

**Chapter 12**

**ANGELS AND SAINTS: THE RHETORICAL  
EFFECTS OF LAY UNDERSTANDINGS  
OF FOSTER CARE UPON CARERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Analyses of the rhetorical effects of public statements and everyday conversation have long demonstrated the potentially deleterious ends to which purportedly positive statements can be put. Specifically in the context of foster care, this can occur when lay people refer to foster carers as ‘angels’ or ‘saints’. Drawing in this chapter on research conducted with Australian foster carers, I suggest that referring to foster carers in this way functions rhetorically to: 1) construct foster children in particular (negative) ways, 2) deny societal responsibility for child protection agendas, 3) construct carework as outside of economic exchange, 4) implicitly question the motives of foster carers, and 5) undermine or discount the considerable challenges that foster carers face. In response to these problems associated with the construction of foster carers as ‘saints’ or ‘angels’, I conclude the chapter by making suggestions for an understanding of foster care that moves away from a benevolent or ‘rosy’ image of care provision, and instead recognises the important role that foster carers play in child protection services and the need for Australian society to better support child protection agendas.

**INTRODUCTION**

Contrary to popular sentiment, words can indeed hurt. Furthermore, and as analyses of rhetoric have long identified, words intended to hurt can fail in their intent, just as words intended to help can actually harm. Certainly this is the argument so cogently made by Judith Butler (1997) in her book *Excitable Speech*, in which she argues that ‘hate speech’ is typically only recognised as such on very limited terms arbitrated by the State. As a result, Butler

suggests that only certain claims to harm are rendered intelligible, and furthermore, that precedent for one claim to harm can be (mis)used to argue a claim of harm that is oppositional to the original claim (e.g., such as those who make recourse to the right to freedom of speech in order to legitimate hate speech). Words thus have performative effects, though these are not necessarily always consistent (referring here either to words not having a consistent meaning over time or the response not necessarily being consistent with the intent of the speaker). As such, rhetorical analyses have much to tell us about the effects of particular words within a given context, and their power to hurt, marginalise or otherwise control particular individuals or groups.

In the context of foster care, the performative effects of language are evident in the terms typically used to describe foster carers. Primary amongst these is reference to foster carers as ‘angels’ or ‘saints’. In the context of Australian foster care (which is the focus of this chapter), the imagery of angels is often used in representations of foster care in general, and has been used specifically by some agencies in recruitment campaigns. Members of parliament often make reference in public statements to foster carers being ‘angels’ whose role it is to ‘save’ children who have experienced abuse. And media reporting of foster care often utilises the language of ‘angels’ and ‘saints’ to describe the majority of foster carers (though this description is often contrasted with an image of ‘failed’ or ‘bad’ foster carers who have abused children in their care). Whilst the intention behind most uses of the imagery of foster carers as angels or saints can be fairly presumed to be positive toward foster carers, it is not necessarily the case that this is how foster carers will perceive the deployment of these terms, nor can we assume that the performative effects of referring to foster carers as ‘angels’ or ‘saints’ are always positive. Importantly in this regard, then, studying the performative effects of referring to foster carers as angels or saints does not require imputing intention on behalf of the speaker. Rather, the point of rhetorical analysis is to examine the potential effects of certain words, and the very real world impact they can have.

With the above points about rhetorical analysis in mind, my interest in this chapter is to closely examine how a group of Australian foster carers reported experiencing the deployment of the words ‘angels’ and ‘saints’ in reference to their role as foster carers. In so doing, my interest is not in the rhetoric of the foster carers themselves, but rather the rhetorical effects of references to them as angels or saints in their everyday lives. Specifically, I identify five rhetorical effects of the use of the words ‘angels’ or ‘saints’ to refer to foster carers, these being the ways in which such references 1) implicitly construct foster children in particular (negative) ways, 2) deny the responsibility of individuals in relation to child protection, 3) construct carework as outside of economic exchange, 4) implicitly question the motives of foster carers, and 5) undermine or discount the considerable challenges that foster carers face. In order to illustrate these five rhetorical effects I analyse extracts from interviews and focus groups I conducted with Australian foster carers in 2006. I then conclude the chapter by presenting an alternate approach to understanding and representing foster carers, namely one that moves away from representations of foster carers as ‘benevolent angels’, and towards one where child protection is seen as the responsibility of all individuals.

