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Australian foster carers' negotiations of intimacy with agency workers, birth families and children

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INTRODUCTION

As of June 30 2012, there were 40, 962 Australian children on a care and protection order, meaning that, due to issues of abuse or neglect, they are unable to live with their birth parents (AIHW, 2013). Of these children, 34, 475 were on some form of order where guardianship is transferred from the birth parents to the state or to another party deemed to be the child's legal guardian (AIHW). A total of 43% of these children were living in a foster care placement, and 47% were living in what is classified as a kinship care arrangement (i.e., with a member of their extended birth family). The 15, 169 children living in foster care were living in one of 11, 664 available foster placements, meaning that just over half of all foster placements (51%) had more than one child in the placement (AIHW).

The figures above highlight the important role that foster carers play in the Australian child protection system in terms of providing long-term care for children who cannot live with their birth parents. Importantly, whilst the term 'foster carer' predominates in both the academic literature and public policy with regard to this population of people, ultimately the identity they inhabit is one of a parent who provides a loving and nurturing home to the children they are raising (Riggs, Delfabbro & Augoustinos, 2008). Importantly, however, whilst foster carers are indeed parents, they parent in the context of a statutory care system, one that is highly regulated. Furthermore, whilst current Australian child protection practice operates within a rhetoric of 'care teams' (in which government agency workers, foster carers, and healthcare professionals whose role is to support children are notionally treated as equal partners), in reality

such teams are typically lead by the government agency worker (given the fact that they are the legal guardian of children who are removed from their birth parents).

Previous research on the topic of foster family life has suggested a number of key areas that may be considered formative of foster family experiences. The first of these is the potential for abuse allegations to be made against foster carers by children in their care. Inquiries into abuse in care have suggested that abuse in care does indeed occur, and thus scrutiny of carers is warranted (Mulligan, 2008). However, ultimately such scrutiny leads to a culture of suspicion, one in which carers operate under the presumption of being guilty unless proven innocent. Male carers in particular indicate that they are especially scrutinised, and that this impacts upon the caring relationships they have with children in their care (Riggs, Delfabbro & Augoustinos, 2009). The following quote from Gabb (2008) highlights how this culture of suspicion leads to particular family practices that create a separation between children and carers:

In the areas of child welfare and non-familial (institutional) care there are clear guidelines on adult-child, carer-client bodily boundaries which delineate the parameters of in/appropriate behavior and intimate conduct. For example, in a guidance booklet on 'safer caring' written for the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, it is recommended that foster carers should not touch a foster child in ways that could be misconstrued; this includes cuddles and kissing goodnight. Carers should enter the child's bedroom only when asked

and male carers should always be accompanied by a female adult in

such 'private spaces' (p. 86).

Interview research with British foster carers demonstrates the impact of this type of guidance upon the everyday lives of foster carers, as the following quote from a participant in Nutt's (2006) research indicates:

Last Sunday morning at half-past six my granddaughter 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 my wife gives me a nudge and I have to get up so that I'm not in the 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.* (emphasis in original, p. 88-9).

As this quote would suggest, rules governing what foster carers should and should not do are often highly gendered. This impacts not only upon the relationships that male carers are able to form with children in their care, but also the distribution of physical and affective labour amongst foster carers in heterosexual relationships.

The second area indicated by previous research to be of concern to foster families in terms of their negotiations of home life is the often ongoing role of birth families in the lives of foster children. Unlike is the case in closed adoptions, in the case of foster care in Australia it is typically court ordered that children should have ongoing connections with their birth families. For foster carers, however, such connections can be experienced as undermining to the placement,

and this has been cited as one risk for placement breakdown (Delfabbro & Barber, 2004). Whilst it must be acknowledged that a small number of studies have indicated that some foster carers manage to negotiate positive and supportive relationships with birth families (e.g., Gardner, 2004), such examples are most definitely in the minority. Instead, carer/birth parent relationships are often shaped through antagonisms or negativity.

