instance, ever employ the term ‘corporate parent’, with its associated connotations. Rather, the four participants who describe themselves in the third person (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4) use only the term “social worker.” Further the participants refer repeatedly to their “jobs” (Participant 1, 2, 4) and their “duty to perform” (Participant 5) and a “duty to accommodate that child” (Participant 2). This language of ‘workers’, ‘jobs’, and ‘duty’ seems to be based firmly within a discourse of employment, rather than the family.

The manner in which the relationship between social worker and foster child is constructed by the social workers is also far from parental. Participant 2 describes how the relationship between social worker and foster child is dependent upon ‘age’, ‘understanding’ and being able to ‘explain’ to the child what is ‘going on’:

“...it (the relationship) depends on the age and the understanding of the child as to if you can explain to them what's going on...”

This experience is echoed by Participant 1 who again determines age and understanding as important factors in a relationship:

“Five of the seven children that I've got that are in care are preschool children, so roughly three of them are babies, one's three and one's four. So there's a limit to the extent that you can ...well, you can build up a relationship to the extent that they would know and recognise you, but not in the way that you would with an older child.”

The relationship being constructed is one of responsibility (‘I've got’), development (‘build’) and mutual understanding (‘not in the way you would with an older child’). This is quite different from the parental attachment relationship that is depicted in the developmental psychology literature, where it is described as being mutual within weeks or certainly months of birth (Mizukami, Kobayashi, Ishii, & Iwata, 1990) and present in a uni-directional form (from parent to child) almost instantaneously.

Rather than being parental, the relationship is depicted more as one between a customer and a service provider. The use of terms such as ‘job,’ ‘duty,’ and ‘worker’ has already hinted at this relationship, but it is made explicit by Participant 4:

“...when I first knew them I went through almost, like a process with them and then they became team-mates and it was like they rejected me in a way and I felt that they moved on, in a different sense. It seemed almost like we reached a completion in our relationship.”

Participant 4's statement firmly supports the conclusion that the relationship is constructed differently to a parental discourse. The foster children are ‘team-mates’ and further have the power to ‘reject’ Participant 4; it is inconceivable that these are the terms on which a traditional Western parental relationship with its own power structures (e.g. Parker, 1999) would be based.

3.3.5. The social workers’ construction of ‘the birth parents’

For the social workers, it is the birth parents that are constructed in a parental role. From a nominative perspective, the birth parents are always referred to as 'parents' or with the single-parent noun associated with such a role (e.g. 'mother' or 'father'). Further, the term "birth parent", which may be considered to signify the presence of 'non-birth' parents is used only once by Participant 5, with the term "birth family" also used once (Participant 3). However, the term "parent" without a prefix is used far more frequently, preferred to 'birth parent' by a frequency of just over 10 to 1. The lack of the clarifying prefix may be taken to imply that the term parent can only 'really' refer to the one group; the birth parents.

The importance attributed to contact with birth parents supports this conclusion that a unique role is constructed for parents. While birth parents are frequently presented as flawed or aggressive, they are nevertheless constructed as individuals of the utmost importance. 'Contact' is a re-occurring theme throughout the interview. Like 'parent', 'contact' is frequently used without a clarifying (i.e. 'with the parents') term and therefore seems to be an event that takes a uniquely important position. Contact is something that the social workers need to "balance" (Participant 5) against all other considerations. In the case of "young children" there is an "expectation" that "they have contact with their parents 5 days a week" (Participant 1).

There is a non-negotiability to contact that separates the event from all others discussed by the social workers. While keeping a child in the same school when faced with a large economic cost would be "a controversial decision" (Participant 4) (despite the obvious repercussions this would have for a child's social relations with their peer group) a child has "got to be brought to contact" (Participant 1) even if they have "got to be brought halfway across the county". Indeed, large sums of money are available to allow for this contact, with Participant 5 describing how "£10,000" had been spent providing transport "for school and contact" for a sibling group of five.

The reason for this immovable stance is quite clear; contact with the birth parents is a fundamental part of fulfilling a child's 'needs.' You have to "meet the contact needs of the children" (Participant 5) and foster parents "know when the child has to have contact, they know what the child's needs are" (Participant 2). These 'contact needs' appear to be a key constituent of the larger category of 'emotional needs,' associated with an attachment discourse. The conclusion therefore is that the social workers in this interview construct the biological parents as primary caregivers and as the parents, to the exclusion of themselves and foster carers.

