'Children out of place': Representations of foster care in the Australian news media

Damien W. Riggs, Daniel King, Paul H. Delfabbro & Martha Augoustinos

School of Psychology

The University of Adelaide

ABSTRACT

The provision of foster care in Australia has a long and contested history. These histories, along with current media representations of foster care, shape the ways in which the lay public understand foster care. Importantly, and where such representations are primarily negative, it is likely that foster care is not likely to be considered a viable option for many people seeking to engage in community work or to care for children. This paper provides an analysis of a sample of representations of foster care in the Australian news media, with a specific focus on the depiction of 1) foster children as 'lost children' who are 'damaged goods', 2) foster care systems and social workers as inherently damaging to children, 3) foster carers as primarily either inadequate parents, or good parents only in comparison with 'bad social workers'. The paper concludes by highlighting suggestions for future directions within media reporting of foster care in Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst the biological family unit is considered by many to be the environment best suited to meet children's needs, for many children this environment can be an unstable, unsafe or otherwise impossible living arrangement. Issues such as those relating to neglect and abuse, parental illness, criminal involvement, or drug and alcohol use can lead to children being placed in out-of-home care. As a result, and as Barber and Delfabbro (2004) suggest, the mark of a civilised society is its ability to protect and provide for those children who cannot live with their birth parents. In Australia, foster care is the preferred model for out-of-home care, and one that is promoted as providing a stable and supportive environment for children who cannot live with their birth families. Recent studies report that there are over ten thousand children living in foster care arrangements in Australia and that this figure has steadily increased over the last decade (AIHW, 2007). The high reliance upon foster care has been exacerbated by both the ongoing closure of residential facility across Australia since the 1980s, and the substantially low adoption rate in Australia. In 2006, there were just 568 children registered for adoption in Australia, and 71% of these children came from overseas (*The Courier Mail,* 2008).

The use of foster and institutional care in Australia has a long history. From the early 1800s, maltreated or neglected white children, largely taken from working-class families, were housed in alternative care arrangements, mostly institutional settings such as orphanages, or in some form of family-based foster care (Ludlow, 1994). Additionally, during the late 19th and early 20th century, large numbers of British children whose parents were deemed incapable of caring for them experienced forced migration to Australia, where they were placed into institutional

or foster care placements (ASCARC, 2001). Australian government reports on children who experienced such forced migration largely depict these children as lost – lost to birth families, lost across social contexts, and very much lost to themselves – what West (1999) terms 'children out of place'. Pierce (1999) argues that this notion of the 'lost' child has been pervasive throughout the history of the Australian foster care system. In his analysis of the narratives of children in alternative care, he demonstrates that the foster child is often described as the product of displacement, as significantly disadvantaged, even 'doomed'. Implicit in each and every 'lost child' narrative, he argues, is the sense that the child is locked in a kind of "stasis" (p. 51), wherein the child becomes trapped by his or her unknown whereabouts. Moreover, and as Ludlow (1994) explains, the notion of the 'lost child' often involves the construction of such children as constituting an 'inferior class' of citizen, which has at times resulted in the abuse of children in foster and institutional care (CARC, 2004)

Class-based distinctions between differing were prominent within many early narratives regarding the construction of children removed into care as 'lost children', and have arguably influenced contemporary feelings about children in out-of-home care. In many such early narratives, 'lost' children were considered the product of a 'broken' family. The centrality accorded to the white middle-class nuclear family through periods of significant social change (for example the World Wars) often meant that those families positioned outside of this location were identified as lacking. This was particularly the case for families who experienced divorce, or where domestic violence and/or child abuse occurred. The removal of children from these families was thus seen as a justifiable response to problems associated with

the family, rather than viewing such families in a social context that often failed to support them.

This discourse of the 'broken family', however, has perhaps been most evident in justifications of the theft of Indigenous children from their families and their placement in foster care with white families or in institutional settings with the goal of placement as indentured labor. As the *Bringing Them Home Report* (HREOC, 1997) clearly demonstrated, the discourse of the 'civilising mission' was widely deployed to justify the illegal removal of Indigenous children from loving families. As such, and whilst the Australian government has placed an emphasis upon similarities between the experiences of removal of white and Indigenous children (via the construction of all children who have experienced removal as 'lost'), the differences between the theft of Indigenous children as a component of genocide and the removal of white children into care (care that was, at times, abusive) are significant.