The third area relevant to foster families that appears in the previous literature relates to interactions between government agency workers and foster carers. As noted above, given agency workers serve as the legal guardians of foster children (as representatives of the relevant state or territory minister for children), it is unavoidable both that foster carers engage with agency workers in regards to key decisions, and that ultimately agency workers hold the power to make decisions. This imbalance between agency workers and foster carers – despite the rhetoric of 'care teams' outlined above – means that foster carers have often indicated in previous Australian research that they are the most vulnerable party in interactions with agency workers. Blythe, Jackson, Halcomb and Wilkes (2012), for example, highlight this point well when talking about the experiences of their sample of Australian foster mothers:

> Unlike other members of the foster care team, foster carers do not have access to departmental files. This meant other members of the foster care team potentially had access to highly intimate details of participants' lives, whereas participants had little to no knowledge of theirs. This intimate knowledge inequity left participants feeling an unequal member of the foster care team (p. 248).

Previous UK research has suggested that one of the ways in which foster carers attempt to minimise these feelings of being an unequal member of a care team is to befriend agency workers:

> Discussions also included discourses of 'friendship' with social workers as indicative of being valued: 'She's like one of the family'. Historically, the quest for friendship was often linked to voluntarism, 'exclusive' fostering and neutralization of the social worker's supervisory role, although friendship and hierarchy among work colleagues are not mutually exclusive (Kirton, Beecham and Ogilvie, 2007, p. 11).

As Kirton and colleagues note, however, developing friendships with agency workers is no guarantee that power imbalances will reduce. Furthermore, they note that in many instances agency workers actively resist befriending foster carers, under the assumption that this would compromise their objectivity. Nonetheless, and as the two quotes above highlight, the agency worker/foster care worker relationship is not easily encapsulated by a service provision model, as it would appear to exceed this to incorporate other aspects of care relationships such as friendship or intimate knowledge (at least on the side of one of the parties in each instance).

This overview of previous research on foster families - with a focus on issues both within the foster family (i.e., the potential for abuse allegations), and in interactions with birth families and agency workers - suggests that foster carers face a unique range of demands upon them as parents involved in creating

supportive and nurturing families with children in their care. Yet despite this range of unique demands, and taking into account the non-normative relationships that carers may have with other people with whom they are not in a caring relationship but with whom they may interact on a highly personal nature (i.e., agency workers and birth parents), it is nonetheless important to emphasise as per above that what foster carers and children in long-term placements are creating are families. As Gabb (2008) suggests, it is important to "conceptualise families as affective spaces of intimacy within which meanings and experiences are constituted by family members in an historical socio-cultural context rather than in accordance with naturalistic understandings of reproductive and/or socialisation function" (p. 64). In other words, what needs to be emphasised are both the legitimacy of the claims to family that Australian foster carers make (see for example Riggs, Delfabbro & Augoustinos, 2008), and the contexts in which such claims are made (i.e., a statutory child protection system).

The present paper takes up this need to legitimate foster families as well as recognise the unique demands they face by exploring accounts of intimacy amongst a sample of Australian foster carers. In emphasising intimacy, this paper is both mindful, as per above, of how intimacy in foster families is highly regulated, but it nonetheless seeks to ask what types of intimacies are still possible, and how they occur. Importantly, rather than simply repeating the concerns about intimacy raised above in previous research, the analysis provided below attempts to extend our thinking about intimacy in foster families by considering aspects of intimacy that are often left unspoken, but which it is argued may have a vital role to play in terms of both recognising the legitimacy

of foster families, and encouraging more productive interactions between all involved in the lives of such families.

METHOD

Participants

The human research ethics committee of the author's institution granted approval for this research. Participants were 85 foster carers recruited via flyers circulated through both formal (i.e., agency case workers) and informal (i.e., social networking) channels. 65 participants were in a long-term relationship. Of these, 45 were heterosexual relationships, 15 were lesbian relationships, and 5 were gay relationships. The remaining 20 participants were not in a relationship. 10 of these identified as heterosexual, 5 as lesbian and 5 as gay. All of the participants were caring for children in long-term arrangements, with the range of length of placement being between two years and 15 years. Participants were caring for children aged between six months and 18 years (the average age was six), and were caring for between one and five children (the average number of children cared for was two). All were non-indigenous carers raising non-indigenous children. Of the sample, 40 participants were raising both foster children and children born to them or their partner. The remaining 45 participants were solely raising foster children.

