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Foster carers' perspectives: the dilemmas of loving the bureaucratised child.

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Declaration.
The names of all research participants, their foster children, individuals mentioned by them and any locations have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

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Abstract.

This research explores the lived experiences of foster carers – how they understand their position. Based on a constructionist, sociological approach it focuses on their personal diverse experiences and perspectives. It contributes to current sociological debates about childhood, contemporary morality and individualisation and considers the relevance of these for social policy. The literature review indicates that foster carers are undervalued and marginalised, precariously balanced at the edges of the several (conceptual) worlds of caring, family, "public" bureaucracy and "private" home life.

These ambiguities are considered through 46 in-depth interviews of a heterogeneous sample which reveal lives full of paradoxes and conflict. Carers justify this because of the needs of the children who are frequently considered to be worth any sacrifice and regarded as priceless in terms of their meaningfulness and emotional value. Yet foster children are bureaucratised – their carers have limited autonomy and are compromised in most areas of their lives by the children's "differences". Anti-social behaviour is excused by the carers, and any blame attached to the children's birth families and the social service departments.

Carers create their own rewards through the children. They position themselves, in relation to the children, as potentially very powerful in terms of the possibility of changing and thereby "saving" them via a particularistic loving tie. The official role of most carers is to prepare each child for a move, preferably back to their biological family. But the carers' love of and commitment to each child may be in tension with the maintenance of children's contact with their birth relatives and thus create a dilemma for all involved.

Foster care provides an identity of care. By contrast with debates on contemporary morality which posit a potential collision between the two ethics of care of self and of child care it is argued that, for foster carers, these are mutually compatible. An ethic of self care is served through their devotion to the children's needs. Caring reassures foster carers that they count.

Introduction.

A census taken on 31 March 2000 identified some 58,100 children[1] in England not living with their families but in state care (Department of Health, 2001a). The majority of them (38,000 or 65%) were with foster families (ibid). Foster care is thus the favoured option for looking after children in public care. These statistics do not include Warren's 1997 estimate of some 11,000 children who were in receipt of short term breaks throughout the year of whom at least 53% had some form of disability. He calculates that on any one day at least 40,000 children are in foster care in the UK and that several thousand more move in and out during the course of twelve months (Warren, 1997). There are now judged to be about 37,000 families who foster in England and Wales (NFCA, 2001).

Foster families and their homes are thus the primary location for the delivery of service for children looked after by the local authority, yet as Berridge (1997) identifies, the foster care service remains under theorised and under researched. In particular we know little about the day to day lives of foster carers - how they manage, how they respond and cope with the challenges and difficulties that face them; how they order and experience their lives. This study therefore looks at how they construct foster care; how they describe themselves as foster carers, their social worlds and how this gives them identity.

There is substantial social research about fostered children but, as chapter one demonstrates in a review of this literature, comparatively little about the adults who look after them. It is significant that during the past 20 years the name foster "parent" has changed (in many areas) to foster "carer". These terms encapsulate the two, sometimes divergent, discourses of family and of bureaucracy (Schofield et al, 2000) that shape foster care. The social services public world discourse of bureaucracy concerns the procedures and systems which oversee and monitor the placement of children within the carers' homes. Along with this is a private-world understood via a more emotional, sentient discourse of relationships and caring as carers include the fostered children within their foster family households. In order to develop a more theoretical approach to a study of how

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[1] Throughout the work "children" includes children and young people.

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the carers manage this, chapter two reviews some of the pertinent sociology literature around family and household, caring, and the notions of public and private. These first two chapters reveal the marginal position of the foster carers in both social research and in those sociological theories which may help to explain the foster care world. They expose the dilemmas and paradoxes that daily face each foster carer (more than carer but less than parent, caring for a public child within their private household) as they must regularly (re)position and (re)present themselves in order to make sense of their life-as-foster-carer.

The aim of this research is to appreciate life-as-foster-carer - how carers experience and understand looking after the children of others. In order to investigate this I interviewed 46 foster carers from 27 foster households (chapter three). My intention was to allow them to define the areas they felt significant in foster care: to allow the research topic to emerge in its own terms (Brannen, 1988). I specifically did not want to hear about the children except in so far as they might illustrate the carers' experiences. I wanted to appreciate how the carers manage the many conflicts and contradictions of caring for public, bureaucratised children within the intimacy of their private homes; to comprehend their understandings.

Analysis of the transcripts shows the presence and the importance of the fostered children to the carers. The first substantive chapter (chapter four) therefore considers this centrality. The children are constructed as deserving of unlimited time, attention, understanding and love. Fostered children are constructed as "victims" who deserve to be "saved". Offering so much to the fostered child gives the carer a moral career but, as importantly, the carer's personal involvement with the child via a particularistic (an intimate, emotional, individualised) tie is also understood to offer challenges and opportunities for personal growth. Fostered children are constructed as so worthwhile that they make life meaningful for the carers. But bureaucratised children are also ambiguous; they are different and present risks. These concepts and their constructions are examined and analysed in chapters five and six.

Chapter five considers the dilemmas of caring for the public child within a private household. It looks at some of the private, "personal" foster home issues and how carers cope with the tensions and ambiguities of looking after fostered children together with

their own blood children. It analyses how, in the interests of parity, carers struggle with the bureaucratic discourse to ensure that all children are "the same". It examines how they manage their lives as natural/birth parents whilst simultaneously acknowledging that they have a professional/foster carer status. There are no immediate, obvious models for foster care so families are left to make sense of their own positions in order to represent themselves in their personal/internal worlds.

Dealing with the public/external (beyond family) world also presents carers with daily dilemmas and inconsistencies as they contend with the local authority and, through them, the children's birth families (chapter six). Social services personnel may expect that foster carers ensure priority for the fostered children whilst carers are attempting a precarious parity between the several children of the household. Coping with these "external" realities seriously compromises the position of the carers and serves to remind them that the children they may love so much are "outsiders" and "different from" their own.

Chapter seven, building on issues raised in the previous three chapters, discusses how the foster carers understand themselves and how they manage all these ambiguities. It considers how they construct themselves as rescuers via notions of family and of home, as change agents and as paid agents; and how some find opportunities through foster care to expiate past personal experiences. Most importantly it explores how they perceive themselves as responsible for the fostered children – their current behaviour and their future lives. Fostering is not only about loving the children and saving them from their abused pasts but is personally gratifying since a particularistic tie reassures the carers that they matter. It gains them a significant place in the child's life and makes their own lives worthwhile and meaningful.

The final chapter draws together these themes to analyse their significance for sociological debate and their implications for social policy. The world of the foster carer makes clearly visible the overlapping of the domestic and the state, society and production through the complexities and contradictions in their own lives. This research highlights the precarious position of the foster carer between (theoretical) worlds – not parent but more than carer, loving a child who is not only bureaucratised but frequently unavailable, and wanting to

provide an exclusive relationship within the social services' prescribed inclusive culture. It considers issues of power, both those of the social services and those of the carer, and how the carers may perceive themselves as marginalised and undervalued. Because of their perceived difficulties many foster carers invoke an individual, particularistic tie with each child in order to confirm commitment. The legitimate role of the foster carer is to care for the children of others for a part of the child's life, but the experiences of fostering may be at odds with this notion. The inference of any dichotomy is that foster carers may want to own the fostered child. The implications are that some foster carers might deny the child's past whilst also impeding the child's future with their own birth family. This may not fit comfortably with the local authority's current child care aims.

Chapter 1.
What do we know about foster carers?
The applied social research.

Introduction.

This chapter reviews the social research literature on foster care with a particular focus on the foster carers themselves. It offers a brief outline of social policy pertinent to childcare in order to set a context for the foster care service, plus a short history of the growth of foster care as a resource for looking after other people's children. It describes both how the foster care service is situated within the social services department and also the several administrative classifications of carers.[2] It reviews what is known about the characteristics of foster carers and concludes by looking at the literature which seeks to faithfully reflect the foster carers' own views, perceptions and explanations about how they make sense of their role. Overall it summarises the current social research knowledge about the context within which the foster carer is placed.

Social policy and child care.

There is a close connection between the histories of childhood and of social policy pertaining to children in the UK, and the development of child welfare law frequently mirrors changing social attitudes towards childhood (Hayden et al, 1999). Ideologies concerning child care in this country can be contradictory (Harding, 1996). When families function without criticism children are regarded as a private responsibility and motherhood is defined as a personal choice (see also Borchorst, 1990). But when families are considered dysfunctional the state will intervene on the basis that children are a public responsibility. The current preferred state provision for children who cannot live with their own families is to place them with substitute/ foster families generally to be looked after by a female carer. Child care norms, corresponding with national statistics, are that most children's primary carer is the mother so this would appear to confirm that the state's general choice meets societal expectation (Ribbens, 1994). But in order that she can be

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[2] See Glossary.

available for this purpose most mothers will have to be dependent upon a wage earning partner (Pahl, 1992). It could thus be argued that child welfare policies which support this arrangement are grafted onto pre-existing beliefs and structures of women as naturally caring, and women dependent upon their male partners.

Beveridge's 1944 overall structure for social security provision assumed that women with children would be supported by a working husband. Although since the 1970s there has been much rhetoric about "supporting the family" (Finch, 1989) this has paralleled underfunding in public expenditure on health, social security and welfare and thus failed to keep up with demand (Family Policy Studies Centre, 1997). Partly as a consequence and in order to fill this gap, the principle that women are their families' carers has become enshrined in community care and the development of social work. This has underpinned Land's (1985; 1978) and Graham's (1985) arguments that, in the past, social policies upheld particular values, normally in favour of men, and thus maintained major inequalities between the sexes.

At a macro level Finch (1986) agrees that an analysis of state policies demonstrates that they maintain and reinforce traditional patterns of gender beliefs but suggests that this is an unintended consequence. Elsewhere she and Mason argue (1993) that it is easier for men to present "legitimate excuses" as to why they are not able to provide care for other adult relatives. Nevertheless, in effect, state social policies operate within a set of assumptions that are gender biased with the result that, usually, women act as unpaid carers within the home for children, for elderly people and for those with disabilities.

Land (1985; 1978) and Finch and Groves (1980) argue that state policies assume and prescribe a traditional nuclear family in which women are the main carers. In fact there are other state policies and provisions for alternative models - for example for single parents - though there are also assumptions about the nuclear family as the preferred norm (Harding, 1996). But the family is continuously being shaped by wider, outside structural forces so that modifications in family life cannot be separated either from other social changes, or from shifts within the sphere of intimacy (Smart, 1997a). Daily life is consequently closely related to politics whilst policy also occurs in micro settings (Duncombe and Marsden,

1995: Hargreaves, 1985) and Giddens (1997) argues that families do not only react to structural changes or to state policy; family members also have their own agency.

But how much agency do individual foster carers enjoy? Their daily life is prescribed by statute, by bureaucracy and by the custom and practice of Social Services Departments. Foster carers have certainly felt the effect of the stringent practice guidelines of the 1989 Children Act. Based on a series of research projects the Act is couched in terms of a service to the children's birth families, not to the needs of foster carers' domestic lives, and was derived from the concerns of professional child welfare specialists (Smart, 1997b). Its three main principles, (the wishes of the child, non intervention and joint parenting) have all ensured that the foster carer's task has become increasingly demanding. Foster carer life has been further challenged by the withdrawal of residential alternatives for the most difficult children and the progressive cutting of local authority budgets. As a result there are more disturbed children under more adverse circumstances needing to be looked after in foster families (Shaw and Hipgrave, 1989a) and, in effect, this means by female carers. Ideologies concerning women and caring are so embedded that they can lead to taken-for-granted assumptions and systems may depend upon socially invisible female work (Davidoff et al 1976: Smith, 1989). A foster "system of care" depends upon the work of women within the private domain, and this review seeks to discover how visible, or invisible, is the work of foster carers.

History of Foster Care.

Ruegger (Ruegger and Rayfield, 1999) traces the history of foster care from references to children in the Bible who were cared for by unrelated adults. Elsewhere historians posit that growing up in another (foster) family may have been common early in the first millennium. There is evidence that, not infrequently, Viking children were raised in more noble families whilst medieval parents, where appropriate, arranged for their sons to be brought up in a family of the Guild to which they were apprenticed (Flekkoy and Kaufman, 1997). Colton (1998) refers to both abandoned children and those of the affluent being placed with wet nurses during the Middle ages in France whilst English sixteenth century records note that young orphans were placed with nurses (Ruegger and Rayfield, 1999).

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But the formal boarding out of poor children in England was first legalised by Hanway's Act of 1767[3] (Adamson, 1973). This was later overtaken by, primarily Victorian, institutional provision which organised basic physical care for destitute children (Ruegger and Rayfield, 1999). In general the prevailing ideologies concerning the care of needy children stemmed from the 1834 Poor Law.

A Report of a Drawing-room Conference on Boarding-out Pauper children (1876) documents the inception of the institutional form of foster care. "Deserving" children might be rescued from the Work House to be boarded out with private families. The report indicates that fostering was a means of cutting the (escalating) cost of poor relief and a means of instilling the "right" values in children by, for example, preparing them for work. This primary source gives the origins of the state system and shows that, in many ways, the issues remain the same. Gradually during the nineteenth century fostering came to be regarded as a charitable act; a means of rescuing children and placing them with substitute families with no thought of their restoration to their birth family. It was considered a long term commitment and the use of the term foster "parent" indicates the surrogate nature of the role. Parker (1990) refers to the "child saving movement" and traces the history of foster care through the nineteenth century as a response to dual needs: a belief that, although male children could fend for themselves within the Work House, young girls should be protected from them, together with a perceived middle class need for better trained female domestics. Interest in the scheme accelerated when, in the twentieth century, it became clear that fostering was cheaper than the upkeep of large institutions.

Development of services.

During the Second World War large scale evacuation of children brought to national attention both an increased public awareness of their needs together with an official

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[3] Act for the Better Relief of the Parish Poor Children, 7 George III, c.3.

concern for those without a "normal" home life. The death of Dennis O'Neill in 1945 from neglect and abuse by his foster parents lead to the Curtis Committee official inquiry (Harding, 1991) which revealed the low standard of foster care supervision by the unqualified Poor Law Officer. Its 1946 Report recommendations laid the foundations for a professional child care service and argued strongly in favour of fostering as the best form of substitute care because the children:

> bore a different stamp of developing personality and despite occasional misfits were manifestly more independent (Curtis Committee, 1946).

This was supported by the Home Office, then responsible for child care, because:

> boarding out is the least expensive method both in money and in manpower and .... it is imperative to exercise the strictest economy consistent with a proper regard for the interests of the children
> (Home Office, cited by Bebbington and Miles, 1990:284).

The 1948 Children Act shifted the balance to recognise that children could be returned home to their families. Although it centralised responsibility for children under the Home Office, actual service provision was delegated to the local authorities' new Children's Departments and fostering was encouraged as a childcare resource (Gray and Parr, 1957). This was later lent further support by the 1953 publication of Bowlby's 'Child Care and the Growth of Love'. Whereas the institutions met the children's physical needs Bowlby identified the importance of also meeting children's emotional needs via an exclusive maternal bond (and incidentally prescribed a set of standards for all mothers which was to confine them to the home). Consequently in the 1950s increasing numbers of children were placed in foster care (Parker, 1990) as the new Act had introduced the concept of fostering as an automatic resource to meet temporary need (Triseliotis, 1989). Fostering was regarded as a natural activity for women, but one that required little or no special training. As a result the culture of many foster families was to offer substitute, rather than complementary, parenting with no regard for the children's birth families (Ruegger and Rayfield, 1999).

The Seebohm Report (1968) recommended the amalgamation of three local authority departments - Mental Health, Welfare and Children into one Social Service Department.

Against the gains was a child care loss with the dissipation of the expertise which for twenty years had supervised children in foster families.

Thus, mainly for financial reasons, the underlying principles of foster care have become care in the community rather than in an institution (Triseliotis 1990) together with a bid to give children the ordinary "normal" family life it is presumed to provide (Packman, 1993). Homes which, in the perceptions of those then organising the placements, most closely conformed to what Packman refers to as their bourgeois ideal, with a working father and a fully available mother. However this ideal was challenged by three studies of foster care (Trasler, 1960; Parker, 1966; George, 1970) which cast a critical eye over the service noting its high rate of placement breakdowns (almost 60% in George's study) and the lack of accord between carers and social workers.

Yet in 1974 a group of foster parents and social workers together formed the National Foster Care Association (NFCA[4]) with the aim of enhancing the service for the benefit of the children. During the seventies fostering was predominantly for young children whilst older children were cared for in children's homes. But a crisis of confidence in residential provision during the 1980s, caused by low morale and the revelation of specific instances of systematic maltreatment within institutions (Berridge and Brodie, 1996), resulted in government pressure to increase the supply of foster families, particularly as a cheaper alternative. This finance-driven policy was regularly confirmed by bodies like the Audit Commission who noted that "the potential for improving value for money by increasing the percentage of children placed with foster parents continues to exist"[5] (1985:2). Alongside this, a fundamental tenet of child care policy was that every child had a right to

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[4] Now known as The Fostering Network.
[5] Warren (1997) estimates that the cost of residential care for a child or young person is six times more than a foster care placement. The Social Work Research and Development Unit at the University of York quotes costs of £497 million for 5,000 children in residential care as against £267 million for over 40,000 children in foster care (1998), that is almost fifteen times the cost. But see also Knapp (1983) who argues that the cost differential is actually much narrower.

"normal family life" (Rhodes, 1994) so that fostering became part of institutionalised welfare (Voigt, 1986).

Effect of the 1989 Children Act.

Successive child care policies and their underpinning legislation were rethought with The Children Act, 1989. This had a marked effect upon foster care. Its over-arching principles are the paramountcy of the welfare of the child, the duty of public authorities to support families and children, a preference for negotiated solutions rather than court orders and the concept of enduring parental responsibility. The term parental rights was replaced by parental responsibilities which remain even when children live elsewhere, for example with a foster family. In many cases the foster carer becomes pivotal as s/he has to actively consult and negotiate with parents about decisions affecting the child. The new duties of the foster carer are spelt out in Hershman and McFarlane which states that the foster parent should:

> care for the child as if he were a member of the foster parents' own family, and ... promote his welfare having regard to the local authority's long and short term arrangements for the child (1999:9)

Like the Guidance and Regulations produced alongside the Children Act, government documents refer to foster 'parents'. NFCA (1987a) recommends that they are called foster carers as this underlines the difference in their relationship with the child and reinforces the continuing role of birth parents.

Shaw and Hipgrave (1989b) document the change of nomenclature from foster "parent" to foster "carer". Since the mid 1970s the UK has witnessed the development of specialist fostering initiatives and Shaw and Hipgrave suggest that this shift was in recognition of the carers' skills and expertise. But there remains some ambivalence over the terminology. Whilst NFCA advises the term carer in order to appreciate that the child has his/her own birth family (Verity, 2000: NFCA, 1987a) the British Association for Adoption and Fostering's assessment formats (for both adoptive and fostering applicants) used by all

local authorities are designed as "a standard way of collecting and presenting information about prospective substitute parents" (BAAF, 1996). This indistinctness of terminology is indicative of a much wider ambiguity regarding the foster carers which I will discuss in the substantive chapters.

Child welfare services in England provide a continuum of family placement from short term fostering through to long term permanency, (which can be with or without contact with the child's birth parents), and on to adoption (Colton, 1988). Between the extremes there is also provision for emergency care, respite,[6] assessment and placement prior to reunification and treatment.

The original nineteenth century assumption that divorcing children from their origins would be the great panacea has changed, as it is now considered that many of these children have problems even after their "rescue". They are seen, not as "children without families", but as "children from families with problems" (Colton and Hellinckx, 1994:563). It is now believed that effective work with children should take into account their origins, family networks and cultural environments - a notion generated by ecological theory - and that the child placed away is a product or "symptom" of a dysfunctional interaction between the family and its environment. Thus within these terms any help should involve the "whole family" in the care process. Foster carers are seen to have a pivotal part to play in the development of this ecological perspective (ibid). They are no longer substitute parents but more an extension of family support. The definition of a "child of the family" in the Children Act excludes a child living with foster carers thus enforcing the view of fostering as a temporary arrangement. Yet, at the same time, the foster carer is responsible for all the common experiences associated with children's lives - peer relationships, opportunities for school achievement, community activities and an "ordinary family setting". Foster care is about providing a "normal" life (Colton and Williams, 1997a).

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[6] See Glossary for definitions of foster care terms.

The newest development in UK foster care has been the mushrooming of independent fostering agencies (IFAs) from the first in 1987 to now over 60 (Collier, 1999). They were initiated by foster carers who believed that they could both provide a better service, independent of the local authority, and also feel more valued (Sellick, 1992). Although the IFAs offer greater financial rewards the foster carers in their employ insist that their primary motivation is their access to better support services.[7] It is not known how many foster carers are employed by these agencies, except that the majority of foster carers continue to work for local authorities.

In a bid to include all foster carers, Colton and Williams' discussion of an international description produces a "somewhat clumsy working definition" (1997b:48). It includes the principles of normalisation, family support and reunification and allows for the diversity of foster care programmes to suit children with different needs. They suggest:

> "Foster care" is care provided in the carers' home, on a temporary or permanent basis, through the mediation of a recognised authority, by specific carers, who may be relatives or not, to a child who may or may not be officially resident with the foster carers (1997a:48).

Foster carers can either be kin carers or stranger carers. The Children Act 1989 encourages the use of family and friends before those carers recruited by the local authority.[8] Families who care for kin children cannot expect financial help as of right. Stranger foster carers are at least reimbursed a set amount to cover the child's expenses:[9] an allowance known until the 1991 Foster Care Regulations as a "boarding out allowance", a term taken directly from foster care's Poor Law beginnings. Rhodes posits that the resources offered to kin carers are restricted in order to uphold the notion of kinship obligation and family responsibility. As she comments:

> Foster care exposes ... contradictory expectations at their starkest (Rhodes, 1995:182).

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[7] Field notes of foster carer focus group (November 1996) conducted as part of the pilot research.
[8] Waterhouse (1997) notes that 12% of foster carers were either relatives or friends of the children they fostered.
[9] Over 60% of local authorities pay foster carer allowances below the National Foster Care Association recommended minimum for carers to even cover their costs (Warren, 1997). Financial aspects of fostering are further discussed in chapters two and seven.

Foster carers and the State.

> Arrangements between carers and authorities would be improved if foster carers are treated as full partners (DoH, 1997:28).

In England anyone can apply to be a foster carer though they must undergo a rigorous assessment process before being approved *(Warren, 1997)*. *Once registered with their local authority,* all foster carers, including those working with an IFA, are then expected to work "in partnership" with social services staff in order to care for the child(ren) placed with them. Although the term partnership is not found in the legislation it is laid out in the 1989 Children Act Guidance (Department of Health, 1991).

In order to understand the part that foster carers play it is important to consider the organisational and institutional setting within which foster care is delivered. Children placed by social services departments with registered foster carers are children in state care. Although the "state" refers to a highly centralised legal and administrative system, in Britain it is the local authorities that actually deliver most services and they have some freedom to define policy and to fix budgets. As a result there is considerable variability in both the structure of foster care services (Warren, 1997) and its terminology (Triseliotis et al, 1998). In addition, different parts of the United Kingdom have their own history of welfare and their own legislative systems so that the structures for decision making are different between the component countries (Bullock, 1993).

Alongside these differences the focus of the social workers' concerns has modified from decade to decade. In the 1960s there was an emphasis on prevention of reception into care which changed during the 1970s because of a series of scandals. The first was the death of Maria Colwell at the hands of her step father after she had been removed by the court from a relative foster placement. Public condemnation resulted in an increase in the numbers of children removed from their families (Packman, 1993). The 1975 Children Act produced another shift within the care system, that of a belief in psychological parenting, so that the decade witnessed a new stage in the development of foster care with the concept of

"professional" or "specialist" fostering. This involved expectations of "treatment" for the children - that they would not just be looked after but that an additional ingredient would in some way ameliorate their characters and their attitudes (Triseliotis, 1989). Packman (1981) has commented that, over the years, fostering has developed to meet the needs of successive child care policies.

There is substantial evidence that the characteristics of the children now in foster care are very different from those looked after in the 1960s or even in the 1980s (Triseliotis et al, 1998; Berridge 1997; Bebbington and Miles, 1989). Many display serious behavioural and emotional problems, some have offended, others have been severely abused. Shaw's and Hipgrave's survey of specialist foster care schemes discovered an uncomfortable recognition by the local authorities that foster carers were keen to extend their range of skills in a bid to help the young people they looked after, but - "we do not wish them to become social workers" (1989b:14). The expectation was that foster carers look after the children leaving any "real work" to professional social workers. Shaw and Hipgrave also argued that social services were not offering the carers any career, pay or support services and that foster care had become the dumping ground for inappropriate and unplanned placements. Rushton's (1989) review of some of the then current literature identified that foster carers received little professional support. He described them as exploited, treated insensitively, with inadequate help and in need of a counselling service to manage rejection from children and support with children's schools. There was little or no training on safe caring[10] or on how to handle disclosure of abuse. He also underlined the need to determine the status of foster carers vis-à-vis the social services.

Sellick's (1994) study noted that the foster carers' most frequent complaints related to the social workers, in regard to their case management, which they felt could be detrimental to the children, together with their unavailability, poor communication and their constant turn over. Generally he concludes that successful fostering depends upon good rapport with the social services staff. He cites the work of both Littner (1978) and Cautley (1980) who demonstrate the need for social workers to praise and reassure foster carers - particularly

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[10] Safe Care training helps foster carers look after children who have been abused. See Glossary.

as, he argues, the local authority expects so much accountability in return. There is always a presumption that foster carers are available, often at short notice, to take in children, to attend meetings or even court. It is assumed that they will accept a multitude of additional tasks - for example the assessment of children, contact with the birth families in the foster home, supporting the family whilst the child is with them and often assisting young people after they leave (ibid). Though Colton (1998) notes that many foster carers are still treated, by social services staff, as service recipients rather than service providers.

In order to assist carers, local authorities now provide Family Placement social workers who, in their support of the placement, also give help, advice and training to the foster carers. Triseliotis and colleagues' (1998) study of fostering in Scotland confirms earlier findings of general satisfaction from carers with this part of the social services department. The National Standards for Foster Care (NFCA, 1999) recommend that these workers are now called Supervising Social Workers in order to underline the growing expertise of the foster care service. Colton and Williams (1997a) identify a slow but fragmented move away from the body of well-meaning and untrained volunteers/foster carers to more specialist schemes supported by dedicated trained personnel. As with many of the caring organisations, a recent trend in foster care has been its own professionalisation. Corrick (1999) argues that foster carers, as well as demonstrating the individual concern of a parent, have also to behave as though foster children are a professional responsibility - "looking after someone else's child as though s/he is your own" is no longer enough (DHSS, 1955:14). A report looking at the education of children within the looked after system lists fourteen complex tasks expected of foster carers (SSI/OFSTED, 1995) - for example assessing the child's developmental needs across a range of circumstances.

Although specialist schemes attract a small fee-paying element, the majority of foster carers are not paid to do these multifarious tasks. The NFCA lists ten statements of good practice with its seventh being:

> professional status for foster carers - as the equal partners of other professionals in
> the fostering team, receiving the full cost for a child plus payment for their skills
> and experience (NFCA, 1987b).

But Corrick (1999) argues that foster carers are not credited with professional recognition by those who appoint them, and a series of critical reports in the 1990s has suggested that the local authority social services departments have marginalised the foster care service. A Social Services Inspectorate report (SSI, 1996) of six authorities identified several serious failings in the system. It drew attention to a lack of standards concerning the foster carers - particularly in the areas of recruitment, assessment, training and retention.

A second report, that of the Association of Directors of Social Services for England and Wales (ADSS, 1997) was equally critical. Based on a survey of more than 500 foster carers and 84 directors it revealed serious inconsistencies of practice among local authorities. It identified that although two thirds of looked after children were in foster care yet still greater attention and priority was being given to residential provision. The report exposed some complacency among the Directors. Whereas seventy five per cent regarded their foster care service as "basically healthy" most also admitted to serious problems regarding recruitment and retention of carers.

That same year the NFCA published a study on the organisation of the foster care services from data gathered from 88% of the local authorities in England (Waterhouse, 1997). This confirmed the considerable variation in the management and resultant quality of the foster care service. Intrinsic within these three reports is a view of the foster care service as undervalued and forgotten - further confirmed by Berridge's (1997) research review. This is able to identify only thirteen prominent studies on foster care in the past twenty years - compared to the ten major studies on residential provision actually on-going whilst he compiled it.

The most recent study in Scotland of 985 foster carers in 17 local authorities and one voluntary agency (Triseliotis et al, 2000) describes a fairly optimistic foster care service. Nonetheless there are tenacious difficulties concerning the children's social workers, finance and general lack of support and consultation. Triseliotis et al argue that the foster carers' status within social services remains ambiguous, neither colleagues nor service users and that, behind the local authority rhetoric, there were few examples of working in

partnership. Many foster carers described the reality of their lives in terms close to the experiences Waterhouse encountered:

> foster carers perceived themselves as having low status and little information or influence; many respondents did not perceive themselves as part of an active team working together with social workers and parents to find a satisfactory outcome for a child (1992:43).

This lack of information is apparently mutual. The SSI (1996) report identified a general lack of knowledge and experience concerning foster care among social workers. Do the social services departments actually know what foster carers do? Freiburg (1994) points out that their lives are little understood. No one knows how they care for the children or how they cope (see, for example Nixon, 1997). They are unseen, hidden from scrutiny, so it is difficult to measure the quality of their care. She believes that it needs to be known and made public exactly how they manage their range of complex tasks. She posits that research into their lives could support their progress to professionalism - although does not say if this is what foster carers want.

Classifications within foster care.

"Professionalism" in foster care is frequently linked to specialist schemes though research over the past decade has consistently shown that fostering is principally a temporary service for younger children. Rowe and colleagues' extensive study of placements in several local authorities over two years notes that -

> the day to day, bread and butter work of fostering is still the placement of younger children needing care for a brief period during a family crisis or to give relief to hard pressed parents. (Rowe et al, 1989:79)

This finding is confirmed by Waterhouse's audit (1997). These children are looked after by what are known as short term foster carers. Berridge and Cleaver (1987) used the legal definition found in the then Boarding Out Regulations of 1955 in their study: that is those placements lasting up to eight, or in exceptional circumstances, twelve weeks. In practice many children are still with short term carers long after this. A recent conference (Wheal, 1999a) called for the removal of a distinction between long term and short term placements. Stone's (1995) survey of all short term placements made during one year in

Newcastle showed that the majority of children were aged under ten years and returned to their birth families within three months.[11] Foster care is thus primarily a resource which provides temporary relief, mainly to younger children who are accommodated, that is without a court order, but also to some who are on formal Care Orders.

But recent statistics indicate a shift in the main reasons for children being looked after by local authorities. The Department of Health figures for the year ending 1998 suggest that an equal number of children (26%) were in state care not only to provide relief to hard pressed parents but also because of abuse and neglect. (Though these changes may simply reflect social worker category-recording preferences.) This second group of children are more likely to remain in foster families for longer periods of time.

This is the same fate for those 58% of children in foster care on that day who were aged between ten and fifteen years, since they tend to have considerable needs and demands. Their foster carers work alongside staff from the courts, special education and health (Sellick, 1997). In his Appendix A, Sellick (1992) lists some thirty skilled tasks that carers need to be able to perform adequately. They have to be able to provide instant care as children move in and out of their families, whilst simultaneously promoting continuity in their lives, often needing to anticipate long-term involvement in the lives of some (Bullock, 1990). Fostering encompasses children with many different needs - disabilities, AIDS sufferers and remandees - so that foster carers have to be "parents plus" (Kathleen Kufeldt cited by Bullock, 1990:45).

The 1974 'Kent Project' argued for the four principles in fostering: normalisation (the experience of family and the community), localisation (close proximity to home and social networks), voluntariness (agreement rather than compulsion/court order) and participation (the involvement of child, birth parents, local authority and foster carers in the aims of the placement) (Shaw and Hipgrave, 1983). Their survey found that 74% of local authorities were operating specialist schemes - primarily for 'disturbed adolescents'. Warren (1997)

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[11] Bullock et al (1993) maintain that, overall as many as 87% are eventually reunited with their families, though some wait until adulthood. Recent work by Biehal (1999) states that very few young people leaving care at age 16-18 return to actually live with their families.

groups specialist schemes into four categories: regular pre-planned respite stays with the same carer (generally for children with disabilities), the provision of home-based care for youngsters remanded by the courts into the care of the local authority, pre-adoption placements where children are prepared for permanent alternative families and assessment foster care to aid the department to determine the child's long term needs. In addition some foster carers offer children permanency, defined as offering "continuity of relationships with nurturing parents or caretakers and the opportunity to establish lifetime relationships" (Maluccio et al, 1986:5). In their summary Shaw and Hipgrave (1989a) note that generally foster carers look after many children with highly complex needs. This together with the foster carer task having become more difficult, means they argue, that in reality almost all foster carers offer specialist skills - whether they be short term, long term, respite, pre-trial, assessment, emergency, pre-adoption, sibling groups or mother-and-baby placements.

But what is known about these foster carers who care for other people's children? These are children whose development may been impaired, or who may have disabilities or whose behaviour can be very troubled and whose care may require particular characteristics or skills.

Life style and characteristics of foster carers.

Both the numbers of children in care and the numbers of foster carers has risen gradually in very recent years. But what is known about these 37,000 families that foster? Although they are crucial to both the concept and to the service they have not commanded nearly as much research as the young people they look after (see for example Shaw, 1994).

Triseliotis (1998) describes Gray and Parr's (1957) government foster family survey as "the most comprehensive picture of the characteristics of foster carers", at that time (1998:3) - except in essence it provides only a profile of foster mothers. Although 90% of them were married there is virtually no mention of their husbands, the foster fathers, except for classification purposes according to occupation. The majority of them were categorised as working class and the survey demonstrated some extremes of income with some under representation, particularly in the upper brackets. About 60% of the foster mothers were

aged over forty years at the time of their current placement. Over one third were childless whilst one half had no other children at home with them. About 12% had adopted children with them whilst a third either had considered, or were considering, adopting their foster child. Their fostering style was 'exclusive' (Holman, 1975) in that they kept the child within an exclusive family situation by minimising the fostering aspect and excluding the child's birth family. George (1970) also found that most foster carers perceived themselves as being the foster child's own parent and therefore resented any intrusion from either birth parents or the local authority. At that time the term foster "parent" was acceptable and the 1955 Boarding Out Regulations, in the form of an undertaking, asked the foster parents to agree that they would "care for the child and bring him/her up as they would a child of their own" (DHSS, 1955:14). The basis of this relationship, as discussed earlier, was fundamentally changed by the 1989 Children Act.

Even though there have been these far-reaching changes affecting foster carers over the years there has been little research into this (Berridge, 1997). Echoing this gap, a report from the Association of Directors of Social Services (1997) notes:

> Nevertheless, without fully understanding why and how it works, the majority of us will say that foster care service is the favoured choice when seeking placements for children needing our care. It is of note that there is an absence of any large scale definitive research about the effectiveness of foster care in relation to other forms of looked after services. We as professionals still clearly **believe**[12] it is (1997:4).

What research evidence is there for this belief? Comparative studies of the care provided for children in twelve residential homes with that provided by nineteen foster families suggests that the interpersonal interactions are qualitatively different (Colton 1988, 1989). Whilst staff in the residential sector monitor and supervise the children, foster carers continuously and personally relate with them. Foster carers take a personal interest in and concern for the children's performance and well-being; the children's attitudes, activities and emotional states matter.

Any research interest in foster carers has been concerned with selection and assessment,

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[12] Origonal emphasis.

usually in order to inform future recruitment. Thus several studies have looked at some of the characteristics of "successful" long term foster carers. "Success" in this instance is measured by the outcomes for the children rather than for the carers themselves and usually looks at the absence of breakdown in placement (Triseliotis et al, 1998). Rowe and colleagues' (1984) study looked for a minimum of three years to count as "successful". Thoburn et al's definition encompassed the " 'successful' families who still had a study child living with them two years after placement" (1986:88), together with placements that were completed "as planned" and those where it was considered that the child had "benefited" or "been helped".

Studies on these "successful" characteristics have been inconclusive - if not contradictory. Parker (1966) found some correlation between the lower socio-economic class of the carers and their increased likelihood of success. He also posits that older (over forty years) female foster carers are more successful than younger (under thirty years) and that the presence of a male carer does not greatly improve matters. There are comparatively few studies which include male carers. Cautley and Aldridge's (1975) work on foster fathers suggests three constituents, (not being an only or the eldest child, not having very religious parents and thirdly, perceiving their own fathers as warm and affectionate), as significant factors in the backgrounds of men who are "successful" foster carers.

McWhinnie (1979) and Triseliotis (1989) also investigated factors associated with "positive outcomes" for the children. They confirmed other findings concerning the significance of foster families' ability to work with the families of the foster children, the presence of their own children, and statistics concerning the female carers' (older) age. McWhinnie's research does not corroborate Parker's regarding class and background but identifies as successful carers those from a more "middle class" life with a comfortable life style. This data was primarily derived from the social workers rather than the foster carers.

Rowe and colleagues' (1984) study of four hundred placements in six local authorities found that the profile of foster carers was very similar to that of the national pattern of adults with slightly more being home owners and slightly fewer living in privately rented

property. Again they found that foster carers were older than parents of similar aged children.

Triseliotis' (1989) review of foster care research over the previous thirty years lists five positive factors attributed to foster carers' successful fostering. He links a willingness to work in an inclusive way (with both the child's birth family and the department), a disparity in the ages of the foster carers' own children vis-à-vis the fostered children, the importance of on-going training, and the need for clarity with regard to expectations and role. But he identifies no significant research that reports the views, or the personal contributions, of the foster carers themselves.

Bebbington and Miles' (1990) survey of 2,694 foster family homes in thirteen social services authorities collected the data (except for two authorities) from social services files, rather than the carers, so the information was thus mediated by bureaucracy. They found that, statistically, a typical foster family form mapped onto the traditional nuclear family. There were 5% of foster carers from ethnic minorities (compared to their representation in the general population of 4%). The median age of foster mothers was found to be 47 years compared to 39 for those mothers with dependent children in the General Household Survey. The average age of the carer's own youngest child was ten compared with age five for families with dependent children generally. They also demonstrated that the social class of fosterers was similar to the national profile. Bradley and Aldgate's (1994) study confirmed similar domestic profiles of foster carers. Other similarities which continue are foster carers' ties to the caring professions. Bebbington and Miles (ibid) noted that 23% of all foster parents' current or most recent occupation was child-related. Aldgate and Bradley's (1999) study, of respite foster carers, found that over two thirds of them had extensive previous experience of working with children.

A positive wish to work with children has been detected in the research on the motivation of foster carers: Berridge (1997) identified three studies of note. One discerns a general desire to help children (Rowe et al, 1984). The other two produce conflicting evidence - one of couples who were either childless or had been advised not to have further children (Dando and Minty, 1987) and, a second where couples already had more children

compared to their peer group (Bebbington and Miles, 1990). A recent Swedish study of 21 couples (Andersson, 2001) identifies four motives - concern for an individual child, personal infertility, parents whose children are now independent and women who wish to care for children rather than find paid work outside the home. Like the other studies, these carers expressed a desire to foster children for the children's own sakes.

Although some studies suggest that "loving children" maybe an important characteristic of foster carers, they have nonetheless continued to use "success" as an indicator. That is "success" using as a criterion the durability of placements rather than any definition offered by the foster carers themselves. Wolkind and Kozaruk's (1983) study of placements of children with medical and developmental problems found that in "successful" placements the foster carers were busy individuals with energy for community activities. They shared family interests and would battle for the child as they exhibited a definite, although "slightly affectionate hostility", towards the professionals - coupled with a wish that they wanted them (the social workers) to succeed with the social services' care plan for the child.

Thoburn and colleagues (1986) identified five characteristics of success regarding caring for children with special needs. Carers enjoyed being with children, had previous experience of children with special needs, and were family centred with a strong marriage. They were also tolerant of others with fairly conventional views about themselves and believed in self reliance. Although many of the foster carers did not fit this template there was one over-arching characteristic - "a persistence which at times bordered on stubbornness" (1986:99).

Thoburn's (1995) review lists her "essential prerequisites" of foster carers. She suggests that these are found in people who enjoy the company of children, are flexible and non-judgemental and can negotiate. They need to be able to empathise with a child who has been neglected or abused but also understand the parent who maltreats or fails to protect. Further research (Sellick and Thoburn, 1997) identifies other characteristics found in "successful" foster carers. They are people who do not see the child as seriously problematic and so respond positively to challenging and difficult behaviour. Neither do

they expect anything back from foster children. Finally they are able to work positively with both the children's birth family and with professional staff. These, very middle class characteristics, no doubt reflect social worker values. The children, their parents and the foster carers may all have differing views.

Generally little is understood about these adults who foster. Triseliotis cites and confirms Prosser's statement that studies:

> .... have provided considerable data on the characteristics of foster parents but in the main these have tended to concentrate on physical and social factors rather than on psychological make-up and motivations for fostering. (1989:7).

Together with two colleagues he has completed some work on Scottish foster carers (1998) and added further to the list of known attributes and life style factors. He found that the fostering households represented a wide range of social backgrounds and therefore generally reflected the community. But they differed in five aspects. 80% of them lived in privately owned, larger houses than their equivalent in the community, and had a partner. The same proportion owned a car. In 60% of the households at least one carer smoked. About a third of the carers were active, practising members of a religious group. The majority of them were employed in non-manual and semi-skilled jobs. Other characteristics of foster carers confirmed previous findings regarding their age (older) and their work connections with the child care/ social care sector. Not surprisingly this analysis confirmed that foster carers are drawn to the task out of their commitment to needy children - believing they had something to offer.

Shaw and Hipgrave's (1989b) survey noted that the selection of foster carers was becoming more liberal and included single parents of both sexes. Wheal (1999) observes that 25% of carers are single parents - though gives no gender breakdown.

Sinclair and colleagues' (2000) latest research notes that 24% of their surveyed carers describe themselves as lone parents, with 55% of these from ethnic minorities. 74% (as compared to Bebbington and Miles' 70% (1990) and Treseliotis' 79% (1998)), live with a partner or spouse. This data is derived from a 'census' involving 1,528 foster carers

registered in seven local authorities. The survey found 90% to be aged between 32 and 57 years with a median age of 45 – two years younger than previous studies (Bebbington and Miles, 1990; Gray and Parr, 1957). Whilst these last studies found that 37% (Bebbington and Miles) and 49% (Gray and Parr) had no birth children at home Sinclair and colleagues note that this is the situation for 44% of their carers.

Most of the information reviewed so far is as a result of research studies focusing on the children with information from social services staff plus some postal surveys of foster carers. There are few studies where the carers were personally interviewed about their particular experiences in fostering. In most cases (eg Triseliotis, 1989; Thoburn et al, 1986) foster carers' views are sought in relation to the service they provide; their concerns appear as marginal. The most recent publication on foster care in general (Wheal, 1999b) has no section specifically on the carers. So where are the voices of the foster carers themselves?

Voices of the foster carers.

Foster care has been described as "the fundamental bedrock on which we build our looked after children services" (Wheal, 1999b:3). Foster families are the preferred resource for caring for those children not living with their own parents. So how do foster carers look after these children? How do they manage the complexities of caring for children some of whom may be their own birth children, some fostered and possibly others adopted? What is their experience of looking after some children for 'free' whilst replicating the same tasks for others involves an allowance or even a fee? This section reviews the literature which relates the foster carers' own perceptions and gives their world view.

There are few studies where not only are the foster carers used as primary sources but are also seen as people in their own right. Most of the foster care social research literature does not have the carers as the main focus but regards them as peripheral to the children and to the foster care system. This section specifically concentrates upon and critiques studies where there was face to face communication, rather than postal questionnaires. It seeks to determine how far the researchers invited the carers to explain how they make sense of what they do rather than asking them to respond to a pre-determined research agenda.

The first major study was by the Home Office (Gray and Parr, 1957). Their researchers visited and interviewed 438 "recruited" foster mothers in twelve local authorities. The purpose was to collect information about carers' main characteristics in order to inform future recruitment campaigns. Foster mothers were interviewed using a schedule of pre-scripted questions. They were asked what they thought people should be told in order to attract them to fostering. Their replies included the fact that a child brings happiness into a home (19%), that children need a good home (12%) and that fostering in itself is worthwhile (12%). A few gave more than one answer whilst 23% had no suggestions to offer. In answer to what they thought prevented people from fostering, again some gave more than one answer. As many as 37% of the responses suggested that people were fearful of how the child would "turn out" whilst 19% mentioned fear of the child being removed once the foster mother was fond of him/her. Those that had decided to finish their fostering careers were asked to give the reasons: 40% felt that they were too old with 7% mentioning failing health. In response to inquiries about how the local authority could be more helpful only 45% had any suggestions. Over three quarters of these replies concerned discontent over allowances and financial arrangements.

Significantly none of the questions actually asked what it was like, for them, to look after someone else's child.

Another study concerning recruitment and retention was Adamson's interviews of 92 recruited foster mothers. In her words the work could be:

> ..... summed up as an attempt to get a sociological picture of the foster family, and to assess their attitudes to fostering and to relate these attitudes to those who were able to maintain a good, that is beneficial, relationship with their foster child. (1973: 103)

Each foster mother was interviewed using a structured questionnaire of 135 points covering:

> both sociological and psychological data because it was felt it was the inter-relationship between the these variables which would prove to be the key to the successful fostering situation. (ibid 104)

Interviewees were given multiple choice answers, many based on the Likert scale with five degrees of intensity. They were asked how they perceived themselves and their role; if they liked thinking of themselves as a foster mother. The study revealed that whilst they might have a clear understanding of what the role of foster mother meant this did not always mean that they liked thinking of themselves as such. The most significant finding of the research was that 57% of them rejected the role - they wanted to be the fostered child's "actual" mother.

A group of ten professionals, comprising both academic and social services personnel, produced a guide to foster care practice for the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS, 1976). Their aim was to reduce the discrepancy in the gap that existed between theory and practice in foster care. They took written submissions from fostered children, foster care groups and individual foster parents. The result was a miscellany of practice wisdom and research findings but to some degree the voices of the foster carers were included. Foster carers were described as considering their task hard work but worthwhile. They were aware that the general public were ambivalent about their role - viewing them as helpful and sentimental whilst simultaneously criticising them for putting their own children at risk from the effects of fostering.

Hampson and Tavormina (1980) interviewed 34 American foster mothers. The women were asked open ended questions inquiring about their motives, rewards, regrets, specific problems and styles of discipline. The study concluded that carers' difficulties with the foster children were exacerbated by their own lack of legal rights and uncertainty about the children's lengths of stay. The women were critical of the number of moves the children experienced and aware of the detrimental effects upon the children. As foster mothers they had no control over this yet felt blamed by the social care services. The authors note that "the general ineffectiveness of foster care is placed upon the foster parent" (page 108).

This dilemma of responsibility is noted by Jassal (1981) in his study of 20 foster families. He found that, even though the carers were all short term carers, most of them perceived themselves as substitute parents to the children. The great majority, 80%, experienced fostering as both more difficult and more rewarding than anticipated. He argued that in all

cases it filled a need in the carers' lives (see also Jenkins, 1965) so that it was as important to the foster carer as to the child that the placement should succeed. Because of the intensity of day to day care, carers became very attached to the children; 90% of the families found letting the children go difficult and painful.

How endings are experienced in time limited placements was researched by Downes (1982) who interviewed 27 foster families together with their adolescent fostered children. She looked at the emerging interactions between the young person and their carer but, although acknowledging that foster carers too have feelings, the focus of the study is primarily on the emotions and coping mechanisms of the teenagers.

Rowe and colleagues (1984) completed an in-depth study of 200 placements and interviewed 139 foster carers. Wherever possible they interviewed both carers together, rather than relying only on the female foster carer. The focus of the study was on "successful" placements and the researchers used a semi- structured questionnaire to seek specific information rather than asking the carers what was of particular importance to themselves. Motivations to foster centred on wishing to help underprivileged children or wanting to increase the size of their own family. The study records a huge variety of personalities and life styles sharing a high level of commitment to fostered children.