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## METHOD

### Participants

The data analysed here are drawn from a broad corpus of individual interviews and focus groups conducted as part of a national research project examining why people choose to become foster carers and how to best attract new foster carers. Ethical approval was sought and granted from both the University of Adelaide and the foster care organisations with whom the foster carers were registered. Ten interviews with couples and fifteen focus groups were conducted with men (n=31) and women (n=49) from a range of cultural backgrounds and with a broad range of care experiences across four Australian states using a semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews and focus groups were audio taped and transcribed orthographically, and all participants were allocated a pseudonym following transcription to ensure anonymity.

### Analytic Approach

In response to one question in the interview schedule ('What do you think other people in your community and friends and family think about foster carers in general?'), the majority of participants orientated in some way to a perception of foster carers being seen as 'angels', 'martyrs', 'saints' or more generally spoke about a perception of benevolence in regards to foster carers amongst the wider community. Often this occurred in focus groups where one individual noted the perception and then others in the group reported similar perceptions. Nonetheless, in individual interviews participants also commented on the imagery of angels and saints and often spoke at length about what this means in their lives as carers. As such, this theme of other people's perceptions of carers as angels or saints was predominant in the broader context of the data set.

Having identified this theme of lay (i.e., non foster carers') perceptions of foster carers as angels or saints, I then proceeded to highlight all instances of this within the data set (55 in total), and then fairly grouped the instances into distinct categories. Categories were distinguished not by the content of the individual speaker's words *per se*, but rather by the potential rhetorical effects of each reporting of the perception that foster carers are angels or saints. In other words, upon repeated rereading of the 55 instances it was possible to discern five distinct rhetorical effects that may arise from the particular construction of foster carers identified. Whilst there was some overlap between the categories of rhetoric I identified, most instances were clearly identifiable as producing one primary rhetorical effect (even if there were other potential effects evident in each individual extract). Having identified five categories, I then selected extracts from within each category for closer analysis. The extracts and analysis are presented below.

## ANALYSIS

Before I present my analysis, it is important to reiterate two things: First, my focus in the following analysis is on the potential rhetorical effects of statements that foster carers reported being made to them or general opinions about foster carers that they perceive from the communities they live in. As such, my focus is not on the rhetorical devices deployed by the carers themselves, nor on the veracity of their claims. Rather, I take as given the fact that a large proportion of carers spoke of the perception that foster carers are seen as ‘angels’ or ‘saints’ (albeit in a range of different ways), and that whilst this can tell us nothing *per se* about what is actually said by lay people about foster carers, it nonetheless represents a persistent pattern of perceptions that warrants attention. The second point is related to the first, in that whilst I treat as valid the perceptions that foster carers report, I am not interested in imputing intent to either foster carers or those in their communities who are reported as seeing foster carers as angels or saints. In other words, and as per rhetorical analysis more broadly, my interest is not to prove that any individual meant to make a particular moral judgement or attribution about foster carers by referring to them as angels or saints. Rather, my interest is on the potential rhetorical effects of such statements in the lives of foster carers.

### Rhetorical Effect 1: Depicting Foster Children in Negative Ways

The first rhetorical effect identified here is one in which the statement ‘oh you must be an angel’ serves to construct foster children as undeserving or as damaged, the implication being that it would take a saint to care for them. In an analysis of Australian media representations of foster care conducted by myself and colleagues (Riggs, King, Delfabbro & Augoustinos, 2009), we found similarly that foster children are almost exclusively constructed as ‘damaged goods’, and that foster carers are by implication ‘angels’ who are the only ones willing to meet their care needs. In the extract below Meg, who at the time was caring for one child with her husband, talks about this association between foster carers being ‘angels’ and children as being ‘lucky’ to have them:

Meg: We are always being told be professionals and family members that we are saints for taking on this child. And people tell him that too. We had a massage therapist here last night and she has been coming to us for 12 months and she said to the child ‘oh you are such a lucky boy. Do you know how lucky you are to be with these people?’. And I just want to smack her; he has the same rights to a family environment as any other kid. My mother came to visit in the holidays too and she kept saying ‘oh you are such a lucky boy’. I told her to shut up; he is entitled to a bedroom just like any kid.