Procedure

A flyer calling for participants raising children in long-term care arrangements was circulated as per above. The flyer emphasised the category 'foster families', and stated that interviews would cover topics such as relationships with birth families and agency workers, family making practices, support experiences and needs, and motivations to care.

Upon agreeing to an interview, participants were provided with a full information sheet and were asked to sign a consent form. Interviews were semi-structured in nature, and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Interviews were typically conducted in the participant's home, though some interviews were undertaken by phone. Most interviews involved only one participant (75 of the interviews), but for 10 interviews both members of a couple were present. Questions in the interview schedule relevant to the present paper include variations of 'Are you aware of the possibility of allegations made by children in care', 'How do you experience interactions with agency workers', and 'How do you engage with birth families'.

All interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were allocated to participants at this stage, and any key identifying information mentioned in the interviews removed.

Analytic Approach

All interview responses that pertained to the questions outlined above were extracted from the full data set and entered into Leximancer, a qualitative data

analysis programme that identifies trends and patterns utilising word sequence matching. There were a number of key topic areas that appeared in the data that are not analysed in this paper. These include a lack of support from agency workers, negative perceptions of birth families, and accounts of child abuse allegations against participants and their outcomes. These topic areas are not analysed in this paper as they are all topics that have been covered extensively in previous literature (as outlined in the introduction to this paper). The topic of intimacy - the other salient area that appeared in the data and as analysed in this paper - was evident in the use of words such as 'love', 'loving', 'cuddle', 'presence', and 'personal', and sequences such as 'care relationship', 'best connections', 'within our family' and 'within our house'.

Having identified this topic of intimacy, all interview responses pertaining to the questions above were then re-read by the author to identify any additional extracts that touched on similar issues but did not necessarily contain the key words. A final sample of 60 extracts was identified, with 30 of these relating to the question of potential abuse allegations, 15 relating to birth families, and 15 relating to agency workers. Due to limited space, only four illustrative examples for each of these three topics are included in the findings below. These three topics are presented as themes that highlight the specific ways in which concerns about intimacy appeared within the interviews in response to the three interview questions outlined above.

Theoretical Framework

Whilst the findings reported below are both exploratory and post hoc, they are nonetheless guided by the overarching theoretical framework of intimacy in care relationships. In terms of foster care, only one paper was identified that specifically addressed the issue of intimacy. The work of Rees and Pithouse (2008) provides a similar post hoc analysis of data collected with UK foster carers, and emphasises how intimacies are negotiated between foster carers and children. Different to a large degree from the present paper, however, the findings presented by Rees and Pithouse focus primarily upon how foster carers negotiate physical touch within a broader context where carers are subject to considerable scrutiny, and where a discourse of risk reduction prevails.

Looking more broadly, there is a substantial body of research on the topic of intimacy, offering a divergent range of theoretical frameworks. Gabb (2006) summarises these in terms of four main areas: 1) traditional research on intimacy and family functioning, 2) theorising of the democratisation of relationships, 3) research on how intimacy is embodied, and 4) theorising of the intersections of public and private life. Of these four, the latter two are of perhaps most relevance to the present paper in terms of offering a theoretical framework.

In regards to the embodiment of intimacy in practice, Zelizer (2005) has argued that whilst historically it has been the case that individuals are presumed to engage in intimacy either for love or for money, in contemporary western societies the two are closely interconnected. Much debate has occurred over whether or not foster carers are on the side of love or the side of money in terms of their care provision, but recent writing on the topic has similarly acknowledged that the two are inseparable (Kirton, 2001). Importantly in this

regard in the Australian context, foster carers are not paid a salary for their role, but rather are remunerated for their expenses. By contrast, agency workers are fulfilling a paid role that is seen as distinct from a caring relationship. The work of Zelizer, however, suggests not only that intimate forms of carework – such as that undertaken by foster carers – is likely facilitated by adequate remuneration, but that the 'public sector' work of agency workers need not solely be understood within a business model. In other words, as a child's legal guardian, agency workers too are engaged in a caring relationship with children, and by implication with those who are parenting them. Whilst research by Kirton, Beecham and Ogilvie (2007) summarised earlier would suggest that some agency workers resist entering into close relationships with foster carers, Zelizer's research would suggest that this maintains a false distinction between love and money, potentially to the detriment of engaging with the productive capacity of the intimacies that arise as a result of the shared care work that agency workers and foster carers engage in (a point explored in detail in the third theme reported below).

