

# Step forward? Step back? The professionalisation of fostering

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**Abstract:** This article examines the long term if uneven trend towards professionalisation in foster care, within the contexts of theoretical debates on professionalisation and contemporary policy in relation to looked after children. While the professionalising trend has been driven by a number of powerful factors within foster care and by broader societal and policy developments, it remains contentious due to the hybrid nature of foster care straddling the domains of 'family' and 'work'. Various aspects of hybridity are explored including its implications for motivation, training and differentiation among foster carers. While broadly supporting the professionalisation of foster carers, not least as a measure to tackle their exploitation and its gendered nature, it is argued that hybridity requires a delicate balance to be struck and maintained in order that further professionalising measures do not undermine the personal and familial aspects of foster care that are crucial to its success.

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## **Introduction**

The past three to four decades have witnessed a clearly discernible, if uneven, trend towards professionalisation in foster care, although as we shall see, this term is both controversial and open to different interpretations. While the discourses of the professional domain have been widely used in the fostering literature, there have been few attempts to critically examine these discourses or locate them within wider theoretical frameworks (Corrick, 1999; Wilson and Evetts, 2006). This article seeks to build on this body of work by reviewing relevant developments and debates while considering their implications for foster care. Following a brief historical overview and outlining of theoretical perspectives, an account will be given of the principal 'drivers' of professionalisation. Attention will then be focused on some of the 'wicked issues' associated with the hybrid nature of foster care as 'family' and 'work', before a concluding review of contemporary policy developments and future prospects.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the diverse and contested meanings of the 'professional' – including its signification of quality, discipline and dedication, detachment, and being paid. In relation to occupations, it has long carried two rather different meanings, the first marking the boundary between the professional and the amateur or volunteer, the second distinguishing between occupations (Freidson, 1988). Both are relevant to foster care, though to date, the former more so than the latter.

## **Historical background**

The historical use of the term professionalisation in relation to foster care can refer both to distinct phases of pioneering change and the wider permeating effects of such changes. It is customary to trace the first recognised wave of professionalisation to the specialist schemes of the 1970s, led by the Kent Family Placement Scheme (Hazel, 1981; Shaw and Hipgrave, 1983). Focused primarily on 'difficult' teenagers, these schemes sought to extend the boundaries of family-based care, through the payment of fees, training and dedicated support from fostering social workers and collaboration with other carers to share ideas and provide mutual help.

During the 1980s, the boundaries drawn between 'professional' and 'mainstream' fostering became increasingly blurred, as criteria changed and features of the specialist schemes came to be more widely adopted throughout fostering services (Triseliotis et al 1995; Verity, 1999). There was also a sea change in attitudes among carers, with overwhelming opposition to payment giving way to clear majority support (Adamson, 1973; Rhodes, 1993). The blurring of boundaries led many local authorities to abandon or re-organise specialist schemes, but this prompted a second wave of professionalisation as some carers, notably in Kent, resisted such moves by setting up

their own fostering agencies. The rise of independent fostering providers (IFPs) has been rapid, growing in less than 20 years to around 260 in number and accounting for almost 20 per cent of fostering placements in England (Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2006; Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2006a). Core features of IFPs have been generous remuneration for carers and strong supports, often including therapeutic and educational services, out of hours provision and greater availability of respite care (Sellick, 2002; Sellick and Connolly, 2002). Due in part to the competition provided by IFPs, these features have been increasingly adopted by local authorities. However, despite these moves towards 'professionalisation', fee payment to foster carers is far from universal, with the Fostering Network (Swain, 2007) estimating that 40 per cent remain effectively unpaid volunteers.

The long-term trend towards 'professionalisation' can also be detected in the policy arena, where central government has become more directive, initially setting a national minimum allowance to cover expenses (albeit regarded as 'derisory' by fostering organisations) and subsequently endorsing fee payments in its Green Paper *Care Matters* (DfES, 2006b). These contemporary policy issues, including the progressive inclusion of carers within the children's workforce, will be discussed later in the article. The government has also supported new 'professional' ventures by adopting models of Treatment Foster Care from the United States of America (USA) and launching Intensive Fostering as a disposal for young offenders (DfES, 2006b).