Notions of ‘luck’ function rhetorically to construct the purportedly lucky person as only in their present situation by virtue of fate: they are not seen as intrinsically deserving of whatever it is they have received, but rather their receipt of whatever makes them ‘lucky’ is relatively unrelated to them as a person. When we apply this to foster children, as Meg does, the construction of children in care as ‘lucky’ not only ignores the reasons why they are in care (i.e., significant abuse and/or neglect), but also treats foster placements as something children should be grateful for. Of course my suggestion here is not that foster children (like

all children) should not be appreciative of the work undertaken by those who parent them. Rather, my suggestion is that constructing foster children as lucky recipients of the care provided by 'saints' fails to recognise that foster children have the right to adequate care, as Meg suggests. The category 'saint' exacerbates this negative construction of foster children as potentially undeserving by constructing the category as one in which only foster carers (and thus not foster children) belong.

Elsewhere I have suggested (Riggs, 2009) in relation to transnational adoption that such a focus on gratitude and the presumed generosity of adoptive parents produces an injunction upon adopted children to first recognise themselves as damaged goods, and then to display gratitude to the welfare systems and individuals who made possible their removal from their birth parents and birth cultures. My point here is not that adoption or foster care may not, in some instances, be the best outcome for children, but rather to suggest that the implicit construction of a sole causal link between bad birth families and/or bad children and removal into care fails to recognise the broader social contexts in which child protection services operate, a point I will elaborate in discussing the next rhetorical effect.

## **Rhetorical Effect 2: Denying Societal Responsibility**

Part of the problem with constructing foster children as 'lucky' recipients of the 'care of saints' is that it individualises care provision. What this means in practice is that only certain children and birth families are seen as the cause of child protection concerns (i.e., 'bad' birth families and 'bad' foster children), and only certain people are seen as rightly engaged in child protection practice (i.e., 'good' social workers and 'saintly' foster carers). An alternate reading of child protection (and one I elaborate in the conclusion to this chapter) would see child protection as a social justice issue that is a responsibility of all individuals. Certainly it could be suggested that the individualising of child protection through the statement 'you must be a saint' absolves the speaker of any requirement to themselves engage in the work of child protection (whether that be to care for children themselves or to find other ways to support children and their families). In the following extract Sam, a single lesbian carer with three children in her care, raises precisely this point about the rhetorical effects of referring to foster carers as saints or angels:

Sam: I find a lot of people are sort of taken aback, 'oh you must be a saint' and all this sort of thing. But no, I am just a normal person. They say 'it must be so difficult, how do you do it. I could never do that'. All these sort of phrases that I get from a lot of people and I just heard recently that my sister in law who was never very friendly with me in the past, now she is being very nice to me and somebody said that is because my sister had told her that I was like the salt of the earth and had a heart of gold and I think it is because of that, the fostering. They make it like you are something other worldly, so then it is okay for them to say 'I couldn't do it because I am not a saint'.

As Sam suggests, the individualising of care provision to individual 'saints' absolves other people of any requirement to care. Furthermore, this type of statement functions as an illocutionary act by requiring a response from the listener (in this instance a foster carer). In other words, by stating 'I couldn't do it because I am not a saint', the speaker places an

expectation upon the listener to refute the statement either by denying that they are a saint, or by finding ways to demonstrate that the speaker is also a saint (or at the very least a ‘good’ person). Again, this functions rhetorically to individualise care provision so that the foster carer being addressed in the statement acts *as an individual* in the good things they do, *just as* the speaker acts as an individual in the good things they do. This in effect flattens out ‘good’ into a singular and simplistic category that doesn’t discern between individual good and good for the society. Of course, as I argue in my examination of the following rhetorical effect, the two are closely intertwined. But nonetheless, the individualising effects of the claim that foster carers are saints functions to deny societal responsibility for child protection both by focusing solely on individual ‘saints’, and by requiring such individuals potentially to recognise a wide range of individual ‘good’ in other people, thus reducing foster care to being just one instance of (individualised) good.