Turning to writing that has theorised the intersections of public and private life, Jamieson (1998) has argued that whilst differing forms of intimacy work may occur in business relationships as compared with family relationships, the distinction between the two is to a large degree artificial. In terms of foster care, researcher such as Nutt (2006) have argued that treating family life as private and working life as public fails to comprehend the location of foster carers who live very public private lives (i.e., their family life is subject to considerable scrutiny). Jamieson's theorisations of intimacy suggest that the distinction between private and public life is driven by an investment in mapping

a binary of emotionality versus rationality onto the two spheres, a binary that again underplays how intertwined the two are.

The analysis presented below engages with and extends the theoretical frameworks elaborated here, both by demonstrating their applicability to the example of foster care, and by highlighting how a consideration of intimacy in the context of foster care can extend our thinking about the binaries of love and money, public and private.

ANALYSIS

Impact of potential abuse allegations on family intimacy

As the research summarised in the introduction to this paper would suggest, it is perhaps unsurprising that abuse allegations were a common topic amongst participants. What separates out the extracts identified as part of this first theme, however, is that they were different to generic talk about the pragmatics of abuse allegations (which typically involved discussing what the allegation was, how it was dealt with, and what support was offered). Unique to the 30 extracts that were identified as part of this first theme was the fact that participants emphasised the impact of *potential* abuse allegations on intimacy within the context of the family. For the majority of extracts (75%) this impact related to the carer-child relationship. For the remaining extracts the impact was upon the relationship between two carers in a couple relationship.

In the first extract below, the participant had spent considerable time in the interview outlining their awareness of the scrutiny of foster carers within the child protection system, and how they negotiate this. The participant then went

on to speak about the impact her foster son's behavior had upon her two daughters to whom she had given birth:

> Interviewer: How do you deal with that possibility that abuse might occur within your family?

> Gina: I am hyper vigilant. I don't even walk out into the garden to put rubbish in the bin without taking note of where everyone is, and making sure I tell my daughters where I'm going. So it's kind of always there, and that makes it really hard, I find, to be a really loving, embracing parent to him, with that threat and that fear always hanging over my head. I find that certainly gets in the way of me being openly loving and treating him like my own child, because to me he's also a threat to my girls, do you know what I mean, that balance is really hard.

This extract exemplifies a concern expressed by many participants who were raising both foster children and children they had given birth to; namely the possibility that a foster child might abuse a birth child. Many people emphasised the competing demands of wanting to connect with a foster child and encourage a sense of belonging, but needing to keep them at arm's length, and in some cases to quarantine them from the rest of the family, for the safety of all.

In a similar way, and as the following extract demonstrates, participants were also constantly aware of how *their own* behaviours could be construed by foster children, and that this resulted in modifications to household behaviours

that were often at odds with the desire to connect with a child:

> Interviewer: What has the awareness of allegations you just
> mentioned meant for you in practice?

> June: I am absolutely paranoid. I am particular to ensure I don't go
> anywhere near the boys if they are having a shower, you have to be
> very careful. It's hard because when you get to know a kid you
> suddenly find you put your arm behind their back or whatever and
> that should be all fine – that is part of bonding and being a parent –
> but I still fear that at some stage it could be misinterpreted.

It is important to note here that many carers such as June spoke about staying away from children whilst they bathed. Yet in many instances these were relatively young children, who arguably need supervision and assistance in bathing. Again, then, there was a competing demand between protective practices (i.e., keeping a carer safe from allegations and a child safe from feeling their personal space violated) and the need to actively parent children in terms of safety. This echoes the findings of Rees and Pithouse (2008), which highlight the competing demands placed upon foster carers to both care for children in ways that help them to heal from previous abuse and form meaningful attachments, whilst at the same time keeping themselves safe from accusations.

Whilst the extract above expressing concerns about opposite gender children and bath time routines came from an interview with a female participant, for the most part such concerns were expressed by or about

heterosexual male carers, such as in the following extract:

> Interviewer: Have allegations ever been a concern for you?