This same commitment is reflected in a study on the experiences of eleven foster families where placements had ended prematurely (Aldgate and Hawley, 1986a; 1986b). It is clear that this was a highly significant event for them and they were invited to explain in detail how it had been managed. As one of the carers clarified to the researcher:

> Foster children are your kids too while they live with you and it's a year out of their lives, so it must mean something to everyone (1986b:49).

A recent study of eleven disruptions[13] (Butler and Charles, 1999) investigated the compensations of foster care. Although they do not quote the actual words used by the foster carers Butler and Charles use their data to construct a theory that the importance of foster care is its intangible rewards. Carers have an expectation of reciprocity of emotional attachment

and gratitude, of children so wanting to become part of the family that they will change in order to "fit in". Drawing upon a particular theoretical framework they suggest that the effects of not getting these rewards leads to a deterioration in the carers' role satisfaction. It means that they focus on the hurts, or blame the social services department. The tangible rewards (payment and training) are insufficient as compensation and the researchers recommend that social workers heed these findings and help carers understand the match between their needs and what is actually feasible.

A piece of practitioner-research by Roche and Dunne (1986) listened to long term foster parents and how much the children meant to them. The views and feelings of the foster families made clear how the lack of contact from the birth families adversely affected the children. Whereas the original aims of the placements had been on reunification with the birth families the study demonstrates the efficacy of action-research as there was then a shift of emphasis away from the birth families towards permanency and adoption elsewhere. A second piece of similar action-research (NFCA, 1990) looked at formalising foster carers' relationships with their local authorities via a written placement contract for each child. This document, signed by both the social worker and the carer, had to clearly state the expectations of all parties regarding the execution of the child's care plan. The resulting model, used nationally and then re-organised to become the Placement Plan, part one, of the Looking After Children documentation (DoH, 1995) was informed as much by the foster carers as the social services departments.

Dando and Minty's study to elucidate any characteristics which would aid the identification of "really excellent long term foster parents, as distinct from parents who were just adequate" (1987:387) sought information from both social services staff and foster mothers. The study listened to the views of 80 foster mothers on fostering and its impact on family life. The decision as to which of the foster mothers were adequate and which were excellent was a judgement made by the social workers who rated the carers' overall performance according to three criteria - agency-role understanding, basic child care and special capacities. The study concludes that the motives most closely associated with excellent fostering are childlessness,

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[13] See Glossary.

a general social conscience and an identification with deprivation based on personal experience (see also Jenkins, 1965). The foster mothers were asked to comment on the ways they believed fostering enhanced family life. The benefits seemed closely related to their motivations - particularly the childless foster mothers who found satisfaction in nurturing children. Generally the study found that high standards of fostering were associated with motivations which are based on or derive from strong personal needs. They established that foster mothers who gave as their primary motive "liking children" were not highly rated. Although the study does not tell us how the foster mothers rated their own experience and their own performance it gives us insights into what they considered to be their compensations.

A more ambitious study of foster care is Berridge and Cleaver's (1987) survey of 372 placements. The study was very child focused in order to look at successful placements. The views of the foster carers were sought on specific issues. One of the authors' findings concerns the power dimension between the carers and the social workers. The authors suggest that it may serve organisational interests for the status of the foster carers to remain unaltered.

The research includes ten in-depth phenomenological case studies. For the latter Berridge and Cleaver sought to interview the child's social worker, the foster carers, the child, the birth parents, residential key workers, a teacher or close acquaintance of the child and Family Placement Workers. It is worthy of note that, in their methodology, they give numbers for all of these categories except for the foster carers. When the same list is repeated later in the study the authors do not mention the carers. It takes some searching to discover that all of the carers agreed to the interview. This actually mirrors their own findings - that files were kept on less than 25% of the carers and that of those in existence half held virtually no information, and all were kept with the clients' files. Like the local authorities, the researchers rendered the carers invisible.

The visibility of foster carers is clearly central to three separate studies, focusing on respite care (Aldgate and Bradley, 1999; Macadam and Robinson, 1995; Stalker, 1990). The researchers in these studies interviewed 60, 69 and 39 carers respectively. All three studies

demonstrate that the carers regard themselves as employed in a different task from main stream foster carers: a more "professional" task.

Some studies clearly interviewed the foster carers but do not use their words. Jenkins (1965) interviewed the adults in 87 foster families in order to extrapolate how fostering met their own "personal needs". A study of 36 foster carers who were investigated for allegations of abuse and neglect (Hicks and Nixon, 1991) looks at how they coped. Both articles give insights into the lives and experiences of foster carers but not what they actually say. Their experiences, perceptions and opinions are mediated by the researchers who use their own conceptual and theoretical frameworks to interpret the carers' words.

The perspectives of carers are central to the research in Waterhouse's (1992) study concerning foster children's contact with their birth families. Her examination of the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of seventeen short term carers demonstrates the complexity and ambivalence of their situation. Cleaver's (2000) research explores the impact of contact on all concerned without giving any of the participants particular weighting. Foster carers found it problematic and were more likely to promote contact if trained and well supported. Sellick's (1994 and 1992) study, on the assistance required by short term carers in order to work most effectively, interviewed eighteen carers but used multiple choice questions.

Two further pieces of work include the perceptions of foster carers in order to more fully understand the experiences of the children. Kelly (1995) interviewed sixteen foster mothers (sic) about current long term placements whilst a more recent study investigated nineteen foster children's established relationships with their birth families and emerging relationships with their foster families (McAuley 1997). In both cases the views of the carers was sought only in relation to the fostered children.

Triseliotis and colleagues' (2000) analysis of 918 foster carers' survey returns focused on the supply and retention of foster carers in Scotland. Further qualitative material was obtained through interviews and group discussions of an additional 67 carers. These interviews were open-ended but centred on specific key themes covering their motivation,

recruitment and training, department support, work with the children and general satisfactions and frustrations. The study demonstrates that many carers feel overloaded by difficult children, increased demands and perceived themselves as frequently ill supported. Yet, although the majority found fostering hard, they also found it rewarding. The qualitative detail from the interviews was used mainly as a check on the survey questionnaires.[14] Thus we know that the three main motivations for fostering is having "something to offer", a fondness for children and an awareness of "need" coupled with "wanting to put something back" into the community. The benefits and attractions of fostering centre jointly around the progress that the children make, a sense of achievement and job satisfaction (70%) whilst the others (30%) said that it enhanced their lives, made them feel that they were doing something worthwhile and gave them an insight into the problems of others. Another questionnaire study supported with 43 case studies (Scofield et al, 2000) notes that social workers are reluctant to advise foster carers and feel incompetent about giving guidance on the management of children's behaviour.

Overall this body of work offers us glimpses into foster carers' worlds but the information is frequently closely framed by the research question of each study. In his research review Berridge (1997) notes that just three studies include interviews with foster carers about themselves (Berridge and Cleaver 1987; Aldgate and Hawley, 1986a, 1986b; Rowe et al, 1984). Warren (1999) suggests that this shortage of in-depth study of foster care, compared to that into residential care, reflects the low priority and status accorded to the service and, one might add, to the place of the foster carer.

Concluding discussion.

This chapter has outlined the history and development of foster care. It has summarised the social research literature with particular emphasis on the foster carers themselves. It has sought, but not found, much prominence given to their perspectives. There are indications that foster carers are marginalised: there can be poor communication with the local authority (Sellick, 1994), carers are treated as service recipients rather than providers (Colton 1989) and there are significant gaps in support from the social workers (Triseliotis

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[14] Personal correspondence from Triseliotis.

et al, 2000). Foster carers describe fostering as difficult but rewarding (Jassal, 1981) since children bring happiness (Gray and Parr, 1957) as many carers want to be their "real" mothers (Jenkins, 1965) and thereby increase the size of their families (Dando and Minty, 1987: Rowe et al, 1984).

The majority of the studies reviewed are from a social work focus relying upon the opinions of the social workers to assess the criteria for successful outcomes (see for example Rowe et al, 1989). But social service departments and foster carers have different frames of reference. Perhaps it is because the views and perceptions of social services staff are so dominant that those of the foster carers have been overlooked and neglected. It seems that foster carers have no narrative rights and, as a result, it is possible to piece together only a fragmented and disjointed picture.

This review indicates that the social research theoretical base for foster care originates from a local authority belief that foster carers should demonstrate heightened parenting skills, (much like adoptive parents and step-parents), for caring for other people's children. Yet the majority of children in public care pass through the foster care system. The official role of the foster carer is to prepare the child for a return home or on to another, permanent family. Foster carers are now considered not as parents, but as carers. How do the carers themselves manage this change? The literature which hints at their perceptions, their world view or their explanations of how they construct their lives as foster carers is very limited. As there is no body of academic work which is both substantially and empirically pertinent to foster carers it is therefore necessary to seek the theoretical frameworks from elsewhere. It may be that an understanding of this will help to bring foster carers into sharper focus and transfer their voices from the periphery into the centre.

Chapter 2.
Towards a theorising of foster care.

Introduction.

A review of the social work and social research literature on foster care produced a body of material related to foster carers, but little that explores their world views. Foster care literature tends to cover only the practicalities of looking after other people's children: most local authorities produce Foster Care Handbooks for their own carers (see for example Oxfordshire, 2000). In order to develop a more theoretical approach it is necessary to draw on frameworks from elsewhere - from the three related concepts of public and private domains, caring, and family and household. This literature should contribute to a theoretical framework for the practice of foster care and thereby make foster carers themselves more visible.

Concepts of public and private domains.

The split between public and private is an established central organising theme in feminist thinking and provides some basic orientations. They are concepts which can be discussed in terms of institutions, of space, of resources and of ways of knowing (Weintraub, 1997: Edwards and Ribbens, 1995). They are frequently dichotomised in terms of political/ personal, instrumental/ expressive and male/ female. Although not an accurate depiction of reality this terminology aids description and can be insightful for the study of foster carers' lives. As a conceptual framework, insights around public and private may help emancipate (foster) families from "theoretical invisibility" (Weintraub, 1997:32) since carers offer what would normally be ideologically constructed as their private lives, their homes and their intimates as a public service for the care of children who are not usually blood relatives.

The ideological division of home (the private domain) and work (the public domain) is often tracked back to the late eighteenth century. Although the focus was on industrial production - and not an analysis of the domestic arena - the separation of home and work has been attached to the processes of industrialisation. Originally women combined caregiving with production but it has been argued that when the two domains became separate that men commandeered

the public world of paid employment, leaving women the private world of home and intimacy (Waerness, 1989). Thus emerged the idea of the household sphere as a private space for domesticity - though Rose (1986) warns against overstating this split. For many women the home continued to be an important site for wage earning and some foster carers may place themselves in this category (Adamson, 1973).

Although the terms "public" and "private" are ideological distinctions rather than empirical categories, people nevertheless expect their public and private lives to make different claims and to offer different benefits. In daily life these distinctions are so continuously constructed that they operate as norms within society (McDowell and Pringle, 1994). Assumptions associated with this division are that the "public domain" is male (paid work and authority, rationality, culture, politics and power), whilst that of the "private domain" is female (hearth and home, emotion, children and domestic labour). The private is regarded as of less authority and lower status and structural oppression ensures that the position of women remains subordinate (Edwards, 1990). Private and public is thus about different domains, statuses, ways of behaving, ways of being (Edwards, 1993), and also different ways of caring.

"Professional" care, within the public domain, is described as rational, scientific and male in contrast to female care, in the private domain, which is perceived as natural, instinctive and emotive. Waerness (1987) suggests that the Welfare State, the public face of care, could learn from women's experience in the private sphere in order to restore qualities which have been lost in its professionalisation. A comparative study of children's homes and foster care (Colton, 1989) concludes that the interpersonal interactions within the two are qualitatively different (see chapter one). He argues that the foster carers had much to offer/ teach the residential staff. This is unlikely to occur because, as Waerness explains, this would threaten professionals and undermine their bureaucratic control (rational care). In fact the current situation in some local authorities is that professional (salaried) staff in residential units advise (unpaid) foster carers.[15] The dominant, rational care philosophy of the public social services is that their staff are considered the "experts".

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[15] Own field notes. See chapter 3.

Foster carers have to continuously deal with this reality of bureaucracy. In theory the family is ideologically constructed as an area for non-intervention, but increasingly the activities of mothers have come to be the concern of public authorities (Brannen and O'Brien, 1995: Ribbens, 1994). Foster carers' care of other peoples' children is constantly monitored and constrained by Social Services' staff. There are explicit instructions regarding the care of children, for example all babysitters are police checked. A service provided within the private domain becomes public property; there is, for example, an annual inspection of the foster child's bedroom. Foster carers thus actively demonstrate Saraceno's (1984) discussion concerning the interpenetrations and integrations between the two spheres and the fragility and fluidity of the boundaries. Cheal (1991), citing Habermas, repeats the need for an analysis of those activities which straddle both domains. Foster carers make visible the overlaying of the domestic, state, society and production through the uncertainties and inconsistencies in their own lives.

The site of foster care is therefore one of ambiguity and potential conflict. Initially grounded in the ideology of the family and the private, domestic domain, foster families are daily impacted upon by the public world via state intervention. This is ably demonstrated by the terminology. Originally foster children were cared for by foster parents: a foster mother and a foster father. The choice of vocabulary underlines the surrogate role and directives emphasised caring for the children "as if they were the foster parents' own" (quoted in Oldfield 1997:19). Fostering was considered an extension of the mothering role requiring those "natural" female virtues that are characteristic of the familial space - described by Rhodes (1994) as "a domestic vocation". But foster parents are now foster carers - nomenclature taken from the public world of care. Adults who are thus 'parents' to one child are 'carers' to another and must manage this ambiguity within the same setting. Parenthood frequently mirrors changes of values in society (Boh et al, 1989) so events in the public world shape the nature of caregiving in the private world of the foster family. Foster carers must remember that the children they give their hearts to are only transitory. How do these issues get worked out in the detail of their everyday lives in relation to ideas about "caring" and "mothering"? Do female carers model themselves on traditional motherhood or professional carers?

Much of the welfare state survives because the work of women is cheap, flexible and provides for human needs. These caring, servicing tasks link the private with the public world because of the "feminine" qualities that women bring. Community care is dependent upon an informal/unpaid female labour force which is therefore not available for formal/ paid care (Sassoon, 1987) as reflected in the national shortage of foster carers (Waterhouse, 1997).

Women who have paid work in the public sphere also have to labour, for love and not for money, in the private sphere. They find themselves between two contradictory value systems (Feree, 1985), one overseen by exchange values (where work is governed by instrumental market relations) and the other by use value (where work is personal and for the satisfaction of others). Moving between these two worlds involves different ways of managing, different "modes of organisational consciousness" (Smith, 1987:6-7) or "contrasting principles of social organisation" (Cheal, 1991). There are tensions between the two. Foster carers cannot move physically from one to the other, like the office worker, but must manage the two together - home as work place; their concern for the children and the process of caring, together with the demands of the local authority. Some have to cope simultaneously with their own and fostered children, but in different ways - there are, for example, regulations about sanctions for foster children. State departments are goal oriented and driven by a means/end rationality (Waerness, 1989) which may be alien to the individual care of the private domain. Foster carers must manage the domestic/ institutional dialectics of privacy versus surveillance, informality versus regulation, and personal versus professional within one site (Peace and Holland, 1998). Rhodes (1994) suggests that the transfer of child care provision from residential homes to foster families has also transferred the institutional characteristics. The additional bureaucratic regulations will erode the informal nature of foster care:

> Although fostering is referred to as "informal care", the intrusion of these regulatory activities increasingly draws it closer to the formal sphere and, in the process, damages the very qualities of family life which it seeks to promote. (Rhodes, 1993a:11)

This caution is also echoed by Leat and Gay (1987). Smart (1997) comments that if the role of the foster carer becomes more functional then it risks losing its vital social interaction and qualitative "feel": any concentration on formal performance distracts from the experiential care of children. Foster carers must somehow retain their privately based experiences along with their more publicly based forms of knowledge and understanding.

This paradoxical situation with its inevitable tensions is analysed in Nelson's (1990a) study of providers of home-based day-care. They experienced complex relationships with the children within contradictory sets of possibilities and explanations. Their strong bonds of attachment were controlled by the contractual arrangements. Like foster carers they had none of the privileges of motherhood and only limited authority and responsibility. Their use of the mothering model not only interfered with business boundaries but upset the children's mothers who, anxious not to be displaced, set limits (Nelson, 1989). Much of this may map onto foster care. The children are placed with carers under a contractual agreement who have to mediate both with bureaucracy and the birth parents - sometimes actually managing the children's contact with the latter (Cleaver, 2000; Waterhouse, 1992).

This review of some aspects of the concepts of public and private is oversimplified but furthers our understanding of foster carers' lives. They are situated at the overlap and the penetrations of the public/private domains and the use of these concepts may help to make known their particular world views. As ideological distinctions, notions of public and private aid the explanation of key features of daily life - although it is important to underline that different people at different times experience them in different ways. Brittan and Maynard (1984) highlight that because ideologies are "common sense" and "obvious" they often appear universal, natural and inevitable and therefore become embedded in the general social system. Reviewing some of the literature on the ideologies around concepts of public and private explains women's particular relationship with the private domain, which Edwards argues is unlikely to change because of their responsibilities rooted in childbearing and child rearing (1993).

In order to understand this further it is helpful to look at some of the literature around caring and the influence of gender constructs.

The concept of caring.

Caring is:

> typically defined by feminist researchers as the unpaid work of kin within the private domain of family. (Graham 1991:6)

This literature review looks at how caring is theorised at a philosophical level and how this can be applied in relation to foster carers. In order to do this I am employing six of Thomas' (1993) seven dimensions of care.

1. The nature of care.
Tronto's theory of care as an overarching framework notes that:

> .... what most recommends care is the practical, daily, concrete way it forces us to think about moral and political life (1995:146).

Care is considered to be a moral activity based on responsibilities and relationships. It is both a set of practices and an ethic. Deveaux (1995) contends that together these two aspects ameliorate perpetuation of social and political inequalities. A care perspective alone could logically lead to endless self sacrifice - hence the need for a parallel ethic of justice. Noddings (1984) writes that care is only an outcome of moral behaviour - but whilst moral philosophy is organised through law and principles in an abstract and formal way we all feel the origins of caring to be in personal connection and responsiveness. Care is properly based in constructed understandings of "family" since tenderness and emotion are more permissible there than anywhere else (Stacey and Price, 1981).

Ideologically the main site of caring in post industrial Western societies is the family and the home. Caring is both practice and disposition (Tronto, 1993); it is a private labour defined as a work of love. A "labour of love", and a daily grind, as the word caring elides both concepts (Graham, 1983). Waerness defines caring as:

> a concept encompassing that range of human experiences which have to do with feeling concern for and taking charge of the well-being of others. (1987:210)

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Caring has thus both practical and psychological implications, it is about activities and feelings. Foster carers have a duty of care for the children they look after which may relate in a complex way to moral imperatives, whether they organise care differently for their own birth children compared to those that they formally "look after". But, for the foster children, like their own, they take responsibility both for practical matters (e.g. medical and dental checks), and also for the children's psychological well-being (as far as this is possible). Much of this is laid down in fostering handbooks. However, much is **not** specified in writing so that the carers only know when, criticised by the local authority, they discover that their care has been found wanting. Care is only visible when it is not done (Graham, 1982).

It is as though Social Services Departments expect their foster carers (particularly the female carers) to know instinctively what constitutes quality care. They demand that foster carers involve the department and the child's birth family - care within an "inclusive" culture (Holman, 1975). It has to be private care in public mode to include the (bureaucratically acceptable) qualities of motherhood.

Boulton (1983) reviews the literature that regards motherhood as important for establishing women's femininity, respectability and maturity (see also Glenn's 1994 review and Held, 1987) but child care as a low status occupation. Tronto (1993) agrees that a mother's tenderness gains her an equal and just place in society whereas caring has become devalued. Yet because the primary skills required in fostering are understood as **just**[16] those of innate, natural mothering, foster carers are regarded as of low status (Oldfield, 1997). Meyer (1985) comments that their status, because they are "pretend" mothers, is treated as lower than "ordinary" mothers (see discussion in chapter one and Sellick, 1994). This is an ambiguous situation where skilled carers are nonetheless defined as of low status. Leat's (1990) study identified lack of recognition of foster carers' skills but, in contrast, noted that there were compensations, for example when carers were congratulated at school for progress achieved, unlikely to occur with their own birth children! Graham (1983:30) found that for some single women caring was "the medium through which (they) are accepted into and feel they belong in the social world". Caring thus defined their identity and this may resonate for foster carers.

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[16] Author's emphasis.

Fisher and Tronto (1990) evaluate four stages or facets of caring. These are: caring about, taking care of, care giving and care receiving. They define caring-about and taking-care-of as fairly powerful positions whilst designating care giving (and receiving) as virtually powerless. They note that one of its identifying features is that women are assigned this responsibility but with little authority. Foster carers are responsible for care giving – that is care as a relationship in which care is both given and received.

Care giving requires time, material resources, knowledge and skill (Fisher and Tronto, 1990). The Social Services Departments are responsible for supporting the carers with the latter three. They are charged to provide equipment, information, training and supervision. But the department holds all the formal power - it can register and de-register the carers, it can place and remove the children - yet, in order to ensure that public children are looked after within families it is dependent upon foster carers.

2.   Social identity of the carer.

Parker's (1990) review on informal care-providers shows that families do usually care for dependants; there is no abrogation of this obligation (Finch and Mason, 1993). Nevertheless this care-task is normally not shared but the responsibility of one person. Cancian (1986) notes that a "feminisation of love" has resulted in the belief that it is "natural" for women to be carers. Gilligan (1995) cautions women to note the difference between care as a feminine ethic, that is an ethic of special obligations and interpersonal relationships, and a feminist ethic of care which notes the discomfort in this. Her work with teenage girls demonstrates that their strengths and resilience become at risk during adolescence with a belief that they should become selfless.

Women become responsible for caring tasks at both an ideological and a material level (Ungerson, 1983) and caring becomes part of their socially constructed self-identity (Graham, 1983). Backett's (1978) study of parents and how they negotiate care tasks for their children shows that there are assumptions that not only should mothers take overall responsibility for their children's care, but that they should also be constantly available. Most of the literature assumes that care is, in reality, gendered - a view challenged by

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Arber and Gilbert (1989). Their analysis of the 1980 General Household survey shows that men make a larger contribution than has been recognised. Elderly couples are unlikely to receive much statutory support so husbands must care for disabled, dependent wives. Is caring defined in ways that make men invisible too? But Arber and Gilbert also acknowledge that there is a general expectation that married daughters should also help and, in overall terms women still comprise the majority of carers (Abel and Nelson, 1990). Age Concern notes that one in five women are "sandwich carers" responsible for both children and elderly parents (News in Brief, 1998).

Because of this cultural designation as carers, women with dependants (child or adult) find imposed, and thus often feel, a moral imperative to provide care (Finch and Groves, 1980). Their special relationship with the private domain entails notions of duty and responsibility, particularly to children and they thus embody in themselves the moral order (Davidoff et al, 1976). It is assumed they will give priority to the morality of caring and to fulfilling immediate family needs. They become, ideologically speaking, the incarnate, moral and emotional centre of the home (Fisher, 1990). Women are thus likely to get locked into sets of commitments. Their moral beings become enmeshed in exchanges of support and the processes through which these get negotiated. Their identities as carers get constructed, confirmed and reconstructed (Finch and Mason, 1993).

Graham (1983) notes that care has two dimensions: the process whereby society reproduces itself, and the actual care experience itself. The reproduction of society also includes the maintenance of the mental and physical health of its workforce. Thus women's role is often described in terms of reproduction, not only of children but of ensuring that other family members (particularly male) can fulfil their work responsibilities (Pahl, 1992). "Good" caring is arguably concerned with the independence and autonomy of the cared-for in order to encourage growth and development (Abel and Nelson, 1990). Foster carers are expected to prepare children for independence. Formal local authority support usually finishes between the ages of sixteen and eighteen with, for a minority, an extension to twenty one years. Thus young people, whose early experiences mean that they usually require more support and care, are expected to cope with independence some years before cultural expectations would consider them sufficiently able, and at a time when

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social policy is increasingly extending young adults' reliance on parental support (Jones and Bell, 2000). Young people in the general population are moving into independence in their twenties rather than their teens (Stein, 1998), with twenty two being the average age for this (Department of Health, 1998). Lindsay (1994) refines this further stating that the average age that children in the care system "leave home" is 16.5 years whilst for the general population it is 22.5 years. Many in this latter group have the option to return home in times of crisis and Jones (1995) argues that, because this option is used increasingly, leaving home should be viewed as a process rather than an event. Nonetheless for those who have been fostered and have experienced the care of the private domain their life course is dominated by the public domain's institutional care. The dilemma for foster carers is that even when they know intimately the difficulties of these youngsters, they may later have to refuse further help, and to no longer care.[17]

Graham's second dimension of care is the experience of caring and being cared-for and how this is integral to women's definition of themselves and their social relations. It is significant for the constitution of the feminine identity. Gilligan's (1982) standpoint is that it is because of cultural constraints that this nurturance/ caregiving becomes part of women's self development and female maturity. Ungerson (1990) agrees that caring is not so much a product of the feminine personality, more the result of the way society is organised. Statistics show that the majority of carers in this country are women (Abel and Nelson, 1990).

Fisher (1990) traces the growth of female employment in the caring services from the need of single women to establish and define themselves as independent both of the household, and of a husband. She extends her study to contemporary women's motivations for care work and identifies three interconnecting explanations - they recognise an unmet need, or feel themselves to be on a social mission, or personally wish to effect social change. But, like Ungerson (1990), Fisher's argument is that capitalist and patriarchal structures favour male earners and thus limit and restrict women's choices. This context may indicate similar

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[17] Many carers do continue to care and are seen as offering an additional (usually unpaid) resource because of this (Wade, 1997).

reasons for women's fostering. Adamson's (1973) study revealed very different motivations for foster mothers in economically disadvantaged areas (no waged alternative) than in more affluent regions (a wish to offer something to children). This is confirmed by Boulton (1983) who found that motherhood was satisfying where employment opportunities were poor. Fisher (op. cit.) argues that women's options are particularly restricted because of their association with the private domain. Tronto (1993) explores this further: that because care is associated with emotion, the needy and historically with servants and slaves, care is conceptually diminished and equated with weakness. It is a vicious circle; care is devalued and those people so engaged are depreciated. Both Berridge (1997) and Sellick (1992) refer to the low status ascribed to foster carers within the social services and attribute this to the fact that, as substitute parents, their work does not appear to require special skills. Although, because they are a scarce resource, carers are not always entirely powerless (Masson et al, 1999). Tronto notes that where men become involved care-work gains status and prestige as, for example, the position of head waiter in an exclusive restaurant.

Many men are carers (Arber and Gilbert, 1989) and the latest survey of foster carers' social characteristics (Triseliotis et al, 2000) shows that 78% of the 835 responses were from married couples. Nationally the local authorities' assessment and preparation of newly recruited foster carers involves both adults. Nonetheless there is an assumption that, once registered, it is the female carer who will take the lead role (Newstone, 1999). Chapter one revealed that much of the research concentrated only on the views of female carers. There is scant information on male carers. It seems that there is little public expectation that male foster carers should be closely involved with the care of the children (Newstone, 1999).

Morgan (1996) reminds us that "new man" is encouraged to develop his "feminine" traits and demonstrate the more caring side to his personality, particularly within the family. Men do show a more nurturing nature, for example they play with their children (Bjornberg, 1992), but the acceptance of new values does not actually change behaviours. Most studies confirm that male participation in caring and domestic duties continues to lag (Gillies et al, 2001: Warin et al, 1999: Windebank, 1999: Gershuny et al, 1996: Pilcher, 1995: Glen, 1994: Brannen, 1992).

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There are studies which focus on parents' and carers' responsibilities and world views in an effort to understand their perspectives. Boulton's (1983) study of mothers shows that although many considered the child a burden nonetheless they derived great satisfaction from being needed. Nelson's (1990b) study of day-care providers made visible women who wanted to be loved and relied upon and actually invited the "burden". Whilst some felt that they were giving children the love that they themselves did not get others could repay the love that they had received. All the providers believed that they treated the day-care children the same as their own. Because of this they felt that they drew most on their mothering skills. Even those that had professional care expertise, for example nursing qualifications, listed mothering before their training and their experience (see also Gelder, 1998: Mayall and Forster, 1989). This resonates with a study of middle class parents who rejected expert opinion on child care as irrelevant compared to their knowledge from everyday experience of parenting, even though several were themselves professional teachers (Backett, 1978). Thus it would seem that domestic caring is primarily defined by private ways of being - even when we might expect other orientations to be apparent. There is a powerful association of caring with mothering. But what do foster carers draw upon for their care of other people's children? The first chapter noted the significant correlation between foster carers and their work experience, past and present, in the caring professions. As carers do they use this expertise or do they draw on their parenting for the care of their fostered children?

3.   Social identity of the care recipient.
Thomas (1993) identifies dependency status as the care-recipient's most significant feature. When the cared-for are needy and relatively helpless they are less autonomous and less powerful. Because they need help care-recipients are frequently socially constructed as pitiful and this can put distance between them and people in general (Tronto, 1993). These constructions can seriously oppress and discriminate against, for example, the elderly (Pilcher 1995: Hockey and James, 1993).

Children in care are constructed as doubly needy by virtue of their situation and their status. In the West childhood is constructed as a protected state which ipso facto

incorporates dependency (see further discussion in chapter four). Whilst nearly all foster care research concerns the children a review of key findings over thirty years (Triseliotis, 1989) reveals that in only four studies, from thirty-nine referenced, are the children interviewed. Although some studies canvas foster children's opinions most depend either partially or entirely on social work records and thus accept bureaucracy's perceptions of events and outcomes (see for example, DHSS, 1985). Little attention has been paid to the children themselves as care recipients. This is essential since whilst all children are vulnerable to mistreatment, too many looked after children have been abused in foster care (Nixon, 2000: Harrison, 1999a: DoH, 1997). There is therefore a need for more qualitative research on children's experiences and perceptions. Like their carers, for research purposes, children in care have no real "voice" (see for example, Harrison, 1999b); like other children they do not, in social policy terms, exist (Qvortrup, 1997 and 1990).

Yet children in care are formally protected. Foster carers agree to certain conditions - foster children may not be shouted or sworn at, or smacked. There is thus a potential for conflict should carers wish/have to treat birth children and fostered children by different care standards. The Children Act 1989 stipulates that fostered children have rights and their wishes must be heard, although these are mediated by adults. Theoretically local authorities construct children as active, competent participants. Foster care has traditionally operated within a needs, not rights framework (Borland 1999) and there can therefore be competing interests between children and their carers. Children may not rely upon foster carers to represent their interests.

This discourse of rights places foster children within a public concept of justice. Ruddick (1996) reviews those arguments which root justice and care in different worlds. A morality of justice is part of the male, rational, separated world whereas a morality of care is part of the female, connected world, and particularly of the family. It could be argued that justice and care are philosophically incompatible, especially as care is particular (an individual foster child wants music lessons) and justice universal (all foster children receive pocket money). Ruddick extrapolates that in the same way that concepts of care are applied to the public sphere so should the language of justice, from the public domain, be applied to the

family (see also Wong, 1996): they are not mutually exclusive. Tronto (1993) insists that a theory of care is not complete without justice.

If foster children are protected by children's rights does this mean that the conflict between care and justice maps onto conflicts between foster carers' birth children and foster children, or does the concept of justice only apply to foster children? Rees (1996) describes how birth children renegotiated their pocket money in order to gain parity with the foster child.

Care versus justice provides a complex context as foster carers must continuously balance out differing needs. Nelson's (1994) day-care providers aimed to treat their own and other children with parity. Examination suggested that they discriminated against their own. Their bid to provide excellent mothering to the minded children resulted in an alteration of their maternal role to their birth children. Not only did they provide a service that they did not believe in, since many of them child-minded in order not to leave their own children for outside paid work, but they compromised their own standards of good mothering.

Foster carers are caught between two different constructions of childhood - children as vulnerable in need of protection, and children with rights. Ignatieff (1989) champions the cause of justice/rights. He demands that welfare should be about rights/justice and not about caring and wants citizenship built on entitlement, not altruism. He insists that, in a just society, care-receivers should not have to accept what carer-givers decide they need. Rights entitle people to respect and dignity and no amount of care/charity is an adequate substitute (Freeman, 1994). The Department of Health prescribes placement choice (rights) for foster children but too frequently they are cared for wherever there is a vacancy (Waterhouse, 1997).

As far as the recipients of (foster) care are concerned a theory of care is not sufficient; we must know how well it is accomplished (Tronto, 1993). Legislation must be interpreted according to care recipients' rights and acceptable standards, and those for foster children must be explicit. Warren (1997) reviews a series of reports from the nineties revealing that children in foster care were poorly served and required safeguards (now being put into place) in order to better protect them, often from abuse perpetrated by their carers.

4.   The interpersonal relationship between carer and care recipient.

Children are placed with foster families because of a belief that this is the optimum arrangement for their welfare. Fostered children have their own birth families and the Children Act 1989 insists that they are given priority. Wherever possible birth parents retain parental responsibilities, even when their children are cared for by a third party. It is the birth parents, not the foster carers, with whom the Social Services Department must work in partnership. Birth families must be consulted and can give explicit instructions regarding their child - for example hair styles and bed times. In day-care situations this undermines confidence and authority (Nelson, 1994). Foster carers are in a similar ambiguous position with regard to their relationships with the fostered children.

Thomas (1993) coins the expression "contingent caring relationship" to describe that between individuals who, like foster carers and foster children, are usually unknown to one another and organised under particular service conditions for specific ends. Hochschild's (1979) "emotional labour" describes the display of warmth and concern that employees are paid to exhibit to customers. Most foster carers are not paid but must juggle family members' competing needs and also maintain a relationship with frequently the certainty of loss (see chapter one) plus manage their own emotions.

It is arguably the emotional component in any relationship that makes it meaningful and fulfilling. Abel and Nelson (1990) posit that it is the emotional constituent that ensures that caring is not demeaning for either party. But caring relationships do not always include affection; some rest on fear and obligation (Graham, 1983). Ungerson (1987) found that strong bonds can frustrate the delivery of care; in order to care **for**[18] their elderly parents some daughters had to stop caring **about**[19] them. Nelson's (1990a) day-care providers experienced difficulties if they became too attached. 77% owned to emotional commitment. Most coped by "detached attachment" and had to re-create this relationship daily with the children. Foster carers face similar emotional dilemmas; they love children often to lose them and cannot depend upon reciprocated affection in the interval.

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[18] Author's emphasis.
[19] Authors emphasis.

Emotion within a relationship has its own power. Relationships based on care include a power component. Narayan (1995) discusses how a moral discourse of care can be misused to justify domination and oppression in Colonialism. But (mis)use of power is not automatically that of carer over cared-for but can be constantly recreated and renegotiated - an "interactional power" (Dominelli and Collins, 1997) and can thus offer a way of understanding power in relationships. Models taken from object relations psychology show that the power of a mother over her children has the potential to produce both idolisation and extreme rage (Chodorow with Contratto, 1982), both reactions to ideas of power as power-over-another. Tronto (1993) explains that, because of this, care-givers are vulnerable to being perceived as "others" and rejected. Sevenhuijsen (1994) argues that (male) theorists equate care and dependence with domination in an effort to resist past dependencies on mothers. Foster children, angry with their birth mothers for not protecting them from the care system, frequently transfer this grief and anger upon their carers (Fahlberg, 1991).

Generally within families mothers hold powerful positions, even if this may be circumscribed and contingent. They carry the knowledge of family life and can thus structure the contexts within which decisions get taken (Ribbens 1993a: Backett, 1978). They can organise the household to their own authoritative advantage (Martin, 1984). But is this true of female foster carers who are no longer foster "mothers"? Glenn (1994) questions whether shifts in language and imagery represent actual movement in thought, or simply the reconstitution of old ideas. Does this change of nomenclature invest in the carers more professionalism and therefore more power, or does it diminish their status to domestic carers?

Foster carers have an ambiguous parent/worker role with the children they look after. Of all the professionals involved with the child they are the ones most vulnerable to becoming emotionally involved. It is the role of the carer to love and to lose (Jassal, 1981). Care involves both labour and love; Lynch's (1989) expression "solidary labour" explains that labour and love cannot be analysed separately because of their reciprocal interdependence. Morgan (1996) suggests that there may be pressures in caring to shift to the more impersonal.

A terminological shift has occurred as foster mothers/fathers have now become, officially, foster carers - a more obscure and equivocal term which may affect the nature of the care relationships. Yet foster carers look after children within the privacy of their own homes; the site where expressions of emotion are not only permissible but expected.

5. Social domain within which the caring relationship is located.
This section reviews both the actual care site and also how the foster family household is situated vis-à-vis the social services department.

Whilst Lynch (1989) argues that caring occurs in several extra-familial contexts other feminist writers place the locus of most caring within the informal, private household (see, for example, Able and Nelson, 1990). Fostering occurs within the carer's household and is regulated by public authorities. There is a perceived need to monitor the care of the children to ensure minimum standards. Foster carers have to work with the many state representatives who visit and check upon their care in their own home. They are obliged to explain their actions, countenance criticism, negotiate on behalf of the children, themselves and their own families. This is considered acceptable, expected accountability by the local authority "experts" and "professionals". This claim to expertise by social workers gives them personal power. Although mostly female they represent the State whose senior managers are predominantly male. Stacey (1981) describes such surveillance as patriarchal intrusion within the domestic domain. Glenn (1994), discussing the division of labour amongst American women, notes how white, middle class women use black, working class women as child minders in order to free themselves for paid posts as "mother-managers." Because these careers bring privileges they have little impetus to challenge an arrangement that oppresses their own sex. There may be similar parallels with middle class social workers monitoring working class female foster carers.

Female foster carers mediate with a growing body of experts and professionals; they are becoming both providers and teachers (Graham, 1985). Yet for all of this motherhood-writ-large carers cannot insist upon being heard in relation to their foster children. It is not automatic that the "experts" will request foster carers' views and opinions on the children that they daily care for. Foster carers have to entrust the futures of their foster children to the

judgement of others. Foster carers have no rights (Lowe, 1994). The need for more collaborative working is recognised (Department of Health, 1997) but the research of Triseliotis and colleagues (2000) reveals that this is empty rhetoric. These tensions, inherent at the interface between foster carers and the social services department personnel, are like those between mothers and teachers (Ribbens, 1993b). She questions how far mothers, who have responsibility for their children, also have authority (see also Ribbens, 1992) and this appears to be pertinent for foster carers.

Foster carers take an undertaking:

> To care for the child .... as if he (sic) were a member of the foster parent's (sic) family (Children Act: Guidance and Regulations, 1991:140)

The belief is that "family life" can offer additional qualities. Studies show that home day-care providers were certain that they offered something "extra" to a day-care centre. They described this in emotional terms; that the centre did not proffer "warmth, love and intimacy" (Nelson, 1994:186). Comparative studies of the care provided in twelve residential children's homes with nineteen foster families confirms these beliefs (Colton, 1988; 1989 and chapter one). Whilst residential institutions "cared for" the children, the foster families also "cared about" them; the residential provision lacked an affective ingredient. The tangible performances of foster carers and residential staff were markedly influenced by the contrasting actualities of home and the more formal, residential institution.

Formal state policy tends to reduce caring to work in the public sense; to rotas, shifts, statutory breaks and second hand information so that it risks losing the "love" dimension. Foster carers offer round-the-clock care and apply knowledge from intimate understandings, from particularistic ties - not abstract principles (Colton, 1992). Foster carers, like Ruddick's theory of mothering (1983), learn through practice not instruction. The essence of care-giving is about attentiveness to detail. This is most efficacious within the context of an intimate relationship, between foster carer and foster child in the domestic/private domain, but foster carers' caring is heavily influenced by the social services. As a public sector body, social services is concerned not with detail but with a general set of rules. Thus the lives of foster carers epitomise a wider issue - that of how to legislate/ bureaucratise family lives and particularistic ties.

Social services departments must ensure that children are cared for[20], that minimum standards concerning their health, education and general welfare are met. The preferred option is that children are placed with foster families. It is these families that care about[21] the children. These concepts identify distinctions which are not mutually exclusive (Graham, 1983; Ungerson, 1983).

Caring and fostering children involve two rationalities (Ve, 1989). Foster carers need to identify themselves with the children in order to understand their individual requirements and adopt a caring, responsible rationality. This is in contrast with the technical rationality of the local authority which is concerned with efficiency, economy and the maximisation of production. In practice the activity of parenting combines both aspects but at least mothers have some autonomy. But foster carers have to manage the conflicting aims of these two models of care - for example not permitting foster children to attend sleep-overs. The context for caregiving is critical; it can impede caregivers from fulfilling their idea of good care, particularly if there are constraints because of the bureaucratic structure and strictures of the social services departments (Colton, 1992). Abel and Nelson quoting Withorn, write:

> The dominant reality for most service workers is bureaucracy, with its hierarchy, its specialisation, its rules and its constant quest for functional rationality. (1990:12)

Bureaucracies require routines and standardisation in order to operate; they deal with generalisations and not with detail. Weber (1958) wrote of 'formal rationality' to explain organisation according to calculated principles, explicit rules and institutionalised procedures. He concludes that rationalised social relations follow generalised principles - but at a cost. Thus if an individual's need is not standard then the care giver must rely on ingenuity to cope (Sachs, 1990: Lundgren and Browner, 1990). Foster carers, for example, regularly subsidise the children they look after (Oldfield, 1997); they meet those needs not yet recognised/formalised by the social services. Bureaucracy's need for standard techniques means that care becomes a component of the regulatory system. It is converted from a human

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[20] Author's emphasis.
[21] Author's emphasis.

service into a commodity; witness the purchaser/ provider splits within some health and local authorities. Foster carers have to work with this rationale which can become more problematic for those carers who are in receipt of a fee.

6.   The economic character of the care relationship.

Care can be analysed in terms of whether it is paid or unpaid (Stacey, 1981). There is much ideological support for the latter (underpinned by economic arguments) as witnessed by government initiatives for care in the community, which frequently means care **by**[22] the community. Foster care could be described as one of the earliest examples of this. Historically foster care was conceived as an extension of parenting, rather than as work outside the domestic domain. Smith (1988) posits that generally society believes that mothering is a skill which women owe humanity. This is explicit in some of the discussion which laid the foundations for British post war child welfare.

> Although her labour deserves reward .... the acceptance of payment for the work cuts at the root of the relation between foster mother and a child which we wish to create. (Curtis Report, 1946)

A report of a London working party noted forty years later:

> Extraordinarily, one local authority had reduced expenses to its foster parents on the basis that they should be "doing it for love"!
> (NFCA, 1986)

Clearly payment and love may be seen as contradictory themes. Money is regarded as a visible symbol of service but there are also beliefs that "money cannot buy love". Issues regarding payment expose one of the key dilemmas of the public/private debate regarding foster care.[23]

One of the beliefs in support of unpaid, "for love" caring is that there is job satisfaction from emotional attachment (Waerness, 1984). It is part of the ideological packaging of care with altruism and mothering. Studies of human services illustrate that people are drawn to certain occupations because of a desire to help (Lundgren and Browner, 1990) and show

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[22] Author's emphasis.
[23] I will return to this subject in chapter seven.

that there are subjective rewards (Fisher, 1990). But are there different orientations for the task now that foster mothers are foster carers and will this change these assumptions?

Cancian (1986) argues that the feminising of love and affective caring by society has contributed to the devaluation and exploitation of women dependent on an ideology that child care is for love, and is not therefore work. Oldfield (1997) posits that foster carers who view themselves as mothers are not concerned about payment. Smith (1988) shows that Australian foster carers demonstrate four sets of assumptions which work to argue against payment. One, that "mothering" is not work because skills and training are not necessary. Two, that people should not be paid if their own needs are being met. Three, that carers would anyway be preoccupied in mothering and houseworking. Lastly, as foster care actually enhances family life it does not merit payment. In summary, the more fostering resembles family life the less it should be rewarded. Leat's (1990) study compares payment issues within four groups of financially remunerated carers - childminders, private agency carers, adult family placement and foster carers. The first three groups felt poorly recompensed but believed that the fact of payment was more important than the amount. Foster carers were in receipt only of allowances and felt that fostering was not so much a "job" as a way of life. Butler and Charles (1999) discover that foster carers want improved financial rewards but feel that payment for parenting is fundamentally contrary to societal norms.

Whilst an understanding of caring is allied to that of family and of altruism there arises an ideology that unpaid caring is qualitatively different and better than paid caring. There is a well established sociological literature debating this. Formal "professional" care suggests a wage (Stacey, 1981). Foster carers who register for fee-paying work are selling their private worlds. They are dissolving further the boundaries between the public and the private, between formal and informal care - Ungerson's (1995) "commodification" of care. Ungerson reviews former debates on whether only informal/unpaid care contains both labour and love and is therefore qualitatively superior. She argues that the belief that care for "love" is better than for money has implications for women; it could continue to confine them to a sphere that is private, domestic and devalued and thereby sustain the public/private dichotomy. Most carers are female (Ungerson 1990; Finch and Groves, 1983) and the payment of low wages rests on the belief that women only earn "pin money" (Tronto, 1993). But, conversely, low

payments may ensure a reasonable supply of carers and thus reinforce this exploitation (discussed further below). Ungerson's argument is that these schemes do not dissolve the boundaries between private and public but strengthen and maintain them. Though in a later paper (Knijn and Ungerson, 1997) she proposes that the introduction of payment may attract male employees and lead to a degendering and an upgrading of care.

Most of the literature debating the theory of care discusses care within the family or care of the elderly. Fostering, an exemplar for unpaid care, merits barely a mention but continues to embrace values of philanthropy and unpaid labour. Even in 1997 64% of local authorities paid their carers below the recommended minimum fostering allowance (Warren, 1997). Most foster carers have to subsidise the children and experience the dilemma of altruism versus affordability (Oldfield, 1997). Zelizer (1985) propounds that it is this non-economic part of the contract that legitimises fostering. It is low payments that certify altruism; the emotional bond must outweigh the financial link.

Even though most foster carers are not paid there are, nonetheless, expectations of their availability and assumptions about priority to be given, particularly by the female carer, to the needs of the foster child. Carers who have their own children must juggle conflicting demands. Analysis of my data and professional observation[24] shows that daily life can be dominated by the needs and the timetable of the foster child. Not only must the foster child be cared for but there are statutory reviews and medical checks and frequently medical treatments. There can be an onerous programme of contact visits with the birth family and the carer(s)' presence may be demanded at meetings or even at Court. Yet foster carers are not paid to take on all these diverse tasks.

But given both a market economy and a permanent shortage of foster carers there are now various schemes which offer a fee - although never at parity with residential workers. Whereas carers in the formal residential sector are waged with all the obligations but also contractual rights that this entails, foster carers have no rights but all the obligations. Any

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[24] I undertook my research into foster care whilst employed by the National Foster Care Association as discussed in chapter three.

"fee" (which often equates to less than one pound an hour - on the assumption of a single carer with no extra fee for the second) purchases round the clock care and availability. Although this is a token it introduces an element of payment so that the practical and emotional tasks that foster carers provide for their birth families for free they provide to other children for a fee. Does payment interfere with caring? Does it undermine the ideologies of mothering? Feeling "rules" are very different in private life and in public life. These foster carers have moved into an area where feeling rules are ambiguous (Nelson, 1990b: Hochschild, 1979).

It is arguable that any payment to foster carers is as a symbol of being valued; it is some sort of recognition that care is 'work' (Ungerson, 1998). But waged foster carers are not fully recompensed, their "symbolic payment" is framed as a consequence of the task and not as a rate for the job (Ungerson, 1995). This payment ensures carers' accountability by reinforcing pressures of obligation, altruism, duty and "love" at an ideological level. The relationship between the care-giver/ foster carer and the care-receiver/ foster child is thus affected and is commodified (Kirton, 2001a and 2001b). The carer is in receipt of "quasi-wages payment for care" (Ungerson, 1995:39) which is not related to the market rate but is conditional on specific tasks and some sort of contract.