Current lay understandings of Australia foster care, and foster children more specifically, are thus very much shaped by awareness of these histories and the ongoing inquiries and public debates surrounding them. Current understandings are also shaped by the way foster care is represented by contemporary media sources, including newspapers, television, and radio (Wilczynski and Sinclair, 1999). With this in mind, the goal of this article is to provide an examination of the ways in which the news media currently represent foster care, including carers, social workers and foster children themselves. Specifically, the aim of this paper is to extend similar research conducted by West (1999) in the UK, which found that media representations of foster care, families, parents, and children may often serve to affirm negative stereotypes about the state and its treatment of foster children

and carers (in addition to stereotypes about foster children and carers themselves). Such negative stereotypes may have significant consequences for the ways in which they contribute to the widespread difficulties facing foster care services in the recruitment of foster carers by portraying foster care as an inherently negative experience.

By engaging in an analysis of Australian news media reporting on foster care collected over an eighteen month period, this paper contributes significantly to our understanding of the role that the media plays in the representation of foster care in Australia. Specifically, our emphasis is upon how foster carers, children, and social workers are represented as being potentially in conflict with one another, and how this perpetuates a particularly negative view of foster care systems in Australia. Whilst positive representations within the news media were identified in our analysis, and whilst the news media does hold the potential to engender positive social change in regard to child abuse (as we elaborate in the following section), it was nonetheless the case that the images of foster children and social workers in our sample were overwhelmingly negative.

MEDIA REPORTS OF CHILD ABUSE

The mass media is widely recognised as playing an important role in facilitating community education on a range of societal issues. Eldridge (2001) has argued that through the process of delivering information to the public, the mass media constructs and presents a kind of social 'reality'. The nature of this reality is the product of the individual representations provided within the media, which may be positively or negatively valanced depending on journalistic slant. For example, a

newspaper may print an editorial on the abuse of children in foster care, and thereby construct a social reality of foster care as inherently dangerous for children (Goddard & Liddell, 1995). As a result, mass media representations of Australian foster care systems deserve analysis for the role they may play in influencing people's attitudes towards foster care (Goddard & Saunders, 2001). In the remainder of this section we outline some of the ways in which contemporary media reports on foster care and child abuse contribute to public understandings of the lives of foster children.

Determining the strength of the role the media plays in determining public opinion is not an easy task. This is reflected in a diverse body of research that has highlighted the benefits and problems associated with media coverage of any particular event or issue. Calvert (1992) reports that public perceptions are most strongly influenced by campaigns that are longer and supported more strongly by a range of other activities, such as television documentaries, live theatre, social marketing and forms of 'edutainment'. Similarly, Wellings and Macdowall (2000) maintain that the influence of the media is limited primarily to raising consciousness of local issues and that it is not able convey complex information, teach skills or shift existing attitudes and beliefs in the absence of other enabling factors. Furthermore, some authors argue that the nature of media attention is often stereotyped, superficial, sensational, and emotionally laden, which can rouse negative public action rather than bring about positive change (Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1998). For example, in 2000 the UK tabloid newspaper *The News of the World* ran a major awareness campaign entitled 'Named and Shamed', which intended to list the names of over 110,000 child sex offenders in the UK. The

newspaper was criticised for its blunt and inflammatory approach which, despite the denials of its editor-in-chief, appeared to incite vigilante-lead retribution.

Similarly, Goddard and Saunders (2001) argue that the mass media commonly employs shaming tactics in its coverage of reports of abuse of children in foster carer. For example, by focusing on a small number of carers who are alleged to have abused children in their care, the media may create the impression that many, if not all, foster carers commit acts of abuse. As already stated, this can sometimes lead to negative, even violent, public reactions. Whilst reports of abuse in care may raise public awareness and understanding of the issue, consideration must be given to the implications of this for child victims who are often not afforded anonymity (Fogarty, 1996). The problem of this breach of privacy is compounded by the portrayal of the children who experience abuse as 'damaged goods'. Goddard (1996) argues that the mass media portrays abused children as a burden or expense to adults, rather than citizens with a right to safety and care.