> Sarah: It is interesting you raise that because with the adolescent girls we care for my husband basically will not be around them without me. That makes life quite difficult. One has had a history of making false allegations in a number of different arenas. But even if I am jumping in the shower, he will grab the dogs and run down the park, because of an innate fear of what is going to happen. If it weren't for me being in the picture, I know he wouldn't do it because of that reason. He loves children and wants to keep doing it, but that fear of being targeted. He is operating in a glass house at times because he is that concerned.

Many male participants or partners of male participants spoke about concerns over allegations being gendered, and specifically with regard to public perceptions about abuse in care (and abuse in society in general) being perpetrated by men against females. Whilst this is to a large degree an accurate reflection of abuse demographics within countries such as Australia, for male foster carers it had the effect of creating considerable distance between them and the children they were raising. This again mirrors Rees and Pithouse's (2008) findings, in that many of their participants indicated that the hyper-scrutiny of male carers resulted in them withdrawing from close relationships with foster children. Importantly, however, in the present research these concerns over

potential abuse allegations were not only gendered, but were also differentiated by sexual orientation, as the following extract suggests:

> Interviewer: You spoke before about being aware that children make allegations. How has that impacted upon you?

> Doug: I think it really changes how you relate to them, and to each other as a couple. It isn't so bad now, but early on I used to find we really monitored our behaviour in public spaces because people could look at us and say 'you shouldn't touch that child, you are not meant to cuddle that child or take him to the toilet if he has wet his pants, you are not meant to do that because you are a foster parent so you could be doing whatever'. Once I had our child sleep in bed with us because he was so sick and I was so scared of his breathing and my partner said I shouldn't do it and he actually went and slept in another room.

In this extract a gay carer talks about his partner's awareness of how other people might view co-sleeping with a male child. Of note in this particular extract is how concerns over intimacy resulted in changes to the relationship, in addition to isolating one of the men from the child. As was the case in many of the extracts, the behaviours that were concerning for participants were those that could be classed as 'intimate' – bathing a child, co-sleeping with a child, being alone in a room with a child. Importantly, however, outside of the foster care context these behaviours are often seen as a normal part of parenting, and

not a cause for concern. For many participants, by contrast, familial intimacies with children in care were a source of stress.

The intimate presence of birth families

In this second theme, birth families were spoken about as an intimate part of everyday foster family life, even if that intimacy was non-normative. The intimacy was non-normative in the sense that it is typically presumed that within the confines of the family home there is relative autonomy from outside parties. For many participants, by contrast, birth families were part of the everyday life of the foster family, even if they were not physically present, as the following extract demonstrates:

Interviewer: Do you all have the same last names or different?

Valerie: We are interesting as my partner and I each have our own surnames, the child I gave birth to has my partner's surname, and our foster children have their own surnames. Given there are more of them than the rest of us, the most common surname in our house is theirs [the foster children]. It makes their birth parents quite a tangible presence in our family, and even just the other day I had a letter from the school address to me as Mrs [foster children's last name] which took me by surprise as that is their birth mother, not me!

Whilst it is increasingly the case that many families are not comprised of people who all share the same last name, it is likely relatively unusual that the most

common name within a family would be a name associated with people who live outside of the family house. For this participant, then, her foster children's birth parents are a tangible presence within the house, and on a very intimate level (such as in receiving letters addressing the participant by the name of the birth mother). This daily, tangible, and intimate presence of birth families was mirrored in the following extract:

Interviewer: How do you support your child to feel connected to his birth family?

Mary: We have a photo gallery in our hall and also a table in the lounge with photos on it. They are of my family, my partner's family, our family in the house, and our child's birth family. Many people have questioned why we do that, and some have struggled with the idea of treating his birth family as part of our family in this way. It certainly was odd for me at first, walking past pictures of someone whom I don't know, but at the same time I feel a great responsibility to honour them, as without them we wouldn't have this family.

Whilst across all of the interviews this type of account of birth families was in the minority (with a greater majority of participants wishing to distance themselves from birth families), for this participant and others like her it was possible to reconcile the daily 'presence' of birth family members in the house by emphasising the need to honour birth families. Research conducted by Jones and Hackett (2011) has similarly found that some adoptive parents emphasise the

need to incorporate birth families into the adoptive family, even if at times this can be challenging. In the present research, these challenges often arose from trying to find ways to negotiate a place for birth families within the foster family in the face of assessments about the 'poor parenting' of birth families:

Interviewer: How do you engage with birth family issues?