But what else might this fee symbolise? Daily life for foster carers is circumscribed by the demands of bureaucratic caring. Are foster carers compromised as the state purchases the right to interfere and keep them dependent within their own homes? Is the symbolic payment compensation for the fact that birth parents can undermine the authority of foster carers? Have foster carers surrendered to becoming low wage earners rather than altruistic, independent volunteers? Payment certainly purchases public sector access and surveillance. Is it a public statement of the social services department's authority?

The position of foster carers and the paradoxes surrounding payment demonstrate how material and ideological conditions can reinforce each other to legitimate (female) carers' secondary status. Although carers deal predominantly with female social workers they are not encouraged to work within an egalitarian or feminist framework (Cousins, 1988). Carers are neither wholly voluntary nor paid the rate for the job.

Those foster carers in receipt of a fee are treated as self-employed without rights or protection (Shaw and Hipgrave, 1989b). As paid carers, do they regard their status as different from unpaid carers and perhaps consider themselves "professional" carers? Studies of day-care providers revealed that some of them carved out careers for themselves by implicitly devaluing parental knowledge in favour of "expert" knowledge (Wrigley, 1990: Nelson, 1990a). Although the foundation of their skills was from the same base as the children's mothers and other day-care providers (women's caring) they also claimed an educational expertise for the under fives. Similar differences are found in a comparative study looking at service delivery between main stream foster carers and specialist foster carer schemes in North America (Unrau, 1994). Whilst unpaid foster carers offered the children their family and warmth and understanding, the paid foster carers perceived their tasks in terms of social training and education. Payment may breed specialism and difference. Rhodes (1993a) prophesied that paid schemes could prove divisive in that "volunteer" foster carers would be viewed as less expert and offering a less specialised care compared to "paid" colleagues.

Leat and Gay (1987) argue that paid foster caring, because it is underpaid, is exploitative. Market wages for foster carers may prove to be an irresolvable paradox. There are sound arguments for paying (foster) carers a fair wage but is this actually affordable? Unpaid carers give of themselves so much that it "costs". There is the physical and emotional stress sometimes intensified by a restricted family and social life (Parker, 1990). There is the cost of forfeiture of employment - estimates in 1982 reckoned loss of earnings to be some £8,500 p.a. without taking into account future losses, and this does not include the likelihood of increased expenditure (Mayall and Foster, 1989). Any adverse factors must impact upon the quality of care which itself depends upon working conditions, carers' self-esteem and recognition of their work by others (Ungerson, 1990) - all issues applicable to foster family households.

Household and Family.

Concepts of home, household and family overlap as is evidenced by this Curtis Inquiry finding:

There was .... much greater happiness for the child by boarding out into a family of normal size in a normal home (Curtis Report, 1946, para 370).

This ably demonstrates how concepts and ideologies regarding the family are so taken for granted. But historically and culturally the family takes many diverse forms and is noted for its social pluralism (Muncie et al, 1995). Nonetheless, because of its unquestioned assumptions of an optimal environment, (male breadwinner, female carer and dependent children), family life in contemporary Western society is seen as the best place to rear children. Yet there is evidence that it was not always like that and possibly never was (Voight, 1986).

Nonetheless, (as discussed in chapter one) Bebbington and Miles' (1990) comprehensive survey comparing the general characteristics of foster carers to a sample of average families from the General Household Survey (GHS) demonstrated that the description of a typical foster family applied to 75% of almost three thousand foster families, but to only 31% of the eight and a half thousand families in the GHS. The majority of foster carers appeared to represent the ideology of the nuclear family and thus presented the paradox of using bureaucratic, substitute care to reinforce images of traditional families. Recent data shows that although only 38% of foster families had a full time mother at home with a waged father, 79% were couple families (Triseliotis et al, 2000). Local authorities, through their choice of families, may be reinforcing a traditional family life form. If social services selection is preserving notions of nuclear households, the children in the looked after system will rarely have come from similar families. Nelson (1994) found that her day-care providers were all aware of the disparity of backgrounds that their charges came from, yet all described a common, established notion of "family" experience that denied these differences. The social service departments represent the establishment, and the general culture prescribed by the Department of Health could be described as middle class. The children within the looked after system come from some of the most poor and disadvantaged families with very limited options. Many foster families may be offering children an experience which is completely incongruent with their birth lives, both because of their own foster family culture but more because of the wishes and demands of the social services.

Voight (1986) maintains that foster care, by perpetuating and reproducing the ideologies of middle class mothering, undermines the working class. Standards regarding childcare are continuously modifying and Wrigley (1990) argues that disadvantaged families face consistent denigration of their culture and childrearing styles. Smart (1997b) attests that there is a culture to continue previous efforts to transform disadvantaged/working class families, lone parent families and families of people of colour into middle class idealised families. She posits that the aim is to recapture the time when "the family" was the resolution to all problems; that "idealised and frozen moment which approximates to the 1950s" (ibid:302), in order that families should again represent values of altruism and unpaid labour.

If the majority of foster families map onto this "idealised and frozen moment" are they portraying an "unreal" life? Real life demonstrates that families are infinitely variable (Cheal, 1991). In a bid to unpack the concepts surrounding family Morgan (1985) discusses these as having three aspects. He lists these as: the imagery and the complex ideologies - for example the notion of the "idealised haven"; the actual physical setting - "the temple of the hearth"; and the kinship relationships and the importance of children. He describes family as:

> both societal and individual, both institutional and personal, both public and private. (ibid; page 285)

Ideologies of family involve notions of privacy, femininity and of reproduction. There is an expectation that "real" carers should always be available within the home and Cheal (1991) reviews the literature that debates family as an anti-social institution which imprisons women. Rich (1977) argues that current social arrangements around the institution of motherhood means that it becomes a central identity for the majority of western women. Are female foster carers trapped by these structures or do they regard mothering as empowering (Oakley and Mitchell, 1976) and use fostering as a vehicle to emancipation?

The problem is not that women care for children but how this family responsibility gets allocated. Borchorst (1990) argues that biologically motherhood terminates with weaning; any

extension is politically constructed, supported by the conceptual private/public divisions. Yet foster carers "mother" a series of children for twenty or thirty years. Harris (1977) posits that the strains of (public) life deny people expression of their talents and they compensate by overloading the (private) family with expectation. Whereas work is about rationality and alienation the family is seen to be about solidarity, companionship and enrichment. The family therefore becomes the only source of fulfilment for most adults who live through their children and make greater emotional demands upon them (see also Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Oakley (1979) writes of the importance of children to a mother's feelings of self esteem (achievement, being wanted and owning property). In Boulton's (1983) study two thirds of her women found a sense of meaningfulness through their roles as mothers. Some of this may map onto life-as-foster-carer.

Caulfield's (1977) work on family life and the housewife is more complex. The family is indeed a source of fulfilment but when members are physically not in the home the wife/ mother can feel empty, degraded and isolated. Do foster carers want children in order to keep the home full and busy? Are their lives solely, mainly, or occasionally constructed around other people's children? Many day-care providers selected that occupation because it allowed them to remain at home all day with their own children. They specifically chose to define themselves as mothers who were committed to mothering as a primary role (Nelson, 1990a).

Ideologically, households are private and thus able to protect vulnerable children from the dangers of the outside world, though gradually childrearing has become increasingly controlled by the public sphere (Hendrick, 1990). The rationale for this is that the child is a product which must meet exact specifications and that mothers are ignorant (Jagger, 1983). Thus the mother's expertise in the, supposed, privacy of her own house is regularly questioned (Beck-Gernsheim, 1992) and her abilities increasingly the concern of public authorities (Ribbens, 1992). Pascall (1997) emphasises that although family has lost its control it has not lost its functions. It remains the main locus for the care of dependants but many traditional female tasks are now defined and managed from outwith the household, by male civil servant managers. Yet ideologically home remains "the principle source of personal fulfilment and identity" (Kumar, 1997:206) and has considerable significance. To

be without a family is to be seen as greatly deprived. Foster care is about (ful)filling this deprivation of family experience.

Concluding discussion.

Theories of public and private, care, family and household, with their distinctive gender components, overlay at most points. It has been difficult to discuss any of them as discrete concepts. All have mapped onto our knowledge of foster care only to reveal its paradoxes. Foster families seem to epitomise the ambiguities of family life, the complexities of public and private domains and the multiple conflicting components around the concepts of paid and unpaid care. Foster carers have to manage all these boundaries. Any theoretical over-view might suggest that foster care cannot work! Yet we know that it is a favoured institution (chapter one). Foster carers provide a public service within a private setting, but managed from outside. Although they are called "carers", children are placed with them in order to have a positive experience of parenting and family life. But relationships within the family are ambiguous. Priority has to be given to the foster children's birth families and foster children have rights that are not necessarily so explicit for carers' own children. Life for foster carers demands many social work skills (Freiburg, 1994) yet the majority remain unpaid whilst also financially subsidising local authority children (Oldfield, 1997). Meanwhile, there is some evidence that local authorities, ignoring the protean nature of family life forms, continue to select "traditional" families for the care of public children.

Family discourse, the language of family life, helps us to understand the family in relation to ourselves and to others. Everyday reality is produced through how people think and talk about activities and relationships. Family is therefore both a concrete set of social ties and sentiments and a socially constructed phenomenon which derives meaning from its context (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990). We all experience family as "real" - but how different are different people's realities? How "different" are the families of foster carers and how do they experience family life looking after other people's children? If a sense of family is constructed then this leads to an assumption that family is not just biological but can be social/psychological as well. The important understandings of family care could potentially be created between adults and children who are not related. This research project is about foster

carers' perceptions and their world view; it is the family-according-to-foster-carers. In a bid to (re)present them I have taken the advice of Gubrium and Holstein that "you have to listen in order to see" (ibid:6).

Chapter 3.
Methodology: Listening in order to see.

Introduction.

The child care system is a social institution whose categories are taken both from legal and from administrative terminology (Parker, 1989) - but how do foster carers, who work within this system, make sense of it? This chapter explains why I embarked upon this particular research and how I chose to set about it - how I have "listened in order to see" (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990:6). It examines some of the pitfalls along the way of the research journey and discusses some of the ethical issues that I experienced as a practitioner-researcher.

Choice of research subject.

Fonow and Cook (1991) review the reasons why feminist researchers regularly use the situation in hand as their research topics. In my case I had just commenced a paid post with the National Foster Care Association (NFCA) when I decided to investigate the possibilities of further academic study. At that time the position of foster carers appeared as incomprehensible to me. I could not understand why they chose their role. My paid post was concerned with their continual difficulties and frustrations, their disappointments and disillusionments, their efforts to help the children they look after whilst feeling regularly undermined by the bureaucracy of the social services department. It was also clear, as examined in the first two chapters, that foster carers are a socially silenced body. Perhaps because they have not been recognised as people in their own right there is an assumption that they can not be perceived as participants of research. Foster carers, as a group, wield little power so their voices are not heard in the public sphere. My choice of substantive research topic of the world view of foster carers was therefore stimulated by my inability to comprehend their position, a wish to give them voice so that their part in the production of knowledge would be facilitated and also, pragmatically, because I had access to them.

I confirmed my access to foster carers registered with local authorities early in the study by obtaining official permission from each of the six social service departments covered by my paid post. This was readily given since, as underlined in chapter one, there is a scarcity

of information on them. There has been no interference whatsoever from these authorities - no expectation that Senior Managers should know either who I interviewed or what about. Not only has there been no interference but neither has there been any official interest.

The research question.

This study investigates how foster carers make sense of their everyday lives in relation to their own families and to the "extra" children that they care for. It aims to understand their lives in and on their own terms. I therefore chose not to define the boundaries too closely in order to allow the foster carers to do this for themselves. Following Brannen (1988) I wanted the research topic to emerge in its own terms. This would mean allowing and encouraging foster carers to talk of issues central and personal to themselves. This could of course prove problematic; auto/biography as a research tool brings into the public domain topics of a sensitive and intimate nature (Harrison and Lyon, 1993). This raises the central dilemma of not only how to uncover foster carers' lives but how to explore their privately based knowledge and their personal understandings, whilst bearing in mind that the study not only examines these worlds but in doing so makes them public (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998). This obviously requires a fine tuned methodology.

The research design.

As chapter one demonstrates, most descriptions of foster care have been from the perspective of the social services or the children looked after, so that anything about the carers themselves has resulted in a disjointed and fragmented picture. Much of the information on them has been gathered via prestructured questionnaires which provide facts that are amenable to statistical treatment and can be categorised. Collecting foster carers' accounts of their daily lives, their experiences and their perceptions of their part in the child care system requires a methodology which privileges their world view and their understandings. I therefore needed to adopt a feminist methodology using qualitative methods, in this case in-depth interviews. This provides a more sensitive research tool; one that furnishes not just the bare "facts" but the context and the emotions surrounding them. I wanted to focus on their subjective experience and the meanings that they give to their actions and to events. There

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is a long history of using personal accounts in order to uncover hidden spheres of culture and the self perceptions of the researched group (Harrison and Lyon, 1993) and I wanted to explore how foster carers construct their foster care world.

I commenced by running a focus group of eight carers to discuss issues around the assessment of foster carers. Without encouragement or prompting they ranged over the many facets of foster care. Their discussion included whether fostering is for giving or receiving, risks and change, problems with the local authority and the need for better support. Using the data from this discussion I designed a semi-structured interview schedule which allows foster carers to talk about those aspects of fostering which are of most importance to themselves. I used open questions in order not to shape the responses. These cover a consistent range of topics that include biographical details, perceptions of family and of caring for the children of others, whether this is different or similar to caring for one's own, any positives or negatives resulting from the experience and how it is all managed. I piloted this on five foster carers. These interviews proved to be fairly intensive with the carers covering, again unprompted, most of the areas I had listed in the interview schedule. As a result of these interviews I then made some changes to the schedule, for example emphasising more whether carers felt that their lives had changed in any ways because of fostering (see appendix b for the interview guide). I also decided to add six vignettes (see appendix c) as I wanted to aid the carers to talk about a full range of fostering topics. The vignettes all give hypothetical foster family situations representing real life dilemmas in foster carers' lives. They thus encourage carers to reflect on whether they have personally experienced anything similar and also give their opinions on what people "ought" to do (see also Ribbens, 1994 and Finch and Mason, 1993). These therefore provide some specific structured material that could provide a basis for comparison (see appendix d).

I decided to interview only foster carers who are registered with their local social services departments and not carers who work for the new independent fostering agencies, or kin carers. This decision was based pragmatically on ease of access and also with a view to possible follow-up research involving local authority personnel. I aimed to interview between ten and fifteen experienced foster carer couples and the same number of very new ones.

Primarily I wanted to see if family becoming foster-family wrought any changes, and if it did what these were and how the adults coped with them. Parallel with this are the changes imposed by central government - the revision of foster "parent" to foster "carer" and its impact upon family life which would only be understood by the experienced carers. It might be that the interviews would reveal different discourses and the intention was to note differences between experienced and new carers. I recognise that this is a small scale project which may not be statistically representative but nonetheless I believe that it has value. The relationship between the particular and the generic is not the same as between sample and population (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Small scale studies are an effective way of collecting information and opinions in order to understand complex situations; study of detail gives an opportunity to seek explanations. Only a qualitative study could enable foster carers to elaborate their own concerns. It requires minimally structured interviews to reveal the considerable complexities of how foster carers struggle to make sense of the tensions and contradictions they live with in order to care for other people's children. Boulton (1983) reviews past small scale studies in order to argue that it is exactly these studies which provide valuable insights into family processes. Thus the research presented by my study sets out to reveal a more coherent picture of peoples' experiences as foster carers - one which reflects their own perspectives. I wanted the methodology to allow for the development of new concepts for describing their experiences which would be grounded in their lives and reflect their main concerns. The aim was to ensure that the resulting set of interviews contained a rich diversity of foster carers - to illuminate the unique rather than the representative. Although it might be argued that the numbers are statistically small I aimed for this mix in the hope that I could answer any criticisms of "you have not included x". A heterogeneous sample means that I can look at what they have in common, despite their differences.

Accessing and selecting foster carers.

In order to interview as large a mix as possible I needed to ensure that my research sample included both foster carers from each of the separate categories (e.g. long term, short term, respite; see glossary), and also carers who look after all ages of fostered children. I had the opportunity to interview foster carers from both urban and country areas and who lived in

several types of accommodation. It was clear from past research studies that foster carers come from a variety of social backgrounds. I also wanted to incorporate foster carers of different ethnicities. Gubrium and Holstein (1995) argue that it is important not to select individuals for research interviews as this then deselects others. I commenced by using the foster carers' own networks but bore in mind that regular checks would actually ensure that I would have to eventually select in order to guarantee a wide mix. Since there have been so many recent changes in foster care I decided to seek the sample from two general groups, those who had fostered for as short a time as possible (most of them for only a few weeks) and those who have been fostering for over three years and, if possible, considerably longer.

I commenced by talking about the research to very experienced local foster carers who I met through my NFCA work and interviewed two of them and their partners. Following Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) I then used member identified categories asking carers (six in total) if they could put me in touch with another foster carer who fostered in a very different way from themselves; different in their attitudes towards the task or in the ages of the fostered children or in any way that they could think of.

I encountered no problems with this snowballing technique. All the carers from whom I requested a further contact could immediately think of someone suitable and different from themselves. All offered to make the initial contact - either by telephone or in one case by personal introduction. One carer who may or may not have anticipated the request had arranged the contact even before I had arrived at her house. Only in one case did the contact fail. One carer suggested that I interview the couple who acted as respite carers for the two boys that she looked after and offered to tell them about the research when she saw them at the week end. It was agreed that I should write to them after that. I received no response whatsoever to my letter. These carers offered week end respite care to children and may well have seen themselves as "not foster carers" as suggested in much of the research (Aldgate and Bradley, 1999).

When I had interviewed about ten couples I compared the known facts concerning their families and their backgrounds against Bebbington and Miles' (1990) classic profile (see

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chapters one and two), in order to identify the gaps and to search out foster carers who did not fit these characteristics. I therefore, for example, specifically asked one carer if she could recommend a foster family who still had their own young child(ren) at home and another if she could introduce me to any carers from other ethnic backgrounds. I also approached one couple who I knew through my paid employment as I particularly needed to include a foster family where the male carer played the lead role. This was one of only four telephone calls where the initial contact and appointments was made with the male carer rather than the female.

Appointments for interviews were always organised by telephone at a time to suit the foster carers and were followed by a letter confirming time and date - sometimes with both male and female carers on the same date (eight occasions), but completely separately. More often I met first with the female carer and then arranged an appointment with the male carer. This letter also explained that the research was specifically about foster carers' own perceptions of their lives. I clarified that I had permission from their local authority but that this was a general permission, not specific, so that all interviews were completely confidential. The letter also stated that the project was supervised by the university.

I had hoped to make all the contacts through the foster carer networks and not to use formal work contacts as far as possible. I wanted foster carers to know that the research was not linked in any way with the authorities for whom they worked. I did not want them to present their experiences in a way that mirrored the public accounts given by the social service departments. But when it became clear that my ethnic mix was limited I decided to investigate other methods. The then Chair on one of the local authority's Foster Care Associations, who had herself been part of my pilot study, therefore asked her social worker for a list of names and addresses of ethnic minority carers. I used this list to telephone two of them. Although greeted with suspicion by one, who rightly complained that her contact details should not be handed out without her permission, both agreed to participate.

Appointments with very new foster carers proved more problematic. Towards the end of the appointments with the experienced foster carers, knowing that I could access my quota,

I commenced requesting their contacts with new carers - but no one knew any. I then asked experienced carers who I had not interviewed as part of this study for help, and one carer found me two interviewees. But, after interview, neither of them were able to suggest anyone else. I was anxious not to find new carers via the local authority social service departments. Foster carer applicants are subjected to a vigorous application process which examines in depth how they operate as a family, as a couple and their attitudes to life in general. Although local authorities usually stress that there is no "pass or fail" at the end of the process many carers refer to the fact that they "passed". I did not want to be seen as an additional check to this procedure. Nonetheless it was clear that I would have to change my search method.

Three of my local authorities enrol all their carers as individual members of the NFCA. This requires the authorities to regularly send names and addresses of new carers to the London office. NFCA agreed to send a letter about the research with the enrolment information. The letter they wished to send was quite unacceptable to me as it emphasised both their own and the local authorities' interest in the project. But, even after negotiation, it was sent out to about six carers in a form that I felt was unhelpful. I therefore requested its cessation. Nonetheless when I attended an official foster carer function I was sought out by a new carer couple eager to be interviewed as a result of this letter. I also myself wrote to one other couple on this list as I was always actively seeking foster carers from ethnic minorities and they had an Iranian surname.

Other new carers were, in the main, discovered via peripheral local authority activities. In my official NFCA capacity I attended a foster carer barbeque and was introduced by an experienced carer to a group of three completely new couples. They co-operated with he research and provided me with a fourth contact. At a Foster Carer Conference I overheard a couple explaining to their neighbours that they were newly registered and immediately enrolled their participation. At this same conference one of the social workers introduced me to a trio who fostered together and I made appointments to interview them. One of the local authorities furnished me with a list of their newly registered foster carers, for my work, and I contacted two of them directly, specifically selecting one because he was a single male carer. An experienced carer mentioned to me that her foster child was in

receipt of occasional respite care from a newly registered couple. At my request she organised the contact for me.

Past studies on foster care emphasise that it is female led and tend to ignore any views or contributions of the male carer (Gilligan, 2000). My study aimed to interview both the male as well as the female foster carers. Some carers felt that I should also include their own/birth children as their voices frequently go unheard, a suggestion I noted for the future. Only in two cases was I unable to meet both adults. One of the experienced male carers, to his wife's great surprise, agreed to an appointment; she explained that he was extremely shy. He was then obliged to cancel because of shift rearrangements at his place of work and decided that he did not wish to be interviewed. In the other case which involved a newly registered couple he was working away from home when I interviewed her and after several telephone calls to try and organise a meeting she then explained that they had separated.

The foster carers.

In total I interviewed forty six carers. Twenty-one of these are experienced carers who have fostered for over three years - some of them for up to twenty. They include eight men and thirteen women; four of the women have no male partner living with them. I interviewed twenty-five new foster carers; that is carers who had been fostering for under two years though the majority had only just taken their first placement and been engaged in the activity a matter of weeks. Of the new carers eleven were male and fourteen female. This group includes one single male carer and a trio where two males (cousins) are the registered carers supported by the mother of one who had fostered many years ago. These forty-six foster carers represent all the different administrative categories of carers (see glossary), came from a variety of towns and villages throughout six local authorities and between them fostered children from new born babies to young adults who they were preparing for independent living.

Small qualitative studies are open to criticism for sometimes failing to recruit both class and ethnic mix (Oleson, 1994). My study involved carers from a variety of both

occupational and educational backgrounds - though as six fostering households did not return their forms to me (discussed below) I have had to make some subjective assumptions regarding the following descriptions.[25]

The most recent descriptions of foster carers' personal and social characteristics are from the work of Triseliotis et al (2000) and Sinclair and colleagues (2000) – though there are differences in the information available. Triseliotis' survey of all foster carers in Scotland found that 62% of the women and 53% of the men had commenced fostering when aged under 40 years. In this study an analysis of the 22 experienced carers shows that whilst six commenced fostering at forty plus the majority, (73% or 16 carers), commenced before their fortieth birthdays. The new carers have an older profile: 64% (16) are over forty. At the time of Triseliotis' survey 70% of the women and 80% of the men were aged forty plus years with almost 50% aged over 50 years. At the time of this study of 47 carers[26], 40% (19) of the women and 34% (16) of the men were aged over forty with a total of 30% (14) aged over 50 years – thus presenting a younger profile.

Triseliotis found that 79% of Scottish carers were living in partnerships: Sinclair reports 74%. My study (see table 1) reflected this "family formation" with 77% (36) carers in partnerships, plus a family of three (mother, son and her nephew). Seven carers are living alone.

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[25] See further description in Appendix f.

[26] I interviewed 46 carers but have included Kelly's husband in this statistical analysis as she provided the necessary information on his behalf.

Table 1.   Ages of couple carers (n = 19)

Experienced carers:

Isambard and Olivia	51	49
Arthur and Yvonne	67	68
Brian and Tricia	48	47
Stan and Laura	54	47
Ali and Khanm	47	45
Clive and Kelly	34	37
John and Ann	46	42
Harry and Celia	40	35
Stuart and Hanneka	both early forties[27]	

New carers:

Richard and Mary	48	45
Keith and Mandy	both late 40s/late50s	
Harold and Kathleen	63	53
Steve and Georgina	29	34
Alfred and Frances	62	56
Al[28] and Daisy	both early forties	
Cyril and Janet	64	47
Gordon and Emma	47	32
Mo and Hope	both middle 40s	
Mike and Louise	32	29

The Scottish survey looks at carers' own children (birth, step and adopted). Whilst there was an average of 3 children per foster carer family 8% of them were childless. One third of the families had no children actually living at home and one quarter had one child with them. In this study (see table 2) 15% (4 foster families) have no children although this number would be increased if it included the two female carers whose step children do not live with them. 38% (12 foster families) have children living at home, although this includes two couples whose adopted adult children have special needs and are therefore unlikely to manage independent living. There is an average of 2.5 (non fostered) children per foster family household. In my study the majority of foster carers, 81%, had birth/ step children (22 of the 27) and 70% lived with spouses/ partners (19 out of 27 households) thereby conforming to the stereotype of the traditional nuclear family.

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[27] Ages of four couples had to be estimated as they did not return their forms.

[28] Al was not interviewed (see appendix f for details) but is included for statistical details as he fosters jointly with his wife.

Table 2   Prevalence of birth, step and adopted children (n = 27)

Foster families with children aged under 11 years at home	7
Other foster families with teenage/ adult children at home	5
Other foster families with (adult) children away from home	11[29]
Foster families with no own children	4

Only a minority of the Scottish carers had remained in full time education beyond the official leaving age. It is possible to take information on the educational achievements of 39 of the foster carers in this study from the returned questionnaires. Of this group of carers exactly one third left school without any qualifications; another third left school with formal pass certificates at Ordinary Level or its equivalent, whilst the remaining third went on to Advanced Level and/or further education. A high proportion of the Scottish female carers were in non-manual occupations and some 40% connected with a social care sector job. In this study 23% of female carers were employed (compared to Triseliotis' 37%) but all in supervisory/ managerial or professional occupations. 35% are, or had been, connected to the social care sector.

Table 3   Occupations of study foster carers (n = 48)

Retired foster carers	7
Foster carers not in paid employment	15
Fee paid foster carers	4
Foster carers in professional/ managerial occupations	10
Foster carers in white collar occupations	7
Foster carers in blue collar occupations	5

Triseliotis' male carers (like the female carers) represented all six groups of occupational classifications but with a preponderance in class 3 manual (39%) and class two managerial (27%). The male carers in this study represent all classifications from Director of a thriving company to a, now retired, Dustman. I do not have sufficient data to classify them with accuracy according to occupational classification but table 3 gives general categories. As far as social class is concerned my interviewees were asked to describe into which class they would place themselves. 34 of the interviewees returned the questionnaire and 32

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[29] This includes two families where the wives (Emma and Mary) have no birth children of their own and whose step children were adult before they married their fathers. It also includes Lenin whose children live with his ex-wife (see appendix f).

replied to this specific question. 13 foster carers positioned themselves as middle class, 12 as working class and nine responded in individual ways – two described themselves as professional, one that the information was personal, others that "we are all individuals", "none", "upper class in Pakistan" and "working/middle class".

The Scottish survey revealed that a high proportion (68%) of carers were home owners. My study also reflects this; of the 27 foster households 70% owned their homes.

In terms of ethnic mix I interviewed three foster carers from the West Indies, two from Pakistan and one from Iran. All of them were consciously sought out for the study but, as identified by Fonow and Cook (1991), as I have no knowledge of class differences between black women I was not able to produce a fully representative sample in this respect. At each visit I was overwhelmed at the warmth of the welcome and embarrassed by my lack of awareness of their cultures. I certainly realised the inappropriateness of my vignettes. All the names in the vignettes are white Anglo-Saxon and all the incidents totally Eurocentric e.g. dilemmas over Christenings and Ruby wedding parties. I had to apologise for these during the interviews and do not know what other differences there were for which I failed to apologise. Whilst talking about their experiences of fostering, cultural differences in family ways became explicit, for example absolute respect for the head of the household, with male carers in particular talking of the daily compromises they make and the lack of parity with regard to this between birth and fostered children. It might be argued that all of these foster carers had placed themselves in close proximity to white bureaucracy and had chosen to deal in an alien activity; all explained that fostering as a formal process is not available in their countries of origin. They had all suffered, and continued to suffer, unintended and intended racism. How much did I contribute to that? For example I refused a meal at one house and still do not know if that violated any Moslem tradition of hospitality. During each interview I was aware of my inability to understand how their assumptions and perceptions of me as a white woman would shape the course of the interviews and how I could then reliably represent their views.

The interviews.

Each interview was taped and lasted about one and a half hours, i.e. the length of the tape. For some of the earlier visits I took additional tapes and they lasted over two hours but later, for pragmatic reasons, I kept to a tighter time limit. Frequently carers continued to talk after the tape finished and I subjectively selected some of this data as field notes for inclusion in my research diary.

Ideally I had wanted to approach each interview without preconceptions. I wanted to start where the foster carer was in a completely open-minded state but this proved impossible. All the foster carers, even those who were so new that they awaited their first placement, used social service vocabulary. They used a professional discourse which provides a professional short-hand and in which I was, anyway, completely immersed. As a partial insider I found this immediately seductive and impossible to ignore. Although possibly detrimental to the research, in that too often any short-hand allows for mistakes and misunderstandings, this did appear to help most of the carers feel secure in their responses and able to talk freely and easily (discussed below).

Many of the carers would have preferred to talk for much longer. Some of the female carers had to fit the interview around their fostering activities as they attended to the foster children. Also the telephone was a constant interruption - social workers making appointments, summons to school as a child was suspended for the rest of the day, past foster children telephoning with news or a demand for help, and general calls from both their own and the foster children's extended family requesting information. Foster carers dealt with these interruptions in one of two ways - they either became embroiled so that the interview had to be suspended for anything from two to fifteen minutes, or the caller was told that they were "in a meeting" and should telephone later. It is interesting to note that, with the exception of the one single male carer, none of these interruptions occurred whilst I was interviewing the partner male carers; I can only wonder if this is because they do not take the lead role in fostering or family caring.

Most of the male carers and all of the female carers appeared to positively want to talk about their lives looking after other people's children. I rarely checked the interview schedule until I needed to discuss the vignettes with them. They spoke easily without prompting or encouragement. I wanted them to talk about themselves and where they placed themselves as the central character so most of my questions were focused on them, on their experiences, on their attitudes, beliefs and perceptions. But the open ended questions allowed the foster carers to use their own language and to speak from their own concerns. Thus they regularly talked of the children they had looked after, of the children's experiences and of the children's lives. I knew from my paid employment[30] that foster carers regularly faced difficulties with social service departments - with both the bureaucracy and with its personnel. I took an early decision not to probe this area as my focus was to be on the carers and not the bureaucracy. For that reason I did not ask about these relationships but they all, without exception, peppered their interviews with their experiences with the department and were not prepared to avoid the issue.

In differing ways these interviews must have been influenced by the lengthy (several months) recruitment and assessment process that precedes registration. Many parts of the interviews could be regarded as a public account of foster care: the carers would want to give me a view of what is not only acceptable but also considered "good practice". But alongside this is the emotionality, that is not only spoken and explicit, but also subtly interwoven and more implicit throughout the transcripts. The content of the interviews reveal not only what the foster carers believe to be the publicly acceptable response but also their own personal private accounts of looking after the children of others within their homes.

There were only four foster carers, all male, who I found more difficult to draw out and whose responses to the interview questions were therefore less expansive. Brannen (1988) suggests that men are, in general, less practised towards interviews and towards personal disclosure. By sheer serendipity one of these had special educational needs. I was

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[30] Throughout the research period I kept field notes so there are occasions when I fall back on my own work/understandings.

particularly pleased to hear his views as too often too many people are de-selected in research interviews as narratively incompetent (Gubrium and Holstein, 1995). The fact that, for so long foster carers have held a pivotal position within the child care structure yet not been asked for their views, begs the question as to whether they, as a group, have also been categorised in these terms.

My experience was that the remaining forty-two carers tended to dictate the shape of the interview, though in general they covered all the topics that my schedule had identified. One female carer used the interview to decide to give up her new career as a foster carer. For her the interview was not so much about creating reality but recognising it (quoted in chapter four). Several carers, more men than women, relived difficult experiences and emotions concerning their foster children during the interview and were visibly moved - some of them weeping (discussed later). Two of the men wept for their own childhoods. At the end of each interview I asked them all if they had anything extra that they wished to add or if there was anything that was of such importance that they wished to underline it. Most took advantage of this invitation.

The research was guided by the statement of ethical practice produced by the British Sociological Association (1993). All of the participants were verbally assured that, in order to ensure anonymity, all the names would be changed. I asked many of the carers if they would like to choose their own pseudonym. To those that I forgot to ask I sent a note several months later with a stamped addressed envelope requesting their suggestions - but received only two replies.

At the end of the interview I left with each foster carer a simple questionnaire requesting basic factual details concerning their age, education, occupation, parents' occupations and the foster carers' own definition as to their social class (appendix f). There was also space for them to add anything they wished about their experience of the interview and an additional question asking if they wished to be kept informed of the progress of the research plus a stamped addressed envelope. The returns were 34 out of 45 with 9 (primarily husbands) not indicating that they wished to know the results of the study. Foster carers are part of a bureaucracy and are too regularly required to complete forms. I

knew from my paid work that paper returns from foster carers are always poor. This may in part be explained by Aldgate's (1990) study which demonstrates that foster carers' own educational levels are frequently low; though the non-returnees in my project did not all fit this description.

Once each tape had been transcribed it was then returned to the foster carer with a note of heartfelt thanks. I felt warmly drawn to each foster carer that I interviewed - which may prove problematic in the analysis. I felt a particular affinity towards some - especially when I could relate to specific dilemmas. I felt less empathy with three - two men who described the care of children in terms of their work vocabulary and continually gave fostering a professional, occupational reference and one female carer whose vocabulary appeared to belittle and patronise the young people in her care, though perhaps I minded more than they did. With others I was overwhelmed with admiration at the situations they took in their stride and their acceptance of the diversity of the characters and actions of the children they sought to care for.

Analysis.

This research is not concerned with what people "actually do" as foster carers but with the meanings that the foster carers give to make sense of their lives. Foster carers are the resource which provides families who take the children of others into their domestic sphere. But the domestic sphere is regarded as a fundamentally private place so that information about foster family activity is a sensitive area for disclosure. Once I had the accounts of foster carers on tape how could I understand their perspectives and stay close to their own understandings? Would it be possible to suspend all my own assumptions of family life in a bid to do this? Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to the "challenge" of making sense of data derived from qualitative methods. It would be a challenge to attend to the varied meanings that could be made of the accounts, particularly as there can be no one "voice" of the foster carers - they are not a homogeneous group. They cannot, as foster carers, be regarded as an unproblematised category (see also Alldred, 1998, regarding other such groups); so how to make sense of the diversity of perspectives regarding foster care? Should I attempt to represent them as a group, and generalise about what they share,

or look at what is individual? Alongside this each foster carer may have different voices in different contexts – as I had in my "separate" roles as worker and researcher (see below).

Yet a further challenge and dilemma is that, although I want this study to be socially useful, how can I know how it will be used, or by whom? Ideally I want the study to provide a public platform for foster carers' perspectives and hopefully provide explanations of their lives which are useful to them in order to improve their situations. Finch (1986) argues that feminist qualitative research can make a contribution to the understanding and to the making of policy. But, conversely the research might influence policy decisions that would damage, rather than benefit, some or all of the foster carers. What would be the particular implications for them? I did not anticipate the sort of "threat" discussed by Renzetti and Lee:

> a sensitive topic is one that potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding and/or dissemination of research data (1993:5).

However I can anticipate that, as foster care becomes more bureaucratised, some of my research findings and analyses might be unacceptable to the social service departments, or even used to the disadvantage of the foster carers..

Analysis has to be a pervasive activity throughout the life of the research project; there has to be a continual interaction between theory and data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). In this study it has been necessary to use purposive sampling in order to ensure that both cohorts of foster carers include the full range of possible types. Continuous reflexive analysis has ensured that I regularly sought interviews with foster carers who might provide either confirmatory cases of emerging themes or contrasting experiences of fostering situations.

Each interview was typed up verbatim noting all verbal responses e.g. laughter and sighs, and all pauses. My aim was to gather the accounts of foster carers' lives as they wanted to present them; the task is how to (re)present them in as honest a way as possible. As Altheide and Johnson (1994) point out, research is not just the field, but also what happens in the office. Because of the nature of the research the responses could not be encapsulated

in coded categories as they were full of emotion with all its ambiguous and contradictory ingredients. It is important to aim to be explicit about analysis and originally my aim was to faithfully attempt a transparent process.

I commenced by analysing some of the transcripts by listening to the different "voices" of each foster carer (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998) but then decided that this was not identifying what each felt to be important. I therefore read through all of the transcripts summarising both the autobiography of each foster carer and also those issues of most importance to each individual. Minimally structured interviews invite complexity both within and across accounts but regular re-readings of the transcripts identified several common themes which offered an organising framework of overarching concepts informed by existing sociological ideas, as discussed in chapter two. I then reconsidered all the transcripts in the light of these emerging, and inductively obtained themes (for a detailed outline of this process see Miles and Huberman, 1994). It was difficult to know what data to retain and what to ignore for this study. The data is anyway incomplete and partial (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996); it gives only a limited version and does not, for example, give real access into how foster carers actually look after other peoples' children on a daily basis. But what has emerged are the complexities of foster carers' worlds with their multiple perspectives; nothing is firm nor certain. There can be no single truth. I want to address the specific experiences of the foster carers in their own terms so that I can examine the relationships between what goes on in individual lives and the way society is structured at a more general level (Edwards,1993). I therefore continually sought to confirm the data across accounts in order to establish its value and search for some general analytic themes.

It was also vital to establish and confirm my presence in the transcripts. There is no clear gaze into the lives of others; it is always filtered through other lenses. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) list language, gender, class and ethnicity as examples of the fact that there are no objective observations. Interactions are always informed by dominant cultural meanings and these shape both the participation of the foster carers and my partial understanding of their distinct perspectives on the world. Alongside this is the researcher's/my own personal and cultural position. My experiences, and therefore biases, sympathies and beliefs, of

family and of caring automatically affect how I hear the foster carers' voices and how I analyse and interpret them. There is always a disparity between the intended message and the received message. The text can be read, constructed and interpreted in different ways (Harrison and Lyon, 1993). Importantly I need to consider reflexively not only my personal autobiography but also the balance of power within the research relationship (Ribbens, 1989), and particularly to reflect upon the institutional power carried by myself both because of my post with NFCA and because of my official ties with the six social service departments.

I was inevitably part of the foster carer world. Nevertheless it is possible to be close to and far from the data at the same time and I brought to the analysis my critical skills and conceptual thinking. The views of the foster carers can only shine through the substantive chapters because of my interpretations. Some of these interpretations are inductively based in that I "looked to see" what they said although, ultimately, this thesis is more than this. It is not only what they said but also how I saw what they were saying and demonstrates an iterative process.

Dilemmas of research versus paid work.

The main variable in the research interview is the researcher herself. I had naively believed that, if I interviewed foster carers whom I did not know, that they would not know that I was employed by the NFCA to provide a consultancy service in their area. Upon reflection I suspect that they all knew. This must obviously have affected how they felt about the interview, about me and the material that they gave. In four interviews this was particularly clear. Two male carers requested specific advice and information. I therefore turned off the tape, we had a thorough discussion of the problem and then, once this business was completed, I switched the tape back on again and we resumed the interview. In one interview with a female carer I found myself, quite inappropriately for a research interviewer, commenting on the social service process of dealing with children's allegations against foster carers in response to her particular experience. I felt that I had confused the two roles and that I was taking time away from the foster carer.

The fourth case was more complex. I interviewed a new female carer and noticed a sexually explicit picture in the hall. When I returned a week later I noted another in the sitting room. Frequently when children are placed in foster homes too little is known about their lives and their experiences so new carers are now told to assume that all children have been sexually abused unless specifically told otherwise. It is thus always considered essential not to give fostered children any messages that could be interpreted as in anyway sexual. I did not want to tackle this with these new carers. I wanted to keep the roles clear and separate - to act as a researcher (and be in receipt of information) and not as an employee of the NFCA (who would give them information). I spent several days considering this ethical dilemma (for a fuller account see Bell and Nutt, in print). Eventually, in an attempt to keep the roles clear and separate, I telephoned one of the managers in the social services department. She agreed to check the pictures on the next visit and, if necessary, speak to the carers in her own right.

In some ways my feelings about my "two hats" served to reflect the ambiguities of the foster carers' own worlds.

In other interviews it was not possible to know the extent of the influence of my post with NFCA on the carers. Several definitely did know even if nothing was explicitly mentioned. I had believed that if the contacts were made via the foster carers' own networks that this would ensure that carers had a chance and a choice not to participate if they so chose. But as I do not know how I was described and introduced by each contact foster carer I cannot know if the added dimension of my official post acted as a pressure to persuade carers to comply with the request. Neither do I know if, because of the information they gave me during the interview, that this possibly inhibited them from using the NFCA paid post which existed specifically for their benefit. Brannen (1988) posits that it is safer for the respondents if they never again meet the researcher as this minimises any gossip and maximises the chances of secrecy and anonymity. It also frees the respondents to speak with emotion. A few of the foster carers, after the research interviews, did contact me about foster care problems in order to seek professional advice and support. One male carer faced with allegations of sexual abuse from a child in his care in fact seemed not to realise that he already knew me. He gave me the facts of his situation and described the

foster children as though I had never visited his house. For him the researcher and the NFCA worker were as two different people.

My attempt to put boundaries around my "separate" practitioner and researcher worlds included decisions about which note paper I used. I decided to send letters and notes to the study group on home headed stationery (me as independent researcher) rather than NFCA business paper (me as social work practitioner). I also send them all cards each Christmas updating them on the progress of the research. This posed a particular problem one year when NFCA audited my role and sent questionnaires to random carers who had used the service. Three of my research foster carers were in this sample and I then felt unable to send them cards in case they misinterpreted my action as some sort of pressure to state that I had given them good advice. On another occasion NFCA required volunteer foster carers who would be interviewed for the media. I felt certain that several of my study sample would enjoy this so decided to send a letter to them all giving the details. I then faced the dilemma as to whether this should go out on NFCA paper (as work even though I had not met them in that capacity) or on personal stationery (because the links were forged through the research). In the end I sent those carers who definitely knew about my NFCA post the letter on work stationery and used home paper for the others. This dilemma was symptomatic of a confusing situation caused by the insoluble problem of balancing transparency of action and knowledge. Had I ensured that all the carers who participated in the research study knew about my NFCA post this knowledge then risked the production of a more "public" description of their lives as foster carers because they would recognise my official links with their registering local authorities. Gallager et al (1995) note that ethical principles can have an effect as independent variables. In this predicament this would be to overstate the case but, nonetheless, full disclosure would have risked a changed and possibly more guarded account.

I commenced my professional life as a Probation Officer, schooled in the use of the "case work relationship" in order to help clients understand their own situations and take their own decisions as to what change(s), if any, they wish to effect in their lives (Biestek, 1961: Ferard and Hunnybun, 1962). I like listening to both what people say and to what they avoid, believing that the "gaps" can be significant. My training has been about making

intuitive links. But before commencing this research I made a positive decision that I would not be a "social worker" in the interview but would conduct them in a different manner. As this was new ground I wanted to keep separate the two experiences of doctoral researcher and social work practitioner. As a feminist researcher I addressed the power relations between myself and the interviewees and planned that the foster carers would remain in control. I did not want the carers to feel in any way subordinate (as they might in a social worker-client relationship) but as a researcher aimed for equality. With only one exception, when for the foster carer's convenience I went to his office, all the interviews were conducted in their homes as I wanted them to feel secure on their own territory with a permissive atmosphere which would encourage freedom of expression.

Allowing people freedom of expression also permits them to behave in an emotional manner. For a social worker this is familiar territory so I therefore decided that I would not interpret back to foster carers in interview any of their statements in a way that might encourage them to examine strong and painful emotions concerned with their fostering. I wanted to reject any "therapeutic pay offs ...(and) opportunities for personal growth" (Brannen, 1993:344). Birch and Miller (2000), review the social theory literature which explains how the way a story is told reveals how the teller/foster carer knows her/himself. Although I wanted them to tell me about those issues important to themselves I consciously decided not to demonstrate sufficient empathy to encourage them to feel able to reveal more than they wished. I wanted to ensure that the carers did not regret taking part in the interviews. I now believe that this was a harsh decision. I witnessed great pain in some as they talked about their experiences but showed little active empathy in a bid not to become embroiled in helping them to cope. Moreover I allowed carers to reveal their inner lives but did not offer a reciprocal exchange; there was no equality of relationship. I do not know how I would conduct myself if I could commence again. I only know that it would have been possible to have responded in a very different way and that this might have helped some of the carers live more at peace with some very painful emotions. The retelling of past experiences can in itself make sense of the past and (re)find positive elements (Birch and Miller, 2000). One carer whose interview recounted a series of personally felt sad events telephoned upon receiving the tape to thank me for "memories of happier times."

Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:15) describe the interview as a "structured conversation." They argue that all social research takes the form of participant observation but that, for an interview, the interviewer is not only an active participant but the actual research instrument. Interviews are therefore interactional events which are constructed as they happen: they are the product of a particular time and place (Gubrium and Holstein, 1995) which means that I, as the interviewer, was intimately involved in creating the data and, more importantly, in organising the meanings. Again my official post with NFCA will have impacted upon this creative process. The foster carers' responses to my questions were given to a particular audience - were they for me as a researcher, or for me as a NFCA worker? Conversations depend upon cultural assumptions. Together with the foster carers I was actively involved in constructing an understanding of foster care. Did those who knew of my paid post see my position as an "insider" or an "outsider"; or perhaps like Song and Parker (1995) not readily apparent and definable? Too often I nodded in complicity, assuming that my understandings were their understandings. On some occasions even though I understood what the carers were telling me I wanted them to be more explicit, I wanted their words on tape, and played the naive researcher requesting description and explanation. What impact did that have on their confidence as me as a NFCA foster care "expert" who they could contact in times of trouble? Moreover was this actual deception as I was giving dishonest information to the foster carers? (Punch, 1994).

Several feminist researchers have written about the exchange of information that occurs in interviews (see for example Ribbens, 1989) as interviewees either overtly or covertly identify points of commonality or difference with the researcher. Graham (1984) posits that reciprocity reduces any exploitative power balance whilst Oakley (1981) feels that this demonstrates solidarity between women. Except for implications of tacit knowledge, which as Altheide and Johnson (1994) explain may be significant but also problematic, in the many expressions of "you know" in order to involve me in the interaction, none of the foster carers sought any personal information from me. If there was any uncertainty about how to "place" me (Edwards, 1993) foster carers did not seem to allow this to inhibit the accounts they wished to tell. Upon reflection I suggest two possible reasons for this. The first was that the foster carers wanted to talk about their own lives; they wanted to use all

the time available to their own advantage. They saw an opportunity to express all that they believed no one else wanted to hear. My second suggestion is the impact of my paid post - they possibly saw me as someone official and therefore slightly remote who, in public, does not have a private life. There was therefore no interest in myself as a person but I do not believe, as argued by Edwards (1993), that a more equal exchange would have elicited more information - though it might have produced different data. She also argues that an exchange of information, particularly personal information, aids the informants to "place" the researcher and that this encourages disclosure. Perhaps, on some occasions, some of the foster carers were reassured that they could "place" me within the foster care world. Knowledge of my NFCA post, for some interviews, provided a commonality of knowledge (Finch, 1984) and was not so much problematic but an additional resource.

Concluding discussion.

Except for two of the male carers the other interviewees were eager to participate in this study. I met with total co-operation, for example three of the men offering to organise their work schedules around my appointments with them. For all of these foster carers, both male and female, talking about foster care was personally very important. This is a significant finding and the carers' attitudes and behaviour contrasts with other studies where accessing respondents can be problematic (see for example Miller, 1999).