### **Rhetorical Effect 3: Constructing Carework as a Generous Gift**

My discussion above of the construction of foster care as but one of many ‘good things’ that people do is closely related to the construction of care provision as outside of economic exchange. Public commentary on the topic of remuneration for foster carers in Australia typically draws a clear line between love and money. Yet research on the topic (e.g., Kirton, 2001; McHugh, 2006; Smith, 1988) suggests that the line is much blurrier, and importantly, that foster carers cannot adequately care for children (who often have very challenging behaviours) if they must undertake full-time work at the same time. Another rhetorical effect of the statement that foster carers are angels or saints, then, is to reinforce the separation of carework from economic exchange, in the sense that ‘angels’ (unlike workers) are not paid for their good deeds – they do good things because they are good people, not because they expect payment. In the following extract Mark, who cares for two children with his wife, illustrates well how the construction of foster carers as angels implicitly overwrites the need for adequate remuneration:

Mark: People say to us we are angels because we foster. They carry on like you are some kind of altruistic angel and that they couldn’t possibly do it themselves, or they would love to but they can’t afford to or don’t have a big enough house. Well we can’t afford to, and our old house wasn’t big enough when we decided to care for a second child. But this is something we believe in, that children have the right to a fair chance in life. So we wear the responsibility of that. But other people don’t seem willing to front up to that, or to recognise the costs that come with it for us.

Many of the carers I spoke to within the project from which these extracts are taken elaborated the bind they find themselves in where they undertake care provision because, for the majority, they are committed to caring for children, but this often leaves them in debt due to the often high costs of caring for children with considerable needs or challenging behaviours. Carers, for example, spoke of feeling treated as though they are mercenary when making requests for reimbursement for damages caused by children. Others spoke of remuneration as allowing them the space to care for children properly and with the right facilities to do so, but that this was often viewed negatively by others (see Riggs & Delfabbro,

2008, for a summary of these findings). As such, the rhetorical effect of referring to foster carers as angels in the same breath as referring to monetary concerns implicitly constructs foster carers as either justifiably poor (in that they accept the financial impact of care provision), or as mercenary (for those carers who make expense claims, who are depicted as doing it for money, not love). One implication of this complex and oft-discussed relationship between remuneration and carework is that carers in general are treated as having questionable motives, a point demonstrated by the following rhetorical effect.

#### **Rhetorical Effect 4: Questioning the Motives of Foster Carers**

The central aim of the research project from which the data in this chapter are taken was to identify what motivates people to become foster carers. Of the 80 carers I spoke to from across Australia, many spoke of undertaking care provision through a sense of social justice, a significant number spoke of becoming carers as a way of having a family or extending their own family, and some carers spoke of care provision as something they had always wanted to do since they were young (i.e., be a foster carer). None of the people I spoke to mentioned monetary motivations (and most laughed at the possibility of money being a motivating factor due to the high costs and low remuneration of foster care). Whilst there may have been monetary or other potentially less positive motivations that were not reported to me, it is fair to suggest that, in general, the sample of carers I spoke with reported positive motivations to care provision. Yet most participants also reported that they felt their motivations constantly questioned by others, including social workers. Perceptions of negative motivations included the aforementioned financial motivation, in addition to the presumption that because it has been identified that abuse of children does occur in care, that some carers might be motivated to care to gain access to children. In particular, male foster carers spoke of feeling hyper scrutinised in regard to their motivations, and that at times the statement ‘you must be an angel’ was perceived as an implicit slight against their potential motivations, as Paul, a gay man who provided care to two children with his partner reports in the following extract:

Paul: One of my friends said to me recently, ‘I just don’t get why you do it, what do you get out of it? It seems so challenging. You must be an angel’. What they don’t get is the reciprocity of caring for kids. Sure it can be hard work, bloody hard work. But it is also rewarding, and it also gives my life meaning. I am not an angel by any stretch of the imagination. I have done as many good things in my life as I have done bad things. But I do know that I am motivated by a desire to care for another human being, and it is great to sometimes feel cared for in return. I sometimes wonder, with all the allegations about abuse in care, if people question why we do it or are suspicious of our motives that they think surely can’t be good.