Samantha: I guess there is the awareness that there's a birth family that we need to honor and respect, even if we don't like them, and even if it's inconvenient, or it's difficult. They're people that we need to keep active in our lives and keep in the forefront of the kids' minds, because we owe that to them that we don't destroy the links with their birth family any more than they've been destroyed coming into care. At the end of the day, they've made decisions that I think are poor, and I don't necessarily agree with any or all of the thing they've done, but we have a relationship because we share the parenting, you know.

This extract is important for the insight it offers as to the possibility of both having an opinion about another person's parenting skills, but still supporting their right to a connection to their child. This extract is also notable for the language it uses to reference intimacy between foster carers and birth parents, namely the idea of 'sharing the parenting'. This is an issue that will be returned to in the discussion section below, and one that suggests a radically different way of thinking about caring relationships between multiple parties in the context of the child protection system.

In the final extract included in this theme, the participant shares another non-normative example of how someone largely outside of the family has a personal impact upon the foster family dynamics:

Interviewer: What does it mean to have birth parents as a part of your life?

Tom: We have always been very committed to ensuring best connections. This took an interesting turn recently, where one of their birth mothers passed away. Given all of our children have different birth parents, it was a challenge to support him through his grief, but also acknowledge that grief is not shared by the rest of us. So we were at the funeral of a woman we don't know, and having to talk about her to him in caring ways even though we didn't know her.

This participant highlights the complexities of the carer/birth parent relationship, which cannot be easily kept on the sidelines at times of crisis. For this participant, a commitment to 'best connections' extended beyond supporting the child to attend access with his mother, and encompassed engaging on an intimate level with her life. This type of non-normative intimate engagement highlights the complex location of intimacy within the lives of foster families, an issue further demonstrated by the final theme.

Awkward intimacies with agency workers

As is the case for all of the themes addressed in this paper, it is intuitive that relationships with agency workers would be salient. Not simply because the topic of agency workers was an interview question, but because foster carers parent in a relationship with the state, of whom agency workers are the representative. In this theme, however, a focus on the topic of intimacy extends beyond what has been covered by much of the previous research on the topic of interactions with agency workers, and addresses the awkwardness that is produced by the fact that agency workers are strangers to foster carers, yet are the legal guardian of foster children, and hence can often be a semi-regular presence within the personal spaces of foster families.

As was noted in the first theme in regards to the gendered nature of abuse allegations, the discussion of what are termed here 'awkward intimacies' with agency workers was gendered such that female participants were much more likely to share this perception than were male participants, regardless of sexual orientation (80% of all extracts in this theme were from interviews with female participants), as the first extract below demonstrates:

Interviewer: How do you experience interactions with agency workers during access visits?

Anne: So often there has been an access visit arranged and a strange, often young, man will present at my door to pick the baby up. I will have to invite them in, talk to them about the child as though we know each other, and then hand the child in their arms. It is such an awkward experience, I think both for me and for them.

As this participant notes, the handing over a child is an intimate act, one normally shared by people who are both engaged in caring relationships with the child, and in many cases will have some form of caring relationship with one another. In the case of agency worker and foster carer, however, in many instances those who undertake transporting children for access (if a carer is unable to do this) may well be a stranger to both the child and the carer. For some participants there thus appeared to be a form of intimacy evoked by these interactions that was both highly non-normative, yet had become a part of their everyday life, as the following extract indicates:

Interviewer: How have you experienced interactions with agency workers?

Donna: It is weird. So often I sit with these strange men in my house, on my lounge, drinking my tea, and as a single woman it feels so unusual. I have to disclose so much about myself, and sometimes it feels too close, too intimate. And then they get up and leave and go to the next person, and you are left feeling really out of place in your own place.

What is so striking about many of the extracts grouped under this theme is the evocative language. In some places the words used to describe the 'awkward intimacies' between agency workers and foster carers would not be out of place in a romance novel or a dating website. Part of what this suggests, then, is that

the distinction between public and private is fundamentally unable to account for interactions between foster carers and agency workers. Instead, what the extracts in this theme highlight are the ways in which carework in the context of statutory child protection necessarily involves a set of complex intersections between the parenting practices of foster carers, the job role of agency workers, and the need for both of these to come together to facilitate the best possible outcomes for children in care.