This thesis is the result of my transactions with the foster carers' worlds shaped by my method of inquiry. My analytic procedures and the resulting data manipulations are fashioned by my ideas. There is no intention to evaluate what carers do; no aim to frame the research in terms of "successful" placements/carers. The purpose of this research is to look at how foster carers understand, make sense of and actively create their part of the child care system. Because of the impossibility of objectivity the resulting analysis will be shaped by my personal values. It is therefore important to look at how the carers talk rather than just what they say: "to listen in order to see" (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990:6).

Study of the foster carers' own accounts will show what it means to be a foster family (chapter five). All except two (single) foster carers used this definition. These transcripts

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provide the raw data of the differing ways that foster carers talk about their lives and the meaning(s) that they assign to the term foster care. This constructionist approach is "concerned with the social process through which ... fixed variables are constructed through everyday interaction" (Gubrium et al, 1994:3). This research is about how foster care gives shape to people's lives and how a sense of "being a foster carer" is achieved. It is about deconstructing the construction of foster carers' experiences in order to focus on the process by which they themselves understand family.

The literature reviews identify foster carers' positioning as marginal in both social research and in those sociological theories which may help to explain the foster carer world. Managing their precarious location may involve the development of particular personal qualities that reflect the requirements of foster carers. An analysis of how they understand this peripheral position should reveal if they construct foster care as founded on particular kinds of knowledge and themselves as particular kinds of people. The purpose of this research is to produce an insider perspective; the emphasis is upon the voices of the foster carers themselves in relation to their construction of the lives they lead.

Boulton (1983) notes that historically, because motherhood has been regarded as unproblematic, studies have focused on the child and looked at mothers only in passing. Chapter one shows that this parallels the treatment of foster carers. In my interviews with the foster carers I explicitly tried to avoid a focus on the foster children in favour of the foster carers themselves, but this proved impossible. My methodology was successful in that I wanted the carers to focus on what they believed to be important. The openness of the interview guide permitted the carers to subvert my research agenda. They wanted to talk about their lives through the children they look after. The fostered child is pivotal to each foster carer's story and in order to remain true to their constructions this analysis will commence with the theme most crucial to their lives-as-foster-carers. Fostered children are therefore central to the framing of this analysis.

Chapter 4.
Having a presence through children.

Introduction.

The aim of this research is to understand how the carers themselves experience and make sense of their lives. In order to understand how they interpret their worlds I am "listening in order to see" (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990:8) as I examine the recorded transcripts. This first substantive chapter will therefore faithfully reflect the emphasis of the transcripts by looking at children-within-foster-families as the unit of analysis. It will look at how the carers construct the children that they look after and whether this is in a particular way. This requires an initial discussion of some of the literature considering the construction of childhood before commencing an analysis of life-as-foster-carer.

The construction of childhood.

Although there remains a debate as to whether the contemporary Western construction of childhood is extending or disappearing (Jenks, 1996) there is considerable agreement in the literature about the content of its social construction. In essence categories of child and adult are seen as separate (Pilcher, 1995) - the result of their differences from each other - and childhood itself has been institutionalised and depicted in particular terms. Childhood is seen as a separate stage/state/concept during the life course (Hendrick, 1990). This is demonstrated in the ideology around the special site of "home" as the most appropriate place for children, in the legislation insisting upon children's full time education and their exclusion from the labour market and in the physical demarcation of particular geographic places, e.g. play parks, specifically for their use. Parallel to this theme of separateness is an emphasis on children's incompetence, vulnerability and dependence (Boyden, 1990). Childhood is constructed as a time for children to enjoy and to benefit from this experience. Ribbens McCarthy et al's (2000) review of the literature concludes that contemporary opinion agrees the child is constructed as innocent. Drawing on work by Goffman and Cahill they posit that children are not expected to be responsible actors and that it is the care-taking adults who are morally accountable for their actions. Thus children are, by contrast to adults, "non persons" (see the discussion by Quortrup, 1990) and the ideology of childhood which positions the child as innocent and not accountable maps onto

macro notions of power and the child's relatively powerless position. This in itself, they argue, reinforces the polarisation of a morally accountable adult and the construction of the child as without moral agency, whose needs are seen as paramount.

But not only are contemporary Western children constructed as innocent they are also placed at the centre of their own individual universe. Zelizer (1985) explores the change from the past view of the child as an economic family unit to today's belief of the child as, not only economically worthless, but expensive and emotionally priceless. She notes a parental shift:

> While the economically useful child was legally 'owned' by the father, the 'priceless' child is considered the mother's sentimental asset (ibid:159/60).

She links this to the domestication and thus redefining of middle class women in the nineteenth century which paralleled the new concept of the child as so precious as to be sacralized. In return for this status contemporary children in Western societies are expected to provide love, smiles and emotional satisfaction. Couples have children for non monetary benefits; children have sentimental value as parents desire love and affection and the feeling of being a family (ibid). Children are perceived as a claim to happiness; they make life meaningful (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

The status of the child is always a social construction in a particular cultural and historical context. In general terms the contemporary Western child is constructed as so innocent and so priceless that the needs of each individual child are overriding. Childhood demands as of right adult labour, expensive goods and an intense emotional involvement (Jenks, 1994). This construction is central to the accounts of the foster carers in the study. But as this chapter will demonstrate they construct their foster children as not only "priceless" but also ambiguous, because foster children are bureaucratised children. Examination of this will deal with the carers' constructions of children in five sections: as precious and sacred, as innocent, as deserving an individual emotional bond, as different and risky, and finally as worthwhile.

Foster carers' construction of foster children.

1. Foster children as precious and sacred.

The transcripts provide over-whelming evidence of the foster carers' construction of local authority children as both requiring sacrifice and also as morally more "needy" than their own birth children. Something of this will be touched on in later chapters though this section will examine the concept, and its implications, in greater depth. There were, however, individual foster carers who did not construct foster children in this way. Grace[31] (an experienced carer), arguing that she was child centred anyway, was adamant that she had just explained to a new 12 year old that she was not prepared to change her way of life: "So **you**[32] will have to fit in. ......I'm just a very as-you-see-me-is-what-you-gets. There's no two way about it." But statements and sentiments like this are very much in the minority and have to be searched out.

The majority of the carers volunteered the information that becoming foster carers had led to significant changes in their life styles, routines and habits; for them it was part of looking after other people's children. Meg (a pensioner and experienced carer) described how she would regularly sit up talking to each fostered lad until three or four o'clock in the morning ("because **this** is the time these kids want to talk") and how, although originally very house proud, housework and gardening now take second place to the needs of each foster placement:

> "they (*new foster carers*[33]) were asking things about, you know, these kids adjusting to a different - I said, it's not the **kids**. We're the ones that got to adjust. Which it is! I mean OK it's all strange for the kids but we're the ones got to do the adjusting and changing. And we have to do it for every different child we get."

Meg's construction of each adolescent is that they are individually so precious that she must make personal adaptations to suit their uniqueness. In other transcripts this is apparent in small but important practical ways. Cyril (a new carer) always allows the foster child to choose the television programmes, even if that means he has to watch the Teletubbies rather

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[31] For pen pictures of each individual foster carer see appendix e.

[32] All original emphasis is in bold unless otherwise stated.

[33] Italics denotes description/explanation by the author.

than sport! Kathleen (also new) used to "watch all the soaps" but no longer has the time or opportunity. Stuart (an experienced carer) now:

"stand(s) on railway stations ... watching trains ... I've changed. I've become interested, for him, in trains. Um. I don't go to discos, **they** like going to discos - we go to discos. So there **is** a change there comes from somebody being sensitive to what their needs are. If that's really what makes them **who** they are, because of their experiences, I wouldn't want to take that away .... Um and it's a joy to be able to, to go and do something. None of them want to go and play table tennis. I play table tennis. I'd love to, I haven't met one that wants. I love going boating, doing all sorts of things but -"

These four carers are all certain that, for them, fostering is about prioritising the needs of the foster child at the expense of both their own wishes and, as will be discussed later, frequently even those of their own birth children. For them the foster child is so precious, their needs are so sacrosanct that there appears to be no consideration of the carers' own rights or desires. As exemplified by (new carer) Mike's response (in line with the majority of other carers interviewed) to the vignette[34] posing the dilemma of birth children's school concert or foster child's court case:

"my gut feeling is saying that I have to go with my son and watch the concert, but as a foster carer you're saying 'no'."

Duty to the fostered child means that Mike will forgo his son's concert. Many carers responded that there would be other concerts. Many transcripts evidence the ways in which fostered children's needs are viewed by the carers as more imperative than the family's needs (see also chapter six). The final vignette concerns two foster children who have been removed because of an allegation against their male carer. The vignette makes clear that the allegation is false. Yet, whilst struggling with the dilemma, not all of the female carers automatically consider their husbands as priority. Mary Pole (a new carer), who has no birth children but was devoted to her three dogs describes how, when one closed it's mouth around a child's arm, she spontaneously thought "That's it. My dogs have got to go." The personal investment in the foster child is deeper; the foster child is worth any sacrifice. But in order to understand this it is necessary to further deconstruct the concept - commencing with foster children constructed as innocent.

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[34] See Appendix c for all vignettes.

2. Foster children as innocent.

For some foster families, children's exclusion from school, offending, serious drug experimentation, graffiti and damage to the foster home, verbal and physical abuse can, on occasions, become the material of everyday life. Whilst some of them mention such incidents in the interviews very few use descriptions of children which are in anyway critical or judgmental. A search of the transcripts reveals little that can be constructed as a negative account. Grace, as a minority example, mentions that children "could be devious" (in relation to the false allegation vignette). Examination of the transcripts shows that the foster carers' constructions of both the children that they look after, and the hypothetical foster children in the vignettes, reveal a definite theme of regarding them as innocent and as without moral agency.

For some this construction is tied in with problems with the local authority and their insistence on children's rights. Ali Shah, an experienced foster carer, tells of different children threatening to complain to their social workers about the foster family:

> "We like to do as much as we can but when you see this behaviour in a child, that does hurt you. That's a bad experience I would say and they **all** do it. **Not** one child. And it's not fault of a child it's the fault of social services........
> (*and upon consideration of resignation as a foster carer*)
> I say, What's the fault of the children? You know, we might be able to help somebody who really needs a good home. So why deprive him or her because of the system?"

Ali's experience is that foster children demand "rights" in the foster home and complain to the department if these are not forthcoming. His explanation of this behaviour is that it is encouraged by the social services and he therefore exonerates the children from any culpability. On occasions he and his wife have found the attitude of the department so inexplicable that they have considered resignation but have continued to foster because they believe that the children are not to blame. His construction of the innocence of children rests on his laying the blame on the local authority. Much of this is echoed by Steve; he and Georgina (new carers) have a practical problem as they both work yet the ten year old foster boy they had for week ends is now placed with them full time:

> "I mean we haven't got a problem with Dylan, but it's just the mechanics of it (*the social services*) just aren't working for us. .... I don't really think he's a

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problem, you know. He's, behaviourally he's got, you know, a few idiosyncrasies that school is obviously trying to sort out …….. It feels very cold to go back to social services and 'Right. Well. I'm sorry but it's not what we wanted. Can you take him away again.' um, I mean it's not Dylan's fault that he's in that situation."

Like Ali, Steve is maintaining that the problems of caring for a foster child stem, not from the child, but from his past life compounded by the "mechanics" of the local authority. Dylan is an innocent in the bureaucratic machinery - it cannot be held against him if they have been let down. Both Steve and Ali find the department liable which allows them to construct foster children as innocent and without moral agency.

Likewise Stan, a foster carer of over twenty years with experience of being let down by the social services, sums up his interview with:

> "Fostering must be a **real** partnership with the social services. That and the baggage that comes with the children, for example the parents. There are no problems with the children. Just huge problems with everything else."

Although he finds dealings with the department and the children's parents problematic he states that caring for the children is straightforward. Nevertheless his wife's description of life with fostered children appears far from uncomplicated:

> "…he (*foster child*) feels the world's let him down at the moment, everybody's let him down um and er you know, but he's smashed his bedroom up a few times but, we still love him. And we don't **part** with him." (Laura).

For Laura there are reasons and explanations for behaviour, however violent, and these do not detract from her love of the foster child or her commitment to him. Similarly Georgina talks of not "judging a child … and it's not his fault". Kelly, a carer of several years experience, explains when one of her fostered boys had sabotaged lessons at school how she had regularly mediated for him in a bid to encourage staff to treat with sensitivity rather than with sanctions. She was certain that he required not more discipline but more understanding. Likewise Olivia:

> "Children in care don't show lots of different, well they don't show any more different traits than normal children, except they're far more extreme and now, because you know what they're coming from, you cope with a lot more because you know their problems are, aren't their - their making."

Olivia's many years in foster care have taught her that all children have the same basic characteristics but environmental factors affect their dispositions and their behaviours. It is this conviction that leads to her construction of foster children as innocent. Celia, also experienced, muses on an incident when a neighbour complained of wanton damage caused by a fostered ten year old and concludes that he was upset by contact[35] with his mother. She then describes how another lad wrecked a family holiday for everyone and says:

> "I just couldn't understand it, you know. Um. All I can think of was the fact that it was all too much for him because in his family life he was never taken anywhere."

All children have agency but, for these foster carers, this is distinct from moral accountability. For Celia all unacceptable behaviour by foster children has an explanation. It is this "explanation" that apparently maintains for many foster carers their construction of the child as innocent; as passive victims that have things "done" to them. Thus some carers connect innocence/lack of moral agency with the past history of the child's life experiences. Janet describing how, within days of arriving, eight year old Craig had reduced her to sobbing in the kitchen, explains that before being placed with her:

> ".... he sort of like moved from place to place bless him, so you can understand when you, going back to the essential information again, you can understand why he's like he is you know."

Similarly Gordon (a new carer) reflecting on violent behaviour explains:

> "We didn't know the **reason** why he was doing it, but we could understand it. There's a problem because he's away from his mum or what happened to his mum or whatever, so it's something in his past that's caused him to be like that. So that's not really his fault - so you can understand all that - so it makes it a lot easier."

These carers perceive each foster child as the sum of their life experiences, some of which are seen to have been highly disturbing. Thus however unreasonable the child's behaviour it is because of these experiences and the child should be understood in this light. The child cannot be held to account. This explanation holds currency in several of the transcripts.

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[35] Arrangement made by social services for children to see their birth families.

Margaret, just returned to fostering after a long gap and missing a teenager who had held the foster family at knife-point, muses:

> "It's a shame how he went because he didn't have a very good life really. Upbringing - I think that was a lot to do with it. It kind of twists them up in their mind I think......... He's had such a lot to go through really with one thing and another. You can't blame the child. No you can't blame a child."

Lenin, whose first placement, Karl, has exhibited much anti social behaviour whilst they walked around town, (stopped an escalator, shouted racist comments, broken display goods and caused offence in a café) concludes with the comment:

> "As I say it's his age, it's his upbringing - without being judgmental and unfair - but it's certainly his own circumstances as regards the learning disability and things like that."

These extracts demonstrate that for all these carers the foster child is innocent - a victim of personal circumstances that are beyond the child's control. It is the adults in the child's life - birth parents, social services personnel, foster carers - who are to be held accountable and morally responsible. Foster carers must work to understand the reasons for the child's actions - however anti-social.

This same belief is corroborated in some of the foster carers' comments on the vignette concerning the unfounded allegation from a foster child:

> "I think it's anything kids say. I know it's not really their fault, you know, so you've got to try and understand that .... adults have to work it out themselves." (Gordon).

IIe is suggesting that the child is without blame/fault and that the onus is upon the adults to interpret the underlying reasons for such statements. Margaret's response, having experienced such an allegation herself, was:

> "well it's just one of her little tales then. 'Cos they do, don't they? Children do. It's probably something like she wanted something and she couldn't get it and she made a little tale up. Yeah, they should have them back. Yeah. Yeah I'd have them back, yeah."

This resonates with new carer Mo's " I wouldn't reject them for one mistake they've done, they're only kids, yeah. They're only kids." Whilst Mary (also new) relates how, on their foster care training, they met two experienced foster carers who, because of an allegation, had been suspended from fostering for eighteen months, because "the boy had just, you know, got upset and - as kids do. You know kids."

Mary is certain that the notion of the innocence of children is understood and accepted. It is part of the everyday world of childhood. Jackie, a very experienced carer who fosters teenagers, suggests a more complex explanation of innocence in relation to this age group. She prepares them for independence; they are at a transitional time on the edge of adulthood. Talking of this foster care scheme (supported lodgings) in general she says:

> "I've heard kids, horror stories about being given their meal on a tray and sent to their bedrooms for eating, not being included round the family table. Kids not being allowed in during the day if they're not at school or work. They have to go out by such and such a time in the morning and come in by, back at such and such a time. And people have got to realise, you can't **do** that with these youngsters. Because they get into trouble if you do that."

Jackie's construction of the foster child as innocent depends upon their treatment by others, in this case other foster carers. She is removing agency from the foster children so that their actions, particularly unacceptable actions, are the response to adverse circumstances. It is therefore not surprising that, when relating the history of problems with her own fostered teenagers, she reflects "Um, you feel, well where did I go **wrong?**" Like many other carers Jackie apparently takes upon herself the blame for foster children's unacceptable behaviour. This construction, in common with the other carers, of the innocence of children - with whom they have no blood ties and over whom they have no legal rights - indicates committed, personal ties which I will examine in the next section.

3. Foster children as deserving a committed, emotional tie.
Chapter five will further analyse how the foster carers construct their role in terms of "caring" and/or "parenting". Parenting is very much a personal activity built upon the individual and idiosyncratic relationships between those involved. But foster children are bureaucratised

children for whom there are rules and cautions (for example, the physical demonstration of affection) which may be in conflict with the foster carer's choices regarding parental agency.

There is no evidence in the data of foster carers constructing foster children as embryonic adults - even by carers, like Jackie, who prepare teenagers for independence. Foster children are constructed as dependent and needy - particularly in requiring understanding and loving. The transcripts overflow with the vocabulary of emotionality. New carer Keith, for example, talks of his upset at having to leave a small child with another carer for twenty-four hours and the emotional exhaustion of wanting to both give the best to foster children yet, as instructed by the social workers, to remain detached:[36]

> "You can't say 'oh I'm going to be unloving, I'm going to be not unkind, I'm just come in (sic) the house that's it, go to bed that's it,' you know, you can't do it ……….. You've got to have feelings. I mean I think you've really got to… *(and on Timmy's initial rejection of him)* ….. It was quite upsetting - oh he brought me to tears once. I, you know, I was really upset. I thought, what am I doing wrong?"

Keith's tie with the young foster child is readily apparent. Its expressive component means that he is unable to behave in a pragmatic way - leave Timmy with another carer, act in a kind but indifferent way towards him and believe that rejection is general rather than personal. Foster children are constructed as deserving of love.

In like manner Emma (also a new carer) talks of the need to constantly prepare herself for the fact that her first foster child will leave and knows that "it will be hard and I'll, I'll probably sob." Ruth, with many years of fostering behind her, describes how she arms herself with pop corn, ice-cream and the television's "weepy film and pretend I'm crying because I'm watching the film" when children go. Like Keith, both Emma and Ruth are constructing themselves as foster-carers-who-demonstrate-caring in terms of their feelings of loss over each individual child.

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[36] Professionals working in medical and allied fields have at times questioned the accepted attitude that "love" is incompatible with a professional role, arguing instead that "love" is the essence of a healing relationship - e.g. see Siegel (1986).

Many of the accounts serve to demonstrate the positives of "caring about" as foster carers construct themselves as moral caring beings. Louise (a new carer) criticises a social worker because he had observed that "one thing you are going to have to do is sever this bond you've got with this child" when she believes that it is this demonstration of her caring-about that is beneficial to Victoria's well being. Another new carer, Mandy, is clear that Timmy "deserves to be loved" whilst Gordon is adamant that "I think you've gotta just love unconditionally I mean you've got to have that in your heart, you've just gotta." This tenet of a particularistic tie and affection for each individual child is a common theme. Foster carers, looking after the children of others, talk about specific loving relationships with particular children. Whilst it is said that social workers in the public domain give advice to "sever this bond" and maintain a distance, foster carers in the private domain view themselves as intimately and emotionally close to each child. This is frequently demonstrated by the carers' practical responses to the vignettes. Margaret's reaction to whether the carers should accommodate an extra child (vignette one) was that they should take Kate, "otherwise it seems a shame they could lose her," as, rather than consider the dilemma as a principle, she responds to the personal needs of a particular child.

Several of the carers talk in very personal terms of the children they care for and about. Brian explains his twenty plus years experiences of fostering:

> "I think it tears you emotionally a lot (of) times simply because you may have a child that you become particularly attached to or that you think needs certain therapy or care and you can't get it. And **that** causes quite a lot of emotions ……. **with yourself.**"

Jackie's description of life with fostered young people continues this theme:

> "I do get emotionally involved with them. I cry for them, I'm happy for them, whatever………. and it **is emotional.** You know, you want the best for them. You want them to do the best they can for theirselves. So yes, you've **got** to get emotional, if you don't get emotional that means you're cold and if you're very cold then the kids are going to pick up on this."

Looking after other peoples' children demands, and gets, an emotional input from these carers. Their construction of this may vary - the emotion may be linked to personal attachment, wanting to obtain particular services for an individual child, striving for a child's

success or a means of helping the young person in a specific way. But the net result is often experienced as a cost to the carer in their representation of foster-carer-as-emotionally-caring in response to their perceived need of the child for a particularistic tie.

Meg tries to make sense of her relationship with Wes, an adolescent frequently on the run from the police. She introduces him with the statement "I loved that boy - still do" and goes on to discuss her married son's views of her fostering career:

> "I think Rick (*son*) was jealous because I think he knew, because I had a lot of feeling for Wes. You know, I really did. I mean I've broken my heart over Wes I've sat (laugh) and cried my eyes out. And I've taken him back no end of times."

For Meg the costs are not only her own emotional pain over Wes and his behaviour but also the hurt to her only child, Rick. Implicit within her transcript is that each foster child needs a mother's love which she should provide (see chapter five). Nonetheless, not all of the lads she fosters receive such a close relationship. One lad reported her to social services for calling him "a winging wimp", though she says of Wes:

> "Wes would never, have ever, really reported me. I think, I mean, I could hit Wes - Wes wouldn't - he would just accept that as part and parcel"

Meg's care of Wes is "an expression of moral commitment that requires people to behave towards one another in caring ways" (Brannen et al, 2000:4); it would be uncaring if he reported her. More than that she constructs a true emotional bond as overcoming all obstacles and breaching boundaries including both foster care rules and the rights of looked after children.

Jackie's experience with a lad who was out until three o'clock in the morning demonstrates her particular construction of the strength of emotional ties with fostered youngsters. Upon his return she:

> "got really angry with him ..... Um when I started telling him off he said to me, 'What do you care?' he says, 'You're only my carer.' With that I just shoved him against the wall and said, 'I bloody **do** care else I wouldn't be in this state.'"

Much of this resonates with discussions about the significance of anger in step-parent families (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2001). Kelly has no birth children and an extract from her interview offers a further dimension:

> "I think the job of fostering is so emotionally draining. It doesn't matter **which** child you have or how easy they are to care for ..... In each of our children it has raised such strong emotions ...... You're not prepared for that. You're prepared for their difficult behaviour but not how to handle being torn and having strong feelings. Actually you get feelings that you've never felt before, like I've felt, I've actually felt like hitting and I've never felt like that before over anybody. But Roy brought that out which is frightening. Everything becomes more extreme."

Emotionality is linked with irrationality. Keith wants to return from work every day and "not be unkind", nor so emotionally involved that he will shed tears. Kelly frightens herself with the strength of the feelings of caring whilst Jackie reports herself to the social services because she has physically pushed a teenager. All of these extracts confirm the connectedness of the carers with the foster children.

Some of them demonstrate this connectedness in intimate practical ways. Celia remembers a baby "like our very own" who would sit on her husband's knee and eat from his plate whilst Hope (new carer) recalls the imperceptible growth of her love for Lindsey:

> "I might give her something to eat and she doesn't want it - 'oh well I'll finish that bit off.' That's what I'd do with Arash and Zeeba (*birth children*). So it's those sort of things. I don't think, there's no **pause** now whereas before we would pause about certain things, um and so the boundaries would be the same I think now as I had with my own children."

Both carers are explaining the complexity and the experience of the connectedness between themselves and the children in terms of the daliness of everyday life. For them it is the detail of their care that demonstrates the emotional content. Much of this parallels our ideas about mothering and caring in, what is referred to in short-hand terms as, family life. Foster children are constructed as deserving love in similar terms to carers' own children. It is a construct that includes a full range of emotions. But the transcripts also reveal that carers also construct foster children as "different" and, not only that, but as "risky".

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4. <u>Foster children as "different" and "risky".</u>

The interviews show the struggles several of the carers had in order to explain how all children deserve parity and are the "same", for example Cyril states that "a child is a child." Nonetheless the struggles also demonstrate that foster children are different. Mandy, Georgina and Stuart all point to the difficulties of having no shared past. Jackie encapsulates these dilemmas as "You wouldn't have rules for your **own** children, you have **understandings**." She enumerates this as:

> "living in a foster family is different because of - you have to treat the kids certainly in lots of different ways. The things you can't do, um. ...... I mean this, this **boundaries** and obviously I mean, like a lot of carers I probably cross from time to time, um, you know. You **know** you leave yourself open to things -"

For some carers having to concede the differences and act upon them causes problems. Stuart and Hanneke's family comprises children from her first marriage plus their own small son and the foster children so they feel parity to be important. Although Stuart explains that different children require bespoke handling, he objects to the fact that they have few sanctions where foster children are concerned. Hanneke explains that if foster children are with them for a short time then the family can cope with difference but if a child stays for several months then there has to be parity and rules. Khanm Shah (an experienced carer) makes explicit how foster carers are obliged to treat the children with difference:

> "Own children, you're free to tell them anything but foster children you have to watch not to shout them and not to - not touch them."

Several foster carers comment that, for a bureaucratised child, differences are of necessity built in. Ruth describes them as "legally" set apart and points out that because they are taxied to school this overtly confirms difference. She purchases a car in a bid to make her fostered children appear "ordinary". Isambard, an experienced carer, notes that the social services' scale of pocket money (regarded by most carers as over-generous) serves to preserve differentials.

Dick (new carer), remembering how foster children were stigmatised when his parents fostered, explains that the general public also construct them as different:

"I still think there's a stigma to foster children 'cos you know you talk to anybody and if you don't get it so um blatantly, but …. 'cor you must be a marvellous person taking on a job with some child like that.' You know, I mean or 'you're gonna have nothing but problems' and that type of thing you know?"

This public construction of foster children as difficult is experienced by new carer Georgina in her efforts to organise day care. The child minder, who had looked after her daughters, was unable to help:

"Foster children have this stigma. He (*child minder's husband*) said 'oh I don't want him breaking everything.' He had computer equipment. He didn't want Dylan in the house because he might break it."

Generally the carers struggle to make sense of whether they construct foster children as the same as or different from their birth children. Whilst Ann (experienced carer) is probably at one extreme overtly acknowledging the differences, Grace represents the other (both discussed in chapter six), denying that there is any disparity. Though, as the following extract demonstrates, Grace does believe that foster children are different. She tells how three siblings said to her:

" 'Don't tell anybody that we're your foster children. You must tell them we are your cousins.' …they choose to call me Nanny Grace. I didn't tell them to, they choose. And they didn't want anybody to know that they were foster kids. They said, 'if when we were asked we'll say that we are your cousins and you are my Nanny Grace.' And that's what they said. Nobody told them to do it, they do it. So I mean, they have the sense to consider difference and all that."

Thus most of the carers strive to make sense of the positioning of the foster children within their families. Typical is the following extract of Lenin's where he explains how he shows his birth children a video about foster children:

"And Dmitry (*son*) turned round and says the thing that he got from that video was, was that not everybody is like him, do you know what I mean? And, and so I suppose it is that it is, it is that they're human beings and that they do need respect and that they have got feelings and they can be hurt and even when they're in the system they can feel feel abused."

Here Lenin commences by explaining that foster children are different but then goes on to explain that all human beings have feelings in common and whatever their circumstances require respect so that perhaps they are not so different. This resonates with Hope's

response to the vignette concerning the foster child who bullies the carers' birth child; she believes that to prevent retaliation by the birth child is to build in difference. Ali Shah's experience, as a carer of several years, is that it is the social services department which insists upon differential treatment. He explains how he constructed the foster children as his own but has been criticised by the department for the parity of his care towards them, for example permitting small children in the marital bed.

Most of the carers talk about the social services' instructions and prohibitions regarding close physical contact with the children and the need to use what are referred to as "Safe Caring"[37] practices. Thus several of the transcripts demonstrate that carers regard some aspects of fostering as potentially risky and may construct foster children as threatening to their fostering status. Foster children are seen to pose a risk for several reasons. Foster carers know that they may be blamed if there is any physical harm to a child (chapter six). There is the risk of becoming emotionally attached (chapter five). There is also what the foster carers construct as the "problem" of children's rights (chapter six). But alongside these issues foster carers construct foster children as different and dangerous because they may make allegations against them, may pose a threat to the stability of the foster family or may criminally offend within the foster home. Yet, foster children are bureaucratised children whose behaviour is, if not condoned, constructed as "explained" to a large extent by their pasts.

Brian recalls how Marcia's manipulative behaviour threatened his marriage to Tricia as she played one off against the other. Georgina struggles to decide where her loyalties lie when care of the first foster child conflicts with family needs:

> "My mother who has done the fostering and my friends said, 'you work full time, why are you thinking of getting this extra burden on?' And I said, 'because .... I was assured that it wouldn't affect my work and it would be possible to do both'. ..... I wanted to do my bit ...... We never go anywhere anymore unless we take Dylan and I - talking to a best friend and she said, 'All you do is think about Dylan. You don't think about Steve (*husband*) and how he's feeling and you're sort of saying well, we've started this so we finish it. But', she said, 'it is, if it's affecting how you listen to him.' So I've had to make a big decision **and the family I've got,**

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[37] Safe Care training programmes help foster carers look after children who have been abused. See Glossary.

if you like, are the important ones and there's no good if I'm going battling along on my own with no assistance from anybody else" (*family and social services department*).

Georgina had hoped to assimilate a foster child within her current family comprising her two daughters and a new husband. But, as explained elsewhere in the interview, the rest of the family are closing the family boundary and not admitting Dylan – though Steve talks only of the practical problems of coping with a child who needs more time than his step-daughters. Although in the above quotation Georgina might be seen to be constructing Dylan as a victim of circumstances nonetheless his presence in the family has generated a threat. He has become her priority rather than her husband and daughters. She has been forced to reflect upon this and decides that she must choose between the past equilibrium of her family unit or its destabilisation provoked by fostering.

Other carers demonstrate resistance if there is threat to their families. Celia refuses parental contact with baby Micah in her home fearing that his parents may pose a risk to her own children. Both she and Laura have had to request removal of lads who aggravated their own daughters and were "breaking up the family" (Celia). Although foster children may be frequently constructed as so precious that their needs come before those of other family members nevertheless there are occasions when, if the foster child poses a threat to the stability of the family, the sacralized child may be sacrificed. But the reasonings behind such a decision are based upon how the foster children or young people are constructed - for example Richard Pole, a new carer, explains:

> "Jake was alright but as I say he stole and I don't, I just can't accept that um. well I can accept it from the likes of the three downstairs (*young foster children*) …. (*because of*) the age group really. Someone who's sort of like seven or eight they take it, you know it's two of one and half a dozen of the other, as long as they realise what they're doing. When you get to about ten to twelve then you know it's wrong, but you know it's one of those things, you either accept it or you don't. but from a sixteen plus and Jake was um going on eighteen and that is, to me, is totally unacceptable to even consider, it is just, so he left. It was only a matter of pence but it's, it was the principle, so that was, that's how that is."

Here Richard's moral construction of foster children is age defined. Children aged "sixteen plus" are constructed as morally accountable adults, so that Jake's behaviour is seen as some sort of threat to Richard's principles, whilst the younger foster children (in contrast)

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are confirmed and constructed as without moral agency, as "natural innocents" (Ribbens, 1994). Jackie's reaction to theft was similar. As a carer for adolescents she evicted a young woman:

> "She was very clever, she stole my cheque book ...... Before you ask, yes I **do** still see her and yes I do still talk to her (laugh). Any **major** money I must admit I do keep locked up in my bedroom and I've got like a filing cabinet."

Jackie's construction of this adolescent is that it is her behaviour, rather than herself as a person, which is unacceptable. Nonetheless fostered young people are sufficiently risky to warrant locked filing cabinets and the safekeeping of cash. But for nearly all the foster carers it is not the safekeeping of their goods that causes them to construct the children as risky but the safekeeping of their reputations and their public integrity in relation to social services and within the community. They are very aware of the risk of complaints from the children against them. Hanneke's experience was thus:

> "all these kids want fantastic, you know, **named** (*designer*) things and they just demand so much that the demand outstrips the - both the financial and the physical .... I mean they almost threaten you, and you know, "You're neglecting me. You're not" like the child that we had, she said - .... I don't buy her any trainers. It's not that I didn't **buy** her any trainers. I just didn't buy new Nike trainers, you know. But it comes **back** to the social worker.... So, I mean then you have, "'So-and-so said she hasn't, she needs some trainers and she hasn't got any." I said, "No that's not the truth at all. I told her that she can have some trainers but she just can't have any Nike trainers." Oh, you know. But it has to be checked out every single time and I think "Oh this is so tiring"."

Elsewhere in the transcript Hanneke explains how physically and emotionally exhausting fostering can be. Here she details how the "demand outstrips the - both the financial and the physical" and that "we are left continuously checked up on, having to explain themselves (sic)." Hanneke's experience is that fostered children can make demands which, if not met, become complaints that the social services then have to investigate. She constructs foster children as risky in that allegations against her care also count against her reputation as a moral person.

Meg's attitude towards allegations or complaints about her care, like Richard's, is straightforward. One of her lads complained to his social worker that she had called him names, but then read out his written statements of the dialogue:

"They (*the names*) were no more than what I would have said to my son, or anybody else the way he was carrying on. But he had written everything down, word for word and I would **not** have him back in the house again. I won't because **of** that."

Meg's transcript states steadfastly that her construction of foster children is that they all require "love": her offer of a personal particularistic tie. Here it is clear that she regards them in the same way as her own son; they receive parity of treatment from her with regards to both love and discipline. It is therefore unacceptable if the fostered child reports her in a manner that she constructs as both unfeeling and distant - in a bureaucratised manner. This is not what she is offering and he is therefore risky. In interview she was adamant about the importance of fostering to her way of life (that it keeps her young and alive) - so youngsters who behave in this way are constructed as a danger to her own well being. Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues (2000) in their study of step-families find a moral imperative that constructs the child as without moral agency and the adult as fully morally accountable. But, for the minority of carers like Meg, this is not non-negotiable. So she, who changes her routine for each fostered lad in the belief that she must attest the love that they all need, when threatened, can demonstrate an ethic of self-care.

Several foster carers in the study had already experienced formal investigations because of allegations about their care. They were aware that behaviour perceived as inappropriate by the foster children might result in their removal from the fostering register. Training had explained to them that everyday events like bath time and bed time were potentially risky situations. Social workers had deconstructed foster children from children-needing-care-and-families and reconstructed them as children-who-could-be-dangerous to individuals and to foster carer careers. Most of the participants in this study admit this redefinition, even if they also resist it.[38] Many complain about the impracticalities - that they can not both take a child

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[38] Whilst interviewing Hope, Mo (her husband) removed Lindsey (aged 9 years) to change her nappy. Another carer talks in her interview of taking their 12 year old foster child into bed with herself and her husband. Neither of these incidents would be considered safe care by the local authority.

in the car to school or both be available at bath time - whilst others argue the effects upon children and childhood to be negative. As Brian explains:

> "We've always been ultra careful over that (*allegations from foster children*) because, especially in the latter years since the accusations have been flowing about with foster parents and everything else. I always, you know, bath and play with my kids in the bath and everything else, you know, you play about but if, likely the foster ones, as I say, it's only if ever Tricia's around, or if somebody else is around. Don't do it on your own and things like that, you know. .... It's spoilt childhood"

But there are definite changes in behaviour - Steve explains that "we're really conscious of the nudity thing" and Simon talks of having to wear a dressing gown if he wants a drink at night even though no one is around. Ann, who describes her two foster boys (ages eight and ten years) as "pseudo adopted", explains:

> "We both kiss them goodnight in the bedroom but we do it with the door open. And we don't sort of take **ages** over it. I wouldn't **sit** and watch television on my own in their bedroom on their bed. But then we sit and watch television in the living room, the four of us, and give them a cuddle then and everyone else can see what we are doing."

Whilst Harold, with his first foster child, describes:

> "Last Sunday morning at half past six my granddaughter (who) was staying jumped in our bed because she does and in comes Ruby the foster child **who jumps** on the bed and follows her and Kathleen (*wife*) gives me a nudge and I have to get up so that I'm not in bed in any way at all with these two, with the little girl, because in the book it says I **mustn't be in bed**, so I had to get straight up, get dressing gown on. I have to get up at half past six on a Sunday morning!"

As these extracts show, foster children are constructed as so risky that foster carers have to not only watch their behaviour but be seen to be transparent in their actions and follow "the book." But Simon, who fosters with his cousin and elderly aunt, makes the point (along with other carers) that the social services do not support the need for these changes in behaviour by giving carers essential information[39] about the foster children:

> ".... before they come to us, saying about their backgrounds and what they **have** done and what they **haven't** done, taking drugs etc ...... we never knew they had a

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[39] Confirmed by research e.g. Hayden et al (1999).

drinking problem, you don't know if you've got one with sticky fingers, ... that sort of thing. It won't change us but we'll know what we'll be looking out for."

He constructs children as risky, and even though the three of them have been investigated for serious allegations he nevertheless constructs this risk as manageable - something they can "look out for."

Not everything is so manageable. Those carers taking long term placements are, in effect, offering the foster children a "family" for life. As the carers get older will their blood children accept responsibility? Mo is very conscious of his responsibilities towards Lindsey, a foster child with profound disabilities:

> **"we have taken this responsibility, it's a huge responsibility for the future ...** The first thing, the condition she's in, is she getting worse or better? But if she doesn't, even if she stays the same? ... I'm getting older that's for sure, ... and less energy, less patience. Hope's going to be the same and Lindsey's getting bigger and needs more attention you know, or more looking after. Obviously yes it does make me **think**, ...it is something yes that **worries** me........ Zeeba asked me once, "oh daddy when you are old or even dead", yeah, Lindsey's only a young lady, "who's going to look after Lindsey?" and I said, "I really don't know yet"."

Family life is about past and future. In giving Lindsey a family Mo has offered her a future. He does not consider her a liability but an anxiety. He cannot plan for such uncertainty; there is no resolution. Whilst this is clearly also true for birth parents Mo and Hope have voluntarily renounced "normal" expectations of leaving dependency behind. For him commitment to a foster child provokes unease. Like most of the other carers Mo, in his own way, constructs his foster child as different and as risky. Yet only one (known) couple were considering resigning from fostering. Somehow all the carers, alongside the "difference", construct the foster children as giving something back to them; something that outweighs and compensates for any threat.

5. Foster children as worthwhile.

This section examines the transcripts in terms of the foster carers constructing the children as, not only something for themselves, but also as returning more to the carers than they can give to the foster children.

Kelly reminisces about a taking their foster lad with his friend on holiday:

"That was so lovely. It was more rewarding taking Shaun with us...... you just got so much back from him. .... I remember taking him to .... the Dolphin Show. ... We didn't watch the dolphins ... We watched Shaun. They sat in the row in front of us and their little faces were alive and Shaun's, his mouth was wide open and his eyes were like this (*demonstrates*). We just sat and watched **them**. We didn't watch the dolphins at all, Clive and I, and that for us meant so much. It meant more than, do you know what I mean? ...... Shaun who came with hardly any clothes. I was having to wash his clothes daily ...... but it was lovely. That was **so** rewarding to do that. That for me means a lot. That's the sort of thing that makes it all worthwhile."

For Kelly and her husband Clive the enchantment of childhood means that all they give the foster children is more than reciprocated. Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues' (2000) study of step-parenting reviews work on negotiated responsibilities in care and definitions of childhood to argue that the care of children is independent of reciprocity. Yet for Kelly the daily washing of Shaun's clothing is constructed not only as a labour of love but a rewarding task. Elsewhere her transcript details the emotional pain of fostering but she constructs the foster children in such a way that this extract shows that worthwhile times are reparative – "makes it all worthwhile".

This construction is echoed throughout other interviews. Keith, who normally celebrates his birthday at a restaurant describes how, instead, they took four year old Timmy to a family pub, "but it made up for it because we enjoyed watching him, you know, we get enjoyment out of seeing him um mixing...... but I think you get enjoyment every day." Timmy is not constructed as a burden, or as a reason for spoiling the birthday meal, but as a source of happiness. This is apparent too in Brian's construction of foster children:

"you get a lot of rewards from the children......... it's been an absolute, been a delight over the years really to foster pre-adoption babies. ..... you are actually giving somebody **something** and you feel personally that you, I think it makes you feel quite good sometimes, you know, you're actually able to give a couple that, you know, have been longing for a baby and can't have one themselves such a lovely present. So in that sense I think you get your rewards."

Brian describes the babies as gifts that he is personally donating. He is sharing the enchantment of childhood when this act of giving not only gives him pleasure but makes him feel rewarded. Something of this resonates with Celia's construction of particular children, "some of the children are really loving and, you know, you get your credit

through them in a way". Like Brian her interview also describes life-as-foster-carer as difficult but, again like him, there are compensations derived through her construction of the children, as a source of credit. Jenny, looking after her first foster child, constructs herself as the debtor in the transaction, "what you give up is, is, would never outweigh what you actually get in benefits."

Mo was certain that the balance was in his favour:

> "I mean our religious culture is, when as far as they (*his Muslim parents*) are concerned, (*fostering means*) I'm buying a piece of heaven for myself, you know (laughs) but really the **pleasure** Lindsey give us, yeah, it is more than, you know, what really heaven for us, if there is such a thing or not. I mean that's a smile."

His construction of their foster child, who requires twenty-four hour care, is not that this earns him his place in any after-life but that her presence and her smile gives him heaven on earth. Because of Lindsey's profound disabilities this is likely to be an emotional "heaven" because of her sentimental value.

Other carers construct the value of the foster children in more practical terms. Daisy who has no children of her own describes the daily routine of foster-child-care as "exciting. I know it sounds silly," whilst Frances, awaiting her first placement muses:

> "they'd each bring um their own personality and I, I hope that we'd be able to interact with them and I, I think you always do gain a great deal getting to know other people, so I think we would gain a great deal."

Although not certain, Frances constructs the foster children as of value and as contributing to the household so that there is, for her, a net gain. The foster children will bring for her and Alfred new personalities to live with and to understand. Fostering offers personal growth hopefully through relationship. But more than that as, elsewhere, she explains:

> "we're used to um having to adapt to new situations and neither of us want to retire. We don't want to sink into um taking life too easily, so ..... Yes, I think, I think we're ready for a challenge."

Her particular construction of foster children is the provision of challenge for a newly retired couple. Foster children are to supply a purpose. This same construction is evident

elsewhere: Alfred, Jackie, Simon and Meg also describe foster children, or fostering, as providing their lives with a challenge. Tricia unpacks the construction:

> "you find things within yourself that you are good at or you've been able to do that you never thought you would .... for instance, to care for special needs children that I always .... used to find quite hard in even going near to. Yes that's been quite a realisation for me (pause). Quite difficult (laugh)."

So foster children are constructed as worthwhile for Tricia because they enable her to do more, to overcome former obstacles, to prove particular things to herself. It is a symbiotic relationship where both parties benefit. Other carers speak in similar terms, of their own personal achievements through the children. Yvonne sums up the descriptions of several when she says, "if you can put one child on the right road you've done something in your life," which Brian describes in terms of a "vocation ..... doing something worthwhile ..... actually making a difference." Two carers reflect upon the ways that fostering has produced self-change. Ruth has learnt to drive in order to benefit the foster children whilst Stuart had achieved an ambition by becoming a role model for a foster child. These carers thus construct foster children as worthwhile because fostering acts as the catalyst for reinventing themselves. Daisy, a new carer, is clear that this is her raison d'être:

> "I sort of wanna change my life, I **want** to do it, I want that fulfilment you know, I want to be able to cook dinners for children .... so yeah I **wanted** to change so no, there was nothing I **didn't** want to change .... There's nothing really I'd want to stay the same you know."

She expects fostering to make life worthwhile and to give it moral value. Children will offer change, drama, events and enchantment. She will become a "family" with opportunities for personal growth. Some of these constructions are reflected in the interviews with Khanm Shah, who found caring for the children of others educational, and Alice (a new carer) who has discovered that having a foster child:

> "makes the brain work more as well because you tend to get mentally lazy because you don't have to think very hard because she (*birth daughter*) knows what she's doing, she knows her routine and you don't have to get involved with social workers and health visitors and group meetings and so, um, it sort of wakens the brain up and you have to start thinking about things a bit."

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Whilst other studies suggest that parents are deskilled by experts and that the impact of educational, medical and welfare professions on (Australian) households leads to the disenchantment of the home (Richards, 2000) Alice finds continuous negotiations with professionals different and mentally stimulating. Foster children are for Alice, as with Daisy and Khanm Shah, constructed as worthwhile.

Both Hope and Tricia construct foster children as so worthwhile that they talk in terms of a super-efficient form of fostering - a quasi professional fostering (see also Nelson, 1990a; Wrigley, 1990). Hope's ambition is to leave nursing in order to care for more foster children. Tricia feels that she already offers this highly proficient service negotiating daily with health and social services professionals for care and support for foster children with special needs. Three of these were terminally ill children and Tricia struggles to make sense of her part in their care:

> "It gives me (pause) a sense of, I don't know that satisfaction is the right word, having been able to do that. To offer that. To see it through, complete it - if that's the best and the only way it could have been. It's really difficult to describe actually because, you know, I can't find the words."

In this extract Tricia tries to explain how she derives a personal satisfaction from looking after children who die in her care. Like Ali Shah, Hanneke, and Dick she describes herself as "offering" something to the children of others; as expressed by Georgina: "I wanted to do my bit, uh, not just give to charity, actually do something, yeah do something." For these carers foster children are constructed as worthwhile ways of putting something back into society. Janet and Hope construct foster children as being victims of society in need of rescue, whilst Lenin describes his foster lad: "he is ever so clingy, you know, he doesn't - he doesn't want to go out without me sort of thing, which is, is, is nice for me." Sometimes the symbiotic relationship, the reciprocal bargain allows for every foster child's loss to be a foster carer's gain - "it's nice".

Many foster carers are clear that they foster because they want children, if they have none, or more if they already have a family. Hope, Miranda, Louise and Alice want to add to their families whilst Margaret views fostering as a way of gaining an extended family, "I call myself a grandmother, foster grandmother now. I regard this little one (*aged 16 years*)

here as **my** grandson. I did Jamie and I did Steve." These carers, in this regard, construct the foster children as blood relatives (see also chapter five) in order to maximise their idea of family. There is evidence that the presence of foster children makes the experience of "family" more real for some carers. Hope talks about the way they hold family conferences with their birth children in order to explore how fostering "was for them" whilst Mary relates how her past, very quiet, husband now communicates with her in order to discuss their foster children. She also finds an unanticipated bonus at work because of fostering:

> "(it) opened my life ... when I was at work one day and people are talking about their kids and their grand-kids and I was completely out of it, I couldn't communicate, ... but I'm now part of a wider circle if you like, even though you know the children are only with me for a very short time, but ... people come up to me and sort of say "have you tried this? Have you gone?" .... and it's a whole different, you know, which I've never been involved in before you know and it's lovely."

Colleagues at work construct foster children as family and foster carers as real parents. Caring gives Mary a socially constructed identity (Graham, 1983).

The presence of the foster children has wrought changes which all of these carers construct as positive. Gordon describes his new foster-children-family as "I think all these things together make it kinda like a family and kinda yeah, it could be a biblical definition of family from the bible." As a born-again Christian Gordon is putting upon the foster children his highest accolade - he constructs them together with Emma and himself as a traditional, loving family. Emma notes that the presence of the foster children is causing Gordon to slow down in his business activities which she regards as positive.