## **Theorising the professional domain**

Early study of the professional domain revolved around an ideal typical set of 'traits', derived from established professions such as medicine and law (Johnson, 1972; MacDonald, 1995). Although the precise list of traits may vary, the core elements are usually those of specialised knowledge and skills, an ideal of service, license-based monopoly, autonomy, self-regulation and an ethical code (Wilensky, 1964; Moore, 1970). They reflect a tacit bargain between profession and state, whereby the former's skills, ethical practice and devotion to service are recognised by the latter in the form of licensed closure and significant self-regulation. The traits model has been widely used as a benchmark by which to gauge whether occupations merit professional status, with terms such as semi- (or para-)professional coined to describe those meeting some but not all of the criteria. Such epithets have been particularly applied to the 'caring professions' of nursing, social work and teaching, which have been depicted as lacking the necessary specialised knowledge base and autonomy for full professional status (Etzioni, 1969; Toren, 1972). The 'traits' model has also been used to study the process of professionalisation, with Wilensky (1964) for example, identifying the following 'stages' – becoming a full-time occupation, developing training and university based academic qualifications, forming professional associations,

certification, gaining monopoly and developing a code of ethics – noting that these have not always been traversed sequentially.

While early studies of the professions tended to accept the ‘service ideal’ at face value, this changed markedly in the more radical climate of the 1970s and with mounting ‘scandals’ shaking faith in the competence and ethics of professionals (Foster and Wilding, 2000). Invoking Shaw’s description of professions as ‘conspiracies against the laity’, a series of fierce critiques were launched from both the political left and right. Their common ground was the idea that far from the ‘service ideal’, professions were primarily concerned with power and self-interest, whether in pursuit of financial gain or their use of self-regulation to avoid genuine accountability. From the radical left, they were depicted as providing career opportunities for the privileged while upholding middle class, patriarchal and ethnocentric values (Larson, 1977; Hearn, 1982; Hugman, 1991). Thus, from a feminist perspective, it was argued that ‘semi-professional’ status could better be understood as reflecting male control over predominantly female occupations and a broader devaluing of ‘women’s work’ (Witz, 1992).

These critiques made issues of power and struggle central to the study of professions and professionalisation. ‘Traits’ were to be considered as strategic devices for ‘collective mobility projects’ (Larson, 1977), while conversely, employers might engage in de-professionalisation, through routinisation, bureaucratisation and other controls over the labour process, a theme taken up in relation to social work by various authors (Howe, 1986; Harris, 2002; Healy and Meagher, 2004). From a different vantage point, others have argued that the professional quest should be eschewed or reframed in order to bring workers into more equal and empowering relationships with their clients (Illich, 1977; Beresford and Croft, 2001). For their part, theorists of the new right have seen market disciplines, external and internal, and tighter management control as the remedies for unresponsive public sector professionals (Brewer and Lait, 1980; Clarke and Newman, 1997).

A further development in theorising the professional domain has drawn on the work of Foucault to consider professionalism as a disciplinary mechanism for occupational change (Fournier, 1999). This process works through ‘technologies of self’, encouraging workers to identify with the changes and engage in the required self-development and self-discipline (Aldridge and Evetts, 2003). Collectively, these theoretical perspectives alert us to crucial debates in study of the professional domain. Johnson’s (1972) description of the professions as ‘Janus-faced’ is still applicable today, with positive images of the ‘service ideal’ co-existing uneasily with more cynical interpretations of their motives and activities..

## **Explaining professionalisation in foster care**

The trend towards professionalisation in foster care can be understood as reflecting several factors arising from changes within foster care and wider contextual developments (see also Wilson and Evetts (2006)). The first relates to the perception that children and young people (hereafter shortened to children) in foster care present greater challenges than ever before. While such sentiments tend to recur in each generation (Adamson, 1973; Pearson, 1983), it remains the case that a higher proportion of looked after children have experienced abuse and neglect, and that the precipitous fall in residential care means relatively more challenging children being placed in foster care. A second relates to changes in the role and tasks of foster carers. Originating in moves from 'exclusive', quasi-adoptive fostering to working 'inclusively' with birth families and social workers (Holman, 1975), these changes accelerated following the Children Act 1989 and its philosophy of 'partnership' with birth families. Thereafter, carers became increasingly involved in contact arrangements and imparting parenting skills (Cleaver, 2000). There was also greater participation in the more formal aspects of the care system, such as attendance at reviews and planning meetings, keeping written records, 'assessing' children, undertaking life story work, or giving evidence in court. Third, foster carers have been subject to tighter monitoring and regulation due both to 'managerialism' and the 'audit culture' and measures to safeguard against child abuse (Kendrick, 1998). Fourth, the changing role of women in relation to paid work has generated pressure for fostering to provide an income in order to attract and retain carers, an issue to which we return below.