For some participants, as above, there was a physicality to the intimacy (i.e., handing a baby over, sitting with someone on a couch), whilst for other participants, such as is evident in the next extract, the intimacy was more ephemeral:

Interviewer: How do you experience interactions with agency workers during access visits?

Tamara: You know I have to say this first off, that having a child returned to you smelling of the worker's perfume can be so disarming. And then it trails through the whole house. It is something normally I would think of as being something intimate – the smell of another person – but this is someone I don't know, but who has held my child.

This extract usefully highlights the subtle ways in which typically assumed boundaries between one person and another are dissolved in interactions between foster carers and agency workers. In this case the impact of this appears to be felt most strongly by the participant, yet as is discussed in the conclusion to

this paper, acknowledging the dual effect of such awkward intimacies upon both agency workers and foster carers may help to open the door to new ways of thinking about the relationship between the two.

Whilst the following and final extract represents an exceptional and extreme example, for some participants the boundaries between public and private were so blurred as to become problematic for foster carers:

Interviewer: How have you experienced interactions with agency workers?

Mark: We once had a worker who used to just come around to talk about what she was upset about in her personal life. One day we were sitting in the lounge room on the couch and the next thing we hear is a 'hi how are you going' and she walked in through the backdoor through the kitchen and into the lounge and said 'I thought I would come around for a chat' and sat down and talked about her boyfriend because he was annoying her.

Whilst it must be noted that this type of account from a participant was rare, it was nonetheless not the only such account. For some participants, agency workers were at times unable to draw a boundary between their own personal lives, and their interactions with foster carers. This is an issue that obviously raises practice concerns, but more broadly is emblematic of how intimacy functions for *all parties* within the foster carer/birth parent/agency worker triad.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented above illustrate the complex interactions Australian foster carers engage in that in some way or another evoke notions of intimacy. Following Gabb (2008), this paper has shifted focus away from intimacy solely as the physical and psychological touching of bodies and the production of this within the context of normative familial relations, and has instead sought to examine how intimacies occur in the most unexpected places: where foster carers make a place in their homes for birth families, and where agency workers and foster carers engage in 'awkward intimacies'. Importantly, the point here is not to over exaggerate these issues, nor to sexualise them in any way. Rather, the point of this paper has been to draw attention to aspects of intimacy in the context of foster families that are typically left unsaid. It is perhaps obvious that some of the experiences reported above would occur, given the fact, as Nutt (2006) notes, foster carers provide a service "within the private domain [that then] becomes public property" (p. 19). What disappears in this account, however, is the fact that foster families perhaps exemplify the fact that the private/public binary is always already illusory, as Jamieson (1998) has argued. In other words, whilst it is readily apparent how the private becomes public in the context of foster families, it could be suggested, as Gabb does, that all families are to a degree public, and vulnerable as a result.

With these points about the public/private distinction in mind, it is important to consider what the findings presented in this paper can tell us about foster carers' interactions with the world around them. In regards to interactions

with agency workers, and with the rhetoric of the 'best interests of the child' in mind, the awkward intimacies reported here might be usefully evoked to consider how the child themselves is factored into the equation. If it is acknowledged that the sole reason why agency workers and foster carers may experience awkward intimacies is because they come together in the care of a child, then how might this be harnessed for the benefit of the child? Whilst it might seem something of a stretch, it is analogous, as Blyth (2012) and her colleagues do, to compare the state and its representatives with fathers post heterosexual divorce, and foster carers with mothers post divorce. In this analogy, one party provides the primary care giving, and the other party negotiates an ongoing care giving and supportive role. The analogy is not intended to over exaggerate any intimacy between agency workers and carers, not is it intended to treat as commensurate the carework of foster carers (which is poorly remunerated but which for many people is accompanied by love for the child) and the work of agency staff who are paid a salary and not necessarily expected to have an emotional connection to the child. Rather, the analogy highlights the fact that foster carers and agency workers are both engaged in the life of a child, and that such engagement requires collaboration and respect, rather than relegating each party to entirely distinct and separate spheres.