Not only do media reports provide us with particular constructions of children and those who abuse them, but in so doing it also provides definitions of 'normality' and, by extension, 'deviance' (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987). In this sense, the mass media articulates the accepted boundaries of behaviour in any given society. Thus, for example, by predominantly covering negative issues in regard to foster care, such as child abuse, the media perpetuates the notion that such events are the norm. As a result, members of the public may come to view foster homes as engendering harmful living conditions, as furthering neglect and abuse, and as ultimately responsible for the poor life outcomes of foster children. This can affect not only the ways in which the public perceives foster care, but also how foster children view themselves within this media-constructed reality (West, 1999). West

suggests that this may result in foster children being negatively affected by representations of their lack of agency in the ways they are represented by the media, as well as being affected by any perceived insensitivities of the general public.

Findings from a national research project conducted by the authors suggest that problems associated with recruiting and maintaining foster carers in Australia may in part result from the negative perceptions about foster care that circulate within society more broadly (Riggs, Augoustinos & Delfabbro, 2007; Riggs, Delfabbro & Augoustinos, 2008). Many carers reported negative responses from friends and family when they announced their intention to become carers. Friends and family 1) were surprised that carers would want to do 'such hard work', 2) suggested that foster children would 'all be trouble' and 3) implied that carers would be left open to allegations of abuse. Negative responses such as these, at least to some degree, thus represent those widely available for understanding foster care amongst the general Australian public. Male foster carers in particular expressed concern about the potential for allegations of abuse, and how this had shaped their commitment to care provision (Riggs, Delfabbro & Augoustinos, under review). As such, negative representations of foster care hold the potential to undermine attempts at recruitment and thus may contribute to the shortfall in the number of available carers.

By contrast, the phenomenon of 'legislation by tabloid', as Franklin and Lavery (1989) suggest, provides us with considerable analytic leverage for understanding the *positive* role that the media plays in understanding and challenging child abuse. Those who utilise this concept suggest that the media appears, at times, to exert greater influence on child protection policy and practice

than professionals working in the area. Goddard and Liddell (1995) demonstrated the powerful role of the media in influencing child protection policy. The authors examined the case of Daniel Valerio, a two-year old who died at the hands of his mother's de facto shortly after he moved in with Daniel's mother. A number of civilian reports to protective services about the violent behaviour of the de facto were made, however insufficient protective action was taken in preventing the abuse that caused his fatal injuries. Subsequent inquiries into the case ensued, which garnered the attention of various media bodies. In particular, a campaign on child abuse in one Melbourne newspaper, the *Herald Sun*, led to the introduction of mandatory reporting of child abuse by health and welfare professionals. This case example demonstrates the important role of the media as an agent of social change. Therefore, it is important to examine the possible implications of media reporting in terms of the potential changes it can make to existing legislation and professional practice.

Given the significance of the mass media in defining public interest in pressing societal issues, as well as its ability to potentially confer either benefits or problems to the parties directly related to their coverage, it is necessary that representations of foster care within the media are critically considered. As we have argued, the foster care system has a long history in Australia, and public perceptions have played an important role in defining the identity of foster children. Media coverage of critical foster care issues may also influence public policy and general practice within the foster care family unit. With respect to these relevant issues, the following analysis explores some of the factors that may prevent members of the general public from considering foster care as a viable option, in addition to understanding the stress experienced by existing foster carers and

children living in a context whereby negative representations of carers and children predominate.

DATA AND METHOD

The data analysed in the following section were collated over an 18 month period between October 2005 and April 2007, utilising the Factiva database to source articles from leading national and local Australian newspapers featuring the keywords 'foster care', 'foster child', 'foster parent', and 'foster'. There were twenty five articles identified in total that focused either entirely or at least in part on foster care in Australia, with five coming from The Advertiser (South Australia), four from The Age (Victoria), eleven from The Australian, 3 from The Sydney Morning Herald (New South Wales), and two from The West Australian. All articles were news reports---letters to the editor were not included in this data set. Three articles were initially excluded from the data set as they were considered primarily neutral accounts of foster care: one was a report about legislative change pertaining to foster care but with no obvious evaluative component about foster carers, children or social workers, one was simply a recruitment piece calling for more foster carers, and one was a report about a child who had been abandoned by her birth mother and who had been placed in a temporary foster placement---this article only mentioned foster care briefly and was thus only tangentially about foster care.