Pressure towards professionalisation has also come from foster carers themselves and their representative bodies. The Fostering Network (and its predecessor organisations) has consistently set out the case for a professional foster care service in manifestos (National Foster Care Association (NFCA), 1989; Fostering Network, 2004) and campaigning documents (NFCA, 1997; Tapsfield and Collier, 2005). It has also played a pivotal role in developing and promoting training programmes for foster carers, from the 1980s *Parenting Plus* through to today's *Skills to Foster* (Lowe, 1999). In relation to payments, the Fostering Network has surveyed local authority allowances against its own recommended minimum allowances, while arguing for reward payments to rest on carers' skills rather than on the difficulties of particular placements. The twin emphases on training and skills-based remuneration came together in the tiered *Payment for Skills* model in the 1990s (NFCA, 1993).

Wilson and Evetts (2006) argue that professionalisation has taken place largely 'from above', as a means of securing occupational change, and in Miller and Rose's (1990) phrase 'control at a distance'. The argument advanced here, however, is that this underestimates the part played by organisations such as the Fostering Network (and local associations) in creating pressure 'from below'. While the local histories have gone largely unrecorded, the Fostering Network's campaigns and activities have

promoted a clear and coherent vision of professional foster care and represented carers' aspirations to policy-makers. It has also provided specific proposals such as the *Payment for Skills* model which has been widely adopted by local authorities and effectively endorsed in the recent Green Paper (DfES, 2006b). Moreover, the Fostering Network has played a prominent role in policy formulation, for example in the development of national standards for foster care (UK Joint Working Party on Foster Care, 1999; Department of Health, 2002).

The professionalising trend in foster care can also be understood as part of a broader emergence, especially under New Labour, of the 'social investment state' (Giddens, 1998) with its targeting of welfare spending towards global competitiveness, and focus on early intervention to raise educational attainment and prevent anti-social behaviour (Fawcett et al, 2004). This focus has included efforts to professionalise groups such as childminders (Bostock, 2003) and play workers (Cameron et al, 2003). The twin concerns of investment and combating social exclusion create a powerful context for a focus on looked after children, who past and present, have been linked to a variety of social problems including educational failure, unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse, early parenthood and crime (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003).

The 'social investment state' has brought a blurring of the boundary between public and private spheres, with responsibilities shifting in both directions between state and family (Meyer, 2000; Daly and Lewis, 2003). This has included a general trend towards 'professionalisation' for carers and parents, comprising a mixture of setting standards and codification, provision of support, training and in some instances, financial incentives (Henderson and Forbat, 2002; Henricson, 2003; Gillies, 2005). There have also been moves towards recognition of 'lay expertise', manifest in ideas about the expert patient, the expert carer, or even, in the case of parents of disabled children, the role of lead *professional* (emphasis added) (Kirk and Glendinning, 2002. *Children Now*, 27.9.06, News, p.4). While it could be argued that such developments make it more difficult to distance fostering from 'ordinary parenting', they also facilitate recognition of expertise arising from close relationships rather than academic credentials.

Collectively, the factors discussed above have generated a strong and growing momentum towards professionalisation. However, this path remains a rocky one for a number of reasons, referred to here as 'wicked issues' to reflect their deep and enduring nature.