Here Paul suggests that a friend had said they couldn’t understand why he would be a carer – what could potentially motivate him to take on children who, for Paul and his partner, had been immensely challenging. One rhetorical effect of this type of statement, and particularly when followed up with the ‘you must be an angel’ comment, is to suggest that perhaps Paul and his partner are not actually angels at all, but rather have other motives. In other words, either Paul is expected to agree and say ‘yes, it is hard, but yes we are angels so

we don't mind', or to deny that he is an angel. Either way, he is caught in a bind: if he agrees that he is an angel then he would likely be seen at best as immodest, and at worst as delusional, both of which would throw into question not only his motives, but also his appropriateness as a carer (i.e., if he were delusional or conceited then he wouldn't really be there 'for the children'). And if he denies being an angel, and in the face of the challenges identified by his friend, his motivations are again rendered suspect – why would anyone want to do something that is so consistently challenging and unrewarding?

Of course Paul's response to me during the interview highlights a motivation that was, presumptively, not intelligible to his friend, namely that care provision is as rewarding as it is challenging. Certainly this was a statement made consistently by many participants, particularly in relation to the kinship bonds that many carers felt had developed with the children in their care (see Riggs, Delfabbro & Augoustinos, 2008, for a summary of these findings). To be motivated by care for another human being, and to engage in reciprocal and mutually recognising relationships with children, was the primary motivation for many carers in the sample. The carers I spoke to were adept at both recounting the challenges they face, whilst also honouring the relationships they have to children in their care. Yet despite this capacity of carers to see both sides of the coin, most carers, such as Paul, reported that other people were unable to see the positives as well as the benefits, and thus reference to carers as 'angels' or 'saints' functioned rhetorically to manage other people's lack of understanding, rather than to actually recognise the important work that carers undertake. And this is a point that I make in examining the following and final rhetorical effect, in which reference to carers as 'angels' can ignore the challenges that carers face as much as it can focus only on the challenges, as I argued above.

### **Rhetorical Effect 5: Discounting Challenges Faced by Carers**

Many of the carers I spoke to reported that they felt unprepared for the challenges of care provision after the completion of their training. They felt that they were given a relatively 'rosy' image of foster care and that the reality of carework was much harder and much less supported. Obviously there will always be a certain spin in foster care training, partly because trainers most often are not carers and thus will not have a complete picture of the challenges, and partly because it would likely be counter productive to training to present an entirely negative image. Nonetheless, many carers reported feeling a pressure to be a 'good' carer once they started caring (i.e., one who coped, or who didn't complain, or who didn't ask for support), and many reported a fear that if they weren't a good carer then children would be removed from them. Certainly this expectation is evident in Australian foster care systems, where carers are expected to provide the highest level of parental care, whilst birth parents are required only to prove they can provide 'good enough' parenting in order for reunification to occur. This injunction upon foster carers to be 'perfect angels' can thus negatively impact carers in multiple ways, as Dee, a single heterosexual carer, suggests in the following and final extract:

Dee: I remember in training that carers were always made out to be martyrs, and so that is what I thought I had to be. That I had to expect no thanks or support as martyrs just get on with the job and do it. For me that turned out really bad, because I care for children with



disabilities, and you really do need a lot of help, and with the last boy I was caring for he had a major operation and I should have asked for more help before, because I was suffering so much from sleep deprivation after a week of not sleeping and him crying the whole time from pain, but I didn't because I thought I had to be a martyr. I have learnt not to be the martyr. That is really important. I fell asleep and didn't hear him crying and the girl next door came and tapped on my window because she knew it was unusual to hear him crying and I didn't ask for help when I should have. So when people say 'you are amazing, you are an angel', I actually find that is an alienating statement, not one that helps me to be a good carer.