In similar vein there are carers who feel that the presence of foster children produces wanted psychological change. Laura, a carer of many years, constructs foster children as giving her life fundamental meaning. Without them she would:

> "be **depressed!** .... she (*Laura's mother*) committed suicide .... I thrive somehow. Stan (*husband*) always says "fill the house up with babies. She won't do the housework but she'd look after the babies"."

Meg describes herself as "a bear with a sore head" between teenagers, Tricia talks of her "need for being needed," and Celia explains "I enjoy helping them. I enjoy looking after them. Um. And to me it's fulfilling a part of **my** life - having the babies. I don't want any more family for myself **but** I am getting what I need off these children." For all these carers the significance of foster children is constructed as giving life meaning. Mary, whilst describing the physical and emotional exhaustion of fostering, concludes:

> "with Damien (*foster child*) I was tense, but the other tensions, not like tension, yeah I suppose other tensions they've gone. It's um I am relaxed. I know that sounds a contradiction of terms um yeah it's done me a lot of good, I know it has. I've got a great deal out of it and, even in the short time I've done it."

Thus whether it is to ward off depression, provide an aim in life, know that a need is being met, feeling fulfilled or contributing towards a more relaxed persona these carers all construct foster children as necessary for their own psychological well-being.

Yet alongside these constructions foster carers also give very practical reasons for wanting to take other people's children into their families. Both Brian and Mike note that their wives are at home anyway caring for children. For some female carers fostering may offer a retreat from the working world: Miranda (new carer) finds fostering to be a solution to her need to be at home for her own son (see also Rhodes, 1993b):

> "I can support myself and still stay at home and be at home for Ashley which is what I want to do. My mum was always at home for me ...... I can do that and also extend my family, cos I'd quite like to have more children, but I possibly can't afford it. You see I send Ashley to a private school and I have to be able to fund that so it probably means I can't afford to have another child."

Rearing children is now more difficult and demanding; parents feel obliged to provide the most advantageous conditions (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), in this case private education. Miranda's decision to foster is therefore instrumental. Foster children are constructed as benefiting the household in two ways. They contribute in terms of the allowances that they bring[40] and also, by providing carers with extra children they save

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[40] But see chapters two and seven for further discussion of the financial aspects of fostering.

families the expense of more birth children.

Older carers construct as an additional benefit that the presence of the foster children makes them feel young. Margaret says that it reminds her of when her own son was a lad, Yvonne states that "even at 68 I feel like 38" whilst Cyril explains that foster children "make me feel ten or twelve year younger." Meg describes how she knows:

> "all the pop tunes .... I **have** to, to keep up with it all, ... yea it's kept me alive actually. It really has because I think that anyone can sit back and vegetate, can't they? I mean I'm sixty-five now and I really don't, I just don't **feel** sixty-five. I just don't, you know."

Meg is talking of the value of youth and of the priority of childhood. Alongside this rejuvenation several of the carers positively enjoy particular aspects of childhood. Both Gordon and Arthur take pleasure in "having a laugh" whilst Harry, Kathleen, Mandy and Ruth enjoy playing with the children. As Ruth (an experienced carer) describes:

> "I do get to play a lot. And I do like to play with small people and I like fun and games and I like going "ape" on trips and things which **now**, as my two (*birth children*) are now adults I wouldn't have actually had. I would have had to go and live in this grown-up world (laughs)."

Foster children are constructed as a reason, as an excuse, for foster carers to go "ape" on occasions in order that they can join the children's worlds and remember their own uninhibited, creative, sensual personalities (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). These carers construct childhood as different from adulthood; it demands different ways of being which looking after foster children permits them to enjoy. Foster carers construct the children as worth-while; they construct benefits from their personal and intimate relationships with the foster children.

Concluding discussion.

Foster children provide a sense of family - not only for the carers' private lives but also for their public persona. These children demonstrate the power of enchantment as foster carers construct them as innocent, precious and sacred. But their construction of the fostered children is also crucial to the construction of their own moral value. Throughout the

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transcripts there is evidence that the foster carers construct themselves as moral people in contrast with the social services (also see chapter six) and as "ideal" parents in contrast to the children's birth parents. Birth parents and the children's beginnings are constructed as flawed and at fault. This chapter has quoted Stan referring to the parents as "the baggage that comes with the children", whilst Olivia excuses difficult behaviour "because you know where they are coming from". Both Celia and Margaret blame past experiences and Lenin explains Karl's anti-social behaviour with "it's his upbringing". The birth parents of the fostered children are thereby constructed as immoral and the children's behaviour difficult but explicable. This is what makes foster children worthwhile and they in turn make life meaningful.

Like Gelder's childminders, foster carers perceive "love as the reward for (their) work" (1998:6). Gilligan (1995) views care as a relationship and explains that a care orientation changes the way people approach political and moral issues. Life is made meaningful for the foster carers not only because the children are deserving of time, attention, love and understanding but because the carers' personal involvement with the child's progress via an intimate, individualised tie offers the carer opportunities for personal growth. The relationship flourishes best when it is symbiotic, or reciprocal, as some foster carers pursue an ethic of care of self in order to benefit the foster child. But fostered children are public children; they are bureaucratised children. As previously noted Meg's teenager, for example, writes out his complaints against her for his social worker. This is so much in conflict with a family discourse of love and a particularistic tie, and so unrewarding, that Meg emotionally rejects and physically evicts him.

Bureaucratised children are therefore ambiguous. They are risky and different. Their construction as such is shared by the children themselves, the carers, the social services and the general public. The next two chapters will explore some of these dilemmas around foster care.

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Chapter 5.
Dealing with dilemmas: private and personal.

Introduction.

This chapter shifts the focus in order to further understand the complexity of the foster carers' constructions of their daily lives. It is concerned with how the carers manage those parts of their social worlds which might be described as, not only "private" (as discussed in chapter two) but also "personal," (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998). Although neither are straightforward concepts they are useful in this context. They aid description of those parts of foster families' lives which are separate from their interactions with the "external/public" world of the social services departments and the foster children's families.

As already noted foster "parents" are now foster "carers". This has confirmed and further encouraged a shift in attitude vis-à-vis the fostered children and the social services department. Yet many foster families look after the children, if not for several years, at least for the important years of their childhood and therefore fulfil a parental role. Alongside this it is perhaps significant to note the way legal and current political discourse has shifted to emphasise that parenthood is "for life" and the implications this may have for increasing ambiguities for foster carers as quasi-parents.

This chapter will therefore discuss how carers manage the tensions and ambiguities of living as themselves, with their own blood families, whilst simultaneously looking after other people's children. Most specifically this raises issues about how this impacts upon time and place. I will then move on to look at what the carers say about their subjective experience of their natural/birth parent status as compared to their professional/ foster carer status. Foster carers have to draw these boundaries in different ways at different times whilst coping with the many complex shifts. Therefore, finally, I consider some of the accounts of how these emotional tensions are managed.

Although, generally, analysis demonstrates much overlap between the transcripts of experienced carers and new carers there are indications that, for parts of this chapter, the differences between them are relevant. Life-as-foster-carer was not as the new carers

expected. Whilst experienced carers were conversant with life-as-foster-parents before the title and legal changes, this may have aided transition from "parent" to "carer" - though this theory is not explored.

Own family life versus caring family life.

Each interview commenced with my inviting the foster carer to talk about themselves and their lives until the time that they became involved with fostering. This was to give them both an opportunity to ground themselves in a life apart from foster care and also to put their caring into their own context. In fact eight carers chose to start their autobiographies from the time that they began to foster. They presented their accounts as though the years before that were, by comparison, inconsequential; as though they chose to relate their foster carer experiences as comprising their significant lives. Becoming a foster carer was for them a milestone, an "epiphanal moment" (Denzin, 1991:55). Although the majority introduced themselves via their childhood experiences several articulated an explicit awareness that the effect of foster care coloured everything:

> "It changes, you know, your life - and I think that social services, social workers forget that you have got a life apart from them and the child that you are looking after." (Louise, a new carer[41]).

Louise is demonstrating some resistance to the way that the local authority defines life-as-foster-carer by saying that the effect of foster care, plus the local authority's expectation of this, is to have no other life outside the family's foster care activities. All life becomes life-as-foster-carer. When asked if fostering had changed her life Emma's reply echoed some of this:

> "**Complete!**[42] Completely turned it topsy turvy (laughing) and it was our first placement and and at the end of a few days Gordon and I both said "we can't do this"!"

The change from life-as-it-was to life-as-foster-carer was so radical for new carers Gordon and Emma that they describe some resistance, some desire to return to their past

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[41] New carers are noted as such where relevant.
[42] Bold indicates original emphasis unless otherwise stated.

established equilibrium. Ruth (an established carer of several years) unpacks some of the change for her and much of this resonates with the accounts given by other carers:

> "I think the level of involvement they wanted from me in **all** areas was a surprise. Because I just assumed that I was going to just care for this child. To do it quietly in my home. Plod along in my own sweet way but then, have to take these children to contacts and fetch these children from contact and have natural parents in my home - I - it - it was yea, yea, but, yea was a shock. The invasion - I felt at the beginning that it was an invasion of my home, of my life style I suppose, to have to alter this to suit other people which I've **never ever** done before in my life. I'd always lived my life **my** way. Yes, yes and had to change it to accommodate these people, yes, yes."

In these extracts the three foster carers say that they experience foster family life as markedly different from their previous (family) lives. There are many taken-for-granted assumptions about family life and one is that it is a bounded unit; it has external boundaries (Ribbens, 1994). But Ruth's experience is that these have been breached; she has been invaded. She is having to accommodate the expectations and demands of the local authority's wishes regarding the foster children within her own household. Louise is stating that she is not just a foster carer and elsewhere in the interview Ruth says of her busy life, "I mean it's not just fostering it's ordinary extended family commitments as well, you know." Life-as-foster-carer must exist with life-as-it-was/is. Fostering is one part of their lives alongside other activities but being a foster carer brings change, and change may impact upon life outside foster care.

Spatial changes.
Some of the changes described by the carers are physical ones to their living conditions. Mandy (a new carer) explains about making the house child proof, not only in terms of plug guards and the height of the bathroom cabinet, but also:

> "we didn't have any banisters. ...... But she (*Family Placement Officer*[43]) said when she came to look, to sort of safety check, she said, "oh you'll have to get banisters back on the stairs" and it cost us £200 to have banisters put back on the stairs, um and it was assumed you know, once you were sort of registered. We didn't have the spare £200 hanging round for the banisters - ...... The decorating, the room costs - and we had to move people around to get the room, you know, so that costs money as well."

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[43] Italics indicate author's explanation/ description.

For Mandy and her husband becoming foster carers involves change at a financial cost. It was only after their registration as new carers that the agents of the local authority demanded new banisters and a decorated bedroom. Although it was difficult for them to raise the necessary monies they nonetheless did so in order to care for a foster child. Like other foster carers they accept the necessity of change and comply. Francis and Albert independently state that they are prepared to physically modify the house if "it is the wrong sort of home" (Albert), whilst Ruth, criticised by the local authority for her poor standards of cleanliness, firstly purchases a dishwasher and then:

> "We took walls out and doors out (laughs), lifted carpet because it's so unhygienic. For about four years I was in perpetual potty training....... So I decided that carpets were most unhygienic and so just took them and polished the floors which actually makes life much simpler."

Ruth, like other foster carers interviewed, permanently changes her house/home for the benefit of the foster children. For these carers the effects of foster care upon their way of life is actually visible. Foster care has physical and tangible effects. Whilst Hanneke is having the house extended in order to better accommodate foster children, Janet (a new carer) is trying to exchange her two bedroom flat for a three bedroom house in the village. Mo, who has a company house for his family, persuaded his employers to pay for an extension so that they could accommodate Lindsey full time rather than just for respite. For these people life-as-foster-carer requires their active agency in cement(ing) change.

Gordon relates how he said to the sisters that they were fostering, "it's your house" as though in some sort of gesture of inclusion. Celia, explaining how she encouraged one lad not to vandalise property says:

> "Also that the house he was living in although it wasn't his house but it was his home. You know. And he should treat it as his home."

So although the foster carers may own the bricks and mortar they are inviting the foster children to share and to participate in their perception and their construction of a notion of "home". But the doing of this may result both in an "invasion," as articulated by Ruth, and also specific changes to routines and ways of living.

<u>Time changes.</u>
Several mention how fostering impacts on their time. Tricia refers to thrice weekly contact in her home as " really tying". Janet feels that her care of/being with her foster child should take precedence over attendance at her slimming club and meals with her husband. She also gives priority to social services meetings on market days; all had been part of her usual routine. Meg adapts her time scales to suit the needs of her teenage lads (chapter four). Life is now dictated by the needs of the bureaucratised child.

Changes in routines may also result in loss of control over time. Foster carers discover the dilemma of bureaucratic time versus current, child-centred time. Foster carers offer twenty-four hour unscheduled child-centred time whereas social workers operate on bureaucratic nine-to-five days. Celia enlarges on the difficulties of maintaining past routines:

> "You've got to be able to drop everything and go. Um. Like for instance, we don't plan ahead very often because, um, sometimes things don't work out."

For these foster carers, timetables and activities are now dictated by bureaucracy; the needs of the social services department and the foster children. As these are not always known or predictable, foster carers have their non-foster-carer-lives on hold, in readiness for adaptation to their lives-as-foster-carers. Whilst blood children offer infinity fostered children can only offer the here and now and uncertainty – they may be here today but tomorrow is unknown – as discussed by Hope below. Foster carers therefore, like Celia live in the present. But the demands of the present also effect the male carers as evidenced in their accounts and the impact fostering has on their working lives.

<u>Impact on work life.</u>
Mike (a new foster carer) has twice had to leave work in order to look after the foster child whilst his wife, Louise, attends meetings at the social services offices. He has taken days off to attend court and give evidence about the child and regards himself as Louise's principal support and back-up for foster care. Simon relates how he changes shifts and, if necessary, gives up over-time opportunities to attend social services' meetings. Brian's new job ensures that he can finish at two in order to support Tricia. Similarly Harry works the early shift in order to be home by two o'clock to help Celia with the foster children but even then there are times when this is not sufficient:

"Like taking them to hospital, I got to come home, leave work, take Celia up there, come back again and then go back to work. Yea, yea. .... Or I'll probably take a day off (*holiday*), instead of losing the money. You know, easier."

Chapter one noted that many foster families may model a notion of a traditional family - of a male wage earner with a female carer at home. Although some of these foster families may map onto this picture these particular men fulfil more than the wage earning role. All of them, including Mo cited below, regard their wives as the primary carers and describe themselves as taking secondary, supportive roles. Yet for them it is, as expounded by Harry, like "having two jobs at one time" and this may therefore have more in common with feminist theories of women who work "the second shift" (Hochschild, 1990). The following extract from Gordon (who is self-employed and whose wife also has paid employment) portrays the dilemmas for him whilst also demonstrating the importance of adaptability:

"the hard part is adjusting my work. I think that's harder because I have to be here some of the time, whereas I'm not saying I'd rather be out there, I've been **used** to being out there so I've had to change and say "no I've got to be in here and I've got to change my times, whereas I could be out at 8 o'clock in the morning I can't be out until 9 o'clock." That kind of thing which is not a big deal, but it's the biggest thing that I've found."

He further explains that he is postponing plans to develop his business as he has decided that this would be in conflict with his availability to care for the foster children. In fact, when caring for two difficult fostered brothers, he worked only two days out of the ten. In interview he reflects on whether he should permanently work part time in order to better look after the foster children. For Gordon work and income has had to adjust to the demands of foster care. Foster care has become such an imperative that the necessity of earning his living takes second place and Emma is now the main wage earner. Emma is supportive of this. They actually live over her place of business which permits her to attend all social service meetings that occur in their home. Like Gordon she wishes to ensure that their life-as-foster-carers retains priority.

Much of this resonates with Mo and Hope's situation. She too has paid work. Of his own situation Mo explains:

"My career, I had opportunity to do more within the Company, go up the ladder as I was going up the ladder fast, yeah, now I cannot commit myself to more than what I do .... The new post would take me further up the ladder and accept more responsibility ...... It does mean I'm more hours of work yeah, ... I wouldn't like that you know, I like to be here at 3 o'clock if Hope can't make it, because Lindsey's taxi (*from school*) will be here, you know I cannot really commit myself."

He can commit to the fostered child but not to his career. Elsewhere he relates how he discusses with his Manager accepting demotion in order to ensure that he can be more available for Lindsey should Hope be delayed at her work place. Mo presents his life-as-foster-carer role to be more important than his life-as-bread-winner role. These male carers make sacrifices in order to support the care of foster children. In these instances caring and economic imperatives are related and provide new rationales for action. Like Morgan's (1996) "new men" and Neale and Smart's (2000) separated fathers, who continually re-assess their work lives in light of the changing needs of the children together with the circumstances of the other parent, male foster carers may centre their time around fostered children.

There were other experiences regarding balancing the demands of home and work. Georgina (a new carer) finds the mix of life-as-wage-earner and life-as-foster-carer difficult to manage. Her employment does not lend itself to the flexibility and adaptability previously noted as required for fostering. The family had offered week end respite to a child originally in boarding school, only to find that the social services expected them to be his full time carers:

"interfering with my work has been too much. .... (*fostering*) is interrupting my work day and - my own children I don't think about them. I'm not saying, that's not nasty, I don't mean it like that. I don't have to worry about them from when I walk out the door to when I come in at night and that's not the case with Dylan because alright he's fostered, 'cos they're ringing you, they're making arrangements, it's his assessment in another month, it's this, that and the other".

Georgina's life as a career woman is important to her. She experiences this as in conflict with her life as a foster carer and has difficulties with the accommodation. She describes foster care as impinging upon and interfering with her working day. Unlike Mo she does

not want to give her life-as-foster-carer precedence but determines to retain her career. She has been used to keeping separate her life-as-mother and life-as-worker; foster care does not fit these demarcations but spills into work. Foster care erodes her boundaries. Her pursuit of career/self-development creates conflicts with social service's notions of duty and responsibility for Dylan's needs. Generally most of the carers, and particularly the new carers, find fostering to be more demanding than anticipated but Georgina alone is open about her resistance. In this extract she objects to the encroachment of the demands of the local authority into her work-life which she wants ring-fenced from her life-as-foster-carer.

Impact on extended family and on social life.
Life-as-foster-carer can be problematic for carers' social lives. Frances (a new carer) spells out some of the changes that she and her husband are prepared to make both for fostered teenagers and their visiting parents:

> "I think we have to be adaptable because if they (*visiting parents*) needed to smoke because they were very nervous or whatever, as a general rule we would prefer people to smoke outside, but um I, I personally wouldn't make a fuss about it but the thing about drink is is another thing that we've discussed as a, as a family because we've had to talk about this with drugs rehabilitation and if you've got somebody with you who's alcoholic I think it's important to get rid of all the alcohol in your home and we would be willing to do that.....it wouldn't be a an enormous problem, I'd rather do that than run the risk of somebody being tempted."

She and Alfred are prepared to change their social habits in order to foster. Like other foster carers in this study they construct themselves as having to adapt and change in order to accommodate other people's children. If necessary this change can be explicit in social habits.

Both Tricia and Harry mention the difficulties of answering friends' and neighbours' questions about foster children when the information is confidential to the child. Harry uses the word "embarrassing" since friendship is frequently based on openness whereas foster carers are instructed not to explain. Several of the narratives demonstrate that being a foster carer can affect social life as they have to erect new boundaries whilst dismantling old ones. Hanneke's experience is that badly behaved children are not welcome in the homes of their friends whilst Stan finds that a houseful of foster children are just too many

to be invited out anymore for Sunday lunch. Harold (a new carer with his first foster child) explains how he makes choices about which relatives he visits with the foster child:

> "My mother's birthday yesterday - I sent her some flowers .... but I will have to go over by myself. I don't want to take Ruby (*foster child*) over there because she'll (*his mother*) ask her embarrassing questions. "Why are you staying with Kathleen? (*his wife*)" You know. Do you know what I mean? And I don't want her to put Ruby in that position."

So whereas, in the past, he and Kathleen had taken his elderly mother out for a birthday lunch, this year he sends flowers and will take a day out of work in order to visit on his own. His life-as-foster-carer has modified his behaviour in his life-as-son. Emma's still new experience as a foster carer causes her to surmise that "you would have to probably match what placement you had to what, to what friends you visited, um, I'm sure." Kelly expounds on the complexities of social events comprising family and friends with the foster children:

> "they're not as sensitive as we are. Clive (*husband*) and I are very, very sensitive to our boys' feelings and how they might be feeling and we try and help them to join in, and make conversation with them. But I don't think other people think like that .... Some of them (*friends*) are really, really nice. I suppose some aren't quite as understanding. Like some people say, "Why do you put up with it?(*abusive behaviour*) You're absolutely mad" .... You either do put up with it or you make them move out which you try and avoid. You don't want that at any cost really. You try and stick with them, and help them but we've had a lot of comments like "You're absolutely mad" or "I wouldn't have my home - no one would damage my home like that." .... I find it very hurtful and it's easier to get on with people now who do foster. I prefer to go out with people who foster, like - I have a few friends who foster that I would prefer to see, because they know. They've been in that position, they're understanding, they know what it's like."

In line with the narratives of several other carers' Kelly's account of looking after other people's children is that, as far as her social life is concerned, her life-as-foster-carer must come first. This involves more re-drawing of boundaries. Those friends and members of the family who are not able to empathise with life-as-foster-carer are considered insensitive, not only to the fostered children but also towards herself. Her personal identity is bound up in her foster carer status. This means that foster carers should continue to care for fostered children in a bid to help them even when, as in their case, fostered children have verbally threatened them or physically attacked both them and their house. Her belief in the priority of her life-as-

foster-carer means that she has become gradually disillusioned with past friends in favour of other foster carers who share her convictions and her experiences. Olivia, reflecting on the same theme of past friends, concludes "you tend to lose that normality." Life-as-foster-carer can be so "topsy turvy" that foster carers estrange themselves from old friends/the past life-as-it-was and reassure themselves with others in the foster care world of the present who understand "why you are dealing with children that are kicking you and punching you and swearing at you" (Olivia). New boundaries of empathy and understanding only come from those who share the identity; fostering becomes a new and central care identity.

Identities: natural/birth parent or professional/foster carer.

Ambiguities of birth/natural family status.

Although "family" is a much contested site there are several notions that hold firm in Western ideology. It is regarded as a social unit comprising adults and children with all children given the same status. There are differentials within the category of child in terms of age and gender but studies of step families (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2002) demonstrate that "fairness" is a key theme and a barrier to further demarcation. Analysis of the data reveals strong parallels in the subjective experiences of step families and of foster families.

Once a couple decide to become foster carers this has an effect not just upon themselves but upon their children and the extended family. Kelly, Keith, and Lionel are examples of the many carers who talk of grandmothers and adult children being "police checked" so that they can baby-sit the foster children. None of them intimate that this is in any way strange or different from how all families manage a social life. For all of them it has become a taken-for-granted fact. Most of the foster carers talk of their relatives as simply accepting and absorbing the foster children into the extended family; the most usual evidence being the parity of gifts between all children of the household. Hanneke stated, as though it should be expected, that both her first husband and his mother always send Christmas presents for all the children - birth and fostered. Even where there has been initial reluctance from elderly relatives, carers state that this had been overcome and greetings cards are now sent to foster children signed "Nan" and "Grandpa." There is no indication from the carers that extended family members might have contrary views about

relationships being hijacked for children who are not related, only an expectation that they should accept "elective" family relationships (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998:53) as "elective affinities" become redefined as family obligations. Neither is there any sensitivity to the views of fostered children's birth relatives who may not wish to be replaced.

But there are signs of extended (foster) family resistance. Both Mike and Mandy (new carers) mention that their respective mothers had not been immediately enthusiastic about fostering:

> "My mum's very concerned. She rang the other day and Timmy (*foster child*) answered and actually she was very supportive and she's rung me since, but when I told her I was going to do it she was........ Worry for me and my health........ You know she's just concerned .... I mean now it's, it has happened I think she'll be alright" (Mandy)

> "my mother at the beginning I don't think she was very happy at all, ...I think it was concern for us really. 'You've got three children of your own, why do you want to bring another one up?' um, but she's fine with Victoria (*foster child*)" (Mike).

Here any lack of enthusiasm is presented as concern for the foster carers themselves rather than any reluctance of the relatives to become involved in fictive blood relationships with children who are not-blood. Nonetheless the majority of accounts indicate that the speaker's own zeal for, and commitment to, foster care is so total that there is no space for the doubts of others. Both these extracts suggest that the foster children were instrumental in the conversion and as Cyril points out "**Your** friends they're gonna meet him and you want 'em to like him as well him to like them." This suggests that, for Cyril, his foster child is so much part of the family that it matters to him that the foster child is not just acceptable but also actively likeable in the eyes of those who matter, his friends. Although a minority of the carers consider the children's birth families relevant, the general focus is on incorporating the foster child into the foster family household. In this respect foster carers can be powerful.

<u>Ambiguities of professional/foster carer status.</u>

Almost all of the carers are adamant in their response to the vignette concerning the invitation which excluded the two foster children,[44] that they must always be included and receive complete parity with carers' own birth children. Ruth explains that she had attended a family wedding without a foster child but had ensured that the family were aware of her disagreement and anger. Generally the statements of the carers are that all children living in the household should be treated the same, whatever their status. Although they may have dual roles as foster carers and as birth parents most of them want to be perceived as able to present the same persona and offer similitude to all children in the foster family. The following extract from Brian's interview encapsulates some of the ambiguities of this situation:

> " you're not supposed to be a parent are you? You're not supposed to be replacing a parent. You're supposed to be a carer looking after them, not a **parent**. I would, I suppose we took, when we started doing it we were foster, I called myself a foster parent and I still do **now** but I suppose - I just think because you're sort of, you're **being** the parent to them but you're **not** their parent! I mean I don't really know - because you're not trying to eliminate their parent from them and you're not trying to replace their parent, **but** you're trying to give them what most other children have got and that **is** a parent who they live with and is looking after them".

Brian struggles to make sense of the (internally experienced) similarities and differences of parenting and foster caring but argues that he gives all children the same. These sentiments resonate with the studies demonstrating the positioning of some step-fathers in similar reconstituted families. Brian is being the parent to them all but as Grace's extract also demonstrates, parental parity is not possible:

> "Grow them as you grow your own children because there's no difference between it really. It's just that you're not the mum but everything else is just the same to **me** .... Just same as I would do to my children so I don't think there was any change I had to made (*sic*) or anything. Um, as I said, to me they was my children. They weren't any difference......... I don't think there are any differences. Other people may think, but I don't think so. Except if my children do anything wrong I give them a clout round the ears, You know, a touch round the ear which I wouldn't, um, do - not that it would be wrong but somebody might say 'well because they're not your children you're hitting them.' And I would not like anybody to think that because I wouldn't school a child because it's not mine. Um, I would school them exactly how I school my children. .... So I mean I don't see

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[44] See appendix c.

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any difference. I didn't have to change my life style. I didn't have to change anything. It's just children need looking after. You just look after them - feed them, bath them........ And **love**, love - the most important thing is to be able to love somebody else's child as you would love your own because some people cannot love another person's child as they love their own. I don't find that to be any problem. Children are children as far as I'm concerned. And they're **all** my children - no matter whose child they are."

This last sentence neatly encapsulates the contradictions and the complexities of the foster carer's (parental) identity. Although Grace thinks that she is the same person to both her own children and to any foster children upon reflection she realises that she cannot treat both groups with parity. Although the feeling and the meaning may be the same, the techniques must be different. Foster carers are expressly forbidden to physically chastise any foster child so Grace cannot, as she would with her own, "give them a clout round the ears." Again much of this resonates with themes in the work on stepfamilies about how discipline can be exercised with "your own" because of the underlying assumption of love and obligation (Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues, 2000). This is problematic for Grace since, as she explains an explicit and integral part of her caring is "schooling"/disciplining children and it is important that she is seen (by her family and her social friends) to administer the same standards of care/ "schooling" to all children. Sanctions for foster children are very proscribed and she describes, elsewhere, how she therefore talks to them about their behaviour. Nonetheless the differences are a source of concern for her so she falls back upon the fact that she loves all the household children with parity.

Ambiguities about equality.

Examination of other carers' accounts illustrate similar complexities; that it is not actually possible to guarantee total equality of care within the household given the differences in status between the children. The adults do have to act as parents to birth children and as foster carers to the children placed by the local authority. There is, for example, some concern for the foster child's physical well being. Mike's extract illustrates some of this:

"we've got a patio and I don't like Victoria playing on the slide ... you don't want her to injure herself. I'm not saying I want my children to be injured (laughing) but there's a difference of taking a foster child to the hospital to have a stitch put in their head, I mean it probably wouldn't be treated any differently ...Yeah, whereas I'd p'raps allow my children to do it. If they had a bump they had a bump, or a graze. But um you really don't want Victoria to go to meet her mum with a big

graze on her leg, um … I think that's another sub-conscious thing that you do, it's not an intentional thing um hmm but you definitely do ……… and part of growing up is to get the odd bump and graze but you really don't want it to happen to, it wouldn't do them any harm, but it's what other people portray as, "Well why wasn't you watching her?" Well probably the same reason as I wasn't watching my own daughter, but - "

Mike has ownership of and authority over his own daughters but not for Victoria. This anxiety regarding bureaucratic surveillance and the external "g(r)aze" resonates with Mandy's statement:

"you've got to protect yourself from the same allegations (*as those against the birth family*) and um, so now I'm so protective of Timmy, even if he falls over (laughing) or he's got a bruise you know they're gonna think it's me, or if he says something - ……Even though I've been nursing a long time and I know all about accountability and I've had some cases of abuse and things and I've been one of the professionals dealing with it, - so I've been on the other side. I just feel a bit vulnerable not being a professional during this."

Mandy feels the difference; risk at work is protected by professional status. Risk at home leaves the carer exposed. Both these carers are new and have attended training courses on allegations of abuse against foster carers. Like the majority of carers interviewed for this study they are aware of their vulnerability should the child they look after come to any harm. Care is most obvious when it is lacking (Graham, 1982). Whereas Mike encourages his three young daughters to further feats of physical prowess he is mindful of actually inhibiting any foster child. Mandy, as a qualified nurse, feels competent about dealing with cases of abuse in her "professional" capacity but as a foster carer in her own home states that she is deskilled. In these circumstances foster carers treat their own birth children and the children of others not with parity but with difference.

Nonetheless there are instances of the ways in which carers instil parity. Keith reports that it feels odd when the four year old foster child calls him Keith and his 22 year old son calls him Dad. In most cases social services actively discourage the use of parental nomenclature so it becomes problematic when Timmy decides to copy their son and call Keith and Mandy "Mum and Dad." Keith and Mandy's response is to ask Robin to use their first names so that Timmy will not feel the difference. Here it would seem that, in

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order to impose parity, their roles as foster carers take precedence over those of parents to their own child/blood.

John and Ann, in what they describe as a "quasi adoption" situation fostering two brothers, explain how they actively considered the nature of their care. The following extract is from the interview with Ann:

> "We had a long negotiation with them (*foster children*) about whether they should call us mummy and daddy and decided in the end since they **were** seeing their **real** mother and father and their sister, who's placed elsewhere, and we didn't actually **feel** like their parents and we have made a conscious decision that we would try to respect **their** life style and the, the memories of the way that their family do things....... So we have very much viewed it that we are **not** the parents because we feel if we try to be their parents they will actually lose something of great value ..... We felt that **they** would lose something and also we would impose on them expectations which, just didn't feel fair. So I would say that I **probably** feel, I feel like neither a parent nor a carer. I probably feel more like a **step** parent than I do either of those things."

The boys have a living connection with their birth parents and this serves to preserve the "gap" for Ann who therefore feels neither a parent nor a foster carer and opts for a parent at one hand removed - a step parent.

The management of emotional boundaries: attachment versus detachment.

This section looks at how carers manage tensions around the emotional aspects of including foster children within their families. The majority of children in foster care are placed short term; that is they move into and then out of the foster families (see chapter one). Some children are placed long term with foster carers but there is no guarantee that they will remain; control over movement remains primarily within the hands of the local authorities and, occasionally, with the children themselves rather than with the carers. Ann, aware of this, explains how important her career and outside work is in order to spread the emotional risk and prevent her from becoming "submerged" in fostering. It is as though there is a danger of her identity being drowned by foster care and she maintains her work as a life-jacket, a device in order to retain her other/essential self.

Other carers talk more about the problems of emotional involvement with the foster children and the subsequent pain at parting. Celia uses contact, in this case the regular, but frequently inconvenient, visits of the foster baby's grandparents as a helpful distancing mechanism:

> "I think it's very important that Micah gets to know them so therefore I don't mind and also I don't want to get too attached to him …So when his grandma and grandpa come I sit back and I let them take over……. So in a way I really don't mind that (*the visits*)."

Kathleen's interview explains how she is attempting not to become overly involved with their foster child:

> "We're trying very hard to keep our distance and not um rushing to kiss her goodbye when she goes to school, ……I'm trying, trying not to be over affectionate - but if she wants it, it's there."

Kathleen confirms the emotional risk to both herself and to her husband Harold and to the foster child Ruby. This extract suggests that it is difficult for the foster carers to hold this emotional boundary; the affection for Ruby is already available. She hints that the managing of this boundary is dictated by the foster child; if Ruby wants the emotion/affection then the foster carers will meet this need.

Detachment versus involvement.
In his interview Mike muses on the fact that they have become too fond of/involved with their foster child. He anticipates much sadness when she leaves and wants to prevent a reoccurrence:

> "I'm not saying we'll do things differently next time, but um as long as you've got it in your mind, ……. you have to take this - you have to put it as a job I think, rather than getting too personally involved and we are with Victoria ….. we perhaps are a bit more involved and we should, especially Louise (*wife*)…… Yeah, try to, whether it will be possible or not I don't know. Not, not that it will in a way that will affect the child, but to try and be a bit harder if you like, more of a shell."

In contrast to Grace who emphasises the importance of loving the children, Mike considers constructing a boundary, an emotional shell, between himself and future foster children. He anticipates some sort of changes in behaviour and attitudes in order to protect himself and his wife - but ones that will not affect the future foster children. He suggests that they

could adopt the mind-set of fostering being a "job" as though the concept of work involves less sentiment, or at least tighter emotion management.

Janet, a new carer, uses the same analogy in order to manage the same "detached attachment" (Nelson, 1990a):

> "It would come back to this part again of um getting too involved and everything else, yeah I think yeah I think so. I think it's safer to think that it is and class it as a job, although I suppose the job satisfaction part of it is the fact that Craig's happy and at the end of the day I'm **I'm hoping that I've achieved something with him that he can move on to his next place** and and get and look back on it and say "well, Janet gave me so and so and I, I learned a lot", so that would be to me job satisfaction and I'd feel that I'd done a good job, so ...... 'cos you, there's always that little bit - you're standing back, but as I say you, you do understand and they do understand, but it does make the job a little bit harder."

Elsewhere she posits that "you're holding back that little bit every time, which is a shame because I still feel he would achieve more, you know (*if I didn't*)" but against this she argues the necessity of maintaining some sort of emotional boundary between herself and Craig. She perceives that her emotional attachment to foster children can not be the same as that with her own grandchildren. She presents herself as sentient-foster-carer to Craig and emotional-grand-mother to the grandchildren. Musing on the differences she says:

> "My behaviour towards Terry (*grandchild*) is a lot (pause) a lot more open. I can say to Terry "come here and I'll put your pyjamas on you," whereas with Craig I say "here's your pyjamas," you know, "you go and put them on." ...... I suppose it was - 'cos you're wearing two hats then if you know what I mean."

Janet would seem to understand and be able to differentiate between the "two hats" that she must wear, simultaneously, when caring for both boys. She feels the difference and, as quoted elsewhere, she knows that Craig notes it. She may feel the same about both boys but her behaviour must differentiate. She can be expressive (grand)mother to Terry but must remain, reluctantly, detached foster carer with Craig. Daisy, a new carer, presents her interpretation of this difference - which for her relies upon her understanding of the distinction between foster carer and foster mother:

> "Oh I liked to be a foster **mum** eventually. I know that doesn't come straight away, but I would like to be a foster mum. Well I know like 'cos I've been at the moment

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I feel just a foster carer 'cos I have them for a very short time and I know I can't bond with them and um even if I did you know, it's a very short time it wouldn't be very good for me, it would be too emotional so I'm just a foster carer for now, but when you're a foster mum is when you've got them for a long time. So yes that's how I, a foster mum - um I look forward to being a foster mum, you know dealing with all yeah, the all the problems and everything that they bring so - "

This extract suggests that getting emotionally involved with children who are placed short term/temporarily carries too much emotional risk for the adult who therefore safeguards her position by considering herself as a "carer." For Daisy, behaving as a foster carer consists of a particular set of self protective attitudes and emotions. Set beside this she looks forward to a future when she can behave as a foster "mum," to bond (see also Boulton, 1983) and to deal with the children in an entirety which includes all their problems. Being a key support in a child's life, being a mum or, in Daisy's instance a foster mum, therefore involves other, different sets of attitudes, emotions and behaviours and will redefine her as a new person offering a different sort of care.

Emotional involvement.
Many of the carers debate the ambiguities of full, emotionally caring/loving the foster children. Hope charts the emotional change that occurred with the family's care of Lindsey who was placed for respite for three years and then became a long term placement:

"I can't just switch off and do things mechanically for her and I, I love this child as my own daughter .... it's been such a gradual thing that before you know when you're besotted by her, you just love her like a daughter, but I couldn't say to you it happened the second year, third, it was just one of these slow things until now, to this point when she's been here a year that you know I can feel the warmth in me the same as I think of Arash and Zeeba (*birth children*) and the warmth it's that you know, I'm sure there **must** be some difference, but I can't, I don't **feel** any difference."

Hope raises expectations that biology matters but caring has inevitably led to an individual bond and to love. Others, like Janet and Mike already cited, feel that to hold back emotionally will either actually damage the foster child or at least mean that the child will not do as well as they should. Alice, talking of her two year old foster child says:

"When he first arrived, I suppose I was very hard to myself and I thought, "right I'm not going to get attached. He's just staying here. I'm not going to get involved to the depths that I can't let him go, um, he's only staying. I know he's gonna go

back. I'm not gonna get that attached that I'm going to get really devastated." But I can't. You can't **not** get attached.........

1 can see the difference (pause), um, I can see the difference in the way he plays from the first couple of days he was here when I was thinking "I'm not going to get close" and the way he behaves now, um, 'cos before he'd do something and he would just look at me across the room and then he'd put it down and then he'd go and do something else. Whereas now, he'll do something and he'll come running up to me with his arms up to show me how clever he is and 1 think if I tried to keep him at a distance he'd know and that just wouldn't be fair on him."

Whilst acknowledging that he "has to go back" Alice also says, elsewhere in the interview, "he's mine now", meaning that he is like her own child and that she feels the same authority about him. She also reports that the social services' training included reference to children leaving so, as the extract demonstrates, she commenced the placement with a view that she should avoid over emotional involvement. But co-residence brings a daily, immediate quality into play; a physical quality, he comes running to her with his arms up, and this has sabotaged her intentions. She thus constructs their particularistic bond in terms of the child's needs and has become emotionally tied. Foster carer training may teach detachment but foster carer daily lived experience invokes attachment. Meg is adamant that "they all want love" and sees her task as supplying this:

"I think (*of*) myself as a foster mum. I've **always** thought myself as a foster mum. I've never des/ they say foster carer but I don't like it. ... I think to be a carer is like being a, going and sweeping up somebody else's house and looking after that. I don't like, I don't like foster carer at all....... but I think what **all** these kids want and I don't care whether they are 13 year old boys or 14 year old boys or two year old children - they just want lots of love. That's all they're missing in their life is love and care."

Love, including overtones of therapeutic love, is hereby defiantly asserted. Meg conflates the giving of unconditional love with, not just her role in fostering, but specifically as a foster mother. This is quite a complex, if not ambiguous, concept as elsewhere in her interview she criticises the birth mothers for not loving the foster children sufficiently and also explains that the foster children call her Meg "because they all have their own mothers." Nonetheless her presentation of the justification of her role is that she does not emotionally withhold from the foster children and that this is tied up with her notions of real motherhood. "Love" offered by foster carers is part of a public discourse but in this extract Meg affirms the love of private discourse as she manages and measures social

motherhood against biological motherhood - usually constructed as real, loving motherhood. Perhaps for her, as well as for others in this study, foster carers consider themselves to be more of a mother than real, biological mothers because of their love plus its quality of care. The birth mothers of the foster children may well have loved their children but, as constructed by foster carers, they failed to care for them.

This importance of love is echoed in Margaret's interview. Talking of the 16 and 17 year olds that they foster she says:

> "Well there should be just plenty of love. You want to give those kind of children, 'cos that's what they are, this little boy here does really."

Margaret then goes on to describe how she provides "plenty of love":

> "I cook his dinner, I listen to what he likes to tell me a little bit. ..... he comes in and puts his little face round the corner says 'hello' when he comes in and he'll make me a cup of tea... yeah that kind of thing you know, that kind of little thing. You don't get hold of them and love them, nothing like that, he's a **boy**, ... Well it's just little things like that you're there, you know, he can look round and see somebody in the kitchen or somebody about.... like when I was a child, you could come and find your mum in the kitchen working with the tea or the dining room or wherever you like to be, your mother was **there**."

Like Meg she elides love with motherhood and interprets its presentation, not by a show of physical affection, but through presence; "being there" equates with love.

Risks of emotional involvement.

But there are risks for foster carers if they behave and allow themselves to feel like a mother to a child that is not theirs. Attachment brings opportunities for conflict with the birth mothers. Georgina "had a go" at one mother about failed contact arrangements because she was upset and angry for the foster child. There are also opportunities for rivalries - some more explicit than others. Georgina expresses regret that their foster child "doesn't want a cuddle or a kiss ...... his mother says she loves him and he cuddles her and you thought he would - (*want Georgina to cuddle him*)." Those who do not maintain the emotional barrier between foster carer status and parent status leave themselves vulnerable. Hope echoes some of this when talking of Lindsey's parents' monthly contact visits and admits that:

"part of me wants to be really selfish and say I wish that three hours didn't happen
...... I'd like to be allowed to get on and care for Lindsey the best way I can."

Grace, relating her feelings of deep loss when three foster children left her to live with their grandmother, states how one of them said they would run away back to her to which she replied:

> "So I say, "You know what to do, don't you?" I say, "You just go into a police station and give the police the address and tell them where you want to go and you come. Your room will always be here" (laughing)."

Like Margaret, still being there for them demonstrates love for the children. Though this might raise issues about the risks of permeating the boundaries between foster carer status and its "professional" behaviours (foster carers are supposed to love and let go), and parent status with its differently charged emotional behaviours since the latter could, as with Hope, result in rivalry with the children's birth families.

Kelly describes how, for the children, their birth parents - whatever the history of abuse - are all important. She had not anticipated how "loyal" the children would be and how they "didn't see them (*birth family*) as they really were." Ann, discussing the "bonds of emotion" between John and herself with the boys concludes "but it **isn't** the same thing they give their parents or their parents show to them". Attachment to the children can be problematic.

All of these carers are presenting as closely concerned with the children they look after; these children of others. But when caring for foster children becomes emotional attachment there can also be a painful intensity of feelings. Something of this is conveyed in the following extract from Tricia's interview talking of a permanent placement:

> "We'd been fostering a little girl for over six years who we thought would stay permanent, who was **extremely** difficult. And that broke down and that was hard. That's the hardest thing I've **ever** had to do. It broke my heart and really, really got to me. I've never felt so **distraught** really - and unable - just unable to cope with the situation, myself. That's really, really hard. And its taken a long time to almost get over that, to the point you know that we actually moved house and you know it was really hard. We really had to go through a slow process of moving on again and rethinking what we could, or perhaps what we wanted to offer in future to safeguard ourselves. **Hopefully** it won't happen again. I think, you know, when you've been

through virtually hell and high water for six years and you just put your **all** into that and still - you know."

In this case Marcia had not only made a false allegation of sexual abuse against Brian but had also come between husband and wife to an extent where the viability of their marriage was at stake. Tricia's presentation of her situation, like that of other carers, is that she has not retained any emotional boundaries with this foster child. She has given Marcia everything she has in order to make this little girl feel secure with them; she has given her emotional "all." Thus when the placement finishes prematurely Tricia is bereft. In order to pick up the pieces of their family life she and Brian physically move to a new house that holds no memories of this foster child. This physical, but symbolic move, allows them to emotionally "move on" and start afresh. This extract typifies both the "pain" and the extraordinariness of fostering.

Much of Tricia's pain resonates with Hope's recollection of Lindsey's removal by her birth mother:

> "Monday night we got a phone call at half past seven and Lindsey was gone the next day. We're left here to pick up the pieces and it was really like a bereavement. I've never as yet had a bereavement, that I've been mature, old enough to understand the intense feelings, until as I say Lindsey was taken back and it was just horrendous .... sometimes I want to just erase that "foster" bit and believe that she's my own daughter, but you know, I suppose at the bottom of my heart I know she's she's somebody else's daughter and I've just got the privilege and whatever to care for her."

For Hope the incident was like a death. Her emotional tie with Lindsey is so intense that, when she was removed by her own birth mother, Hope could not respond as a foster carer. She could not remind herself, as Brian does, that the children are "not mine ... (but) on loan." Hope would like to believe that Lindsey is her own child. For her foster carer and mother have become the same. Even though she has to remember that Lindsey is not her own blood child, any boundaries between behaving-as-a-foster-carer and behaving-as-a mother are now extinguished. But it was not always thus. She did not always feel this way:

> "I remember the first time she came for respite to change her nappy. It really made me cringe to have to do it, cleaning up another person's child to be honest with you. Although I'm a qualified nurse and I've been doing it, but it's just actually when you move in and you know sort of it felt really weird, really **weird** having to change her and getting the boundaries right for physical contact and things like this

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because again you know you can - there's things that you do quite spontaneously with your own children, but you know because that child's not your child I don't know it does **feel** different, or it **did** feel different then right at the beginning."

This extract shows that foster carers can feel differently about foster children and their own children. Hope was physically repelled by Lindsey in a task that she had undertaken many times for her own children without a problem. She was initially aware of both physical and emotional boundaries in the care of this child and was disturbed by their ambiguity. Some of this is reflected, though barely and rarely, by other carers. It is as though foster care insists upon the loving acceptance of a child, even if unlovely. Yet elsewhere Hanneke makes the point that "the kids, most of them are so difficult they're not easy or **nice** to have" whilst in her interview Grace reflects that "even God's children can be cruel sometimes." Alfred, still awaiting a first foster placement, ponders:

> "these kids are going to be telling us exactly what they're feeling when they get confident enough to do so and we need to be able to tell exactly how we feel about those kids and sometimes you're going to feel like murdering them (laughs)."

Concluding discussion.

This chapter has examined how foster carers manage their own family lives whilst also caring for the bureaucratised child. It has noted the significant effects foster care has on time, space and work lives. Also the changes foster-care-life demands both from extended family lives and upon social friendships. It has discussed the impact of fostering upon the carers' identities; the ambiguities around both birth/natural parent and also foster carer/professional parent and the problems in relation to offering the bureaucratic child equality with the carers' birth children. Finally it has analysed some of the complexities around emotional boundaries; the dilemmas of attachment or detachment.

This chapter has therefore focused on how foster carers interpret, understand and cope with incorporating "other" children into the family and how this affects their ways of being. In order to cope, foster carers make continuous changes for and around the foster children. Although neither fully explored nor analysed in this study, there may be class divisions around fostering and parenting as identified by Edwards and colleagues (1999). Their paper notes a middle class emphasis on biological rather than social parenting when

compared to more working class step-families. Working class step-fathers are more inclusive in their emotional and practical attitudes to the children of their new partners. A minority of foster carers draw a biological boundary of difference around the children but most position themselves as social parents. They consider their caring for fostered children to be as solicitous and as loving as for their own.

Bureaucracy may shape the external context of carers' relationships with the children but the internal reality is that fostering becomes a care identity based on love. Thus the many ambiguities around the position of the foster child leads to major dilemmas for the carers in their subjective identity and experience. This examination of how foster carers manage their somewhat precarious worlds has identified the conundrum that, as there are no models for foster care, the families are left to make daily sense of their position and to re-negotiate and to re-present themselves in their "internal" dealings. The next chapter will consider how they cope with their "external" world.