Kirton, Beecham and Ogilvie (2007) suggest that one reason why agency workers may refuse closer relationships with foster carers is due to the potential for abuse allegations. In this instance, their participants suggested, agency workers need to be impartial parties who can undertake an investigation. Yet the question that must be asked in this regard is whether impartiality is the only way of undertaking investigations. Research with foster carers suggests that when an

investigation occurs, is it the clinical objectivity and lack of sharing of information that typically occurs that can result in some carers terminating a placement, even if the allegation is not substantiated (Wilson, Sinclair & Gibbs, 2000). This would appear to indicate that it is the act of objectification that is the point of concern, rather than the right of the system of investigate. In other words, foster carers accept as part of their role the fact that they are open to investigation, and that the level of care expected of them is higher than of most other parents. Foster carers are thus aware that investigations may occur, and that this is part of being transparent and helping to ensure a system that is not corrupt or abusive to children. Yet there is a difference between being aware of the potential for an allegation to be made, and being prepared for the level of objectification that typically accompanies it. Again, viewing both agency workers and foster carers as shared parties in the care of a child may facilitate other ways of thinking about investigatory processes. It could be argued, following Zelizer (2005), that the distinction between love and money exacerbates the problems associated with abuse investigations. If agency workers are only seen by foster carers as doing a job, then their actions may be read as clinical and objectifying. If, however, agency workers are seen as people also involved in caring about children for whom they are legal guardians, then their investigations may be seen not just as part of their job, but as part of how they demonstrate that care.

Of course abuse allegations are not only made by children. They are also made by birth parents (amongst other parties). Partly this may be due to a perception amongst birth parents that their children may be returned to them if a foster placement breaks down. Another possible motivation to make allegations may be a sense of antagonism or hostility that birth parents perceive

from the child protection system. Whilst a negative view of birth parents may at times be warranted in terms of the abuse they have perpetrated, if the goal for children in care is either reunification with birth parents or the best possible connection with them (if they cannot be reunified), then there must be a point where a shift is made towards a more positive account. Obviously there will be instances where positive interactions are not possible between birth parents and foster carers, but one possibility suggested by the data reported in this paper is that there are many, subtle ways in which positive relationships can be fostered. What is required, then, is for foster carers to be supported to undertake the work of relationship building, a task that again requires considerable co-operation between agency workers and foster carers. Again, this reiterates Zelizer's (2005) point that separating out love from money fails to comprehend how the two are intimately intertwined. Working with birth parents from a starting place of best connections requires both the skill of agency workers and foster carers, but also the care they both show in being willing to find ways to reconcile past abuses by birth families with a desire for ongoing connection.

In terms of both limitations of the present research and implications for future research, it is important to acknowledge that the participants were not invited to specifically speak about intimacy, and that the data are only one cohort's perspective on the issue. It will be important for future research to speak with other stakeholder groups about what it means to share the care of a child in the context of statutory child protection. It will also be important that future research attempts to determine if in fact what is reported in this paper is about the ways in which foster families represent themselves publically (i.e., to an interviewer), and whether this differs from the actual practices of foster

families. This is not to suggest that participants decried abuse in their interviews but were in fact abusive. Rather, the point here is that foster carers are indoctrinated into very specific ways of accounting for their interactions with children in their care. That they do this when they speak about their family to other people may thus reflect little about the actual caring relationships they engage in. By contrast, an ethnographic study might capture differences in modes of engagements between when foster carers hand a child over to an agency worker at an access visit, as opposed to when they hand the same child over to a friend of family member. The suggestion here, then, is not that the aim of future research should be to 'catch out' foster carers voicing the rhetoric of 'protective practices' but not following through with this. Rather, the point is to increase our understanding of the healthy and productive ways in which foster families negotiate intimacy.

To conclude, the findings presented in this paper add to existing literature demonstrating that long-term foster carers are indeed parents, but that they negotiate their parenting role and identity in a statutory child protection system that comes with considerable constraints. The findings also usefully extend previous research and theorising in the field of intimacy by further demonstrating the fallacy of the binaries of love/money and public/private. How agency workers, birth families, and foster carers negotiate these binaries, and the implications of these negotiations for the lives of foster children, must be a topic of ongoing investigation.

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