Having excluded the three aforementioned articles from the data set, the remaining twenty-two articles were read by the researchers with particular attention paid to how 1) foster carers, 2) social workers/the foster care system more broadly, and 3)

foster children were represented. Articles were classified according to whether the members of these 3 categories were represented in primarily positive or negative ways (in some instances individual articles included both positive *and* negative representations of varying groups). Each article was allocated an identification number from 1--22, and these are reported in brackets when specific quotes are provided in the following analysis, with a table of the articles and the corresponding identification number provided below. In the analysis that follows we report both the number of representations accorded to each of the three groups identified above, the degree to which the representations were positive or negative, and the implications of some specific representations within particular media reports. We focus on each of the three groups identified above in the following separate sub-sections.

[place table 1 about here]

ANALYSIS

Foster Carers

The greatest amount of attention paid to any one of the three groups identified above was to foster carers, with a total of thirteen reports out of twenty-two spending a considerable amount (or all) of the word count focusing on the actions, experiences or needs of foster carers. Of these thirteen reports seven were negative and six were positive. The majority of the former (n=4) focused upon allegations of abuse within foster care. Here foster children were reported as being in conflict with foster carers, with the latter abusing their position of power relative to foster

children. Two of these articles spoke of court hearings regarding physical or sexual abuse by foster carers (9 and 10). A third carried the headline 'Carers let girl in crash drive car' (8), with the article providing a relatively long account of the neglect suffered by seven Indigenous children in the care of a white foster couple. Surprisingly, little was made in the article of the cultural differences between the carers and the children, despite the ongoing legacies of the abuse of Indigenous children in white foster care throughout the history of Australia's colonisation. The final article of the four focusing on allegations of abuse reported the outcome of a legal investigation over allegations against a female carer who had been cleared of the charges but 'has since been banned from acting as a foster parent' (12).

The second type of negative report (n=2) about foster carers involved a focus on the 'black-listing' of foster carers who had been considered unsuitable to provide care. I, one of these articles it was pointed out that, under Victorian laws, it is possible for a list of unsuitable foster carers to be kept and monitored over time (13). The second such article similarly used the category 'black' to denote the power of social workers to record a 'black mark' against foster carers who challenge the authority of social workers (10).

The final instance of a negative report about foster carers centred upon 'concern' within Western Australia over the registration of lesbian and gay foster carers. Those groups reported as being against the registration of lesbians and gay men as foster carers were quoted as saying 'foster children… [do] not need the extra burden of dealing with gay foster parents' and 'gay people should be banned from foster care because it was cruel' (11). Here a distinctly negative value is attached to lesbian and

gay foster carers. Whilst the article countered these representations with 'positive' accounts of lesbian and gay foster carers, it did so not only by providing a 'sameness' account of lesbians and gay men (i.e., 'all people are the same, regardless of sexuality---something that has been identified as problematic in regards to lesbian and gay foster carers---see Riggs, 2007), but also by allowing the negative accounts to go relatively unchallenged---whilst 'positive' and 'negative' accounts were provided, the former were not used to negate the latter, but were simply represented as 'differing opinions'. In this way such negative representations of lesbian and gay foster carers were allowed to stand as potentially <u>acceptable</u> ways of viewing such carers.

These seven negative representations of foster carers are significant for what they tell the general public about foster care. They in many ways affirm the negative beliefs that some people may hold about foster carers, as elaborated in a previous section of this paper; namely that foster carers abuse children. Although this has at times been the case, it is not appropriate for this to be the dominant way in which foster carers are understood as engaging with the children in their care.

Importantly, there were also positive representations of foster carers (n=6). Two of these were reports of a foster carer winning 'mother of the year' (16 and 18). Two other reports (referred to in the following section) contrasted negative representations of social workers or foster care systems with positive representations of foster carers: 'exceptional foster carers' (20) and 'model foster carers' (18). Another representation identified as positive was one that recognised some foster carers as parents (1). In our research with foster carers we have found

that many desire recognition of their identity as parents (Riggs, Augoustinos & Delfabbro, 2008), and thus this particular article was important for the way it accorded recognition to foster carers as parents. Finally, one article reported on the experiences of an Indigenous opera singer who had grown up with white foster parents who, it was reported, 'opened a door for [the singer] that would otherwise have been closed' (5). Again, and despite this being positioned as a 'positive' news story, it seems surprising that nothing was made of the racial politics of foster care in Australia and the role that white carers have played in practices of assimilation against Indigenous people, knowingly or otherwise.