This is a perfect example of how the injunction experienced by carers to be 'martyrs' can work to the disservice both of carers and children. Indeed, the expectation that carers who are *not* martyrs will fail functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy: carers are expected to cope, and when they don't (and typically this is for legitimate reasons), they are seen to have failed, and thus to have been flawed or imperfect martyrs or angels to start with. What this type of logic fails to comprehend is that no parent is perfect, and no one, no matter how good their parenting skills are, can succeed every time if they are faced with considerable challenges and no support (and this includes birth parents). The expectation for carers to be martyrs, then, sets carers, children and indeed the foster care system up to fail, in that it doesn't adequately recognise the challenges of care provision, nor does it put in place adequate support for foster carers and children.

Furthermore, and as Dee suggests, the statement that carers are 'amazing angels' serves to ignore the very real challenges that carers face. Certainly, I would endorse the fact that, in the face of considerable pressures and a lack of resources, foster carers, on the whole, succeed in caring for children in positive and productive ways. And certainly, this is something to be recognised and indeed celebrated. Nonetheless, if the only response to the experiences that carers have is to say 'you must be an angel', then there is again an injunction upon carers simply to accept this title (and thus not speak of the challenges), or to deny the title and thus be seen as having questionable motives or as having poor judgement in continuing in the face of challenges. In this final rhetorical effect, then, the statement 'you are an angel' (and further the expectation of foster carers to be *selfless* angels) sets foster carers up to potentially fail by schooling them in the belief that a) they must be perfect, b) if they are not then they have failed, and c) if they find care provision challenging then they must just take this in their stride and not complain. None of these are approaches that we would advocate with birth parents, and it thus seems illogical to advocate this type of logic when it comes to foster carers.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter I have emphasised the ways in which the statement 'you must be an angel' in relation to foster carers functions to control, marginalise or otherwise disempower foster carers and to potentially discredit their experiences. Importantly, many of the rhetorical effects I have identified function contrarily and in competing and overlapping ways with one another. So, in one instance, a claim that foster carers are angels can serve to discredit the costs and challenges of carework, whilst in another instance it can construct foster children as unfathomably hard work (which, it would be expected, should be

adequately supported and remunerated). And that is precisely why identifying the statement that foster carers are ‘angels’ or ‘saints’ as having rhetorical effects is so important: otherwise, the effects will continue (primarily in negative ways for foster carers and children), and nothing will actually be put in place that could more usefully support or recognise foster carers.

One approach that could actually shift how we see foster care away from one of rosy benevolence on the part of foster carers would be to recognise the responsibility of all individuals as part of a broader society to engage in the work of care provision. Beasley and Bacchi (2005), drawing on the work of Levinas, suggest that understandings of ‘care’ may be reconceptualised through an approach of ‘non-indifference’ towards those other than ourselves. Whilst they provide an important critique of the limitations of Levinas’ work (and in particular the ways in which he relies too heavily on a particularly narrow account of care), Beasley and Bacchi’s work nonetheless signals the importance of adopting a ‘non-indifferent’ approach to caring for others that takes as its starting point the contingency of the self upon the other. They suggest that considering the need for care of those other than ourselves must be a product of an acknowledgement of the ways in which our own identity as ‘cared for’ individuals is intimately enmeshed with those for whom we may not typically consider a duty of care over. They suggest that moral indifference towards the other is only possible if we deny how reliant we are upon those other than ourselves for our sense of self and location within the world.

Taking up this understanding of care as a ‘non-indifferent’ approach to others, and particularly in regards to foster carer, it is important to recognise that normative discourses of ‘the family’ are premised largely upon the juxtaposition of ‘good families’ with ‘bad families’. In other words, not only are differing families placed in explicitly adversarial relationships with one another (such as birth families and foster families), but those of us who are identified as ‘good parents’ or as living in ‘good families’ are implicitly reliant upon those who are identified as ‘bad parents’ living in ‘bad families’. Recognising the contingency of the former category upon the latter would be central to a ‘non-indifferent’ account of foster care provision that pays close attention to the ongoing politics of child placements.