## **Professionalisation in foster care: The wicked issues**

### **Love and money**

The complex relationship between love and money has lain at the heart of many debates regarding professionalisation in foster care. Such debates revolve around two conflicting paradigms. One posits an essential contradiction between personal relationships built on emotional ties and the cash-nexus of the labour market. The influence of the latter is seen as corrosive, leading to an instrumental and impersonal approach to care work (Zelizer, 1997; Folbre and Nelson, 2000). However, it has been argued that this dualism is over-simplified and misleading (Land, 2002). For example, research suggests that rather than being reduced to the values of economic exchange, paid care work is often characterised by close personal relationships (Stone, 2000). Nelson (1999) similarly questions prevailing notions of 'self-interest' and 'mercenary motivation' in working 'for the money', suggesting that paid care work may be done to provide (necessities) for others. She also contends that the romanticisation of altruism rests heavily on gendered assumptions about women's self-sacrifice, and that its association with the private sphere may mask more complex motives and power dynamics (see also Pahl, 1989). Folbre and Nelson (2000) argue that 'commodification' is not simply a product of monetary exchange, but depends on the diverse meanings attached to flows of money, for example whether it is perceived as controlling or acknowledging.

The second paradigm sees no necessary conflict between pecuniary and non-pecuniary values and focuses on the incentive effect of remuneration and its capacity to 'value' activities. This may be expressed pejoratively, as in references to foster carers being paid 'less than it costs to keep a dog in a kennel' (Colton and Williams, 2006 p.115) or in more measured recognition of the importance of market values in our society (Triseliotis et al, 1995). Advocates of professionalisation may also ask why the concerns raised regarding foster carers' motivations are not applied to others working with children, for example social workers or psychologists (Verity, 1999).

Such arguments are persuasive to a degree, but do not entirely address the distinctive nature of relationships within fostering and the importance of carers' personal commitment, whether as an antidote to a bureaucratic and otherwise 'uncaring' system (Sergeant, 2006), or the development of attachments and possibilities of permanence (Schofield et al, 2000). Nutt talks of carers' 'vocabulary of emotionality' (2006, p.80) and how they constructed themselves as 'intimately connected to the children' (2006 p.74), regarding this as crucial in improving the latter's lives. This does not, of course, mean that commitment should be exploited or that foster carers should be financially 'penalised' for their importance to children. However, it does suggest that there are vital elements to fostering that may be at risk if professionalisation is implemented in a way that encourages 'calculative' approaches to care. However complex the term, 'altruism' remains an important part of foster care (Sinclair et al, 2004)

## Family and work

The location of foster care in relation to 'family' and 'work' is relevant to professionalisation both in its passage from voluntarism and its quest for the status of profession. In ideal typical form, these domains are assumed to operate quite differently, resting on emotional bonds and contractual exchange respectively. For foster care, this generates two competing benchmarks for comparison, namely those of 'ordinary (or adoptive) parenting' and residential child care. As in the case of love and money, however, these dichotomies can be problematised, especially in the light of feminist scholarship emphasising (domestic and care) *work* within the family and the importance of emotions within paid labour (Hochschild, 1983; Parry et al, 2005). The shift towards goal-oriented placements (e.g. reunification and so forth), the wide range of tasks outlined earlier and in some instances, therapeutic or treatment roles have drawn foster care closer to conceptualisation as 'work'. One obvious sign of the shift has been the change of nomenclature from foster *parent* to foster *carer*. In turn, this has been strengthened by attempts to resolve 'status' problems in areas such as taxation and pension entitlements (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, 2005). Meanwhile, at local levels, greater attention has been devoted to 'terms and conditions', for example paid holiday entitlements.

Yet despite this broad trend, it can be argued that foster care remains characterised by hybridity, not least because much of the 'work' of fostering is carried out in and through the family, with a relative absence of temporal and spatial separation. This, in turn, means that the normative 'privacy' of the family must be managed in conjunction with the bureaucracy and external surveillance associated with the care system. Particular challenges include how to treat foster children (perhaps with formal entitlements to pocket money or clothing allowances) and the carers' own children. (Kirton, 2001). Similarly, the impact of abuse allegations or risks associated with theft, damage, or violence from foster children or their families are likely to be experienced directly within the foster family (Nixon, 1997).