Chapter 6.
Dealing with dilemmas: beyond family.

Introduction.

In order to gain a deeper and broader understanding of foster-family-lives it is important to locate them within a wider framework, that of the bureaucracy of the social services departments. This chapter considers how foster carers manage those boundaries which are imposed externally upon their households by the actions of the social services departments and by the imposition of the legal status accorded to the foster children's birth families. I am specifying the foster children's families as external and "public" in this context because foster carer interaction with them is mediated via the 1989 Children Act and thus bureaucratised, although birth parents may see their positions differently. As a result the foster carers' public position may be ambiguous, varying between "them" and "us" when viewed by themselves, the department and the children's parents. The final section of this chapter will examine boundaries between the fostered children and the other members of the foster families. Discussion will include whether, as a public child, the fostered child is regarded by the carers as an insider and the "same as", or as an outsider and therefore "different from", the foster carers' birth children.

Relationships between the carers and the social services departments.

Some would argue that all families are under scrutiny and therefore semi-public, even if this is part of an internalised public gaze (see Rose, 1989) whereby people (covertly) monitor themselves. But for foster families the scrutiny is overt and they could thereby be described as semi-public institutions, held accountable for their actions in that strangers (the staff of the social services departments) have an influence upon them. I specifically did not ask foster carers about their relations with the local authority departments but, as discussed in chapter three, they all chose to talk about this. Some of their comments are affirmative - that social workers are doing a good job and are supportive, for example in the supply of equipment. One carer felt that the department now provides foster carers with more information than in the past concerning the children and six commented positively

either on the value of training or of being part of a known system. Four remarked that they positively enjoy official visits.

Set against this there are many more critical and negative statements about the department and the foster carers' relationships with its personnel. There are numerous complaints about the lack of information and how the local authority make them feel distanced, misunderstood and mistrusted. Some of this is explained, by the foster carers, in terms of the department's bureaucratic systems which result in disorganised resources and poor practical arrangements. Many carers say they feel exploited; that the department is intrusive and expects too much from them, ignoring their outside-fostering-lives. There are many statements which suggest that they believe themselves to be undervalued in general, and relegated to an "us and them" situation:

> "All the way through, even the things - they know lots of things - but it's always been 'us and them'. And it still is to this day, still 'us and them,' it's not (*although*[45]) they keep telling you it's a contract..." (Stan)

Stan constructs foster carers as "others" in relation to social services staff and their explicit attitudes and behaviours - in this case the withholding of information. The rhetoric of partnership (noted in chapter one) is not a real experience for him. This is echoed by Lenin who is only days into his first placement but describes how he is being asked to undertake tasks beyond his competence, in this case support for a young person at the police station:

> "this is just my gripe and I might be the only one in the whole world that has this gripe, I might've - I might've **offended**[46] everybody so much that they turn round and say 'right we'll make it a little bit harder for him', but the point surely has to be for anybody is that we all want an easy life, or an easier life, and for that we need the tools and we need support. Foster carers need support **now**, it's no good throwing me in the deep end saying you're now an appropriate adult (*for dealing with young people interviewed at a police station*) blah blah blah."

The perception of these two carers is that their treatment by the local authority is of being left to cope with the problems. Lenin actually fears that he may have upset the staff to such an extent that his feeling of isolation is because of their decision to punish him. He

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[45] Italics denote description/ explanation by author.
[46] Original emphasis unless stated otherwise.

wonders if he is in some way responsible for the behaviour of the social services staff and has no idea what to do. The dominant culture of the social services department is seen, by these foster carers, as very powerful whilst the position of the foster carers is described as powerless. Several carers suggest similar experiences. Mike explains that social services:

> "invited us onto this, this training course that was for six weeks and that was interesting, that really was interesting, um but I don't think it's in touch with the reality of what really happens in foster care and they were saying the support you get is paramount and, and it's not, it's not there."

Mike's knowledge of social services' treatment of himself and his family is that, although the foster carer training course had promised support in looking after children, this is not reality. He gives a further example. He reluctantly wrote a formal letter of complaint in order to get changes made to Victoria's (foster child) contact arrangements which he felt were upsetting her. But before this he tried more informal channels:

> "I, I'd spoken to the social, I couldn't go over to the social worker, I mean this particular time she was terrible, it was upsetting me, it was upsetting Louise (*wife*), it was **definitely** upsetting Victoria, she wasn't sleeping, she wasn't eating, um, so I came home from work and I'm fed up of this, so I rung up, couldn't speak to anybody, in the end I spoke to Judith Marlow, the big boss, and um she said "oh I'll see what I can do." She didn't even give me the courtesy of ringing me back the day after to tell me what happened, so nothing changed. That's when, I mean, you get to the point where you say, "come and take the child away. We're not doing it anymore because it's not worth it". You start to."

Mike constructs himself as so powerless that he considers resorting to behaviours that he does not wish to use. These feelings resonate with Brian's statement when, in order to be heard, he describes himself as pushed into conflict with the department:

> "You can see where the system's failing you in a lot of ways **but** you're really powerless to do anything and I think, probably, as I say, that's what makes you - makes me angry sometimes. Sometimes I've got really angry and I've had numerous rows with social workers over certain things and, you know, because I feel that there's a point to be made and, you know, somebody needs to make it. But it's not always easy (laughs) .... they say they take what I've said and stuff like that but, I mean, who knows if it goes any further? But, yes I would hope that they listen to what's been said and I think probably it's mostly been sort of sorted out. I mean usually we've always ended up sorting it out amicably but sometimes it's had to be after a few pretty terse words (laughs)."

Foster carers feel that they know intimately the care needs of the children but when social services fails to respond then feelings of powerlessness about the situation lead to anger. Generally the foster carers construct their fostering lives as without autonomy in relation to the local authority. They describe the social services as being in control. This control is also demonstrated through surveillance and criticism - though this can be idiosyncratic. Miranda, an experienced child minder but newly registered foster carer, explains:

> "I had a .... argument almost when I got registered. I used "time-out"[47] or I have used time-out - you know as - if they're really stroppy and I had the door open and apparently that was a real issue and I nearly wasn't registered for using time-out and I was **devastated** because one, in the foster care lecture they suggested time-out was a good means of behaviour therapy, most psychologists think it's about the best thing you can do and then they registered me and I said "well if you're registering me you should trust me to discipline these children. If you don't trust me, should you register me?" Anyway they said it was an issue and they registered me – "you are registered" - but they had to come round, the Panel[48] had to come round and talk to me about these issues and I was - it still hurts me now to an extent. .... I'm sure it depends on which social worker you're talking to as well to an extent. Like for instance, I'm sure if I spoke to someone else about time-out they wouldn't have batted an eyelid."

Miranda has experienced the uncertainties which arise from differing expectations. More than her authority, her sense of worth and her identity have been undermined, "it still hurts me". She places this within the context of the idiosyncratic power of the local authority department and its ability to intrude upon personal child care choices and practice. There were many examples of what could be regarded as intrusion into the personal choices and lives of foster carers. Dick and his cousin Simon live with Dick's mother. The three of them applied to foster:

> "we did have an awful lot of trouble actually getting approved, ... my cousin had been married and divorced and as I said I lived with a partner (*female*) for a number of years, but hadn't actually got married um which gave me a lot of this come back that um (pause) we was gay and things like this you know for, from the Panel. Um, I think basically what it was what he (*Family Placement Officer*[49]) was saying was the chap that's a Chairman of the Panel doesn't get on with him, so there's a little bit of friction there, um but like um. It was like the Spanish Inquisition actually, I had to go and see all my old girlfriends, speak to them um you know, you usually

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[47] The removal of a child from a situation of conflict for a set amount of time.
[48] See glossary.
[49] Social worker responsible for assessing new foster carer applicants.

need two references, he'd got about half a dozen references they wanted, um you know that that did annoy me ……. he (*Family Placement Officer*) went to the girlfriends, and I had to tell them who they were sort of thing and um references and then he got references off of them."

Again power can be idiosyncratic. All local authorities are supposed to have an equal opportunities policy which covers the selection of foster carers and allows for applicants from the gay community. In this case the two cousins say they are heterosexual and are obliged to prove this, apparently because there is some friction between their assessor and a member of the Fostering Panel. Dick did not resist this close examination of his sexuality. It is as though on occasions, foster carers see themselves, and feel themselves, to be so powerless in the face of the local authority that they actively co-operate with actions which are unjustly and unreasonably intrusive. Apparently unquestioningly Dick gave his Family Placement Officer a list of his past girl-friends. These actions positively manufacture the power of the social services department. Many carers state that they fear that the social services will not place further foster children with them if they resist the local authority[50], although as discussed below, there are some examples of resistance from some of the carers in this study.

Carers indicate that they mistrust the local authority's power and are wary of the department's decisions. This point is illustrated by Yvonne who, requesting registration for three children, was granted only two until:

> "…this was 19 December, um, the Duty Officer said to me, "Yvonne can you fit anybody else in?" I said, "I've got them coming out the woodwork now!" So she said, "Yvonne, what room have you got?" I said, "The dining room." She said, "That'll do!" (laugh). So I went, I went down and got one of those Z beds, you know? Cost me £100, ……. And that was the bedroom. Then another boy came in and used that as a bedroom and another **girl** came in and used that as a bedroom. And **now** I've been passed by Social Services as I've got three ……
> They've passed it to suit themselves, you see? There you go."

The interviews indicate that frequently foster carers relinquish personal agency in the face of social services' demands. Their sense of powerlessness, of otherness, means that they allow social workers to take decisions which affect their private, personal lives. This is

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[50] Case notes from work with NFCA.

graphically illustrated by social services' attitude to 'Safe Caring' practices'.[51] Olivia tells how one teenage girl constantly ran away and, when found in the small hours, Isambard had to collect her from the police station, the male duty social workers having refused to escort her in line with Safe Caring procedures. Stan recalls social workers bringing a small girl to his house, when Laura was out. The child was filthy and louse ridden. The social workers told Stan that they suspected that she had been sexually abused and requested that he bath her. They neither offered to do this themselves nor remained to chaperone the event. Bureaucratic care provides the rules and the regulations but not the practical solutions. Foster carers are left to grapple with the pragmatic realities which may affect, in their perception, the quality of their care. Brian suggests that safe caring practices have:

> "spoilt childhood .... It's spoilt sort of parent-children relationships with a lot of them. You're frightened to death to play with them like we used to years ago because you're frightened to death of getting accused of abuse."

These fears are echoed by Khanm. She describes herself as "scared" and therefore instructs her small foster child how to wash himself from the open bathroom door. But underlying these fears is the knowledge that, if there is an allegation (however unfounded) social services will investigate from a basis of the child's story being true. Not only is the local authority all powerful but it is constructed, by the foster carers, as partisan. Foster carers have to continuously guard against misinterpretation; being a foster carer can be risky.

Relationships between carers and the children's birth families.

Edwards and colleagues in their study of step-families (1999) note two current discourses of children requiring both biological families and social families which are mutually reinforcing in intact nuclear families but are in tension in reconstituted families. This model, with its potential for conflict and dilemma, maps onto the situation for many foster carers. The majority of foster families are looking after children until they can return home or, even if in long term care, children who are encouraged to have continuing links with their extended birth families. There is a legal duty placed on local authorities to promote family contact

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[51] These are a set of procedures recommended by the department to protect both the children and the foster carers; for example that male foster carers should not be alone in cars with female children.

for children in the looked after system. The Children Act, 1989, with its accompanying volumes of Guidance and Regulations, underlines the importance of all children's birth families and the fact that parents retain, or at least share, parental responsibility with the local authority. This gives birth parents particular rights to be consulted about the care of their child(ren).

Cleaver's (2000) survey of contact arrangements for 152 children in foster care finds that family visits to the children occur in the foster homes for 23% of them. In line with Cleaver's work this study shows that, for foster carers, the children's birth families become a real part of life and not only for the children. Several of the transcripts document perceived inconvenience caused by the ties and restrictions of contact arrangements upon foster carers' household routines.

Miranda's concern is that too many visiting birth parents will result in her becoming confined to the house. Harry explains that he accepts that social workers must visit, "they're doing a professional job," so switches off the TV at their arrival, but is irritated by the constant visits of the birth families, "they intervenes so, in your social life sort of thing. You're relaxing at home and then they come in and say, 'Now what you watching on telly?'." When they visit it is Harry who switches off. Celia, his wife, describes the visits as hard work but, because they have been defined as important for the child, co-operates and organises them for when "we've done more or less everything and I can sit down and have a chat." She constructs her foster carer responsibilities as befriending the parents in a bid to mediate their child to them. Mandy, a very new carer, now tied to thrice weekly contact in her own home explains that although her views were sought:

> "I didn't know what the implications of what I was - what was happening. It was very much determined by them (*the social workers and the birth mother*) ....
> but because I don't know, I have no experience of it, it's no good asking me really because I haven't, I can't anticipate (laughs). I've got nothing to base any decision on ...... I thought that's what everybody did. How do you know that that isn't what everybody agrees to, unless somebody tells you?"

She had assumed that agreeing to these arrangements constituted part of the package of foster care and does not appear to consider whether she can negotiate changes. She

explains that the social workers "were going out of their way to try to, you know, to do what they were supposed to be doing which is to keep families together."

Contact arrangements are frequently made during court hearings where foster carers have no representation except via the local authority who are expected to act in what they believe to be the child's best interests, which may not always map onto that of the foster family. Louise describes how she informally discovered that Grandma was to visit the fostered baby; the social worker had not notified her of this. In fact because of the size of the foster family home Louise and her three daughters have to regularly sit upstairs in the bedroom for an hour whilst the social services supervise family visits downstairs in the carers' living room. Several, like Louise, describe contact as onerous but state they are prepared to put the needs of the children before their own convenience. They depict and position themselves as helpless and selfless. Experienced carers who were registered some years before the implementation of current legislation, like Isambard, explain how they never expected to have to meet and deal with so many birth parents. But even newer carers like Hanneke say that they experience some of this face to face contact with parents as problematic:

> "Sometimes they come before the child is placed ...... and they can obviously have a say, "Well I don't like it" ..... I mean we have had that where the girl that we were supposed to, or consider having, but because we're Christians and the mother was er some sect - anyway er - and so she didn't feel comfortable that we were looking after her child for even a short period of time. So I mean they obviously got their rights as well ...... and some parents want to see what the foster parents are like and some don't. So some come, some don't, to check you out and make sure and you have to obviously say, "Look I'll promise I'll do my best to look after your child, and um if you don't want anything for that child not to have or to have something then I'll try and comply as much as I can"."

Hanneke frequently does respite care for children with special needs in order to support the parents. Like other foster carers her fostering allowance is unlikely to cover the true costs (discussed in chapters two and seven) yet she believes her task to be that of working with the parents (in line with the research findings discussed in chapter one), of accepting and complying with their requests. She speaks of their "rights" and constructs birth parents as having, in this context, more rights than the foster carer. In this case "rights" equates to power and some control.

A similar situation is related by Olivia, an experienced carer of many years. One mother visited five times each week for four hours. She refused Olivia's offers of lunch which meant that she and Isambard did not eat until after the mother left at two o'clock. The same mother complained that she could not bring her son as he was frightened of their adopted daughter Lisa (who is a Downs child) so Olivia took her out. The understandings of these carers regarding their situations is that the wishes of the parents and the child care philosophy of the social services department both take precedence over their positions as foster carers, even within their own homes. Their perception, like Hanneke's, is that the birth parents hold the power in arrangements for the foster children. Their understanding is that the birth parents have the rights whilst they, the carers, have the responsibilities.

Foster carers speak of the amount of time and attention they give to birth parents, for example several give them meals. Many speak of their responsibility, not only to the foster child, but also to the child's family and believe they have to work with them. The vignette which solicits their views regarding a clash of interests - child's contact with an alcoholic father at the same time as a family party - demonstrates that they all, in this hypothetical case, insist upon the importance of the child's contact with her birth parents. Whilst 20 of them say they expect the department to rearrange the date, 25 accept responsibility for actually doing this with ten of them offering to allow the parents to attend their own private family function. These ten carers seem to perceive their own arrangements, wishes and status as subservient to those of the child and her birth family.

Several foster carers speak with sympathy of the birth families. Ruth includes in her run-down of a typical day finding time to counsel her foster child's mother. Laura still regularly receives Mothers Day cards, not from the children, but from their mothers in recognition of the support and understanding she gave them. But, for some there is an uneasy involvement. Mary's efforts prove difficult:

> "there was a lot of contact with mum, dad, mum was on the phone every night, um and there was a lot of jealousy going on and she admitted it to me, she'd say "here they are for the first time getting well fed um **getting proper care**" and she was getting frightened, you know, about was I going to take the affection away and

even though I tried to, 'cos it is you're not just working with the children you're working for parents as well, and I was trying to put her fears at rest as well."

As several carers find, looking after the children of others sometimes also involves the "others" as well. Caring is a complex task and can entail misunderstandings. Dealing with the parents may be problematic. Mary apparently accepts that, as a foster carer, she has a dual responsibility to child and to parent. But Ruth's concern is more to do with capability and professional responsibilities:

> "My job is to care for this child the best way I know how. And sometimes some social workers will try to offload their work ..... I mean I did a six month - a rehab (*rehabilitation*) job with natural mum coming to my house, four days a week, **all** day. ...... building up from one, ending up to coming **every** day to take this child back home. Took this child back home for two months and it all fell apart again in two months. Which wasn't my job to do, it wasn't my job to do this rehab job. And perhaps if the social worker had done the rehab job - she was more qualified to do this rehab job than me. I was winging it, you know - just doing a mum job."

She suggests that there are clear boundaries regarding expertise and responsibilities and understands the social worker role to be very different from that of a foster carer which is "just doing a mum job." Ruth feels she is used, but not paid, as a professional colleague of the social services department. Her interview is rich with examples of how dis-empowered she felt by the social services and in this instance, when she might have constructed herself as working in partnership with the department (as one of "us"), she nonetheless describes herself as "winging it" and unqualified. This provides an example of the ambiguous, marginal status of foster carers. Did the mother in this instance perceive Ruth as "working with her" as Mary had tried to explain, or did she see Ruth as part of a powerful bureaucracy and working with "them"? Foster carers have to manage different worlds as they work with both social workers and parents. Several foster carers describe this tension. Olivia remembers the regular visits of a mother to a baby. Olivia knew that the baby would be placed for adoption yet had to sit with the mother, who anticipated reunification, through the long process of authority taking the decision. Brian's story resonates with similar ambiguities:

> "you see you get, you get what the social worker tells you. Then you get what the natural parent tells you - which may be two completely different things but **they** very often will look on us as a listening post and will tell us all sorts of things that you may feel you don't want to repeat to the social worker. Or you may feel that you need to repeat to the social worker in confidence."

Social services and the birth parents may give the foster carer their particular, differing perception of events. Where the department has removed the child without parental agreement it is likely that there is some underlying opposition in the situation. But which "side" is the foster carer on? Is there choice in this situation?

Hanneke describes difficulties over birth parents demanding extra unplanned contact:

> "The last foster child's dad wanted her to stay over, a night after (*contact with him*). He phoned. I said "it's fine with me so long you ask the social services to arrange everything," (laugh) knowing full well that he wouldn't anyway..... I mean you sort of pass the responsibility on him. I said "Well. Fine. I do not have any objections. So long as social services don't have any objections" and just leaved (sic) it at that."

Here she aligns herself securely with the social service department. This resonates with Isambard's statement concerning dealing with difficulties from birth parents. He and Olivia position themselves with the local authority:

> "We have a strategy of standing back and saying, "ah, but you know if you really want to sort this out you have to talk to a social worker" ."

Frances (awaiting her first placement) has clear expectations of being seen to be part of the social services:

> "if there is a problem (*with the birth parents*) that we couldn't deal with - that they would know that we would contact the relevant social worker, so that they didn't feel that we were just acting as individuals, but as part of a system."

But Lenin, newly into his first placement, has found that the lad he cares for has been let down by lack of planning and:

> "the system still isn't working. Now I, I can cope as an individual because as I say I've got a house, I've got food in my belly and things like that, but it's not, it isn't, and and maybe this undercuts all of it but **it isn't about me** because I'm, I've done this (*become a foster carer*) as a free choice. I can walk away from this at any time, I can turn round and say I don't like the game, I'm off."

As he states the foster care system is not for the individual foster carer but for the fostered children. When "the system" lets the child down foster carers may reposition themselves, not with the social service department, but possibly with the birth parents.

Brian's extract (quoted above) reveals the doubts for him. In their relationships between the department and the birth parents, foster carers may construct their positions differently in particular situations. Stan recalls giving practical help to a mother and baby because the social services emergency duty team refused aid. Isambard did an extra four hundred miles round trip to bring a baby back mid holiday to see her parents because "they were a bit down." Yet, in other circumstances, Yvonne tells how:

> "When the parents have been here and really giving him hell and he's gone to the kitchen, that was Peter had gone to the kitchen and said, "Yvonne, can't take it no more". I said, "Come on darling, give us a cuddle. Let's go back in. Come on. We're both together. If they have a go at you, they can have a go at me"."

Yvonne allies herself with the fostered child – though in this interview the opinion of the social services department is not known. The position of the foster carers can change, can appear ambiguous or can appear partisan. Both Laura and Mike gave evidence in court against their foster children's birth parents. Most probably, in these cases, the foster carers were supporting the local authority but, of more significance to the carers, they were trying to ensure the best outcomes for the children in their care. When dealing with the parents of the children, foster carers construct themselves variously as sometimes "us", and sometimes "them".

Relationships between birth parents and foster carers can be unstable and change. Brian and Tricia have fostered three terminally ill babies. They had Josh from four months until his death fourteen months later. He spent part of each week end with his grandparents:

> "I **thought** we had a good relationship. .... She (*grandmother*) was able to cope .... unless the tubes or something came out and then I would go up and do it. She'd just phone. ... Josh came very ill during the night and I got him to hospital .... we knew he wouldn't live and so I got Granny up there, just in time about half an hour before we lost him and, bless him, he died. And she said, "You can go now," to me "you can go now". And I was absolutely - and the Dr took the baby from her and said "Just let Tricia have a cuddle. Just for a few minutes now" and I had the baby and she said, took him back and said "Right. That's it. **This** will be our **private** business now" and they took - I left the hospital. I mean I'd gone in through the night and spent all this night, sat with this little boy and, all through his other illnesses I'd done all the dirty bits. She'd had, just had some nice cuddling care really and they **never** invited us to his funeral, **never** wanted us anywhere near. She phoned the following day and said

"Could you take all his clothes to the hospital and I'll pick them up from there" and that's the last I ever, ever heard."

Tricia had constructed her foster carer role as central to Josh's life only to find that his birth family regarded her as peripheral and expendable and could assert their boundaries. Birth families can include, for example send Mothers Day cards, or exclude as in this extract. It would seem that the roles of carers vary with each individual child; even though many look after more than one child at any point in time.

The carers' transcripts give many examples of their difficulties with birth parents and the ways they have to change family routines to accommodate them. Some have been cited in the previous chapter and Olivia's examples have already been discussed. Stan has to ask neighbours to act as chaperones, if Laura is out, when visited by young mothers wearing "pelmets". But there are also definite incidences of resistance to the parents' demands and behaviours. Celia, in order to protect her own children, refuses to allow specific parents to visit. Grace asked the department to remove one child because of his mother's aggressive telephone calls which upset her youngest daughter. Foster carers frequently describe parents as posing a risk to both person and to property. Harold tells of a foster carer who was rammed by a birth parent's car. Laura still deals with a mother who once arrived in the middle of the night and broke a window in a bid to gain entry. The official social services' response was that the local authority insurance covers damage done by the foster children but not by their parents.

Generally foster carers appear to accept social services' explanation that some of this aggression from the birth families is anger transference, as carers are more accessible than social services. Celia explains:

> "For instance, Charlotte's mum's ..... trying all sorts of ways to discredit me with Charlotte at the moment because she may be staying here long term..... She wants Charlotte back for herself ..... so she tells her solicitor all these sort of things, you know. "Charlotte is **very** upset **every** night, she's crying and she comes and she tells me this, and she tells me that, you know." And of course it goes back (*to social services*) and I get a phone call and .... they say, "Is this happening?" I said, "No, of course it's not happening"."

Although recounted as unfair incidents, there is no sense of real grievance from the carers concerned. In their descriptions it is clear that they are living with these difficulties but perhaps not consciously reflecting upon them. Ruth refers to anything that she perceives as negative in foster care as "her lot." It is as if carers construct themselves as victims and present foster care as a package which inevitably includes hardship and injustice.

But there are a few positive remarks about foster carers' dealings with birth parents. Foster carers rarely receive news via social services departments of how children manage once they have left. Celia mentions that it is only because she occasionally happens to meet the parents that she receives any positive feedback on the children's progress. She counts this as a "bonus" being able to think "yes. I did a good job there."

The ambiguous status of foster children as "insider"/ "outsider".

Foster children are bureaucratised children. Their lives are circumscribed by rules, regulations and rights. Their presence within the household demands that foster carers keep daily diaries on their activities, attend meetings and accept into the home officers of the social services who will monitor the child and surveille the family in general. All of this has an effect upon the foster carers' decisions about the child's status within the household - whether s/he is the "same as" or "different from" their own children. Those with dependent birth children somehow have to manage a household where some children are birth/blood and more permanent, whilst others are not-birth/not-blood and temporary, frequently with an unknown move-on date. These decisions affect not only the immediate family but also other relatives.

Whatever the protean form of family, it is generally seen in contemporary Western culture as a discrete unit offering a sense of belonging and internal cohesion. Within this, fairness with regards to children is considered a major issue (as discussed in chapter five). Most carers in this study say that they offer parity to all children within their household. Yvonne explains:

> "I love my children dearly, I love my grandchildren but if I bought **him** (*grandchild*) something I will buy **them** (*foster children*) something, you know."

Jackie insists that her three fostered young people have to abide by exactly the same conditions as her son. Hope echoes this whilst discussing the bullying vignette; she posits that real life should not inhibit the birth child from retaliating, all children should be treated the same. Her husband Mo, (and they have two birth children of their own), states with feeling:

> "You know, I value Lindsey (*foster child*) as as much as anybody's daughter, my own brother you know, my own brother's kids you know, anybody ...... one thing only for me is very important to have Lindsey as my kid, you know, in my heart and in my mind, accept Lindsey as my kid is my responsibility."

For Mo responsibility includes potential for authority where his own children are concerned (Ribbens, 1992) and he wants this same "responsibility/authority" for Lindsey. These two extracts represent the many carers who construct the foster children as equal to their own blood children and who insist that the terms and conditions for living within the household are non-discriminatory. Many (as discussed in chapter five) love them "like their own" but they also state, not that the foster children are the same as their own, but that they merit equality of treatment. Fairness within family is sacrosanct.

Some carers describe how social services discriminate in favour of the foster children against the foster carers' own birth children. They tell of incidents where the department insists that the foster child's welfare is of paramount importance and that the foster family's birth children must take second place. Alice explains how the social worker telephones daily to inquire how the fostered toddler is settling but never inquires as to how Alice's young and very jealous daughter is coping (see also Part, 1993, who describes how foster carers' own children are never viewed in their own right). Louise talks of the priority given to contact for the foster baby, Victoria, when she already has three young daughters:

> ".... my youngest was off school .... and she does have febrile convulsions .... all I wanted to do was get Emily to the doctors, ... so I phoned up (*social services*) and said "look I cannot make, I can't do it" (*Victoria's contact appointment*) and I explained why, um, and I had a stroppy letter - 'you signed an agreement to say that you didn't mind contact every day at your house, if you have got a problem with that then please let us know' and we actually had a, had a meeting which took place here and the social worker ... went to say "well we have had problems when Louise got on her high horse", and I said "well excuse me I do get on my high

horse, I've got a daughter with a temperature of one hundred and two, who has febrile convulsions. My my priority was with my daughter and not my foster child, contact can be arranged for another time" .... but my kids aren't allowed to be ill."

Foster carers who believe that they are selected for their parenting skills thus suggest that they are pressured into letting their standards slip with regard to their own birth children. In general parents take and accept moral responsibility for their own children. But now there is a less than subtle demand to ensure that care for their foster children takes precedence over care for their own. Should they stand their corner they may be criticised. It is experienced as a moral dilemma. Louise is obliged to reconstruct her notions of conscientious standards of care and must now finely balance the needs of the foster child with her own three (see also Nelson, 1994, as noted in chapter two). There is a moral responsibility to put the needs of children first - but not all of the children are regarded as equal.

Possibly because of this quandary, many foster carers explain that, within the family, the foster child's needs have to be regarded as paramount. Their needs must not only be met but regularly take precedence over those of their own children. Some re-frame this moral dilemma with the explanation that as the foster children came from such sad beginnings they deserve better, if not the best. They wish to ensure for the foster children the "proper childhood" which they believe that their own children have experienced. As Mary points out:

> "(it's) so difficult to get that correct balance......it's natural - you get a kid who's been hurt, you want to do everything to, you know, take the pain away, show them that there are nice people in this world and you know um so it is, we all do it, you know to protect you know – "My (*birth*) child's alright he's, he's had all this". "

The majority response to the vignette where the foster carer has to choose between attending her own sons' school concert or court for the foster child was that there would always be other concerts, or another relative who could attend school, but that the foster child's future was more important. Ali Shah states "we do our duty first." Brian's reply includes:

> "I don't think - I try hard and I don't think I treat them (*the foster children*) any differently.... my children would, in fact they have said more than once "they (*the foster children*) get away with far more than we were ever allowed to get away with". (laughs).

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So you have to sort of be a bit **tactful** and say, "Well, you know, you had a decent home and you were brought up, you know, bit better so the fact that these children you've got to remember, you know, that they may not have had the same advantages that **you've** had. And you've got to take that into allowance. I mean that's all there is to it. Not everybody's been as lucky as you've have, to have had a mum and dad to look after you all the time. Sometimes you've got to remember that".

And, on the whole, ... they (*his birth children*) have put up with a lot."

So Brian says that he treats the foster children with parity but in fact constructs them as different, more needy than his own three and mediates this inequality to his own children. There are rules for his children but different, individual rules for fostered children. Ali Shah discusses these ambiguities and differences but explains that the decision is taken, not by himself as a parent, but by the social services on behalf of foster carers:

"if a (*foster*) child is in our family he will not be treated any differently **unless** the system force us, you know. Otherwise we will give them **every** way like we give our own children.... (but) you have to tell your children, "Behave differently with your foster children". When you have children they always fight. I mean my own children are always fighting. So when they fight you call both of them, ... tell them off and say go away, or whatever. Now you can't do this with a foster child. You see foster child will always come to you and he will want proper answers. He told me, he would say "he touched me first, **why**?" Now your child cannot say that to the parents, "Why?" You always tell them to get lost or shut up or something. And you can't say this to a foster child. You have to explain all the time. For **that** you have to tell your children not to go that far so we'll have to explain everything. So that's where your own children have to be careful all the time. ...... and that's where I feel sometimes it's wrong, unfair for our children to bring them in that predicament."

Although there are clear cultural implications here, nonetheless this extract points up what other foster carers explain - the clash of expectations regarding the carers' own ideas of parental authority and that of the social services. Whilst carers may well believe that foster children deserve better/more, this is supported by departmental practice and underpinned by a creed of children's rights. Hanneke's view is that this is not acceptable. Describing life with one nine year old:

"she says "you're not allowed to touch me... you try and restrain me and **I** will say something else" and .... the Social **Worker** will **always** take **her** side not - because they're the one that's, er, disadvantaged as such. So if you can't touch them, I mean in the real world you can't touch them, you can't restrain them, you can't do anything and um, it's impossible really. ..... now they've got all the power, you have not........ She would torment my four year old with a stick. You'd call her in

and before you even opened your mouth she says, "It's not fair" screams, bawls and shouts.... slump onto the floor and I mean it's just a, no hope. ... she'll say, "You're not allowed to touch me. I'm going to go the social services. I'm going to tell." Now when the other children are obviously looking on they see this behaviour and they learn what? How um I'm incapable of doing anything and think "Well I can get away with it. **She** can get away with it."
I can't get away with anything!"

These extracts demonstrate how the social services' efforts at ensuring the protection of foster children via children's rights have resulted in the foster carers feeling further dis-empowered. The foster children are thereby constructed as powerful. More than that, children's rights can contribute to inequalities within the household between children who are fostered and children who are birth children. Some of the foster carers point out that it is not they who foster but the whole family; everyone is in some way affected. This sharing is explicit in Ruth's interview:

> "In the very beginning it was me and my two children and **we** cared. **We** were foster carers and I use the word **we** always. It wasn't just me, it was a "we" and we did it, the three of us because they foster, my children fostered as much as I did. They didn't take any of the parental rights but they still had the babysitting to do, the "will you just mind this while I just go do this?" "

So becoming a foster carer may lead to an alteration in the status of the carer's own children. Although many state that they aim for parity some may expect more adult behaviours from their children in order to cope with any disturbance from the foster children. Thus some of the birth children of foster carers get constructed as more understanding and more able/useful. Parallel with this, many carers describe the foster children as blameless victims whose behaviours are explicable because of their birth family experiences plus the disadvantages of being a bureaucratised child within the Care system. Cyril talking of their foster child's tantrums sums up with the statement, "I mean you can't blame him 'cos he's a foster child."

In general carers forgive the fostered children. Gordon, reminiscing about looking after two brothers, excuses quite extreme behaviour:

> "It was really bad they were um doing all sorts of things like pouring water in the light bulbs and blew up the light bulbs and running away and running out in the middle of the road and throwing stones at cars and throwing stones at signs and I

had to hold them for an hour and a half while they kicked and punched me about three or four times and just being bad. No not **bad**, just being disturbed."

Whilst foster children are constructed as innocent and not responsible for their behaviours, the foster carers construct themselves as passively accepting and understanding of it all. The only variation concerns two female carers who describe how they cope with this behaviour in public. Olivia explains that she "just kept on thinking he actually isn't my child. So that's okay, he's not my child, and and I think that's how I got through it". Whilst Ruth jokes with people she knows "not from my loins! (laughs)". On these occasions Olivia and Ruth cope by constructing a biological boundary between themselves and the foster child - accepting responsibility for the good behaviour but distancing themselves from the bad.

But the problem, as Georgina articulates, is:

> " I don't know, I, I just thought I could give a family life to children that needed it and I can, but it – (pause) it's you can't choose the child you're having, you, that comes to you."

Georgina expresses some sadness that their first foster child has not been, for the family, a success whilst for Janet the sadness is because it has been, for her, too successful:

> "he went back and to be honest it did break my heart and um but it also learnt me a hell of a lot as regards um knowing what's yours and what's not yours you know. As much and as much as you care for them at the end of the day, he had still got to go home."

Janet understands that foster children cannot be as her own - even if that is how she feels about them; they are, as Brian describes "on loan." Ann, with her quasi-adoption situation, explains whether her mother sees herself as a grandmother to the fostered boys:

> "she doesn't, she doesn't. We talked about it. I think that she would probably have a similar attitude to ours. They were - children, individuals who came from different backgrounds. They are individuals. One does, we do our best for them but they're not "us" and it wouldn't be right to make them be us. I'm not sure that I would **want** them to be us (laughs)."

She sees and feels the differences; the children as individuals are defined by (other) family membership. They arrive with their own heritages, attitudes and beliefs. Ann articulates the

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struggle between the discourse of being a family and being a foster family which frequently cuts across and fails to meet general expectations of family life. During their interviews both she and her husband, John, identify their own and the boys' different ways of talking, interests and commitment to etiquette. Ann describes the problems around these issues; that social services provide extra financial support for children from different ethnic backgrounds or with special needs but refuse to recognise the similar problems of assimilating children from a different class. Yet this, they believe, is the reality of their situation and they must struggle to make sense of it; whether to absorb the children within their own middle class mores or allow them to be themselves, at some irritation and cost to their own standards and beliefs. Each day is a balancing act as they construct the children as "not us" or alternately as "us"/part of their family, although overall Ann says:

> "we're going to have all the feelings that you have when you've brought up your own children. I mean I couldn't imagine life without them. I would be totally distraught if the placement broke down."

These same anxieties regarding class issues (see also chapter two) resonate in Keith's interview. He and Mandy are looking after four year old Timmy who they hope will return to his birth mother. Because of Timmy's health problems it has been important to get him into a routine of regular meals and with this they have taught him how to use cutlery and behave, in what they define, as appropriate ways at table:

> "that child has got to go back into the environment in which they've been brought out of for so long and you know it's, it might make them more resentful and ......
> I'm scared that when he goes back or somewhere he'll come home and he'll expect and it's not there, you know, and that's a big fear you know, because we've sort of educating him for life, you know, for life skills and they might not, he might not need them - it's just grub again you know, something on the table."

Concluding discussion.

Caring for other people's children in terms of their sameness or difference is full of complexities. Expectations about fairness in family life demand that fostered children receive parity with the family's birth children whilst social services expectations are that the interests of foster children should possibly be given priority. Set against this are foster

carers' practical considerations regarding those children who return to, and must once more be assimilated by, their own families and their community mores (Fletcher, 1993).

This chapter has explored some of the externally imposed boundaries which shape foster carer family lives and looked at the tensions in the nature of these relationships. Analysis of these tensions has unpacked some of the carers' constructions of foster children. It has aided in the explanation of how children who are so loved by the carers are also regarded, in some ways, as different and as outsiders. Foster carers present themselves here as generally powerless; their authority and their boundaries are heavily compromised as they must be always mindful of the children's birth families, the children's own rights and the ever present social services department. Foster carers lack both legal power and authority. The birth parents have legal power whilst the social services department have authority, ie a monopoly of power.

Organisations, and in this case the social services departments, provide routine ways of representing social reality. Foster carers are part of the social service bureaucracy but their place is unclear and ambiguous. The bureaucracy and its staff have apparent roles and legally based powers. The foster children and their parents have specified rights. Foster carers have none of these but must somehow construct their roles and shape their lives in ways that allow them to navigate through all of these complexities. Their attitudes towards the social service departments are ambiguous and paradoxical. This chapter has focused upon their frustrations and their hurts at bureaucracy's inabilities to appreciate the detail of care required for each individual child. Yet, at the same time, carers enjoy the visits of the social workers, they appreciate the inclusion at formal meetings and experience kudos from the many "business" telephone calls and appointments.

This analysis has demonstrated the de-privatisation of their lives, as increasingly carers conduct them within the context of the social services public organisational sphere. Whilst foster carers look after other people's children they are continuously negotiating at the interface of external boundaries which, as we have seen, shape and affect their households. The next chapter will examine how the foster carers construct their own position whilst on the periphery of so many margins.

Chapter 7.
How foster carers position themselves.

Introduction.

The last chapters have analysed the several different ways foster carers construct the children that they look after. This chapter, building on and refocusing issues raised in previous chapters, considers how the adults understand themselves and their own position within the contexts and constraints of their lives as foster carers. Chapter five touched on the dualities of being both foster carer and parent. This chapter explores other constructions - foster carers as rescuers via notions of family and of home; as change agents and as paid agents; finding opportunities through foster care for expiating past experience; and foster carers as people responsible for both the children's behaviour and their outcomes.

Foster carers as rescuers via notions of family and of home.

In general the foster carers in this study talked of wanting "to make a difference to some children's lives" (Emma). They clearly anticipated this "difference" in positive terms because, as Mo asserts, "those people who know Lindsey (*foster child*[52]) - they know the difference." Ali Shah describes a practical difference; children learn better manners (in his perception) in his care. Thus implicit in "making the difference" is an intention to make better and to reverse some sort of damage caused by earlier experiences; to rescue spoiled or harmed children.

> "They (*foster children*) are a bit difficult and naughty, but looking over that and seeing what the problem is and try and help them, that's what I like to do, to try and make that bad child better or a happier child. .... Yeah, yeah I, I think like a good happy family, a nice home, nice comfortable rooms for the child you know just that family **unit**[53] thing really, including the child in everything and making them feel part of your family, which I think that, that child really needs, ... they need that love and care, they need security more than anything and I think routine is wonderful for children, you know, having a good routine and making, knowing there is normal life there, you know." (Daisy)

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[52] Italics indicates author's explanation/ description.
[53] Bold indicates original emphasis unless otherwise stated.

Daisy is a very new carer whose construction of foster care has elements of idealism. She constructs foster carers as people who can "make a bad child better" by the provision of family and home and a "normal life". She envisages rescuing children with love and care and a routine. Kelly, a very experienced carer whose construction of foster care is possibly based more on realism, reflects on past years:

> "I was hoping to give what they'd missed out on. But I actually feel that's impossible in a way. I don't think anybody, we just cannot make up for what they've missed. We can try and I think we've had to - from my point of view anyway - I give all I've got and do my best and I work really hard to be empathetic, help them to understand why they are living in foster care. You can't replace their natural family. You can't undo the damage that they've experienced. I wanted to, I just wanted to be able to give to children, which I still do, and try and give them as normal a life as possible in a family, living in a family........ I just wanted to try and help him and hope he could have a fresh start. You know we wanted to try and bring him up in a family that was **normal**, to be an adult."

Whilst recognising the impossibility of repairing children's lives Kelly nonetheless constructs herself and her husband as a "normal" family who provide the foster children with fresh opportunities again via a "normal life". So some idealism remains as she puts forward the view that they can rescue children for a new start.

Integral rescue ingredients for both of these carers are the notions of "home" and "family." Both are certain that there is a common, comprehensible definition of both which equates to "normal." Neither of these carers have any birth children so it could be argued that the foster children offer them "family" rather than vice versa. Kelly, when responding to the first vignette (whether a foster family should take a girl as an emergency placement) considers her two current foster children and decides "You've got to put your own family first."

Others carers demonstrate this same adamant regard for the significance of family. Yvonne speaks of including foster children "**in** the family circle." Laura explains her construction of family and home as:

> "I believe in children eating all together, you know, **as a family**. You're not separated sort of thing..... You're just a normal family, well you **should** be ....

> I like a home where they come in, they go to the fridge, shoes are there, which they are, and coats. I mean some nights the house is, you know, with coats here, chucked there, the bedrooms are a mess but, you know, why should everything be put in its place? ...... you know, that's not **home** for children. I don't think."

Laura's construction of family is very dependent upon her notion of home. It requires a space where children feel free to leave their clothing and take food without restriction or criticism and also eat together (see Murcott, 1983, regarding the cultural symbolism of meals). Laura's construction contrasts with that of Ali Shah which is bound up with actively teaching children to adopt acceptable manners and ways of behaviour. Something of this is reflected in Frances' expectations and construction of fostering:

> "I just feel so much that a good family gives so much stability to an individual and if we can be involved in any way in helping to give confidence or um stability um to young people that's really what I hope that we can achieve through foster caring."

Her wish to instil stability and confidence into young people is heavily predicated upon her notions of Alfred and herself providing "a good family." It is this which comprises the rescue package. Georgina, considering resignation from foster care because its demands are in direct conflict with her full time employment, describes her "ideal" foster family as offering:

> "being able to give them oh you know, a warm house to live in and a family .... she (foster carer) can spend all day with them and they all play together and that's the ideal family. Then she takes them on trips and has got all the time in the world for them and that, to me, is what it seems to be."

Kumar describes home as "the principle source of identity and personal fulfilment" (1997:206). He notes that maintaining the idea of home requires a continuous effort at ensuring collective activities. Here Georgina's construction is dependent upon the full time mother-figure who can spend her time playing with the children (see Ribbens, 1992 regarding the relevance of games in family life) and taking them on trips. It is these activities that construct not only the family but the ideal site for fostering. Warmth commences as the physical but becomes the emotional - the ideal family.

Family is about a sense of identity, belonging and intimacy. Although offering a "family" some carers struggle with describing this complex construction. Kelly states "in our house none of us are related" whilst Ann describes her two boys as "not us": blood ties are omnipotent and social behaviours count. Ruth is clear that her two unrelated fostered children and herself are "**not** of one family." In her explanation she tries to make sense of what she offers via a notion of "home":

> "We try to work as a family, but I don't call it a **family.** I say this **house**. This house. This **house** is a caring, sharing house. .... They (*foster children*) **have** a family, you know. What they **need** is a safe place to be. They don't **need** another family, they don't need people crawling all over them and making them family. What they need is a safe place to be, somewhere where they know they are cared for and loved and looked after. But do they need the word family? It means different things to them. So this is what it is. It's my house, their home."

Ruth knows that often the children she looks after have been let down/made unsafe by their own families. Nonetheless they remain loyal to their birth families so do not need foster carers to replicate another for them. Knowing this she does not therefore refer to her household as "family" although that it is how the unit operates. In fact it seems that she does reproduce this notion, if only because she offers her "house (as) their home." This extract again demonstrates the complexities of the foster carers' worlds - how their efforts to care for the children entails continuously positioning and repositioning themselves.

Foster carers as change agents.

Rescuing children and making a difference in their lives is all about change. All the foster carers reflected on this in some way in their interviews. For many this is, for them, the raison d'être for their fostering and very closely linked to the previous section. Foster carers want to believe that their influence, their intervention and contribution, can in some way beneficially change the lives of the children. As articulated by Mary, "You know you can't give everything, even to if it was your own child, and so you realise 'I can do something different'." For Grace the pleasure in fostering is:

> "to see the **change** in the children. When they come they're so distracted. They're so upset. Um. They don't know what to think or anything - the background and things like that. And then to see a change - them is like a magic and they **change**."

Grace's care of foster children produces such dramatic change that she likens it to magic. Mary may not consider herself a magician but she too constructs what happens to the children as something which is personal to herself and the result of her own power to change things and to make a difference. Dick enumerates on this when speaking of Derrick:

> "He's sixteen going on twelve. He's a very immature boy for his age and um, but actually not being horrible, for the first time with the three lads I've had, this is the only one I really feel that I'm actually fostering because he does need help learning everything ……. you can talk to Derrick and he will listen to you and you can see that he takes notice of what you say and he comes to you for advice,…… (*and on being taught to cook*) this week we had Spaghetti Bolognese, I mean nothing, you know any sauce out of a jar and then the thing, but at least it's an improvement on what he could do before."

Dick's construction of himself as foster carer is that change is required for Derrick and that he, Dick, can be the instrument of that change. For the first time he knows himself to be that agent for change and this means that he is now, with this third foster lad, reassured that he is actually fostering; actually making a difference. For Dick life-as-foster-carer is life-as-change-agent.

Although all the foster carers talked about the importance of change for some it could be slightly uncertain. Both Grace and Isambard reflect that foster carers do not always know what changes are effected in the long term:

> "Rewards are very delayed. Sometimes the disappointments are that you never get to see whether or not you've had an effect, but the rewards are when you know you have. When you've made a real difference. …… for example, taking a child in who was, who'd been excluded from school and was really, you know, the family situation was absolutely chaotic and dreadful and by the time he left you he was back in mainstream school and, you know." (Isambard).

Change only has a magic for some carers if they experience it. It is not enough to be a foster-carer-as-change-agent unless it can be witnessed. Though Hanneke is more pragmatic and suggests a long term view:

> "Well I want my (*birth*) children er not to be a burden on anybody, I want them to make sure that they can er look after themselves and if you can help another

(foster) child do the same it will save all those, I won't say crimes that could have been committed otherwise. Really. So it - prevention, trying to do the preventative thing, actually looking ahead".

Foster carers can only know if their care has been adequate/wrought the sought-for change by knowing how the children develop. Hanneke views childhood as a process, a developing career, and herself-as-foster-carer able to influence this in some way for the better. The parent-child relationship functions on a foundation that childhood is a continuing changing state. The child embodies their own future and, with this future in mind, Hanneke constructs herself as foster-carer-as-change-agent. This quotation demonstrates the pervasiveness of time orientations to the construction of childhood. As in Boulton's study (1983) Hanneke appreciates the long-term meaningfulness of motherhood.

Foster-carer-as-change-agent is not only satisfying and reassuring but can reverse very negative situations as Stuart describes. Speaking of a child whose behaviour he considered so damaging to his family that he had to request her removal he says:

> "We did take a lot of interest in how she was, taking her to her family, going through school - her school work changed hugely so we know one success was - it was a **dramatic** upheaval for her in her school attitude. From being the most terrible difficult child she did tremendously well at school."

Change can gratify and can also compensate. This is important because as earlier chapters revealed life-as-foster-carer can be distressingly difficult. So should foster carers be paid for this service? The next section examines the part played by payment and the effect this has on how foster carers construct their position.