Overall, whilst it is heartening to see positive representations of foster carers within the news media, it is important to note the limitations of some of these accounts. First, a number of them focus on specific carers (such as the woman who won 'mother of the year'), which may do little to emphasise the important role that all carers play in regards to child protection. Second, and as identified above, two of the reports only represented foster carers as positive in comparison with social workers. Again, this does not allow for a focus on the work of foster carers in their own right, and instead depicts the conflict between 'good foster carers' and 'bad social workers' as the main point of emphasis. Finally, whilst there were indeed positive accounts, besides numbers five, sixteen and eighteen outlined above, the positive aspects of being a foster carer were largely incidental to the news report, rather than central. Thus only three of the twenty-two reports explicitly focused upon the important work that foster carers do. It would therefore seem important that more news media attention is given not only to the positive work that foster carers do, but that this is represented as occurring often with a lack of conflict between carers and children.

14

This would not be so as to construct foster care as banal, or as free from conflict, but rather to emphasise that negativity does not so thoroughly structure the lives of foster carers as may at times appear to be the case.

Foster Care Systems/Social Workers

Across the twenty-two articles selected for analysis, depictions of foster care systems and/or social workers constituted a total of twelve accounts, all of these being negative. Primary amongst these were reports of a case where an Indigenous couple who were foster carers had been told they had 'too high expectations' for an Indigenous foster child. This story was reported across three of the newspapers and each employed overwhelmingly negative language to describe the actions of the social workers, including: 'appalling', 'frightening' and 'shocking' (1). The same article referred to the government organisation involved as a 'basket case', whilst the other two articles referred to the event as 'bureaucracy gone mad' and the treatment of carers as 'absolutely horrific' (4) and 'crazy' (21). Overall, this particular incident was reported as being mishandled by the government organisation who had mistreated the foster carers and devalued the rights and experiences of the foster child.

The remaining nine accounts of foster care systems and/or social workers focused primarily upon the actions of the latter (n=5), who were almost uniformly represented as disrespectful of foster carers and directly working against the best interests of foster children. One article spoke of reports of foster carers being 'bullied', and that 'dealing with bureaucrats and social workers is [considered by

foster carers to be] a nightmare' (5). Another article spoke of research findings which

suggest that 'foster carers reported the attitude of bureaucrats and social workers as

the 'worst thing' about fostering' (19). A similar report spoke of the finding that

'foster carers feel like they are treated with disrespect' (6), whilst another reported

foster carers talking about the 'disrespectful attitude of social workers' (3). Finally in

regards to social workers, one media report outlined a case where a foster family had

not been given adequate information by a social worker as to the foster child's

experiences of abuse, reporting this decision as 'crazy' (21).

In regard to foster care systems more broadly, four articles depicted foster care

organisations across a number of states as inherently negative. Aspects of such

negativity included a failure to adequately consult with foster carers in regards to

changes to foster care policy---reported as a 'sham' in one article (13). Foster carers

were reported as being 'traumatised' by the foster care system and treated as

'second-class citizens' (2). Negative outcomes for foster carers were reported as being

the result of 'serious and unforgivable failings in the system' (9) that results in

instances where the 'Department had failed to protect' foster carers (22).

Across the twenty-two articles identified for analysis none reported positive aspects

of foster care systems or social workers. In our own research with foster carers many

reported feeling unsupported or even deliberately undermined by social workers

(Riggs, Augoustinos & Delfabbro, 2007; Riggs, Defabbro & Augoustinos, 2008).

Importantly, some research has suggested that the recruitment of foster carers often

appears to hinge upon prior understandings of foster care gleaned from public

discourse about foster care systems and social workers more specifically (Hawken &

McHugh, 2006). This would suggest that media reports that emphasise the negative aspects of foster care systems across Australia may do very little to encourage the general public to consider foster care as a viable option for engaging in child protection and/or creating family relationships.

The overwhelmingly negative focus of all of the articles that mentioned social workers or foster care systems may thus be considered not only as reporting the conflicts that exist between social workers and foster carers, but also potentially perpetuating such conflict by centring it as the only available account of relationships between the state and foster carers. Although it must be recognised that conflict often does characterise these relationships, there are also opportunities for recognising the supportive relationships that carers and social workers have, and the ongoing attempts by government departments to meet the needs of foster carers and foster children.