In relation to child protection, then, an understanding of the responsibility that comes from a ‘non-indifferent’ approach that refuses or challenges moral binaries of worth as they pertain to families is one that focuses on a child’s right to care that is the result of living in a social context whereby care is disproportionately distributed according to factors such as the socio-economic status, gender and race of their parents (Roberts, 2003). Again, such an approach would refuse a paternalistic engagement with children in need of care (and their families) that centres upon ‘pity for the other’ (which holds the potential to reify indifference towards those other than ourselves – ‘I have done my duty and that is enough’), and instead focuses on how the privileges held by those of us who occupy dominant or privileged social locations are always already contingent upon the aforementioned differential distribution of social resources (Riggs, 2008).

Further in regards to foster parents, an engagement with the concept of ‘non-indifference’ may help to engender forms of recognition that emphasise foster carers locatedness within a broader social context that at the very least promotes a concern about child protection. In other words, if foster carers are seen as engaged in the actual work of caring for children in a context of protection, then it is likely that this will result in forms of recognition that extend beyond the sanctioning of foster carers by the State. To acknowledge foster carers, at a

national level, as engaged in the work of child protection, would be to shift attention away from a focus on individual instances of child abuse or the individual carework that carers take (which is often depicted as the individual ‘good’ of specific ‘angels’, as I discussed earlier), and towards a focus on the rights and needs of children to a safe living environment, and the important role that foster carers (amongst others) play in meeting this need.

Recognition that emphasises the meeting of children’s needs may help to counter the dichotomisation of families into categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and the role this plays in perpetuating disparities in family outcomes across Australia, whereby a failure to achieve particular normative family standards is typically marked as deviant. Whilst it is obviously the case that child removal will continue to be primarily considered the product of ‘bad parenting’, the promotion of non-indifference as a framework for understanding child protection may help to engender an understanding of the contexts within which a range of families live, the hardships that some families face, and the role of foster carers as one facet of a commitment to meeting the needs of children, some of which will also be met by the ongoing role of birth parents and potential reunification with birth families.

A focus on non-indifference would of course also hold important implications not only for foster carers as family members, but also for social workers. A non-indifferent approach to social work may entail the elaboration of a praxis that views a commitment to social justice as a significant component of the paid work of child protection. Certainly many social workers may already engage in such a praxis, but an educational and workplace commitment to ensuring ongoing awareness amongst social workers of current and changing factors that impact upon families (both biological and foster) may help to ensure this focus. This may involve encouraging social workers to understand their work practice as occurring in contexts where issues of child protection primarily result from a lack of social support and a failure to meet the needs of particular families, parents and children, rather than primarily resulting from the pathology of individual people. Examining the often implicit comparison of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ families may enable an approach to social work practice that not only appreciates a more diverse range of family forms, but which is also committed to institutional change that enables families to achieve supportive relationships.

In conclusion, and as I have briefly elaborated here, engaging in a ‘non-indifferent’ approach to understanding child protection may help to move away from the need to see foster carers as ‘angels’ and ‘saints’ (and the rhetorical effects of these claims), whilst still acknowledging the vital role that foster carers play in national child protection agendas. Seeing care provision as a social responsibility, and foster carers as key players in this work, doesn’t undermine recognition of foster carers, but it does put that recognition in context, and thus refuses the individualisation of ‘good’ in the context of foster care (whilst nonetheless recognising the challenges that foster carers face as individuals). Seeing child protection as a form of social good and thus a responsibility of all individuals is no less a rhetorical device with performative effects than is referring to foster carers as angels or saints. Nonetheless, it may be somewhat more productive in its effects in that it may broaden out societal understandings of care provision, and indeed encourage more people, in a range of ways, to engage in supporting children and families who are in crisis by seeing care (and the reasons for why it is necessary) as everyone’s responsibility, rather than seeing crises as solely the product of ‘bad families’ who are positioned as other to the norm of the ‘good family’

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