In the context of work, hybridity poses two distinct challenges. First, the boundaries between work and non-work are open to widely divergent interpretations. Oldfield (1997) calculated the former in terms of the 'additional' demands arising from fostering, estimating these at around 13-14 hours per week. Alternatively, foster care may be viewed as a '24/7' or '365 day' job, a stance favoured by advocates of professionalisation, but perhaps exaggerating the impact of a foster child's presence or pervasion of a 'work ethos' in the context of family life. A second related challenge is that of how foster carers see their role. Research findings suggest that rather than regarding parenting and job as alternatives, many foster carers draw simultaneously on both discourses. Thus, although typically at least two thirds of carers endorse the idea of fostering as a job meriting payment, they are still more likely to describe their role in terms of parenting than as a worker or professional (Hayden et al, 1999; Kirton et al, 2003).

Within this hybridity, there are of course, invisible boundaries surrounding 'family', perhaps most clearly apparent when placements or fostering careers are ended because of perceived adverse affects on family members, but also when foster children move progressively from 'outsider' to 'insider' status, permanence or even adoption. Irrespective of longer term outcomes, these boundaries are also important in terms of emotional integration and sense of belonging for foster children.

The relationship between hybridity and professionalisation is a complex one. Initially, the professionalising trend was focused on cultivating greater detachment, so that carers would be 'concerned but not possessive' (Parker ADD DATE, cited Adamson, 1973). However, the danger that detachment might mean a loss of emotional involvement and commitment has long been recognised (Dinnage and Kellmer Pringle, 1967) and is reflected in Nutt's (2006) call for 'detached attachment'. Achieving this is perhaps especially challenging in longer term or permanent placements where detachment might be seen as a barrier to the development of deeper emotional ties or when professionalism is associated with therapeutic skills and change.

### **Knowledge, skills and training**

As outlined above, the development of knowledge and skills are central to professionalisation, and in the case of foster care, this has been manifested in a steady growth in training (Lowe, 1999). Its content reflects both issues relating directly to foster children within the family and broader 'system' issues (for typical ranges of topics see e.g. Triseliotis et al, 2000, p.74-5 or Sinclair et al, 2004, p.112). Focusing initially on preparatory courses, this was subsequently extended to post-approval training. The first National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) for fostering was introduced in 1996 and qualification at Level 3 has become the widely accepted benchmark target for carers at national and local levels. Beyond this level, there have also been tentative efforts to develop qualifications linked to higher education (Sellick and Howell, 2003). Training has been important as a means of marking distance from 'ordinary parenting' and in turn justifying other aspects of the professionalising project, including remuneration, with qualifications often recognised financially, either directly, or indirectly as a criterion within tiered schemes

However, if training has become an established feature of foster care, its present scope remains limited, especially in relation to stronger professionalising ambitions. Despite expectations that all foster carers participate in post-approval training, attendance has been found to be highly variable, with relatively weak sanctions in the case of non-attendance (presumably explicable in terms of reluctance to lose carers or disrupt placements) (Farmer et al, 2004). Meanwhile, in relation to NVQ level 3, Tapsfield and Collier (2005) estimated that only 5 per cent of foster carers had attained this marker. Cameron and Boddy (2006) are also critical of what they

term the vocational-industrial approach of the NVQ and advocate moving to a more professional model represented by the social pedagogue, with its emphasis on skills underpinned by theoretical knowledge. This could, in principle, form the basis of training for at least some foster carers, but this remains a distant prospect at present. While research on the effectiveness of training is in its infancy, there is to date little evidence of a link between training and child outcomes although there may be indirect benefits in terms of feelings of support and engagement with fostering as well as retention (Minnis and Devine, 2001; Pithouse et al, 2002; Macdonald and Kakavelakis, 2004; Sinclair et al, 2004).

The hybrid nature of foster care may also give rise to tensions over the value placed on what Cameron and Boddy (2006) term tacit knowledge, derived from life experience and practice wisdom. Tacit knowledge figures prominently in recruitment and initial approval and arguably remains crucially important to successful fostering. It is therefore important both that formal training complements rather than undermines tacit knowledge and that capable carers are not unduly penalised due to lack of formal qualifications.

### **Professionalisation, homogeneity and differentiation among foster carers**

The professionalising trend relates not only to the broader parameters of foster care but its 'internal' constitution. To the extent that professionalisation reflects and reinforces distance from 'ordinary parenting', the diverse types of fostering generate pressures to differentiate between carers. Seen most dramatically in the distinction between 'professional' and 'mainstream' fostering, this is also implicit within tiered systems and in differences of payment and training requirements attached to particular schemes. Differentiation along an axis from family/voluntary to professional has also been seen as a means of accommodating carers with different orientations (Adamson, 1973; Hudson, 1999). However, there are also forces resisting differentiation, including a reluctance to create 'second class' carers or children, recognition of the unpredictable nature of placement 'difficulty', or notions that demands may be 'different but equal' (for example between short- and long-term placements).