Foster Children

Coverage accorded to foster children within the data set (n=11) was also entirely negative. These reports almost uniformly functioned by associating pejorative terms with foster children, or at the very least describing the life outcomes of foster children in negative ways. Very much mirroring the aforementioned research by West (1999), foster children were constructed as 'children out of place'---as children who can't 'just be children'; as children who potentially are 'intrinsically damaged'; and as children who are always already in conflict.

In regards to the case mentioned in the previous sub-section referencing an Indigenous couple who had 'too high expectations' for an Indigenous foster child, a social worker was reported as saying to one of the carers: 'You expect every child to be able to eat caviar, and some can only eat Vegemite' (7). Such an account depicts some children (i.e., foster children) as inherently disadvantaged or damaged---try as they like, they will always be limited in their achievements. Another article used such a construction in a headline telling of a 'sex abuse girl' (22), whilst another spoke of a 'drug baby' (14). Accounts such as these depict drug dependency or sexual abuse as an inherent aspect of the identities of the children, the inference being that their life outcomes will automatically be negative. Although it is important to recognise how such forms of abuse do very much impact upon the lives of children, it must also be recognised that this is not the only story to be told about children who have experienced abuse, nor will it be the only (or even primary) identity that they hold.

Another version of this account of foster children as 'damaged goods' was slightly less deterministic in its attribution of a 'fatal flaw', but nonetheless called for a degree of predictability in regard to outcomes for children in care. One article spoke of an infant with parents experiencing drug dependency, and questioned what would happen 'if the baby grew up to become a drug addict' (10). Another spoke of 'highly troubled children' (20) whilst another reported that 'foster children suffer… rates of suicidal tendencies, attention problems and severe disruptive behaviour' higher than children who are not in foster care (15). Although it is undoubtedly the case that foster children do overwhelmingly experience difficulties as a result of abuse and family change, the predictability with which this is presumed to occur would appear

to set a trajectory for foster children that may be experienced as limiting and inherently negative. Thus whilst it is of course necessary to recognise the percentage of foster children who will experience negative life outcomes as a result of abuse in childhood, removal from their birth parents, and placement in a system that may fundamentally fail to support them, what is needed is not so much a focus on the potentially unavoidable nature of these negative outcomes for some children, but a focus on the positive role that the strengthening of support systems may play in the lives of foster children.

In the news articles examined here foster children were also reported as being in conflict with those in authority, namely social workers and sometimes foster carers. Foster children were reported as 'going off the rails' (3) and that 'children [and] teenagers now rule the department' (19). In the first account the metaphor of 'the rails' implicitly provides a normative account of childhood from which some children deviate---to be 'on the rails' is the norm, whilst to be 'off the rails' it to somehow be deviant. Such metaphors serve to normalise the notion that child development should and will follow a particular path if children are kept away from conflict. Understandings of childhood such as this do little to acknowledge both children's resiliency, and children's ability to actively engage with the world. In contrast, whilst the second example of foster children being in conflict does indeed accord children some agency, it does so in order to depict them as 'taking over'---that their 'ruling the department' is again inappropriate childhood behaviour.

As West (1999) suggests, such accounts of foster children serve to provide foster children with ways of understanding their lives that are inherently limiting and

negative. Foster children are automatically placed in conflict not only with their birth parents (and other figures of authority), but also <u>with themselves</u>---try as they might, they are likely to 'turn out bad' as a result of abuse. Additionally, these negative depictions of foster children may serve to discourage the general public from considering foster care, as foster children are very much presented as bringing conflict into the lives of those they associate with. Finally, and whilst child abuse is very much evident in accounts of foster children in the news media, it is by and large not connected to a wider understanding of how discourses of family, rights and propriety may be connected to child abuse, and how child abuse happens across a range of social contexts, not solely in those depicted as 'in conflict' (or those that are actually brought to trial or where children are removed). The depiction of only certain children as being in conflict (something we have seen more recently in Australia in regards to accounts of child abuse within Indigenous communities) serves to normalise particular understandings of childhood and to depict certain places as where children are 'meant to be'.

NEW DIRECTIONS

As we have elaborated throughout this paper, accounts of conflict are intimately woven throughout news media reports of foster care in Australia. Through an analysis of twenty-two Australia news media articles, we have demonstrated some of the commonplace ways in which conflict is constructed as an (often central) aspect of the lives of foster carers and children, and we have highlighted some of the limitations that may arise from this in regard to 1) foster carer recruitment, 2) the

working relationships between existing foster carers and social workers, and 3) the identities and experiences of foster children.