3.3.6. 'Care Matters' construction of 'the birth parents'

As with the role of social workers, the contrast between the role constructed for birth parents by the social workers and that constructed by 'Care Matters' could not be starker; the role of the birth parents during the course of a foster placement is curiously absent from 'Care Matters'. Birth parents/families are referred to as such throughout the document both with and without the prefix of 'birth'. However the majority of these references refer to the reasons why children came into care, proposed support services for a child once they return to the care of their birth parents, or appear after the words "has no contact with" (e.g. p.39).

The entity of 'contact', so crucial to the social workers, is used only once in reference to Tier 1 children. The only other time that contact with birth parents is mentioned is to state that it may exacerbate problems in children who misuse substances (p.42).

The conclusion to be reached therefore is that the birth parent is constructed as someone almost entirely irrelevant to the fostering process. While both social workers and foster carers need to be aware of issues regarding separation and loss following arrival into care, this is presumably more of an obstacle that must be passed, than something that must be accommodated for. The constructed role of 'the parent' is, for the duration of care, not the birth parent's to claim. This is unsurprising for, as previously mentioned, this role is already filled by the social worker in 'Care Matters.'

4. Discussion

The current study compares how social workers and Governmental literature constructed both foster placements and the importance of personnel within them. We have observed that discourses based around Attachment Theory are drawn upon by both the social workers and 'Care Matters,' but that each constructs the parental role rather differently. The social workers position themselves as 'team-mates' of the children, with a relationship dependent upon age and understanding, and they position the birth parents in the traditional parental role. Within 'Care Matters' however, birth parents are relatively marginal, and it is the social workers themselves who are positioned as parents. Neither party consider foster carers to be 'parents,' despite the fact that these are the people charged with 'coping' with the child's needs, and providing daily care and support. Indeed, 'Care Matters' explicitly constructs the foster carer role in professional terms. One important implication of this is uncertainty is the apparent conflict between the construction of a foster placement primarily through an attachment discourse, and the construction of foster carers as non-parental. What is depicted is a situation in which both social workers and the Government (and academics) see positive placements as those which allow attachments to flourish, which bring a security and consistency to the child's life and which allow for their emotional needs to be met by providing 'all the benefits of a good family life'. At the same time as this however, foster carers are constructed as part of the workforce, providing a service to the child, akin to their 'colleagues' in the social work and teaching professions. Further, foster carers who attempt to adopt a position at the top of a 'carer hierarchy' (in a position we may expect to be taken by parents) are viewed negatively by the social workers.

It must be considered whether these two discourses are actually operating in direct conflict. It is easy to imagine, for instance, a potentially successful attachment being hampered by the belief that a foster carer is over-stepping the mark and transgressing the boundaries of the non-parental role attributed to them. The commitments and 'stickability' of successful foster carers risk being discounted in the context of their increasing professionalisation. While it is beyond the realms of this study to elaborate on the extensiveness of this incongruence and any effects that it may have, it is certainly worthy of further consideration.

A second consideration, that becomes apparent when comparing the constructions within 'Care Matters' and those utilised by the social workers, is the significant difference in role attributed to social workers. There are potentially significant repercussions in the stance taken within 'Care Matters', that the professional aspect of a social worker's post should be diminished. The use of a discourse so firmly based in the familial, and the use of terminology such as 'inconsistent parent' to describe changes in social worker caseload, places considerable pressure on social workers to fulfil the role of the parent and, perhaps, forego changes in career, attempts at promotion, or any other life changes that may necessitate a change in caseload. It should also be asked if this parental construction of the social worker is fair upon the foster child. The relationship that is constructed by the social workers suggests that – regardless of any policy change – it may be impossible for a familial relationship to develop. It has already been demonstrated (Doelling & Johnson, 1990) that expectations play an important part in the development and success of relationships while a child is in care, and we must wonder if this construction of social workers may raise expectations to an unrealistic degree, and be detrimental as a result.