Foster carers as paid agents.

As noted in chapter one the majority of foster carers in this country are unpaid. They care for the children of others in return for an allowance which does not cover the real costs (Oldfield, 1997). Zelizer (1985) posits that fostering allowances never cover the actual costs since it is this non-economic part of the contract that legitimises the scheme; the emotional link must be more than the financial bond. In this study twenty-three foster households are in receipt of allowances only. The other four (Meg, Clive and Kelly, Mike and Louise, and

Lenin) are working on fee paying schemes whereby each of the households receives the allowance for the child plus an extra, tax attracting fee. It is pertinent that twelve of the foster households, including Meg's and Lenin's, are on fixed incomes in the form of pensions and/or state benefits.

Harry, Brian and Mike make the point that fostering fits in with their life style as their wives are not in paid employment. Children can offer women a retreat from the working world and, although not explored in this analysis, some may foster in order to demonstrate to others that their husbands are keeping them. In this study, of the fourteen working-age couples, six wives also had paid occupations, three of them working full time.

Analysis of the data reveals that most foster carers are constantly distancing themselves from the fact of allowances and payments. It is as though they believe that money undermines their status as carers (some of these issues around payments and care are examined in chapter two). Nonetheless all of them have views on the financial arrangements and the ambiguities of caring for money. This section, building on earlier discussions, looks at how finance impacts upon the foster carers' identities.

In general there is a weariness about the fact that the social services are not honest about the costs of fostering. The allowance scales are known and understood but not which extra costs can be claimed. This extract from Ruth's interview is typical of many of the carers' sentiments:

> "(sigh) - I don't know. I'm probably sure that financial help, even though it's such a crass thing to talk about, I **hate** talking about it and, I don't like to talk about it because that's not what I'm **here** to do. I'm not here to make lots and lots of money. I'm not doing it to make money. I'm not even doing it as a living, do you know? It sounds strange. I mean it's **not** a living. Being a single parent you see, we were very limited, financially. And in the very, very beginning it was very, very difficult to meet all these demands that were made upon us. To see to these children socially, to see to their fun, to see to their clothing, you know, because 90% of these children came without clothes and to **have** to get on the phone and practically **beg** for money was, not humiliating for me but humiliating for these children - you know, specially if they heard me. ....
> And I had to struggle to buy a car, you see. Nobody came forward and said, 'Now you've learnt to drive and you're going to take the children here, there and

everywhere, you know, do you want us to insure the car or, you know, sort of buy the road tax for you?' I didn't want them to **buy** the car, you know. I was quite happy to buy the car but perhaps they could have helped in other little ways. I mean it's their children that I ferry backwards and forwards, you know."

For Ruth, money and care are distinct issues but, dependent upon state benefits, she is obliged to request financial help from the local authority to care for their children. But her construction of foster caring is such that this is a problematic issue for her. For her money is "a crass thing to talk about"; she does not construct her financial requests as of right but says that she has to "beg." Elsewhere in her interview she explains that the car purchase is primarily to benefit and further support her foster children. She does not feel reciprocally supported by the local authority. The department is not contributing towards the car's running costs even though it is primarily used for taking the boys to school and for therapy appointments. Leat's (1990) study shows that although foster carers do not look after children for money they do feel that caring should not be expected without payment. Although aligning herself with this perspective, Ruth, in common with most other foster carers in this study, constructs caring as distinct from, if not somehow superior to, financial issues. The practicalities of foster care costs have become difficult and painful to deal with.

This extract shows how the discourse of money reveals the difficulties of reconciling care and payment; for foster carers "Work is love made visible" (Gibran, 1923:38). Ruth constructs life-as-unpaid-foster-carer as needing to be separate from money since families as described by Hood-Williams "are, distinctively, places within which the common currency of money, of profit, of loss, of 'rational' economic exchange, is out of place" (1990:159). Since the place of money is inappropriate in family relationships, Ruth, like the other carers, is at pains to explain that she does not look after children because of the payment. As Stan states, "I don't think you can put a price on a child's head." Children are so priceless that their value is above cost (discussed in chapter four). Wakeford (1963) suggests that foster children fulfil a social rather than an economic role; middle class women can find alternative goals within the home but working class women need another child, or at least a child, to give significance to their role.

Nonetheless, several of the carers did talk of fostering being a "job" or a "business". Some of the female foster carers, like other women, describe full time mothering as "their job". Richard's extract demonstrates many of the statements and constructions of those carers:

> "I tend to think there are times when it's just, it is a business, you're part of a business as if it's about work, but you're part of a group that's for looking after kids and your job - and it is a job 'cos you get paid for it um - is to look after, you're the carer for the kids .... I mean you get an allowance, so it's um for looking after the kids, so technically you're paid for it and you know it's, you know it's not enough ...... so you are out of pocket ......
>
> I've been saying about the money and it sounds like that's the most important thing, but it isn't...... we just happened to have placements which cost an arm and a leg to kit them out from day one, which I think is wrong....
>
> (and on the bureaucratic muddles over payments) I keep on coming back to money and I'm not that type of person......
>
> It cost her (Mary his wife) an arm and a leg looking after these, it's silly things like the amount of time, the washing and ironing and that sort of stuff, it's ludicrous, but I wouldn't say, if you said to me would I change it - no, I would say I'm quite happy doing it."

Richard is actually self employed so this extract illustrates the many contradictions and complexities for foster carers when looking-after other people's children. His own work time is costed out yet in fostering his wife gives her time for free. Even though he can see the inconsistency of this he proffers the fact that he will continue to foster. Yet because they are in receipt of (only) allowances for the children, Richard's instinctive metaphor for foster care is that of a business. He constructs Mary's fostering as part of the local authority's formal care of children - foster-care-as-unwaged-business.

Similar conundrums concerning payment are voiced regularly by the carers in this study. Purchasing love and affection is morally unacceptable and must be freely given but the principle of payment is important (Leat, 1990). Miranda struggles with the complications of reconciling receiving money whilst caring for children:

> "It's difficult. I mean do you want, you know you don't, you don't want to attract people to fostering for the wrong reasons, you know. I mean yes I need the money and sometimes I feel bad about that, I'm feeling am I doing it for the wrong reasons, 'cos if I wasn't paid I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't do it because I'm only doing it because I want the money, but I wouldn't do it because I couldn't physically afford to, but um, I mean I think as someone's told me B (local authority) pay less than any other county in the country - whether that's true or not

I don't know and then if you did private fostering (*with an independent agency*) you get paid more for doing it through private organisations, but I mean I'd rather do it through the local authority."

Even though she believes that the allowance scales in her local authority are less than elsewhere and knows that, unless she is in receipt of an allowance, she actually can not afford to foster, Miranda feels guilty about the financial arrangements. Several foster carers express problems about the receipt of money/the reimbursement of monies and seem to have to justify the transaction. Yvonne, for example, lists in her interview such items as the number of television sets in the house and how much food she purchases each week in order to account for the money. For many foster carers the construction of foster-carer-in-receipt-of-money proves problematic. This includes Mike whose wife Louise fosters on a fee paying scheme:

"Victoria (*foster child*) gets an allowance which isn't a lot, um so it, it's a (pause) I mean it's for the work that Louise does. It's a twenty-four hour a day job, so it's really only um I think it's more of a (pause) um an acknowledgement payment I think, um. I mean you certainly wouldn't go into this for financial gain by any means...... Louise didn't work until we had Victoria, um 'cos her job was looking after children, that's the way that we always intended it to be. ...... I've said to him (*Family Placement Officer*) how can you sift through the people that are doing it purely for financial reasons when the people like us want to do it to help?"

For Mike fostering is not a business but an activity that sits well with his and Louise's decision that she will not take paid work outside the home because they have three children. But the fact that Louise is in receipt of a fee does not fit comfortably with his notion of genuine, wanting-to-do-it care. He wants to ensure that people understand the difference; that he and Louise want to foster anyway. For him any construction of foster-carer-as-paid-agent must include the rider that he and Louise are not doing it for the money. A stance mirrored by Lenin who is a fee paid carer on a pre-trial scheme.[54]

Kelly feels that because she is in receipt of a fee that she cannot ask her mother to baby-sit; she and Clive go out on separate nights. Thus foster-carer-as-paid-agent is constructed by her as the local authority purchasing twenty-four hour care and complete accountability.

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[54] Foster carers on these schemes take adolescents bailed by the criminal courts.

But there are variations. Meg, also in receipt of a fee, is comfortable with the instrumental construction of foster-carer-as-paid-agent. She fosters adolescent lads who she describes as not only expensive but hard work. She is forthright in her complaint concerning the one lad for whom she did not receive a fee. Hanneke also feels strongly that foster carers should be paid:

> "I mean if you asked us, do we get paid/**should** we get paid I think, yes, we should get paid because it's, I mean the trauma that you go through both emotionally and physically having to deal with them - I think **more** than just **expenses** should be paid. I mean if you'd **want** to do it but I mean it's like a nurse you know. I mean doing it for nothing is hard going and probably less likely for it to be successful because you think, well what am I doing this for? This child doesn't seem to want our care. Why should I care? ....
> It is wrong about the monies. We do a " job" and we should be fairly paid. .... we should not have to subsidise the foster children. As things are at the moment we are happy to give of our time and our caring and love but not the money as well. Is it right?"

Tricia, fostering children with multiple disabilities, argues along similar lines:

> "I do just feel quite strongly that, you know, in lots of situations we are **not** listened to or recognised for what we're doing, what we're offering. The **commitment** that we're offering. Alright, alright, it's ok for these (*social*) workers to sit here and say 'Oh well you are being paid 25% above the national rate (*NFCA recommended allowance paid by the local authority*), ... but - I still would argue, you know, that the recognition is **not** always there ...... with disabilities, ... you're going to get basic (*allowances*) and I'm afraid I don't agree with that for nursing care, not twenty-four hour nursing care. It's just not on, you know. .... And we're not looking for a great fee.... But I just think something should be there."

Both these carers state that they already give the local authority more than the allowances justify. Hanneke's construction of her fostering is that the local authority should expect to get her time, her caring and her love for the children for free but that there should be compensatory payments for the frustrations and the emotional and physical exhaustion. She already constructs fostering as a job of work, but one that is unpaid. Foster-carer-as-paid-agent she constructs as warranting more accountability in a bid to confirm the success of difficult placements; a fee would purchase even more effort. Tricia has fostered three children with terminal illnesses. The current baby requires tube-feeding, regular resuscitation and general nursing, even though Tricia has no formal qualification. Yet she says that none of this effort or experience is formally recognised and she wants financial

acknowledgement, however minor. For both these carers foster-carer-as-paid-agent is constructed as the social services department recognising, appreciating and giving some credit for the fact that foster carers are regularly doing more than is required. Generally there is a sense of financial exploitation; foster carers expect to give love but feel aggrieved that the local authority takes advantage.

Analysis of the transcripts reveals that most foster carers appear to be subsidising the children, some more consciously than others. Gordon and Emma keep the children out of their own salaries and use the allowances for clothes, toys and outings as they regard the money as "their (*the foster children's*) money." Mike complains that, as Victoria is continuously growing she requires new clothes with the onset of winter and that these have to be purchased from his wife's fee. Laura remembers the arrival of a new foster child the day before a family wedding: "I went out that Friday and I bought her clothes to go to this wedding. I can remember as if it was yesterday - it was our mortgage money."

Thus those carers who do not see fostering as incompatible with payment resent the continuous subsidies. Hanneke talks of caring "being like nursing", that is worthy of a wage, and Meg complains bitterly about a lad that she had had to care for without a fee. But carers, like these two together with Tricia and Mike, who construct foster-carers-as-paid-agents are in the minority in this study - although the interview guideline did not necessarily focus on this issue. Most of the carers, although expressing some dissatisfaction with the costs of fostering nonetheless agree with Brian (husband of Tricia):

> "I **do** know why we do it, as I said before, but, you know, I sometimes think we must be mad and I sometimes say to Tricia, "I just don't know **why** you just don't go out and get yourself a job, nine to five and, you know, we'll know **exactly** where we are, we know when we can take holidays, we know, you know, what our life structure will be and everything else". **But** we always go back to the same thing - **it's not what we want to do.** You know, fostering is what we want to do. And really if you had a nine to five well paid job in, you know, if you were, if you were head of - I don't know what - would you be happy if you weren't doing actually what you want to do?"

Understanding why the foster carers "want to do" fostering is complex. The following section looks at just one of the possible reasons which contributes to their construction of the role of foster carer.

Foster care as expiating carers' childhood experiences.

Nine of the carers mention that either their parents had fostered other people's children, or they had personally experienced the care system as foster children themselves. Hanneke's parents and grandparents had looked after both children and adults so she feels that fostering is a natural life event. This is also true for Margaret and Dick. Margaret's extended family had been involved with caring for children evacuated from London during the war and she has taken this as a model for fostering. Her son, Dick, grew up with fostered children and then, as an adult caring for elderly relatives, he feels fostering to be an accepted, next point on his life course. Georgina's mother (she does not mention the participation of her father) fostered and then adopted one of the foster girls. Although Georgina mentions other reasons for herself wishing to foster, it was because she had personal experience of living in a foster family that she suggests it as a possibility for her own household.

Miranda's reason, in following the example set by her fostering mother, is couched in emotionality:

> "One of the **biggest things that made me want to do it** was when I was seventeen, I was still at home sixteen/seventeen. We fostered this girl and she was a real pain in the neck to me …. she was probably there for two or three weeks and then she went …. and then um she started sending Christmas cards every year to my mum and then when my mum died she turned up at the funeral with a big bunch of flowers and it, oh it just chokes me up just thinking about it, but what my mum did for that girl in three weeks had such an impression on her that five, six, seven years later she would take a bunch of flowers to her funeral and that really made me want to foster 'cos I thought if she could do that for somebody then I'd like to do that too. Isn't that amazing? It always makes cry thinking about it, but and she was only there a few weeks."

Miranda's decision to foster is also about her wish to care for more children but the motivation is this experience. For her, life-as-foster-carer is also about homage to her mother and an ambition to give the same meaningful experience to another child. Some of

this resonates with Stuart's account. His childhood experiences had been difficult and he was orphaned at age twelve years. The local Bank Manager, having charge of his financial affairs, informally arranged for him to live with a local (non fostering) family. He refers to this couple as his foster parents:

> "I see how he was, and how she was, um their unit together said, 'I must follow that model' which really meant a loving, caring, sharing, inclusive um view of life, of people, of their family, of other families um and I suppose it's **that** that I've probably picked up um as a straightforward thing I think probably it might crunch down to um - **if** I see a need I meet it. If there is something I can do, if I genuinely perceive need, **is** there something I can do to meet it? and that seemed to be some sort of underlying feeling that I picked up probably that you don't pass by um somebody in need without doing something........... we have one who has taken **me** to his heart in the same way that I took **my** foster father to his heart and um ... he enjoys being with me, I enjoy being with him. I'm **his** sort of person and he's **my** sort of person um. .... We get on very well. He rushes in, you know, "Stuart I want to see you" - whatever it happens to be, you know, um. I'm looking forward to my week end, I really look **forward** to my week ends."

Stuart, like Miranda, takes a meaningful experience from his past and strives to replicate it. In the same way that he models himself upon his foster father he is now delighted to foster a lad who he perceives to be fond of him. His ambition is to be a role model to another child and he is achieving this. For these two individuals their construction of foster carer includes an ambition to rework a role model from their childhood.

Jackie's account is similar as she makes connections from her own fostering model. She describes her years in foster care as:

> "a very positive experience..... with an elderly couple ..... I was there for two and a half years but I still keep in contact with the family...I learnt the caring, um, setting the **standards** because - it might be my standard but it's my/it's our **home** and there's got to be a standard the way we're all going to live together, and, Uncle had always said that to me - I always called them Auntie and Uncle. Never mum and dad. And I think he taught me, you know, "I'm **never** going to be your dad. I will always be your best friend." And they were. That felt comfortable for **me**. And I always called them Auntie and Uncle. So yes I suppose I have taken that from them. I've never really thought of it before."

Like Stuart and Miranda, Jackie is using her past experiences of care to look after today's young people, although this construction took place within the interview as the research affected her attitudes and situation.

Foster care, for these last three, is about replicative scripts and long-term time orientations and continuity. But foster care for Gordon is about corrective scripts ensuring discontinuity and changing the life course. He was fostered until about age seventeen:

> "I was treated very badly with the foster carers........ (sighs) um, they abused me - in every way, kind of way you can think of apart from physically, um, the the main thing was - there was mental abuse. They would say things to me and promise me things and threaten me with things .... They made me, eh, play in a shed three feet by three feet with no door in it in the middle of winter and with short trousers on and a, (*near to tears*) and a shirt, freezing cold. I used to have porridge for my breakfast, a sandwich for my dinner and porridge for my tea, (laughs) it was really bad......I can reverse that. Couldn't I? I can give somebody a good life."

This parallels the man in Jenkins' study (1965) who fosters in order to act out the role of the father that he had missed. It is important to Gordon to give children a very contrasting experience from his own. He wants to reverse the treatment that he received so that his construction of foster care includes emotional warmth and security and reassurance. He wants to take his own negative experience of abuse at the hands of foster carers and offer children in his household a positive time (see also Nelson, 1990b, as noted in chapter two). Being a foster carer is, for Gordon, about ensuring difference.

Foster carers as responsible for children's behaviour and for their outcomes.

Chapter five discussed some of the dilemmas concerning whether foster carers do, or do not, construct themselves as parents to the foster children. As an extension of this debate this section now examines whether foster carers consider themselves as responsible for the children's behaviour and/or for the children's future. Examination of the transcripts provides a wide variety of responses. Some carers like Ruth and Olivia, previously quoted, are clear that they are not parents to the children. Meg is instrumental in her approach. She is matter of fact about the lads who do not flourish with her whilst expressing pride about those who do. Talking of Roger who was with her for some five years she says:

"He **was** a problem, not saying he wasn't but he was quite good. He is a good kid now, he comes to see me ... once a fortnight **at least**. 'Cos he's got a job ....so I felt as if I'd done a **really good** success story over that boy because he was a boy that literally **everyone** and I mean **everyone**, social workers, schoolteachers **everyone** foresaid he would just be, spend the rest of his life on the dole, on the scrap heap - no one would want him. He's been in the same job, he's twenty-one this year, ... So we both proved everybody wrong! You know. I feel quite good about it, Roger, actually."

In a proprietorial parental way Meg is saying that some of Roger's success is because of herself, enough for her to own some pride in him. Although she does not talk about feeling bad, or a failure, about other teenagers (Wes's continual fracas with the law or her current lad's inability to settle) nonetheless, in some circumstances she, like a parent, constructs foster care as including responsibility for outcomes for children, albeit selected ones.

Stan and Laura struggle with this same construction. As long time carers they are used to new carers telephoning them for help and advice. Stan explains that:

"people must understand that they are not a failure if the first placement isn't successful. They (*the social services*) shouldn't give them (*children placed*) long-terms, it's too difficult. They should have children, or a child, for a few weeks or something, when they can see the end. Then if it isn't working they can see the end in sight. But they mustn't be, feel they've failed."

Laura also gives the same advice:

"I've had new foster parents ring up and say, you know, "I can't handle this you know, we're a failure." I say **"no you're not a failure** just 'cos you can't keep the first ones." I felt that way um but, you know, I mean I felt that with um the one that we, that was very close to my son (*a foster girl who fell in love with Laura's son*), you know, we kept for eight months and then realised we'd got to give - it was **our son's home** and not her permanent home. So we had to give her up but it wasn't so much that it was, um, - oh I don't know, I don't - you know, it's ever so difficult, it's really - um - you know."

Here Laura struggles but cannot bring herself to state that, in requesting the removal of a foster child from the family, she has not failed. She can advise new carers to believe this but knows how she feels over the incident. Implicitly she constructs foster care as taking responsibility for children's futures. Elsewhere in her interview she explains how the girl's behaviour made life impossible for her son and led to the disruption of the placement. Nonetheless Laura does not here put the responsibility for this back onto the girl, but struggles

with where to place it. Parents can be held to account for their children; their moral identity is bound up with behaviour and, in this way Laura feels morally accountable for children who are not hers.

This same accountability is also evident with those carers who are aware that frequently strangers assume that foster children are blood children. Hanneke, describing life with one particular foster child, explains why they do not go on family outings:

> "Because if she threw a wobbly say in a captivated area, say a cinema or a ice skating rink, you know, I mean it depends on her behaviour but I mean if you could find **yourself** into a, an, a sort of, a situation you'd rather not be in where other people are not only looking but they must have some concerns of thinking, **You** must be in the wrong - or that's the way I would feel and I would think, Oh dear! Cringe! Hide away!"

Although not accepting responsibility for the child's behaviour, Hanneke believes that this is how other people would perceive things. Adults are held accountable for the actions of children in their care. Georgina explains that, since they have had Dylan placed with them, she has not visited her Great Aunt "because I dread to think if he broke something." Like Hanneke she decides not to put the situation to the test. Their construction of foster carers accepts that, like parents, they are held publicly responsible for children's (unacceptable) behaviour. Similarly Celia is aware of public scrutiny where her control of foster children is concerned:

> "It's very difficult because I feel as if I shouldn't be arguing in public. I've got that thing you know, I didn't want people to point their finger and say, "Well look. She's looking after this child and she can't control this child. ..... What useless parents"."

These constructions resonate with Mandy's:

> "I saw some children who were really being awful and I thought, well Timmy is better than them, I don't think I have to apologise for anything here! (laughs) .... Keith and I took Timmy out and he had a (*tantrum*) .... Keith was quite worried about it and then we saw two children having, you know, really bad, and I said "look, you know, we are doing very well"."

Generally mothers in contemporary Western societies feel socially accountable for their children's behaviour (Ribbens, 1990). So foster carers, like parents, compare quite

competitively children's conduct and manners. In this case Mandy is saying that they are succeeding. Her construction of a foster carer includes responsibility for general behaviour and pride in behaviour which is acceptable.

But many of the carers, particularly the experienced carers, speak of feeling disheartened. In accepting responsibility for things that have gone wrong for past foster children, the carers take the failure upon themselves. Although acknowledging that the children present particularly difficult behaviours they nonetheless talk of their own failings. This extract from Kelly's interview is typical:

> "Roy is a particularly disturbed child with such extreme behaviour. ....he actually set fire to a teacher's hair and threatened another member of staff with scissors........ he's injured one of our dogs, I think we've done the right thing (*agreeing to his removal*). I think we're doing the right thing now. I still keep in touch with him ...... we get jobs, we get married, we have a family - I can't see that going on for Roy. I can't see any of that going well for him and I feel very, very sad about that and I always will do and I don't think I will ever get over that. It damaged my confidence a lot because I felt really confident with the success of Jane and then Nathan. I felt great!.... I know we've had a failure with Roy - in my opinion it was a failure."

Here she accepts responsibility for both the successes, for Jane and for Nathan, but feels a failure because Roy had to leave them. She knows that his behaviour was too much for any foster carer to cope with yet nonetheless still wonders if she and Clive took the right decision. For Kelly the foster carer is constructed as totally responsible for the children - their behaviour whilst with her and therefore their future lives.

All of this resonates with Dick's account of Jim. Dick explained that Jim was told erroneously by his social worker that he could remain with Dick's family but later the local authority decided that he had to move into independent accommodation. In his outrage and upset Jim held the foster family at knifepoint for several hours:

> "I feel a total failure with him because he just, every week he's at W (*Police Station*) getting had up for something or other, but you know I mean, I tend to blame myself but it's not my fault, it's that social worker's fault, but you know what I mean."

Like Kelly, Dick states that it was not his actions that led to the disruption of the placement and Jim's subsequent decline into offending. Nevertheless, like her and many other carers, he constructs foster carers as people who should be able to rescue and actually save young people. When this does not occur it is regarded as a personal failure which cannot just be discounted and forgotten. Jackie is regularly remembering the youngsters who have not managed to move on from her with success, "you always think back and think to yourself, could I have done something different with that relationship?" Any success or failure is constructed with great intimacy; it is the foster carer's personality that is on the line. As she says, "from a carer's point of view, every time those kids get moved on it's like a **death** for them (*the foster children*) .... You feel, well where did I go **wrong?**" Foster children are not held accountable for their own actions. They are not responsible. The foster carers' sense of care is about connectedness; their sense of self is bound up with others (Gilligan, 1982) so they take on that onus.

Celia (as an illustration of family support for their fostering) tells of when her sister accompanied them on a family holiday. This was completely ruined by the attitudes and behaviour of a foster child:

> "But even then when we came off holiday she (*Celia's sister*) didn't actually say, "Because it was your (*Celia's*) fault - but you ruined our holiday." You know. And her holiday **was** ruined, through me."

As mentioned in previous chapters, Celia's belief, in common with other carers, that children cannot be blamed means that she takes responsibility for behaviour, however unacceptable. Celia's construction of herself as foster carer is that she is responsible for everything that the foster children do. Explanation for unacceptable behaviour does not, for her, exonerate the carer.

But, like Kelly, foster carers also take credit for some successes. Stan is delighted that Stacey is at College "and come on really well". Kathleen's pride in Ruby is such that she is sad when she chooses to sit with her friends in church. One Sunday Kathleen bribes her into the pew next to her and Harold:

"So more of the congregation would have realised that that was our little girl, but up until that point we were not able to show her off (laughs)."

Like all children, foster children are called upon for display purposes and for companionship (Hood-Williams, 1990). Like Cyril, who wants his friends to approve of Craig, and Grace who "suit(ed) them all out" for church, Kathleen is concerned about the public presentation of her foster child. These foster carers therefore construct themselves as taking responsibility for their foster children: their physical appearance, their public behaviours and their personal happiness.

Concluding discussion.

This chapter has looked at how the foster carers construct themselves in relation to the children they look after. They are not just providing physical shelter and care but an emotional, expressive relationship which is sometimes made problematic by the payment of monies. Generally they construct themselves as intimately connected to the children. They construct this close bonding as enabling them to act as change agents for the children and to rescue them from their pasts. This is a powerful statement. Fostering is about making things better for the children. But importantly, change is not only personally gratifying for the carers but reassures them that they count.

Chapter 8.
Conclusion

Introduction.

Foster families and their homes are the primary location for the delivery of service for children looked after by the local authority, yet as Berridge (1997) identifies, the foster care service remains under theorised and under researched. In particular we know little about the day to day lives of foster carers - how they manage, how they respond and cope with the challenges and difficulties that face them; how they order and experience their lives; how they look after the children entrusted to their care.

This study has looked at how foster carers construct themselves and what they do; how they describe themselves as foster carers and how this gives them identity.

This concluding chapter reviews the research and its findings in order to note the connections between the substantive issues and their related theoretical perspectives. It then discusses these by way of broader sociological topics in order to contribute to current sociological debates about childhood, contemporary morality and individualisation. It concludes with some examination of it's relevance for social policy.

Review of the research.

The social work/ social policy literature review (chapter one) indicates that, not only have the local authorities marginalised the foster care service, but foster carers have been undervalued and forgotten. The search provides only a fragmented and disjointed picture with very little original sourced material giving any priority to the voices of the carers. The dominant view is that of the local authorities, the social workers and the policy makers. The reasons for this are complex but include the political choices of policy makers and their contractual control demanding large scale research designs (Burgess, 1994) together with the preference of researchers to work with them (there is little kudos in research with people of lowly status). Although many research projects have been completed within the home there are particular inhibitions regarding this as notions of home include, not only a strong ethic of privacy, but a provision of identity to its occupier which confers power

(Twigg, 1998). Chapter one noted that it may serve organisational interests for the status of the foster carers to remain unaltered (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987). Sometimes dominant ideologies which justify the status quo (the power of the social services department) silence the voices of others (in this case the place of female carers within the private sphere) in order to define and validate a particular, potentially oppressive, reality. Perhaps partly because of these factors, information from foster carers, usually concerning the children, has been primarily sought by way of postal questionnaires.

The first chapter therefore concludes that the voices of foster carers are usually peripheral to those of others (social services and even children) in any discussion or study of foster care. A review of the sociology literature (chapter two) considering concepts of public and private, care and the family, demonstrates that the lives of foster carers are precariously balanced at the margins of several conceptual worlds. The private sphere theoretical worlds of motherhood, childhood and the family are usually compatible but for foster carers the public world, via the local authority, acts as a vital agent upon this nexus. It is this element which so significantly reshapes all three concepts in such complex and contradictory ways that it might be concluded that the management of this precariousness might prove (theoretically) impossible. Mapped onto these concepts, foster care emerges full of paradoxes, with the foster carers of ambiguous status and having to manage a life-style which, in theoretical terms, is full of conflict.

The construction of foster care is within specific contexts. The purpose of this research is to "listen in order to see" (Gubrium and Holstein 1990:6) how the foster carers in this study understand their own lives. The methodology (chapter three) notes that as there are no obvious models for foster carers this study must somehow examine how different individuals make sense of fostering. The research is not concerned with evaluating what foster carers do, but is focused on their personal diverse experiences and perspectives. The thesis therefore explores the ways in which these carers understand their experiences of looking after other people's children by deconstructing their statements and searching for their meanings. My focus has been on how they create their own meanings and how they position themselves. Together with the carers, it questions taken-for-granted assumptions about family life in order to hear/see how they use their understandings to make sense of

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their social worlds. It looks at how foster-carer-selves are constructed and presented in particular ways at particular times. It shifts the focus from the cared-for onto the carers.

I interviewed the foster carers with the aim of asking them to talk about themselves. I specifically did not want to hear about the foster children as there already exists a body of research work about them but, as discussed in the first chapter, virtually nothing about their carers. Nonetheless, analysis of the transcripts finds that life-as-foster-carer is not only centred upon and around the children, but that foster carers use the children in order to explain their lives and themselves. Individuals have different voices, yet it is impossible to separate out their lives as foster-carers-as-adults from their lives as foster-carers-who-look-after-children. This, together with their understandings concerning foster children and their particular vision of childhood, therefore contributes a central theme in this concluding chapter.

The first substantive chapter (chapter four) analyses how foster carers construct the children that they look after; children who are ambiguous because they are public and bureaucratised. The transcripts reveal that foster children's lives are frequently prioritised over others within the foster family. Not only does the local authority demand this but carers regard the foster children as precious and sacred. Zelizer (1985) points out that wanted children are regarded as "priceless" and that they are sacralized because they are invested with sentimental meaning. Foster carers regularly adjust their own personal life-styles, and frequently those of their families, in order to suit each individual foster child. Foster children are frequently considered worth any sacrifice.

Unpacking the reasons for this construction of foster children shows that foster carers do suggest that the children's behaviour can be unacceptable. Examples include extreme public tantrums, wanton damage, theft and deception. Nevertheless, all of this is generally detailed by the carers in non-judgemental, non-critical terms. This holds true for most of them even when the children make false allegations of maltreatment by their carers to the social workers. Thus threats posed by the foster children do not detract from their emotional value. Frequently foster carers blame the social services for these allegations, linking the explanation for this behaviour to the social workers' emphasis on children's

rights. Children are bureaucratically constructed as active participants whose competence is underestimated by adults. But foster care has traditionally operated within a needs, not rights, framework. Foster carers must now accommodate both perspectives, although in general they continue to construct foster children as innocent. It is, for foster carers, an unquestioned, taken-for-granted assumption that foster children are passive victims and cannot be held to account. As a rule, carers believe that anti-social actions are the result of environmental factors; there is always a reason, an explanation and therefore an "excuse" for any behaviour.

Foster children are portrayed as non-accountable and therefore innocent victims. This is regularly defined by references to their past and to the negative actions, or inaction, of their birth parents. Foster carers, in positioning the child as an innocent, thereby shape the foster child's parents as at fault and place themselves in contrast to these birth families. By this mechanism they construct themselves as above suspicion; as "ideal" parents who, compared to the birthparents, put the child's needs first. Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues note the "importance of contrasts as a narrative device that (has) the effect of implicitly constructing a moral identity for the teller" (2000:9). In this study the foster carers' constructions of innocence necessarily involve apportioning guilt and blame onto both the social services departments and onto the birth parents. Rarely is "blame" apportioned to the foster children. Perhaps, on occasions, the more demanding and challenging the children's behaviour is portrayed, then the more moral the foster carer may appear.

Many foster carers feel guilt and blame themselves when foster children placed with them do not do as well as anticipated. Ribbens (1994) speaks of mothers being held to account for their children (see chapter two and also Ruddick, 1983). In general the foster carers in this study accept the public and private responsibility for the children and talk of failure when there are disappointments. They expect to "save" each child placed with them. This responsibility rests on a particularistic tie - an intimate, personal relationship that they have with each individual child. The foster carer sense of self is one of connectedness. Their sense of self is an "interacting sense of self" (Miller quoted in Jordan, 1993:138) which is continuously formed in connection with others. Concern for each child is holistic, for their

physical appearance, their general behaviour and their personal happiness. Emotional boundaries can overcome own-family boundaries.

Yet there are some foster carers who manage these tensions differently. They either discriminate between children, feeling a proprietorial sense of pride for a selected few, or, because they are not the birth parents, do not take responsibility for the children's attitudes or behaviours. But these carers are very much a minority in this study. The majority position themselves as responsible for the children, with some risk as to whether they will enjoy the rewards or suffer great costs. They do not regard children as socially competent but accept accountability for both the children's current actions and also for their future happiness. Their lives are focused around their foster children even though they have no autonomy of care. Fostered children are public children and their carers are therefore compromised by this "difference" - that each child brings with them a birth family and the bureaucracy of the social services. Foster carers not only adjust their lives to suit the children but must understand and account for all this complexity.

Understanding the fostered child is the foster carer's raison d'être; foster children deserve to be understood and also fully loved. Most carers feel it is unfair to withhold this love - though believe that social services expect them to maintain an emotional distance. Indeed Jamieson (1998) makes the point that feelings of love and actions of love are quite distinct; (paid) carers may care in practical ways but may not always love. But emotional involvement is described by the carers as essential for the child's well-being, even though they intimate that, in the long term, this may prove detrimental to their own. This exclusive bond with the child is considered by many carers to be so essential that for some it may jeopardise blood-family relationships within the foster care household. Emotional connectedness may therefore change behaviours; it may lead to more inclusive treatment of the foster child and/or more excluding treatment of the foster carer's own family. Foster children are constructed as deserving an individual, committed, loving particularistic tie, one that is not bureaucratised and distanced, through which the foster carers will save them from their past.

But there are problems of a past that is not shared plus the potential unfulfilment of an uncertain future. This means that most of the carers have cautions about the children and about their own relationships with them. Bureaucratised children are not the same as their own children. The social services department builds in difference - there are rules about the treatment of public children - and both the general public and the children themselves construct foster children as "different". Caring for other people's children brings extra responsibilities and anxieties. These lead to changed behaviours in order to manage the risks as foster children can pose a threat to the carer's marriage, to family stability, to individual members of the foster family and to the carer's own principles. Foster children are different and can be dangerous.

Nonetheless, most carers continue to foster (Triseliotis, 2000: Waterhouse, 1997) whatever the general difficulties or the personal problems of their situation (discussed below) because of, and for the sake of, the children. Implicit in the transcripts is that for many of the foster carers, looking after other people's children gives a real sense of family - for those who have no children, or whose children have left home or who cannot afford more birth children. These extra children therefore promise the total enchantment of childhood (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: Zelizer, 1985). The carers are certain that the children give them more than they could ever give the children in return and describe this in terms of happiness, rewards and credits, and heaven on earth (chapter four). For many carers, the children also offer opportunities for personal growth. The foster care service and the care of the children is constructed, by different carers, as including educative components, providing challenge and the prospect of realising a sense of achievement. All 46 foster carers construct fostering children as worthwhile, in contrast to some studies of caring for children which find that, on occasions, it is stories of despair and difficulty which people may be most eager to tell (Gillies et al, 2001).

The literature reviews (chapters one and two) do identify the possibilities of tensions and difficulties within both the foster family household and their wider networks. The public world intrudes into and onto what is understood as the private lives of foster families, and the foster carers continuously have to take their private lives into the public world in order to advocate for the children. Bureaucracy's primary concern is the families' fostering

status, and carers find that their own "private/personal" non-fostering lives are eclipsed. The activity of fostering cannot be easily contained, it spills into the rest of life. Female foster carers in paid work outside the home find the two activities may be incompatible, and male foster carers talk of "two jobs" as they take time off for the children or even change employment to suit the family's fostering. Time is affected; families become tied into the foster child's timetable of continuous demands. There is conflict with the social services department as bureaucratic time is often unsympathetic to the child's time scale. Frequently foster family life is dominated by current time as the unpredictability of events in the foster child's life dominates and prevents planning (chapter five). Acting as foster carer can involve spatial change (house extensions, modifications) and social change (no alcohol, child centred activities). It affects relationships as confidentiality rules regarding the children inhibit openness between friends and sometimes relatives. Many foster carers had come to construct their social lives mainly in relation to other carers who are empathetic to the often unsympathetic behaviour of unruly fostered children. Thus foster carers find that they redraw personal friendship boundaries. Fostering becomes for most a new caring identity.

A "carer" is a professional label, a public label and does not denote family membership as does "parent". Foster carers must balance these two identities in relation to each fostered child. Most of the carers in this study assume that their extended family will accept and absorb sometimes a stream of foster children over several years. Many carers feel that, because they consider the children part of the family, it is important that the foster children are similarly accepted by relatives and friends. Dilemmas of equity and fairness are daily faced by those carers who are parenting birth children whilst looking after foster children. Most strive to manage this situation in a way which offers parity but perceive that external pressures, primarily from the local authority, ensure that foster children are treated differently. When change is required it is frequently the birth family children who have to adapt and possibly experience detrimental alterations in the quality of parenting.

Carers suggest that, although they love the foster children in the same way as they love their birth children, they know that they have to treat them with difference, if not deference, because of the surveillance of the social services department and because of the

risk of allegations concerning their care. The subjective experience of foster carers is as parents; they act as parents but have an ambiguous position perhaps akin to step-parents. Both care for reconstituted families which have an added dimension of extra birth family members. Being a foster carer is an uncertain category, they are more than carers but less than parents. This tentative relationship is compounded by lack of both authority and control; foster carers rarely know how long a child will remain. Children can be removed by the social services department, of their own will or, on occasions, the decision of the birth family. Foster carers discuss the special bond that the children have with their birth parents and how this can cause jealousies. Many carers propose the need for emotional life jackets; they may therefore frame fostering as a "job" or spread the emotional investment elsewhere or talk of "growing a shell". Nonetheless they propound a belief in not withholding love from the foster child as this would be unfair - even if the child does not reciprocate. Everything has to evolve around and change for the fostered child.

Foster carers state that much of this change is dictated by the social services department (chapter six). Although the influence of the department is "external" to the foster families it has an intrusive internal effect. Bureaucracy provides rules and regulations, but not practical solutions, which affects the quality of foster care. Foster carers frequently report that they experience the staff as unsupportive and insensitive to both their lives as foster families and to the foster children. Nonetheless, nowhere in the transcripts is there any indication that any of the foster carers ever give up on negotiating with the local authority in their bid to achieve preferential services for their individual foster child. There is, from the foster carers' perspective, a dominant theme of the (ab)use of bureaucratic power. Foster carers describe the social services as all powerful and themselves as powerless, although sometimes themselves contributing to the authority's power base. Foster carers regularly position themselves discursively as without autonomy (chapter six). They construct their relationship with the department in terms of "us" and "them". Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens (1999), debating issues surrounding reconstituted step-families, point out that power in these families is not focused but diffuse. Foster families are also reconstituted families and for them the power is spread across and between social services, the foster children's birth families and the foster family household. Legal discourse, via the Children Act 1989, gives the birth parents (rather than the foster carers) responsibilities

and power so that, in law, "there is no notion of 'children need (social) parents'" (ibid, page 758). Yet the normative standpoint of the foster carers is their intrinsic belief in increasing the foster child's stability via strengthening ties of belonging, that will "save" the child. It is this "ownership" that is the foster carer focus for producing change and improvement in the lives of the children. Foster carers may construct their situation as powerless but this is a very powerful statement of the power to create change and made by the majority in this study.

Although constructing the position of both the social services and the birth parents as more powerful than their own, the foster carers also depict their own position as ambiguous and chameleon. Carers suggest that the birth parents may perceive them in apparent alliance with the department (helping with contact, aiding reunification between child and birth family) so that, at times, the carers' position changes from "them" to become "us". There is usually an expectation that foster carers will work with the social service department and this can result in hostility, and possible physical risk, from the fostered children's family towards the carers. It can also mean that the carers' devotion to children can be regarded as expendable as far as the parents are concerned. Nonetheless, in the face of this parental hostility and/or dismissal, foster carers frequently explain, and thereby excuse, the parents' behaviour and attitudes – which can be in contradiction to their other views regarding birth families (see above).

This acceptance of the parents echoes how the carers describe the fostered children. Analysis of the transcripts demonstrates that the carers treat the fostered children (often accepting anti-social and antagonistic behaviour) differently/ more generously than their own children and manage the tensions by mediating this difference in terms of the fostered children's overriding needs. This is in line with the social services' expectation that the fostered children's needs should be given priority, although on occasions the carers complain about this, insisting that they would prefer to aim for fairness and equality of treatment. Whether the fostered children's presence within the foster family household is constructed in terms of them being "insiders" or "outsiders", "same as" or "different from" the foster carers' birth children, these concepts and the carers' explanations for their decisions are multi-layered and very complex. For some, automatic construction of foster

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children as always "insiders/ the same as", is cautioned by a subtle combination of the carer's belief that fostered children deserve more in a bid to make up for past damaging experiences, reinforced by the reality of bureaucratised children's rights. The carers construct these as giving the children power and thereby making them different and "outsiders". There is some minor variation - two of the carers deal with anti-social action by framing it in biological terms that distance their own accountability (as noted in chapter six), but the majority construct the children as blameless victims and themselves as passive recipients of any abusive behaviours. On the whole, accounts given by the carers tend to be very positive - perhaps because they are for the researcher as "public" audience and possibly also because prohibitions regarding punishment pressure them into rationalising the children's behaviour. In general, any dissatisfactions are related to the fostering system rather than the children, with the carers constructing themselves as powerless, their boundaries heavily compromised. There are few hints of resistance - Georgina considering resignation, Meg insisting that "her lad" be moved on and Brian and Mike unhappy about feeling forced into arguments with the department in order to achieve better services for the children. The over-all picture is of carers justifying their unsatisfactory position and status because of the needs of the children.

The carers therefore construct their own position as rescuers and as change-agents for needy children (chapter seven). They talk of provision for children via notions of "family" and of "home" in order to make a (positive) difference to them. They want to make them "better" and to save them. They believe that this can be achieved via "normal" family life, by incorporating the foster children into the foster family. Only a minority of the carers define their enlarged households as "not-family" because of the importance of the foster children's blood ties or because of social distance. Against this variation, the majority of carers in this study construct, as the important component of their foster carer status, their personal influence to change and to save the fostered child. This is either via their own web of family based loving relationships or their individual particularistic loving relationship with the child. Changing the child is centrally important to these carers. It gives their lives meaning and is thus personally gratifying. Fostering is not totally altruistic but reassures carers that they count.

The majority insist that money does not count. Most view cash and care as distinct issues and distance themselves from the allowances as though money might undermine the quality of their caring. For foster carers, family is not about rational economic exchange since (foster) children are beyond price; children deserve unconditional love - with hope of some reciprocity. Carers view themselves as giving their time for free and there is evidence of guilt about accepting the (uneconomic) allowances. Some on fee-paying schemes continue to consider that caring is superior to money and feel embarrassed about the fee and therefore totally accountable. A small minority are completely instrumental about the issue and want a wage-based foster care service. Most of them consider themselves undervalued and exploited, but adamant that they wish to foster for the sake of the children.

Additionally a group of them foster, as well as for the children, because of their own pasts. Their own families fostered or they were themselves "in care". They gain meaning through changing children's lives as they either aim to pay back and return their own past experiences of good care or change their own negative experiences into positive ones for other children in need (see also Nelson, 1990b).

Discussion.

This study commenced with a focus on a particular set of issues underpinned by "sensitising" concepts (Blumer, 1954, as discussed by Hamersley and Atkinson, 1983) as identified via the sociology literature review (chapter two), but as the analysis has progressed it has discovered an additional agenda. It has led to different connections and theoretical relevances, as discussed below.

Initially it set out only to examine the context in which foster carers look after the children of others in order to understand their lives on their own terms. The 46 carers represent different nationalities, cultures and class whilst including all types of local authority fostering from emergency placements to "quasi-adoption". They include a full range of ages, life styles, geographical areas, own family constitutions and single carers of both genders.

In general, foster carers describe the circumstances and the context of their fostering as fraught with difficulties, confirming the findings of Sinclair and colleagues (2000).This is particularly so when they cannot access those services they believe should be provided for the children. They explain that, as a result, the department forces them to complain, to act aggressively and even to lie. This group of foster carers includes victims of threat and fraud and those who have been physically attacked, intimidated, distrusted, and even had their sexuality questioned. (Yet probably only one family resigned from fostering through choice[55]). They have established their own coping mechanisms and find sufficient internal resources in order to confirm commitment. They create their own rewards through the children in relation to whom they position themselves as potentially very powerful in terms of the possibility of changing and thereby "saving" them.

Foster carers believe that they can save children by giving them stability, offering them positive role models, teaching them, understanding them and all of this by means of those notions of home and family which offer a particularistic emotional attachment. Whilst the work of Giddens (1992) and of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) examine the nature of intimate relationships between adults, there is little written about close relationships between adults and children. Giddens (2000) posits a democratic family, where gender is a less salient issue between adults, and decision making includes negotiating with children. Thus equality, mutual respect and autonomy through communication should provide the family, and specifically the children, with stability. But for foster carers the issues concerning family and children are differently shaped. These are not the underlying concepts for their activities; of more importance is how they construct the foster child. Generally foster carers understand each foster child as needy, innocent and sacred and therefore deserving of protection (not consultation) which is offered via a particularistic tie and a notion of love. This discourse of protection seeks an empathetic response which provides foster carers with a special relationship.

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[55] Information from work networks.

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Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) examine the importance of special relationships in a post-modern age; the need for intimacy and commitment in personal life in an increasingly unsure shifting world. They hypothesize that, as the last half century has witnessed new questionings of life with a constant search for individual meaning, there are no longer any certainties or explanations for everything. Adults therefore need to find a sense of security and individual meaning via a particularistic relationship. There is a basic need for individuals to have a primary bond in order to develop a sense of identity. Relational aspects of family life are not on offer in the marketplace and individuals therefore seek this rewarding and satisfying relationship with another adult from elsewhere. But these "pure relationships" (Giddens, 1992) are inherently fragile and cannot hold without mutual satisfaction. Intimacy with another, in the context of commitment, promises fulfilment, but people must work at this the whole time, "negotiating and deciding the everyday details of do-it-yourself relationships" (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998:67). In this uncertain environment, relationships with (birth) children appear more secure and enduring.

There is no longer any material advantage to having a child but children have a "psychological utility" (Beck-Gernsheim, 1995:105); children can reward via intimate and holistic relationships. They therefore become very precious, a principle concern and a primary love object, particularly for parents as blood relationships offer some certainty and a fixed reference point. Although for foster carers there is no blood relationship, there can grow an affinity, an "elective affinity" (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998:66); a freely chosen act understood via the needs of the child which may, or may not, be reciprocated. This is demonstrated by the carer's special relationship with each fostered child. Each foster child becomes the all important love object which makes life purposeful and provides happiness; they are regarded as priceless in terms of their meaningfulness and emotional value. Yet relationships with fostered children are full of risk. Their tenure and primary alliances are always uncertain and their attitudes and behaviours can, at best, be unpredictable and, at worst, anti-social. Nonetheless carers appear to ignore the strong dichotomies presented by childhood – these "extreme idealizations of child rearing juxtaposed with equally dismaying possibilities" (Walkover, 1992:178). Some of the transcripts suggest that the more challenging the children's behaviours then the more foster carers will protect and love, via a particularistic tie.