We are of course mindful of the structure of news media reports, and the predominance of negative stories within the media---this is what, most often, will make the news or sell the papers. Yet, from the few positive examples we found, it can be seen that it is indeed possible for there to be spaces in which foster care in Australia is positively represented. This may involve the reporting of positive research findings, or at the very least placing positive and negative findings alongside one another. In regards to positive findings, then, it is important that researchers engage with the media in order to ensure that positive research findings are used to challenge existing stereotypes. For example, allowing 'positive' and 'negative' accounts of lesbian and gay foster carers to simply sit alongside one another will do very little to challenge stereotypes about lesbians and gay men as parents, particularly if the 'positive' accounts adopt a framework of liberalism (and the notion of 'sameness') through which to account for same-sex attracted people's lives. Contrasting negative opinions with the rapidly growing body of research on lesbian and gay parenting may be a more appropriate way of reporting findings and challenging commonly held stereotypes.

Another opportunity for challenging accounts of conflict within foster care is to consider who the reporter is speaking to. If news reporters primarily speak with researchers, policy makers, foster carers or social workers, they will fail to account for the experiences of foster children. As research continues to highlight (e.g. O'Neil, 2004), adults who were raised in foster care consistently report positive experiences

of care, and are often highly capable of telling their stories and providing alternate accounts of foster care. Of course, and as Goddard and Saunders (2001) have recognised, the capacity of a child to understand the full implications of disclosing their identity, as well as relating personal experiences to a third party, is a subject of much debate in both ethical and legal circles. A focus on the stories of adults who were raised in foster care may thus go some way towards alleviating these ethical and legal dilemmas, whilst nonetheless providing alternate perspectives on foster care within the media.

Also, and as we suggested in the introduction and elaborated in the analysis, it is important that the news media engages with the diversity that exists within Australian families, and more specifically, acknowledges how a range of histories shape contemporary experiences of family. Talking about foster care (and child protection more broadly) in contemporary Australia requires talking about the ways in which claims to 'protection' have in the past (and still in the present) been used to warrant the removal of Indigenous children from their parents. Recognising how race, class, sexuality, ability and gender play out within Australian families is an important aspect of a responsible news media that locates familial conflict within social contexts that themselves are marked by multiple forms of conflict.

Finally, it is important to recognise that whilst conflict does indeed exist within foster care systems across Australia, it can potentially be ameliorated by increased support for carers and children, the ongoing recruitment of new carers, and the provision of better working conditions for social workers in order to ensure job continuity. As we have suggested in this paper, the ways in which the news media

reports conflict in foster care hold a considerable weight that must be used responsibly. Our call is not for the news media <u>not</u> to report conflict, but for there to be a greater balance between a recognition of conflict and a recognition of strengths. As the broader research project that this paper stems from has found, both foster carers and children engage in innovative and novel forms of family that serve to meet the needs of foster children for safe and nurturing family environments. Providing media representations of foster care that are positive may signify one step towards celebrating the beneficial aspects of foster care and its role in creating families that undertake the work of child protection. In this sense, foster families may be understood within the Australian news media as sites where children are very much 'in place', rather than being considered children perpetually located 'out of place'.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Table 1: List of articles referred to in the analysis

ID	Author	Title (abbrev.)	Source	Date
1	Karvelas	Inquiry ordered into removal	The Australian	13/09/06
2	Overing	Foster parents not told	The Australian	28/09/06
3	Overin	Foster parents deserve	The Australian	27/09/06
4	Overing	Foster parents demand	The Australian	14/09/06
5	Overing	Foster care opened world	The Australian	16/09/06
6	Overing	Foster parents forced to play	The Australian	26/09/06
7	N/A	State bureaucracies mad	The Australian	14/09/06
8	Koch	Carers let girl in crash drive car	The Australian	20/12/05
9	N/A	System failed abused children	The Australian	25/08/06
10	Overing	Hopes for black baby	The Australian	12/09/06
11	Gibson	Gay, single foster rule queried	The West Australian	05/10/05
12	Kleinman	Injury charges dropped	The Age	12/11/05
13	Farouque	Child protection overhaul	The Age	04/10/05
14	Kelton	Free fuel for foster parents	The Advertiser	27/09/06
15	N/A	Foster children's health burden	The Advertiser	19/02/07
16	Vlach	No lack of support for mum	The Advertiser	11/04/06
17	James	Foster parent crisis	The Advertiser	21/06/06