Arguably the most vexatious aspect of differentiation has related to family and friends as carers (FFAC), an increasingly favoured placement option (Farmer and Moyers, 2005). Historically, FFAC have often been paid at lower rates (or not at all) but in recent times, the trend has been towards equalisation, driven by legal challenges to discrimination as well as broader advocacy for this placement option (Broad, 2001; Gillen, 2004). Equalisation, however, sits uneasily within a professionalising framework. Typically, the perceived strengths of FFAC are those of continuity, familiarity, attachment and identity rather than their 'generic' skills. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that many would not be approved as carers for

children outside the family (Wheal, 1999). Similarly, arguments for payment tend to emphasise opportunity costs and levels of need for FFAC, many of whom have low incomes (Waterhouse, 2001). It is also clear that many (probably a majority of) FFAC do not identify themselves with the professionalising project, including the requirement for training in order to look after a grandchild or understand the workings of the child care system (O'Brien, 2000; Tapsfield, 2001). The recent Green Paper (DfEs, 2006b) has acknowledged this uneasy relationship by proposing revision to assessment processes and support for FFAC to recognise the probability that they will only ever care for one child.

### **Professionalisation in foster care: 'Progress' and prospects**

The current state and future direction of the professionalising project in foster care can be considered both in terms of feasibility and desirability. Though it has a considerable history, the trend towards professionalisation has shown signs of acceleration. In pursuit of its aim of 'improving the number and quality of foster carers', the Green Paper (DfES 2006b) incorporates four main measures relevant to professionalisation. The first, and arguably most important is the proposal to introduce 'a tiered framework of placements to respond to different levels of need' (p.7). Despite this use of the language of need, accompanying references to corresponding fees, skills and career progression for foster carers all suggest that the framework will be very similar to the *Payment for Skills* model. Second, this is to be underpinned by a new qualifications framework, including the development of (foundation) degrees in foster care (p.49). A third proposal is that of mandatory registration for foster carers, and in that regard placing them on an equal footing with social workers and residential workers. Finally, inclusion of foster carers within the children's workforce is clearly endorsed (Campbell, 2005), including their possible treatment as 'key workers' for housing purposes. Even without additional funding for implementation, there is no doubting the shift away from voluntarism and it could be argued that professionalisation, in its 'occupational' sense, is clearly on the horizon.

In its second meaning, attaining the status of a 'profession', there is rather more, and more controversial, ground to traverse. Beyond the Green Paper proposals for (foundation) degrees, opportunities for foster carers arise from two sources: first the promotion of social pedagogy (see above); and second the weakening of traditional boundaries as commonalities within the children's workforce are emphasised (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003). However, there remain significant challenges in raising qualification levels from their current low base, including lack of entry qualifications, busy lives, career plans and turnover. At present, the prospect of a substantial 'graduate' element within foster care remains somewhat distant.

Autonomy and discretion are also important elements with the professional domain

and here foster care represents something of a paradox. On the one hand, carers have considerable autonomy in terms of day-to-day living and how to deal with their foster children. Conversely, however, this takes place within a framework where the major decisions are taken by others and even relatively minor decisions may be subject to bureaucratic controls (although there has been some recent relaxation in respect of carers' powers to approve foster children's overnight stays with friends). As Hugman (1991) observes, occupational claims are always judged in the context of the professional claims and status of other groupings and for foster carers, social workers are clearly the most important of these. Corrick (1999) has suggested that social workers' shaky professional status makes them more reluctant to recognise foster carers as professionals. However, it can be argued that the delegation of tasks (such as life story work or liaison with schools) may enhance social workers' professional status so long as they remain in supervisory charge (Triseliotis et al, 1995). In the absence of organisational and cultural change, narrowing any status gap between foster carers and social workers is likely to prove difficult, due to a mix of respective qualification levels, vested legal powers, historical legacy and the significant personal scrutiny to which foster carers are subjected.