By this mechanism the foster carers construct themselves as individually necessary to each child. This raises a notion of self, an ethic of care of self, which is actually enhanced through the foster children. Current debates argue that an ethic of self care is in opposition to an ethic of child-care thus suggesting that foster carers represent an anomaly in the modern world. The current decreasing birth rates in the West are of increasing concern (Boase, 2001: McRae, 1997). The reasons for this trend are several and complex; not least that paid work outside the home is regarded as fundamental to both self-esteem and the esteem of others. Today's post-modern, employed woman, in pursuit of individualism (described by Bumpass as the "progressive legitimization of individual self-interest" (1990:488)) constructs children as undermining her sense of self. Heady with the culture of post-modernity, a time of self-awareness and autonomy in private life, she is concerned with individual fulfilment, the valuing of risk and change and a morality centred around self-care which would be compromised by motherhood.

Caring for foster children could therefore be described as the ultimate challenge. Not only are they constructed as victims, needy and exhaustively demanding, but significantly they are bureaucratised, public children and their carers have very circumscribed autonomy. There is also the disadvantage of different time orientations and competing time frames. Understandings of family include strong orientations to time past and to a future; childhood offers parents both futurity and nostalgia (Jenks, 1994). Family is about traditions and a shared history. Foster children bring no shared past and can offer no certain prospects of a future. Yet one's own children not only ensure (re)presentation, but signify adults' hope for and meaning in the future; blood children offer ongoing and infinite time. Foster children offer only finite time; foster carers must, and do, invest everything into their here and now. In a disenchanted modern world, the loss of the hierarchy which maintained the social disparity between parents and children now means that parents have to work at being loved (Jamieson, 1998) and Cunningham (1995) argues that child rearing is no longer about certainty but about negotiation. Thus, even though relationships with children can be precarious, there is an expectation that foster children will give the lives of foster carers value. The meaning of life is loaded onto them via the relevance of a loving particularistic tie.

Thus foster carers appear to be in conflict with part of this particular explanation for current trends in a falling birth rate - that parenthood is loosing its ascribed status (Bumpass, 1990). It can only be that the fostered children themselves represent something of significance. Foster carers must frame differently the dilemmas between the ethics of care of self and of caring for children. Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues (2000) identify the significance of dependent children in upholding moral adequacy for (step parent) adults. Moral adequacy is not totally dependent upon children but once adults have young children, Ribbens McCarthy et al argue, there is a moral imperative that they not only take responsibility for any children in their care, but also accept that their needs are paramount. In this study, foster carers' moral selves are shaped by their construction of fostered children as vulnerable, innocent and deserving of care via a loving relationship that only they can provide. Whereas the current trend is that many women do not want the responsibilities of parenthood and the duties of child care - Walkover notes that "parenting has been transformed from a duty to one's family, community, or country into an optional way of living" (1992:183) - foster carers positively seek these out. Their strong ethic of care for others is prominent throughout all the transcripts. These make clear that the carers construct themselves as moral beings. Not only do foster carers try to ensure that the children's needs are given priority but they do this in the face of problems and opposition from the social services department, other agencies such as schools, and the children's birthparents. They present themselves as giving the children's needs precedence before those of themselves and frequently their own families. They regularly choose to change their lives in order to better accommodate the needs of foster children. But in the potential collision of the two ethics - an ethic of care for children and an ethic of self care - it can be argued that, for foster carers, they complement each other. The ethic of care of self for the foster carer is tied in with the carer's self-esteem and self-identity. Looking after the children of others may be a service but more importantly, it is also a way of life where the foster carers describe their own interests as mutually compatible with the care of others. They do not recognise any division of interests. It is an essential part of what they are; it is a sense of self bound up with their love for the children and the motivation for their agency. In different ways, the transcripts talk of challenges provided by foster care – opportunities for education, for occupation, for mental stimulation and for emotional

satisfaction. Much of this suggests a strong ethic of self-care but in this study an ethic of care of self is not constructed in opposition to an ethic of child care. It does not become an immoral stance since it shores up and complements the ethic of care that serves children's needs. Foster carers construct fostering as providing a moral career.

Yet other studies suggest that not all foster carers, in practice, are totally committed to the children they look after. Official reports identify the potential for negligent care and actual abuse - for example Utting (1997) and Berridge and Cleaver (1987). It is not possible to tell whether there are any such carers in this study, only to note that generally, in interviews, respondents manage self presentation and parents wish to appear competent and adequate (Baruch, 1981). These foster carers are no different. Parenthood and family life is about being a moral person; Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues (2000) conclude that it is virtually impossible for a parent to relate an immoral tale with regard to children. My sample was culled predominantly through the foster carers' own networks and so cannot therefore be fully representative. But as foster care is bound up with notions of being a moral person, can a foster carer express a negative view of the child as undeserving? Can they say that they don't like a child and experience them as unfulfilling? Brian and Tricia continue to grieve for the child that they had removed because her behaviour threatened their marriage, and they remain in contact with her. Celia, Laura, Grace and Stuart all describe requesting that children be placed elsewhere because of conflict with their birth children. Gordon and Emma blame themselves because their first placement proved impossible to manage. Georgina intimates that she will have to request another foster family for their child because hers cannot provide the detail of care he requires; it is the fault of her family and not the child. It is only Meg who insists upon the removal of a teenage lad because she feels the conflict as personal (see chapter four). He has placed himself as a bureaucratised child by writing out a list of what she accepts as valid complaints against her care. But this is set in a context where he ignores Meg's offers of kindness and daily grieves for his mother, refusing to allow Meg to replace her. As a public child with his own birth mother he repudiates his foster carer's overtures of nurturing and mothering. He has rejected the special relationship. It is thus perhaps only Meg in this study who considers that a child is undeserving of her care, and that it is therefore morally

acceptable not to continue the responsibility because she is unable to employ a particularistic tie.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim quote Nichteheliche Lebensgemeinschaften that motherhood "is felt to be a crucial and exceptional test of one's own character" (1995:110), (though this may be a view from a particular class and ethnic perspective). Foster children are the definitive challenge frequently requiring more understanding, patience, help and unconditional love than other children. Some foster carers put themselves through this test many times. Of the twenty-seven foster households in this study, seven had fostered ten or more children, and three at least five. For them there have to be compelling reasons and motivations. It might be argued that as foster carers, and not parents, they do not consider themselves eligible for this "character testing" except that the data demonstrates the contrary. The majority feel personally culpable when they fail either to access services required by their foster child or the children leave for, what the carers consider to be, unsatisfactory family arrangements or life styles.

Foster carers accept accountability for the children. Their redefinition from (natural) foster parents to (professional) foster carers (within these accounts) means that they do not only measure the child's "success" in public agenda terms of better health, education achievements and behaviour. Foster children are placed within foster families. For foster carers the significance and strength of family discourse and family framework is such that they do not view the child as a bureaucratised, public, contractual child with defined rights. They embrace the child as innocent, victimised and needy; as a member of the family and as "their" child. From this comes a notion of foster children that requires the carer to save them through love. Foster children represent the emotional value that make carers feel not only responsible and important but also emotionally indispensable. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) posit that parents control their children under a cloak of love. This is confirmed by Gillies and colleagues who find that parental support may carry potential overtones of control and obligation (2001). Certainly, for foster carers, loving the children provides a route to happiness and thus makes life meaningful. Giddens (1991) discusses the project of the self whereby individuals reflexively chart and rework their own life course and destiny. This requires an autonomous, discreet, rational being. Foster carers are

possibly working with a different notion of self and a different project. Theirs is a relational self based on interactive qualities, continuously formed in connection with, and seeking emotional and physical empathy with, each individual fostered child (Jordan, 1993).

Jamieson (1998), reviewing the literature on intimacy and parenting, considers whether motherhood necessarily involves a loss of sense of self. She quotes a US study of single mothers by Lewin which concludes that women who intend to have a child avoid any supposed loss of individualism because it is motherhood by choice. This is certainly the position of foster carers who volunteer to look after the children of others. They do this because the foster children confirm moral value and give the carers, they believe, more than they can give the children - a meaning for life and a sense of family.

Furthermore, there is evidence that this encompasses men as well as women. Although in most foster families it is predominantly the female carer who takes the lead, it is important to note that twenty male carers were interviewed for this research. Five of the male carers consider themselves as taking the lead role, not always in the daily care of the children, but in all formal negotiations with the social service department. They choose to fulfil the more bureaucratic, if not dominant "professional" role, within the public domain - as demonstrated, for example, in studies on parental involvement in schools (Lareau, 1992). But of particular significance is that all twenty male carers have views about fostering. The majority do not distance themselves but speak about the involvement of their own feelings. They are not solely concerned with their paid employment and their careers; work is important but when making work related decisions they take into account their caring responsibilities for the fostered children. Although most of them perceive themselves as occupying a supporting role, their lives have been significantly compromised by foster care. Several of them have made employment and social changes, actively adapting their work days and their home lives for the sake of the foster children. None of them suggest that they have done this for birth children. They do this because looking after foster children offers them a special relationship. There is much evidence in the transcripts of male carers' sense of connectedness with the children and their belief that all foster children need close intimate ties with both female and male carers. Some of this resonates

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with the findings in Lewis' (2000) review of studies concerning fatherhood; there are men who give priority to the care of children.

But the children of others are problematic; they are public children with specified rights. They do not map onto the traditional notion of dependent children. Foster carers nonetheless expect a reciprocal bond with them but all of this is compromised because they are not "ordinary" but the children of others. This impacts onto and into the foster family household; it upsets notions of fairness and parity with the carers' own blood children. All children have different needs and although most families manage these in a manner which offers fairness, if not equality, this is not always possible with foster children. Foster carers have to constantly justify everything because foster children are different, they are bureaucratised children. Nonetheless most foster carers cope. They make sense of their worlds in order to provide for the foster children. They continue to seek to save the foster children because of their belief in a particularistic loving individual tie. In different ways foster carers construct the children of others and their care of these children as worthwhile.

Further questions for research.

This study is concerned solely with the perceptions and constructions of life-as-foster-carer. It does not include other perspectives - those of the parents, fostered children or of the social services and how any of these construct foster care and foster carers. These alternative frames of reference and important dimensions would help to more fully appreciate the foster carers' position. But had I not completely immersed myself in the foster carers' world I would not have comprehended so much of its particularities.

As the Methodology chapter demonstrates, my sample was selected from two groups of foster carers - those who are new to fostering and those with several years of experience. The analysis has not in the end identified any key differences between these two groups which might contribute to over-arching themes in sociological debate. I was looking for differences but analysis has revealed much in common. Most of the new ones reported experiences of the local authority which they described as unhelpful and unsupportive in their goal to look after fostered children. They also held similar views concerning

dilemmas of care and payments with as many of the male carers already changing their work routines in order to better suit the children. One of the purposes of the vignettes (see summaries in appendix d) was to note whether the two groups of carers, who might take a normative line in interview, would perhaps reveal a difference in personal practice. A search for diversity, possibly because of fostering experience or ethnicity or gender, has not demonstrated dissimilarity of perspective. Nonetheless, although the research sample is heterogeneous the study would have benefited from more information and analysis from cross cultural and inter-country comparison.

In the main, the foster carers in this study portray themselves as dedicated to their lives as carers and to the children that they look after. I am aware that I have therefore presented a preferred, possibly over-positive, version which may read as uncritical. Not all carers provide a quality service; there are many where the social services' perception is that the care of the children is substandard. A different analysis might have uncovered hints of this and generally this study would have been more complete had it included some foster families where a different commitment had produced alternative data. There were at least two adults whose care I might have criticised wearing my "professional" hat but the aim of this project and its analysis was to understand the many differing perspectives of the foster carers themselves. I have had to omit much but have endeavoured to explore common themes across a heterogeneous sample, whilst also paying careful attention to any divergent perspectives.

All of the foster carers in this study are registered with a local authority. The majority receive only a fostering allowance for each child. Over recent years there has been a mushrooming of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) which not only pay their carers a fee as well as the allowance but, in theory, treat the carers as professional partners and provide practical round-the-clock support services. Sellick's recent review (1999) of information on IFAs notes that "these foster carers felt themselves to be valued, respected, trained and supported". They may therefore position themselves very differently within the child welfare service and have a divergent concept of self and of an ethic of care.

Another area for further analysis is the research finding on the commitment of the male foster carers to the children. Male parenting is too often depicted as a social problem - absent fathers, men who either work long hours or who do not support their children, (Lewis, 2000) or even abuse the children, rather than the social strength that the majority of these male carers' transcripts suggest. Recent work by Gilligan (2000) argues for their role to be given greater attention. The issue of gender with regard to caring is an important sociological area with social policy implications that deserves further work.

Indicators for policy and practice.

Children in the care system are a relatively small group. A study by Barnardo's (1996) notes that they account for less than one per cent of their age group but are massively over-represented among those young people who become disadvantaged. Between 50% and 80% of care leavers are unemployed, whilst 75% have no academic qualifications. 38% of young prisoners and 23% of adult prisoners are care leavers. Buchanan's (1993) examination of the data from the National Child Development Study suggests that children are disabled as much by the stigma of being "in care" as the actual context of being looked after.

The complex, multi-layered nature of this research data does not immediately offer straightforward policy recommendations for the foster care system. Nonetheless there are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from this study which have implications for policy and practice.

Life-as-foster-carer in this study holds an unclear location positioned on the edge of several boundaries, public and private worlds, neither volunteer nor colleague, not parent but more than carer. In life those who have one foot in each camp are secure in neither; theirs is a precarious existence. Policy makers need to note the foster carer's position - peripheral and excluded, lacking professional respect, marginalised from decision making and planning.

Foster carers are caught between two worlds which are constructed as increasingly divergent. This risks placing them where they are positioned as alienated. Policy makers and practitioners need to recognise this position - that it is deeply ambiguous. For most foster carers, their work only makes sense if they truly love the children. The foster carers' accounts challenge the discourse of social services.

In line with Triseliotis and colleagues' major survey (2000) of all Scottish foster carers, this study demonstrates the ways that foster carers perceive themselves to have been "othered" by social service staff. It may be that this contributes to their desire for intimate emotional attachments with the children and to their concentration upon the present. This can be in conflict with current established child care practice which is to understand the holistic child including his/her valuable past. This study suggests a risk that some carers are taking foster children away from their personal/blood contexts. Foster carers have a significant role with regard to the developmental needs of children but perhaps some are seeking to do so on their own terms, ignoring the fact that children have a past and a future independent of themselves. Best care for fostered children is normally considered to incorporate arrangements for them to see their birth families. Research, including this study, has shown that this is frequently an ambiguous, if not difficult, experience for foster carers (Schofield et al, 2000; Waterhouse, 1992). This thesis contributes to understanding the reasons for this. It is the fostered children that give meaning to the lives of some foster carers; this has powerful implications for contact with the children's birth families. This study indicates the risk of some foster carers, although accepting inclusive care arrangements, wanting this within an exclusive relationship. Social workers need to take account of this.

For the majority of children in public care fostering is a transitory experience. It is the role of the social worker to keep children in touch with their past and to work for its continuation into the future - and to work with the foster carers to this end. Although this study has not included children themselves, the work of Brannen and colleagues demonstrates that fostered children regard their birth families as of central importance and as able to offer "their only chance of a 'proper family'" (2000:113); these perspectives may not map onto the notions of all foster carers. The child welfare service exists to serve

children who may therefore be experiencing very difficult paradoxes and ambiguities. Foster families are the social services' preferred substitute care for these children so foster carers are immensely significant.

But if foster carers are defining themselves as moral beings via the children's lives, they are not always viewing the birth parents in a neutral way. There is not a consistent positive belief in the importance of the children's birth families with encouragement to retain (where appropriate) emotional bonds. Perhaps, like the issue of payment, this is irresolvable; love is crucial and needs to be so, but this inevitably creates dilemmas.

Life-as-foster-carer is dominated by a set of understandings imposed from the public world into and upon their private one. Home is normally regarded as a refuge from this but foster carers must accept visitations from the local authority, possibly the child's birth family and health and safety inspections by the social services. There is also an expectation that social services are notified of any changes in the carer's private, personal life such as in employment or with domestic relationships. As a result this intrusion may in fact militate against those qualities of life that social services staff seek for children and which, initially, the foster families could offer. Foster care households are constantly under pressure because of the demands of professional caring and public accountability. Peace and Holland (1998), studying small care homes for the elderly, note the gradual changes: from domesticity to institutionalisation, from normalisation to specialisation, from informality to regulation, from risk to security, from personal to professional and from privacy to surveillance. All of this resonates with the position of foster carers. The foster home may no longer be "a (private) haven" since it must be open to intrusion and inspection which can be experienced as hostile. Social services bureaucracy can be experienced as so overwhelming that foster carers can easily become disenchanted.

As previously discussed, disenchantment in a hostile world encourages the need for individuals to have a primary meaningful bond. The active creation and sustaining of emotional relationships has become central to lives in the personal and family domain - a search for satisfaction and self-fulfilment through emotional connection and communication. Issues of someone "being there" are crucial to social support. It is by

being rooted and attached to someone who is concerned for that individual that children find their own identities through connectedness. But fostered children are bureaucratised children. They are not freely available and foster carers are reminded of the importance of emotional distance. The social services perspective asserts that "recognising that the idea that 'love is all you need' is out of date"[56] - perhaps without appreciating that, for the foster carers, love is absolutely crucial. Thus the foster carer's love, via a particularistic tie, may sometimes be in conflict with the legitimate role, which is to look after a child for a finite length of time, since frequently they want to "own" the child.

This study raises important, and critical, questions concerning the importance of the work that social workers do together with foster carers. They must work in partnership in order to provide properly for the children. To be able to do this social workers must have the abilities and skills to understand the lives of foster carers. Research by Schofield and colleagues (2000) indicates uncertainty on the part of social workers in relation to foster carers and children in long term placements. Social workers are reluctant to advise foster carers and feel incompetent about giving guidance on behaviour management. This therefore resonates with the findings of this study which identifies the need for a child welfare service that values its foster carers in order to support and work with them. The gaps in social worker practice that Schofield identifies could detrimentally affect the children. Foster carers perceive themselves as rescuing children from both their birth families and the social services. Children are placed with foster carers for their own protection. Child protection is understood to also include protecting the identity needs of the children, as laid down in both the 1989 Children Act and also the European Rights of the Child. Harding (1991) points out that relationships between parents and children are more appropriately construed in terms of love and care rather than rights and duties. But foster carers are not parents. In the private world of the family, where an ideology of love and care triumphs, a denial of the appropriateness of the concept of rights can lead to injustice and exploitation. It is the right of each child to have information and knowledge of his/her birth family. There may be times when foster carers, because they love the children and wish to save them, may undermine the children's loyalty to their birth

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[56] NFCA (1999) – internal memo.

families. Social workers must understand foster carers and their need to love the children. Loving the fostered child may not fit with the local authority's prescription for "caring". This may have the effect, ironically, of heightening the disjunction between the world views of the foster carers and the social services staff.

But, conversely, it may be difficult for foster carers to care, in a bureaucratically acceptable way, for the children that they need to love. The change of nomenclature (and therefore attitudes) from foster parent to foster carer may have been for solid reasons but, paradoxically, at possible cost both to carer and to child. There may be consequential effects to the quality of their care as foster carers shift their perspectives and their behaviours in order to understand the importance of the birthparents and to ensure that the children retain their connectedness with them.

Not all children retain links with their birth families. The current government is committed to a 40% increase in adoptions out of care by 2005 (Department of Health, 2001b). It is worthy of note that the two government documents most relevant to the foster carers are the 2001 new Adoption Bill and the 1989 Children Act. Both refer to foster carers as "foster parents"; in official literature they are afforded elevated status. Foster carers have a central role in the preparation of children for adoption and may need more support in managing their role from the local authority social workers.

Social workers also need to recognise that foster carers have their own children. This study suggests that, in some families, the blood children of the foster carers are additionally marginalised by their own parents' lives-as-foster-carers. Local authorities provide a service for all children in need but many are ignoring the needs of the "children who foster." Some may also not be recognising the contributions of the men who foster. Their importance and relevance as men-as-foster-carers is dismissed because local authorities over-focus on the particular ambiguities around risks of allegations (Gilligan, 2000). Dominant ideologies concerning home, family and caring may mean that social services staff automatically relate to female carers to the detriment of both the male carers and the fostered children.

Conclusion.

My aims in this research project have been several. Firstly I have sought to bring into the research world the understandings of the foster carers so that they can be seen as people in their own right and therefore as significant participants in research. Additionally, I have aimed to acknowledge their importance as active agents and recognise their distinctive perspectives. This is essential if they are ever to make their own progressive impact upon public debate in the social policy of foster care. Although the study has demonstrated the pluralities of experiences and meanings it has also identified some common themes - the overlaying of the imperative of caring and of mothering and, for the carers in this study, that their view of self is crucially bound up with the children. Their statement that they aim to "save" children by changing them is extremely powerful and worthy of note. Their attachment to the children can prove to be both empowering and disempowering; they may feel powerless but are not always constructed as such by birth parents and the local authorities. Although there is no obligation in the 1989 Children Act for social services staff to work in partnership with foster carers, this study suggests that more attention should be given to this area.

This research also addresses Berridge's challenge that "foster care remains an under-researched provision" (1997:3). He notes the "insufficient qualitative research" and a need for "focusing in detail on the dynamics of foster households .... in which carers' perspectives (are) explored" (ibid page 80). This study contributes to an ongoing process to theorise foster care in order to locate it within a wider frame of reference. The over-arching key themes identified are the central importance of the children to foster carers' sense of self, of intimacy and meanings of "family." It has endeavoured to understand the foster carers' perspectives and positionings with regard to the theories of care and of boundaries of public and private domains and thereby make a contribution to current sociological debate.

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Appendix a
GLOSSARY.

accommodation - a service by the local authority to enable a child who is not under a care order to be cared for away from home. This is a voluntary arrangement. Parents keep all responsibility for the child.

approval of carers - foster carers need to be approved by the local authority before a child can be placed with them.

assessment of carers - a process that involves collecting information about the prospective carers and their family before agreeing that they are able to care for other people's children. Police and health checks are undertaken and two personal referees are interviewed by social workers.

break down – disruption, unplanned ending to a foster care placement.

care order - a court order that places the child in the care of a particular local authority.

child's review - a meeting, usually twice a year, to assess the effectiveness of the plans for the child.

contact - there is a duty on local authorities to promote contact between children who are being looked after and those connected with them irrespective of whether they are accommodated by voluntary arrangement or the result of a court order.

bridging placement – preparing a child for a new family.

disruption – unplanned ending to a foster care placement.

family placement worker - assesses the carer, the family and the home and manages financial and other resources.

foster carer's review - an annual review to check that the carer and the household continue to be suitable.

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fostering panel - group of formally constituted people responsible for the registration of foster carers.

long term placement – agreement that child will remain with the foster family until either independent or ready to move to supportive lodgings to prepare for this.

looked after - the term used for all children cared for by a local authority, whether this is by voluntary arrangement or because of a care order.

monitoring - there are legal requirements that specify the minimum arrangements or the support and supervision of foster care placements by the local authority. These set out the minimum frequency for visits to the child and the requirement to give advice to the foster carer.

permanency – this can either be a long-term placement or an adoption.

placement - a term used to describe where a child goes to live eg in foster care.

public care - where the local authority is involved in the upbringing of a child.

remand schemes – foster carers who take children placed by the Youth courts before final sentence.

respite care – regular, part-time care of a child eg one week-end each month.

safe care training – training for foster carers on how to keep the child and the foster care family safe from abuse and the family safe from false allegations of abuse.

short term placement – agreement that child will remain until other arrangements can be made.

social worker - manages the care planning process and liaises with the carer about the child's needs.

Appendix b
INTERVIEW GUIDE.

AIM

1. to use as open ended approach as possible so as to enable foster carers to raise those fostering issues that are of most concern to them.
2. this research is about the foster carers; their experiences of; what it has changed and not changed for them.

INTRODUCTION

1. Explain research; much already exists on fostering/social policy, virtually nothing on foster carers' own perspectives and how fostering fits with/ affects their lives overall.
2. Confidentiality. Will be written up but in anonymous way.
3. Tape recording; tape to be sent to the foster carer.
4. Any questions re research from the foster carer?

SECTION 1.

LIFE HISTORY

To start with can you tell me a bit about your background and your own childhood.

Do you have a clear memory of how you first heard about fostering? Can you tell me about your life at the time you thought about fostering yourself.

Looking back, what do you think you expected fostering to be like.
What made you decide to apply?
What did you expect to be good about it.
What did you think might not be so good?
Did you have any anxieties about it?

In general; what has your fostering history been like?
"You must be mad to foster" - how do you explain what's in it for you? Why do you stick at it?

When people are new to parenthood they often feel that their lives have been taken over. How is it in fostering?
What happens to your sense of self? Are you still a person?

SECTION 2: PRESENT SITUATION.

It is helpful to know about the nitty-gritty of daily life.
Can you tell me about yesterday.
Was that any/ very different from usual?

Do you think of yourself as a foster carer or as a foster parent?
What are the differences?

What sort of person makes a good foster carer/ parent?

What skills does a really good foster carer need?
Do you have an image of the ideal foster household?

What is the downside of fostering - the more negative side?
Are there differences caring for birth and fostered children?
How are the fostered children's lives different from your own/ other children's lives.
How do the lives of fostered children compare with your own as a child?

Are fostered children part of your family?
Are foster families different from other families? How?

Does being a foster family affect other settings?

Working with others; which others?
How is this managed?

CHECK LIST

1. Is it/ was it as anticipated?
2. What was unexpected?
3. Were the rewards from taking the children into your home what you anticipated when you originally applied to foster?
5. Unexpected benefits?
6. Unexpected pitfalls?
7. How did you manage? What helped you to manage? (people, life experiences)
8. Would anything else have helped you to cope better?
9. Expected and unexpected differences to self/ couple/ immediate family/ extended family/ life-style?
10. What have you enjoyed most? liked least?
11. Contribution by partner?

SECTION 3, VIGNETTES.

SECTION 4.
1. What advice would you give new foster carers?
2. Anything else that we haven't covered?
3. Anything else you would like to emphasise?

SECTION 5, DEBRIEFING.
1. How was the interview?
2. Any questions?
3. Choose own pseudonym?
4. Partner available for interview?
5. Contacts - who foster in a significantly different way from yourself?
6. Leave questionnaire, with SAE.

Appendix c
VIGNETTES.

Experienced carers were asked in response to each one –
1. What should they do?
2. Has anything liked this happened to you?

New carers were asked –
1. What should they do?
2. What would you do?

1. DAVE AND MARGARET

Dave and Margaret have two daughters aged eight and six years. They foster teenagers, short term and currently have Zak (14) who is likely to be with them at least a further five months until the end of the school year. Social Services need an emergency placement for Katy (14), who was with them for several months a year ago. She fitted in well with the family but was very demanding of individual attention. Katy has especially asked to be looked after by them.

They could squeeze a bed into their daughters' room, but have had experience of "emergency" placements lasting several months.

2. MIKE AND ANN

Mike and Ann have two children, Stephen 13 and Jerry 15 years. They foster under fives. They have had Rachel for 15 months - since she was nine weeks old. She arrived underweight, failing to thrive and clearly neglected. The local authority care plan is that an adoptive family should be found for Rachel. Rachel's mother has visited her many times and Ann is certain that she (Rachel's mother) cannot meet her needs. Rachel's mother is opposing the social service department plan as she wants her back. Ann's evidence to the Court is vital for the social service department's application that Rachel be freed for adoption.

Both boys are playing in a school concert. The night before Ann gets a message that the Barrister needs to see her urgently the next afternoon as she will be needed in Court then. This will mean missing the concert.

3. DON AND BARBARA

Don and Barbara's boys are aged 10, 11 and 13 years. They are fostering Neil who is eight. He has been physically and sexually abused. Against all the odds he has settled well with them and is now accepted at the local school as a full time pupil - even though he can never be "reasoned" with. His social worker is delighted, believes that Don and Barbara have wrought "a miracle" and wants Neil to remain permanently with them.

By chance Don and Barbara discover that Neil is provoking and bullying their very sensitive 11 year old. Neil is regularly hitting and punching him. Their son knows that he must not retaliate but his life is being made difficult. Barbara is very committed to Neil who is strongly bonded with her.

4. CHRIS AND VIV

Chris and Viv are delighted when Chris's boss asks them to be Godparents to his first child and accept with some pride. When the invitation arrives for the Christening it includes their two birth children but not the two they foster - who have been with them for over three years.

Chris' boss knows that they are foster parents.

5. JIM AND SUE

Jim and Sue are hosting a large family Ruby Wedding celebration for Sue's parents. They are planning a lunch which will probably last well into the afternoon. All Sue's relatives and their children are coming. It is important for everyone that the day is a success.

Jim's and Sue's current foster child, Kirsty age 12, is involved. She is very fond of Sue's parents. A few days before the party Kirsty's parents telephone her and announce that they intend to visit at 3 o'clock on the afternoon of the family celebration. They rarely visit her so she is delighted.

Kirsty's father is an alcoholic. There will be a lot of wine and beer at the party.

6. PETE AND HAZEL

When, after eight years of marriage, Pete and Hazel found that they could not have children of their own they decided to foster. They have had sisters, Toyah and Petra, for almost six years. It is a long term, permanent placement. Toyah has always been very attention seeking. Hazel has invested a lot in them both, Toyah in particular. She loves them dearly.

Recently Toyah told her social worker that Pete had been "beating" her. Both girls were removed for the investigation. Pete could not work for anxiety. Hazel could not sleep or eat. Eventually the Child Protection Team decided that the allegation was false.

Toyah and Petra telephone Hazel every evening to ask "When can we come home?" The Social Services say that they can return at any time.

Pete says that, if they return he will find it difficult not to distance himself from both girls - Toyah in particular. Hazel cannot bear to think of the girls as unhappy.

ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO THE VIGNETTES.

Although all the vignettes were put to each foster carer in interview in practice not all of them addressed each one as they talked, for example, about similar situations.

1. DAVE AND MARGARET – request for an emergency placement.

Experienced carers: (22 responses)
Eight of them had taken children in emergencies only to find that there were no real care plans in existence and that the 'short stay' became longer than anticipated. These carers, whilst knowing that they would do it again since refusal would invoke guilt, stated they would advise new carers to refuse such placements. Two carers hoped that they would now feel better able themselves to do so. Five would consider first the needs of their current household and discuss the situation with everyone concerned. Seven foster carers just accepted extra children as part of life-as-foster-carer.

New carers: (25 responses)
For six of the carers this was not a hypothetical situation – they had already accepted unplanned placements and insisted that they would not repeat this mistake (though as yet had not experienced the pressures that the experienced carers knew at first hand). Ten others discussed how they would first carefully consider the needs of the current household and take a decision based on this. Eight felt sure that they would accept the child whilst one said she would seek further advice from her support social worker. In fact it would most likely be that person who would encourage her to accept the placement.

2. MIKE AND ANN – court or concert?

Experienced carers: (21 responses)
Four protested that this was a typical situation where social services exploit foster carers but reached no decision. One carer explained that she had had this situation and had managed to change the legal appointment in order to keep her family appointment. Two insisted that it was "family first" whilst the overwhelming majority, fourteen, either put up a token resistance or straightforwardly explained that the court appointment for the needs of the foster child was paramount. Those in two partner households pointed out that the male foster carer could attend the concert with several explaining that this was a regular occurrence, even if the male carer lost wages because of this.

New carers: (25 responses)
Two carers insisted that the court must reorganise – without any experience of the impossibility of this. Two carers tussled with the dilemma without resolution. Four others

would attend the concert – one commenting that it was "unfair". The other seventeen readily agreed to attend court. It is likely that they would all in fact attend the court.

3. DON AND BARBARA – foster child bullying birth child.

Experienced carers: (20 responses)
Five carers' experiences of such situations meant that, in future, they said that they would want removal of a bully. The other fifteen foster carers (some of whom had also experienced similar situations) talked in terms of doing all they could to manage a challenging child and only reluctantly, and in some cases with a feeling of guilt, request removal if all else failed.

New carers: (23 responses)
One carer didn't know how she would resolve this dilemma. All of the others were certain that they would try to manage the situation and only in the last resort disrupt the placement. Like the experienced carers they accepted responsibility for the child and his behaviour.

4. CHRIS AND VIV – christening invitation

Experienced carers: (21 responses)
Six carers would try and negotiate regarding the foster children with only two suggesting that they would, if necessary, make alternative arrangements for the foster children. The other fifteen were assertive in their "all or nothing" statements.

New carers: (25 responses)
One carer anticipated that there would be occasions when she would have to make alternative arrangements for a foster child. The other 24 were certain that any child counted as a full family member and must be included in all family outings.

5. JIM AND SUE – clash of contact with an alcoholic father and a foster family party.

Experienced carers: (20 responses)
The majority of carers were certain that it was important that the foster child see her parents but concerned that she should not see him in a state of inebriation. Three would ask social services to reorganise the contact – although two recognised from bitter experience that nothing would be done. Eight said that they would accept responsibility for reorganising the contact appointment and deal directly with the parents. Nine carers accepted that both events would have to happen on the same day: three carers would try and either organise separate rooms or take the family to the nearest McDonalds whilst six were accepting of the parents attending the party.

New carers: (25 responses)
The majority of the new carers were generally receptive to parents visiting the children in the foster home. Three would expect the social services department to make alternative arrangements for this particular day whilst the rest accepted the responsibility. Five offered

practical help eg lifts to the family to another venue on the day, whilst two suggested making a separate room available to the foster child's family. Five would accept the presence of the parents at the family party. Only one foster carer thought that the party was of more importance to the child than her birth parents because it's 'also her family'.

6. PETE AND HAZEL - allegation

experienced carers: (18 responses)
In general this vignette caused many carers the most difficulties. Five of them came to no firm resolution – falling back on the advice that the couple should come to a joint decision. Two, with some experience of problems with foster children, blamed social services for the impasse. One carer, who had experienced an allegation and kept the child, recommended that the couple did not keep the children as there was a danger that the quality of caring would suffer. Four carers decided that the children should not be returned against the six who would take them back.

New carers: (24 responses)
Three carers felt they did not have the experience to recommend any resolution to this with another three certain that the couple should take a joint decision – but unable to do this for them. Five were torn between what would be best for the girls or best for the foster carers. Four advised that the girls be placed elsewhere with nine recommending that they be returned.

Appendix e
EXPERIENCES OF FOSTERING QUESTIONNAIRE.

This questionnaire is designed to gather some general details about you and particularly about your experience of being a participant in this research project.
Please complete Section 1, and Section 2 if you so wish.

SECTION 1 General Details

1.   Your date of birth   ....

      Partner's date of birth   ....…......

2.   Age at which you left school   ....

      Partner left school   ....

3.   Educational achievement(s)   ....………..

      Partner's ed achievement(s)   ....…………

4.   Your occupation (or last) if applicable

                                       ....

5.   Your parents' occupations

                    father   ....…………..

                    mother   ....…………..

6.   Partner's occupation (or last) if applicable

                                       ....…………..

7.   Is your house rented   .... owner occupied   ....

      How long have you lived in this house   ....…..

8.   If asked to describe which social class or group you would place yourself in, which would it be?
                    ....…..

9.   Also, which ethnic group do you place yourself in?

      ....

10.   How long have you been fostering   ....

11.   Which children are you approved for ....

      How many   ....

12.   About how many fostered children have you looked after

                                           ....

13.   Who is currently living here?

            sex   age   relation to self

14.   Do you ever help the SSD with foster care

            Recruitment   Yes / No

            Training   Yes / No

15.   Are you a member of -

            a local Foster Care Association   Yes / No

            a support group   Yes / No

SECTION 2   The Research

This section is about your own experience of being a participant in this study.

13.   How would you describe being a participant in this research project? (for example you might like to include your thoughts on the interview, the researcher etc).

14.   If you would like to add anything further, please do so.

15.   Finally, **thank you** for **your** involvement in this study as without you it would not have been possible. If you would be interested in receiving news of the findings - which won't be for some three years - please tick here .... and add a contact address.

Experienced carers:

Isambard and Olivia Bridges were aged 51 and 49 at time of interview. He has a university degree whilst Olivia had commenced study with the Open University. Isambard does part time lecturing and Olivia is a local JP. They have adult birth children and two adopted children. Over 19 years they have fostered 19 children in all age ranges and most types (short term, long term etc). They are currently registered for two children, any age. Isambard is very proactive in formal fostering affairs whilst also being very involved with the day-to-day care of the children. He described himself as middle class and she described herself as working class.

Arthur and Yvonne Daykin were aged 67 and 68. Yvonne fostered with her first husband so has been involved for about 30 years. She married Arthur eight years ago. They both left school at 14 years. Yvonne filled in the questionnaire for both of them. She has had little paid employment whilst Arthur worked as a Site Foreman for the MOD but is now retired. Yvonne has both birth and adopted children from her first marriage. Arthur has no children. She has lost count of the number of teenagers, many with their babies, that she has looked after and prepared for independence. They are registered for three teenagers. Yvonne described them both as middle class.

Ruth Charles was aged 44. She is divorced with two children, one of whom is still studying and living at home. She left school at 15 years and took employment as a picture framer. She has fostered for almost 12 years and looked after some 50 young children (placed before their tenth birthdays). She is registered for two children who, until recently, had all been short term. She currently has one boy, short term, and another long term. Ruth described herself as working class.

Brian and Tricia Hale were aged 48 and 47 years. Both left school at 15 years with GCE qualifications at Ordinary Level. She took clerical posts and he trained as a chef. They have three birth children and an adopted child. They have fostered for 21 years and cared for 55 children. Brian ensures that his work offers hours that enable him to be at home in order to help Tricia during the day. They are registered for three children aged under five years and have cared for many babies who have gone on to adoptive families. Many of the very young children that they look after require nursing care and Tricia has fostered three terminally ill babies to their deaths. They both described themselves as middle class.

Stan and Laura Lewis were aged 54 and 47 years. Laura and her siblings had experienced institutional care as children which Laura described as abusive. Stan had retired from his job as a dustman because of health reasons. Laura did shop work before her first child was born. They have two birth children and either three or four adopted children (they could not remember if the fourth was actually legally adopted but definitely considered her as "theirs"). They have fostered 68 children and currently have four long term teenagers. Current legislation only permits registration for three – there has to be an official "exemption" for any others. They both described themselves as working class.

Ali and Khanm Shah were aged 47 and 45 years. They both came to this country, independently, from Pakistan. He was a manager in the hotel industry, now retired through ill-health. She has never worked outside the home. They have four children who are all high academic achievers. Registered for three children they have been fostering for almost five years and cared for about 20 short term children. Ali Shah described himself as "high class in Pakistan" but left the section blank on his wife's form.

Stuart and Hanneke Penny were in their early forties. She has two daughters from a previous marriage and together they have a young son. Stuart had himself had a very positive experience in foster care as an adolescent and Hanneke's family had fostered at home in Holland. Stuart works long hours in banking in the City. They had commenced by doing respite care but this is now interspersed with short term fostering. They have fostered for five years and looked after six children. They did not return their form.

Meg Page was 65. She had left school at 16 years and enjoyed a varied career in the Forces. She has a married son from her first marriage, and has twice been widowed. She applied to be a foster carer on the death of her second husband – seven years ago. She is on a fee paying specialist scheme and looks after more challenging teenagers. She has cared for four lads and one girl. She describes herself as working class.

Grace Moore was aged 60 years and from the West Indies. She had worked all her life in the Care sector – primarily in hospitals. Divorced, she has four adult daughters. She has been fostering for five years and looked after five children. She asked me to complete her questionnaire for her and didn't know which category or for how many children she is registered. At time of interview she was being introduced to a twelve year old lad in a children's home with a view to him moving in long-term with her. She declined to describe which class she placed herself, explaining that this was "personal".

Clive and Kelly Collings were aged 34 and 37 years. He has no formal educational qualifications and is employed as a butcher. Kelly completed her City and Guilds Art Fashion Course and then worked in the Care Sector with children, the elderly and those with disabilities. They have no birth children. They have been fostering for seven years and are approved for three children – both short term and long term. They have cared for six children (long term) and currently have living with them Nathan, their first foster child now age 22 years and two younger boys. Kelly is registered on a specialist fee paying scheme. Clive declined to be interviewed. Kelly describes herself as working class.

John and Ann Field were aged 46 and 42. They are both graduates. He is a developmental engineer and she works from home offering a free lance marketing consultancy service. Ann's family are Austrian. John and Ann have no birth children and approached the local authority with a view to applying to adopt a child. In the event they have become long term permanent carers to two brothers who have been with them just over six years. They are registered for this placement only, which they refer to as "quasi-adoption." John described himself as middle class whilst Ann chose "professional".

Jackie Rowe was in her late 50s. As a child she was herself fostered for a period of some two years which she describes as a very positive experience. She has four adult children and only her youngest son (26) is still at home. She is divorced. She has been fostering for nineteen years and prepared over thirty young people for independence. She is registered for three teenagers and is always full. She did not return her form.

Harry and Celia Stevas were aged 40 and 35 years. They had both come to England from the West Indies to join their respective families. Harry left school at 16 years and been employed since then as a machine setter at the same factory. Celia's last paid work was as a Section Manager in a supermarket. They have three children of their own all still in full time education. They have been fostering for over five years and are registered for three children, aged under five years for short term placements. They had three children at time of interview and were considering keeping the nine year old long term (although outside their registration criteria). Harry did not complete the question regarding social categories. Gloria describes herself as "working-middle class".

New foster carers:

Richard and Mary Pole were aged 48 and 45 years. They were both self-employed. Richard in the building trade and Mary in the Care sector (provision of home help to the elderly). Richard has an adult daughter from a previous marriage. Mary has no children and has sought much medical help regarding this. They have had some previous experience on a local authority protected landlady scheme for adolescents but have only been registered foster carers for a few months. They are currently caring for their fourth child. This six year old boy has two sisters cared for by Gordon and Emma Buchanan (see below) and the four adults organise care in school holidays etc around their various work schedules. Gordon did not return his form. Mary returned hers placing herself as middle class.

Keith and Mandy Grindley were in their late 40s/ early 50s at time of interview. He is in the police force and she is a qualified Nurse Tutor. They have two adult children. They had just become registered foster carers and had their first placement - a four year old who had been with them only a few weeks. I have no exact data on birth dates etc as their forms were lost in the post.

Alice Dodson was aged 29 years. She had been widowed for three years and has a four year old daughter. She investigated fostering as she had planned to have more children. She is registered for two children under four years of age and has had her first placement, age two years, for two weeks. She describes herself as middle class.

Margaret Barton, Dick Barton and Simon Martin. Margaret was aged 72, David 42 and Simon 39 years. Margaret and her husband (he was the local postman) had fostered when Dick was a child. As an adult Dick had helped care for two elderly relatives. When they died he and his widowed mother together with his cousin Simon set up home together in order to care for another cousin, Andy, who is in a wheel-chair. Dick describes his last occupation as a Manager (no further details); he was not in employment at time of interview. Simon, who attended a school for children with special needs, is employed as a Security Guard. Dick is the lead carer of the trio. They are registered for boys aged sixteen in order to prepare them for independence and have now had three lads over the past two years. They currently have a 16 year old with them. Margaret and Dick describe themselves as middle class and Simon describes himself as working class.

Harold and Kathleen Hawkins were aged 63 and 53 years of age. They both have adult children from their first marriages. Harold is a Company Director of his own successful enterprise and, over the years, Kathleen has done occasional office work for him. They have just become foster carers and have had their first placement, a six year old girl for four weeks. Kathleen returned her form noting, in response to the question on social category that "we are individuals".

Steve and Georgina Radley were aged 29 and 34 years. Both completed further education qualifications. Steve commutes two hours each way daily to work (IT industry) whilst Georgina works locally as a Sales Manager. Georgina has two daughters from her first marriage who spend alternate week-ends with their father. Steve has no children. They commenced fostering less than six months ago agreeing to give week-end respite care to an eight year old boy in boarding school. Within weeks it became clear that it was expected that he would spend school holidays with them. Just as they were trying to manage this the school announced that it was closing their boarding house and the expectation was that the Radley family would cope with the child full time. Steve describes himself as working class and Georgina describes herself as middle class.

Miranda Fish was aged 30 years with her own house. There was no indication as to the main source of her income. She is a single mother with a three year old son and is also a registered Child minder. Her own parents fostered and Miranda worked in the Care sector with children. Whilst at home with her parents she did week-end respite care for two small children via Mencap. She retired from this when her son was born and moved to independent accommodation. Miranda had just been registered as a foster carer for one child, age under five. She was waiting to be introduced to a profoundly brain damaged baby who would be placed with her short term prior to finding an adoptive family. Miranda wanted to foster because she wanted more children but felt that she could not afford to have any more of her own as she is having her son privately educated. She did not return her form.

Alfred and Frances Cole were aged 62 and 56. Both are graduates with professional careers who had been made redundant within the past twelve months. They have four adult children. They had past experience of looking after teenagers through their church networks. Although they had just been registered for either two teenagers or a mother and baby they had had to put their fostering career on hold as their youngest daughter had cancer and they needed to support her through treatment. Once this is completed they are fully determined to foster. Alfred describes himself as professional and Frances as middle class.

Daisy Dousadj was aged just 40 years. She and her Iranian husband met through their work in the hotel and catering industry. They have no birth children. They had only just commenced to foster and had looked after a series of single placements for week-end respite. Daisy was waiting to be introduced to a four year old girl with serious dietary problems who was likely to be placed for several months. Her husband was working away when I interviewed Daisy. When I contacted her to make an appointment to meet him she said that they were separated. I discovered several months later that he had returned to her and that they were both fully involved with fostering but I did not pursue the appointment. Daisy describes herself as working class.

Cyril and Janet Allen were aged 64 and 47 when interviewed. Janet had been a young single mother. She met and married Cyril when he was widowed with two children. Cyril now works for his son as a lorry driver. Until they commenced fostering Janet had worked in the village Working Men's Club. They were very new to fostering. Cyril's son had a child whose mother was unable to care for him competently. Janet had therefore taken the child in and applied to the social services to foster him. In the event he was returned to his mother's care. Janet decided that she wished to apply to foster anyway. Their first placement, a boy of seven years, had been with them a matter of weeks when I first met them. Janet returned her form describing herself as middle class.

Gordon and Emma Buchanan were aged 47 and 32. Gordon had previously been married and has an adult daughter. This is Emma's first marriage and there are no birth children. Gordon had previous careers in the prison service and in the Care sector but, at time of interview, was establishing his own office cleaning service. Emma is a qualified veterinary nurse. They had been fostering a few months - first two brothers for a couple of weeks and now two sisters (see entry for Richard and Mary Pole). Gordon had himself survived a very negative, abusive experience of foster care as a young child. Emma describes herself as working class whilst Gordon completed the question with "none".

Mo and Hope Zazemi were in their middle 40s. Mo is Iranian. Mo is a farm manager and Hope a Nursing Sister. They have two teenage birth children and because Hope wanted a larger family they investigated fostering. They live in a small farm bungalow so this meant that their two children had to share a bedroom in order to free one for a foster child. They commenced by doing week-end respite and had two small boys (separately) for week-ends. They were then introduced to Lindsey who is profoundly handicapped. Gradually the whole family became more involved with her situation and concerned about the amount of neglect they believed that she was suffering at the hands of her own birth family. This situation continued for several years. Eventually the social services department decided that Lindsey required permanent care and Mo persuaded his employers to extend the bungalow. I include Mo and Hope as new carers as their registration had only just changed from respite to long term. They did not return their forms.

Mike and Louise Jones were aged 32 and 29 years. He is employed in the Motor sport industry with a racing team and her last paid post had been factory work. They have three young daughters under ten years of age. They became foster carers because Louise would have liked more children and also because she was considering doing a social work qualification at some stage. They had had their first placement for some five months when I first met them. She was a 20 month toddler who had been physically and sexually abused. They reported that their GP felt that new carers should not be asked to cope with this situation. They both describe themselves as working class.

Lenin was in his late 30s/ early 40s. He is a divorcee with two children whom he sees regularly each school holiday. A shop floor trade union convenor in the past he was unemployed and on state benefits at time of interview but fully occupied with voluntary work. He saw an advert for fee attracting fostering in the local paper and applied. His ex-wife wrote to the local authority stating that she would not allow the children to ever stay with their father if foster children were present. The social services gave an undertaking that all fostered children would be removed in time for Lenin's birth children to visit as usual. He fosters on a specialist scheme which provides alternatives to custody for young people bailed by the Youth Court. When interviewed he had had his first lad, age 14, for only a few days. He did not return his completed questionnaire.

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