18	Leo	Dedication bonds	The Advertiser	05/06/06
19	Ovington	Foster parents don't care much	The Australian	15/09/06
20	Horin	Call for more foster support	Sydney Morning Herald	15/08/06
21	Wallace	Model carers lose children	Sydney Morning Herald	19/01/06
22	Pedler	Sex abuse girl angry	The West Australian	13/03/06

REFERENCES

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2007). *Child protection Australia 2005-06.* Canberra: AIHW.

Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee. (2001). *Lost innocents: Righting the record.* Canberra: AGPS.

Barber, J. G. & Delfabbro, P. H. (2004). *Children in foster care.* London: Routledge.

Brawley, E. (1995). *Human services and the media.* Melbourne: Harwood Academic Publishers.

Brill, A. (1990). *Nobody's business: Paradoxes of privacy.* Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

Burrows, D. (1988). Mass media campaigns: Worthwhile or wasted resources. *Connexions, 8,* 14-16.

Calvert, G. (1992). Using mass media campaigns to prevent child sexual assault in New South Wales. In G. Calvert, A. Ford, & P. Parkinson (Eds.) *The practice of child protection: Australian approaches.* Sydney: Hale and Iremonger.

Corbett, K. (2008). Adoption rates fall dramatically. *The Courier Mail, February 20.*

Community Affairs Reference Committee. (2004). *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children.* Canberra: Australian Senate.

Eldridge, J. (1993). Whose illusion? Whose reality? Some problems of theory and method in mass media research. In J. Eldridge (Ed.) *Getting the message: News, truth and power.* London: Routledge.

Ericson, R., Baranek, P. & Chan, J. (1987). *Visualising deviance: A study of a news organisation.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Fogarty, J. (1996). How long must the children suffer? *The Age,* 23 October.

Franklin, B. & Horwath, J. (1996). The media abuse of children: Jake's progress from demonic icon to restored childhood. *Child Abuse Review, 15,* 310-318.

Franklin, B. & Lavery, G. (1989). Legislation by tabloid? *Community Care,* 23, 26-29.

Goddard, C. (1996). Read all about it! The news about child abuse. *Child Abuse Review, 5,* 301-309.

Goddard, C. & Liddell, M. (1995). Child abuse fatalities and the media: Lessons from a case study. *Child Abuse Review, 8,* 251-263.

Goddard, C. & Saunders, B. J. (2001). *Child abuse and the media*: *Issues Paper 14*. Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Hawken & McHugh. (2006). Recruiting, maintaining and retaining foster carers: Capturing the wisdom of carers and workers. Paper presented at NSW Foster Care Association State Conference, Parramatta, 17-19 March.

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. 1997. *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families*. HREOC: Sydney.

Pierce, P. (1999). *The country of lost children: An Australian anxiety*. Cambridge: University Press.

Riggs, D.W. (2006). *Becoming parent: Gay men, lesbians, and family*. Tenerife: Post Pressed.

Riggs, D.W., Augoustinos, M. & Delfabbro, P. (2007). 'Basically it's a recognition issue': Validating a foster parent identity. *Family Matters, 76,* 64-69.

Riggs, D.W., Delfabbro, P.H. & Augoustinos, M. (2008). Negotiating foster families: Identification and desire. *British Journal of Social Work, 38,* 1-47.

Riggs, D.W., Delfabbro, P.H. & Augoustinos, M. (under review). Foster fathers and carework: Enacting alternate forms of parenting. *Fathering*.

Saunders, B. J. & Goddard, C. (2002). *The role of mass media in facilitating community education and child abuse prevention strategies: Issues Paper 16*. Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Wellings, K. & Macdowell, W. (2000). Evaluating mass media approaches to health promotion: A review of methods. *Health Education, 100,* 23-32.

Wilczynski, A. & Sinclair, K. (1998). Monsters, molesters and moral panics: Child abuse and the media. Paper presented at the *Kids First – Agenda for Change* Conference, Melbourne, 11-13 April.

Wilczynski, A. & Sinclair, K. (1999). Moral tales: Representations of child abuse in the quality and tabloid media. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology, 32,* 262-283.