Some of the challenges of professionalisation are catered for within a tiered model, which allows the more 'professionally oriented' carers to seek progression and arguably greater potential to participate fully within decision-making. In effect, it allows for differences, without the binarism of professional and mainstream. It is unclear at present, however, if specialist schemes such as those relating to remand, treatment foster care or intensive fostering will operate outside the tiered model.

The desirability of professionalisation in foster care clearly raises questions of 'desirable for whom?' and according to what criteria. The case for professionalisation and greater investment in the foster care system has a strong plausibility (Tapsfield and Collier, 2005), but is far from proven. Evidence of improved child outcomes has come primarily from evaluations of professional schemes with troubled adolescents (see e.g. Caesar et al, 1994; Chamberlain and Reid, 1998; Testa and Rolock, 1999) but it is debateable how far these findings might apply to other types of fostering. Wider research has identified certain carer characteristics - notably personal qualities such as warmth, resilience and empathy, or parenting styles based on encouragement - as ingredients for successful foster care (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987; Sinclair and Wilson, 2003; Farmer et al, 2004). To the author's knowledge, however, there has been no research relating such characteristics (or child outcomes) to professional orientations or levels of training. There is also need for research to explore the relationship between professionalisation and recruitment and retention, where the evidence remains limited and somewhat inconclusive (Waterhouse, 1997; Kirton et al, 2003). Similarly, despite the obvious sensitivities, there is a need for more research on children's perspectives on professionalisation.

Thus, in terms of securing improved performance, the proposed professionalising measures of the Green Paper still represent something of an act of faith. Beyond

government rhetoric, however, there is a strong case for professionalisation on grounds of social justice and gender equality. There is little doubt that historically the work of foster carers has been, and for many continues to be, exploited and that this work is still predominantly undertaken by women (Smith, 1988; Rhodes, 1993; Nutt, 2006). Setting aside debates regarding the transformation or reinforcement of gender roles, professionalisation does offer female carers some redress as well as representing a pragmatic adaptation to the social norms of working mothers and two income families. It remains to be seen, however, whether professionalising measures will increase the supply of families willing and able to take on what is both a very distinctive lifestyle and challenging work.

## **Concluding discussion**

Despite its unevenness, the professionalising trend within foster care over recent decades is unmistakable. An attempt has been made here to contribute to an as yet small, but growing debate regarding the professionalising process. While endorsing much of the analysis of Wilson and Evetts (2006), it has been argued here that their focus on change 'from above' under-estimates the part played by organisations such as the Fostering Network. This article has also emphasised the importance of wider policy contexts and the distinctive 'hybridity' of foster care.

In addressing the 'balance sheet' aspect of the article's title, professionalisation in foster care can be seen as a step forward in various important respects. First, it has been pivotal in the extension of 'fosterability', offering family experiences to children whose behaviours and emotional difficulties would once have precluded this. Second, it has played a similar role in work to improve the planning and goal orientation of public care, including the recent efforts to raise the educational attainments of looked after children. Third, the professional focus on performance has facilitated the development of a wide range of services and training provision to support such efforts. Finally, as discussed above, the professionalising trend can be viewed as adaptive to changing social norms and as reducing gender inequality and exploitation in fostering.

However, it is also possible to identify less positive aspects of the process. For some, this would include the demise of voluntarism, which might be seen, if only in an 'ideal world', as the preferred basis for fostering. Earlier discussion of the 'wicked issues' in foster care suggests that while hybridity permits the management of complex and often contradictory principles, it also entails delicate balancing acts. Both in policy and practice terms, there is a danger that over-emphasis on the professional domain, its rationale and requirements, may lead to a loss of the familial. This risk is heightened with increasing prescription and contractualism, whether rooted in 'terms and conditions' or orientation. In the words of one child 'It is not like a family.'

It's like a staff team' (Sinclair et al, 2005). As noted above, the idea that further professionalisation will improve child outcomes remains somewhat speculative. What is known, however, is that the personal qualities of carers and 'chemistry' involved in foster placements are crucial and should not be undermined. Professionalisation can take different forms and it is vital that it is implemented in a way that manages and nurtures the hybridity of foster care.

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