Finally, with regard to the parental role, the conceptualisation of the term 'parent' itself should be carefully considered. It seems to us that while the allocation of 'caring' responsibilities may be perceived as infinitely divisible, 'parenting' is probably not. In Western culture, a parent is not a disembodied skill-set that can be divided between different parties, as some discussions (Bullock et al., 2006) in defence of the notion of 'corporate parenting' seem to suggest. This is not how society depicts the mother (Burman, 2007), how Attachment Theory depicts the primary caregiver, how we picture our parents, or how our participants conceptualise the parents of foster children. Various individuals and institutions may take on particular aspects of the parental role, but this does not make them parents. The construction of roles is complicated (especially given the phrase 'caregiver' in Attachment Theory) but of potential significance. Remembering that an individual's concept of a parent is going to be embodied in a living breathing human will surely clarify future discussions on the parent, corporate or otherwise.

This is certainly consistent with concerns about the connotations of the term 'carer' which have been raised in other domains (e.g. Molyneaux, Butchard, Simpson, & Murray, 2011).

In a related finding, it should also be considered what the effects of professionalising the role of the foster carer – done by both social workers and 'Care Matters' – are more generally. In *Therapy Culture*

(2004), Frank Furedi makes the following point:

“Probably the most significant legacy of professionalisation is that it encourages the formalisation of relationships. Instead of friends, neighbours, elders and the many informal roles for which we have no name, we have peers, mentors, appraisers, life-style gurus, personal trainers and a whole army of counsellors.” (p. 102)

It must be noted that the positioning of the foster carer away from the (private) family and towards the (public) workforce supports the hypotheses of Furedi. 'Care Matters' seems to suggest that it is only through professional training that carers are capable of providing for the needs of children. Recent work by Oke et al. (in press) demonstrates that while successful foster carers do, of course, have specialist knowledge and skills, it is their human qualities (relating, bonding, committing, withstanding) which set them apart as a vital resource for the care of vulnerable young people.

The study should of course be considered in context; we have examined the constructions within one governmental green paper (which underwent modification before becoming the Care Matters plan) emanating from a single Governmental Department at a specific moment in time, and the discourses of one small group of social workers from one particular county. Simple generalisations from these data sources should be avoided, but they do tell us something interesting about the dilemmas facing professionals and policy-makers in this field, and they do provide questions for further study. There is a clear need to examine the discourses of personnel in other portions of the service, notably psychologists, service managers and directors of social services departments. This may allow for a better understanding of the function of roles and placements at all levels. There is also a need to ask similar questions of other important players in the fostering process; how do birth parents and foster parents construct their roles and how do they construct placements? How do foster children construct these roles and the purpose of placements? These are important questions and ones that can be addressed in future studies.

Acknowledgments

We wish to give thanks to all those within 'the County' who considered, assessed, accepted, recruited for, and participated in this research. We would also like to thank Dr Helen Rostill and Dr Biza Stenfert-Kroese for their advice and feedback on this project.

References

- Barber, J., & Delfabbro, P. (2005). Children's adjustment to long-term foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 27*, 329–340.
- Bengtson, V. L. (2001). Beyond the nuclear family: the increasing importance of multigenerational bonds. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63*(1), 1–16.
- Berridge, D., & Cleaver, H. (1987). *Foster Home Breakdown*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Bowlby, J. (1951). *Maternal care and mental health*. World Health Organization Monograph (Serial No. 2).
- Bowlby, J. (1956). The growth of independence in the young child. *Royal Society of Health Journal, 76*, 587–591.

- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss, Volume 1: Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss, Volume 2: Separation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and loss, Volume 3: Loss, sadness and depression*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brown, S., Redgwell, G., & for the Office of National Statistics (Eds.). (2007). *Local and health authority areas population and vital statistics by area of usual residence in the United Kingdom, 2006*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bullock, R., Courtney, M. E., Parker, R., Sinclair, I., & Thoburn, J. (2006). Can the corporate state parent? *Child and Youth Services Review*, 28, 1344–1358.
- Burman, E. (2007). *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Butler, S., & Charles, M. (1999). 'The past, the present, but never the future': thematic representations of fostering disruption. *Child and Family Social Work*, 4, 9–19.
- Cairns, K. (2002). Making sense: The use of theory and research to support foster care. *Adoption and Fostering*, 26, 6–13.
- Colton, M., & Hellinckx, W. (1994). Residential and foster care in European community: current trends in policy and practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 24, 559–576.
- Colton, M., & Williams, M. (1997). The nature of foster care: International trends. *Adoption and Fostering*, 21(1), 44–49.
- Department for Education (2010). *Children Looked After in England (Including Adoption and Care Leavers) Year Ending 31st March 2010*. Retrieved, June 30, 2011 from <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000960/index.shtml>
- Department for Education and Skills (2006). *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care*. London, UK: The Stationary Office.
- Doelling, J. L., & Johnson, J. H. (1990). Predicting success in foster placement: the contribution of parent-child temperament characteristics. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 60(4), 585–593.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London, UK: Tavistock. [Cited in]. Parker, I. (1972). Tracing therapeutic discourse in material culture. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 72, 577–587.
- Furedi, F. (2004). *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1995). *The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power*. In S. Hall, D. Held, D. Hubert, & K. Thompson (Eds.), *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Heller, S. S., Smyke, A. T., & Boris, N. W. (2002). Very young foster children and foster families: clinical challenges and interventions. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 23(5), 555–575.
- Hinde, R. A., & Stevenson-Hinde, J. (1993). Perspectives on Attachment. In C. M., Parkes, J. Stevenson-Hinde, & P. Marris (Eds.), *Attachment Across the Life Cycle*. London: Routledge.
- Jackson, S. (1999). *Heterosexuality in question*. London, UK: Sage.
- Krueger, R. A. (1988). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. London, UK: Sage.
- Maluccio, A. N., & Ainsworth, F. (2006). Family foster care: Development or decline? *Adoption and Fostering*, 30(4), 20–25.
- Meltzer, H., Gatward, R., Corbin, T., Goodman, R., & Ford, T. (2002). *The Mental Health of Young People Looked-After By Local Authorities in England*. London: HMSO.
- Mizukami, K., Kobayashi, N., Ishii, T., & Iwata, H. (1990). First selective attachment begins in early infancy: A study using telethermography. *Infant Behaviour and Development*, 13, 257–271.

- Molyneaux, V., Butchard, S., Simpson, J., & Murray, C. (2011). Reconsidering the term 'carer': A critique of the universal adoption of the term 'carer'. *Ageing & Society*, 31, 422–437.
- Oke, N., Rostill-Brookes, H., Larkin, M. (in press). Against the odds: Foster carers' perceptions of family, commitment and belonging in successful placements. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*.
- Parker, I. (1999). Tracing therapeutic discourse in material culture. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 72, 577–587.
- Rostill, H., & Myatt, H. (2005). Constructing meaning in the lives of looked-after children. In C. Newnes, & N. Radcliffe (Eds.), *Making and breaking children's lives*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
- Rostill-Brookes, H., Larkin, M., Toms, A., & Churchman, C. (2010). A shared experience of fragmentation: Making sense of foster placement breakdown. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Online First, June, 2010, 1–25.
- Rowe, J., Cain, H., Hundleby, M., & Keane, A. (1984). *Long Term Foster Care*. London, UK: Batsford/BAAF.
- Sinclair, I., & Wilson, K. (2003). Matches and mismatches: the contributions of carers and children to the success of foster parents. *British Journal of Social Work*, 33, 871–884.
- Unrau, Y. A., Seita, J. R., & Putney, K. S. (2008). Former foster youth remember multiple placement moves: a journey of loss and hope. *Children and Youth Services Review*, doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2008.03.010.
- Utting, W. (1997). *People Like Us: The Report of the Review of the Safeguards for Children Living Away from Home*. London, UK: The Stationary Office.
- Willig, C. (2001). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Wilson, K., Petrie, S., & Sinclair, I. (2003). A kind of loving: a model of effective foster care. *British Journal of Social Work*, 33, 991–1003.
- Wilson, K., Sinclair, I., & Gibbs, I. (2000). The trouble with foster care: the impact of stressful 'events' on foster carers. *British Journal of Social Work*, 30, 193–209.