Negotiating foster families: Identification and desire

Riggs, D.W., Delfabbro, P.H. & Augoustinos, M.

School of Psychology, The University of Adelaide

Introduction: Foster Care in the Australian Context

It is widely recognized that foster care systems across Australia are facing many significant challenges (Barber and Delfabbro, 2004). Not only have governments been faced with a doubling in the numbers of children coming into care over the last decade, but they have also found it increasingly difficult to recruit and maintain foster carers who are willing to provide care for children with increasingly challenging needs (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2006). In addition to these supply and demand factors, there has been a significant decrease in the availability of residential care options, meaning that out-of-home care systems have become increasingly reliant on foster care or kinship care (the latter only in some States) as the principal forms of placement (Australian Senate, 2005; Scott and Swain, 2002; Layton, 2003).

Significant concern continues to be expressed at the high rates of placement instability currently experienced by children in care as a result of the increasing disparity between the complexity of children's needs and the capacity of the existing pool of carers (e.g., Barber and Delfabbro, 2004). There has also been some discussion of the need to develop more intensive forms of care similar to those developed in the United Kingdom or United States utilising paid carers (e.g., Layton, 2003). However, an issue that is seldom discussed within these debates is the extent to which current legislation and policy has contributed to much of the discontent, instability and uncertainty in the care systems around the country. As Scott and Swain (2002) have pointed out, Australian out-of-home care policy has followed many of the trends observed in both the UK and the US. Policies have

swung from one extreme to another, as evidenced by a shift away from high levels of removal of children from their biological families in the 1980s and towards repeated attempts at reunification in the 1990s. The shift towards reunification as the primary goal of child protection has resulted in many children experiencing 1) a high number of short term placements (defined as less than 12 months in duration), 2) continual movement in and out of the foster care system as reunification attempts fail, and 3) difficulty in securing long-term orders and thus placement stability.

Although the exact legislative framework and nature of available orders varies from one Australian state or territory to the next, current data confirms that most children enter care on various forms of temporary or short-term care and protection order often at a very young age. Several types of more permanent orders are available, including guardianship and custody orders, but these are usually more difficult to obtain (Layton, 2003). With most traditional Guardianship orders, the legal responsibility for the child passes to the State and the daily care to a third party (typically foster carers). More recently, however, there has been a move towards the introduction of new types of order (e.g., Permanent care orders in Victoria, or parental responsibility orders in Western Australia) that have the effect of transferring both legal responsibility and daily care to a third party. Alternatively, some states such as New South Wales have recently introduced provisions that allow the State to maintain legal responsibility, but for important decision-making to be undertaken more autonomously by a third party.

Unfortunately, as the AIHW (2006) points out, these hybrid or more flexible orders are not available in all Australian jurisdictions. Many foster carers thus continue to be faced with a considerable degree of instability and uncertainty in a context where children may be removed from their care. Knowledge of this thus affects both the retention of existing carers, and the recruitment of new carers who may be unwilling to forgo long-term security in order to provide care. Finally, in regards to the problems facing foster carers, placement services have been increasingly outsourced via competitive tender to private organizations. This has resulted in an increasing separation and animosity between government case-workers who act as legal guardians of children removed into care, and foster carers who have day-to-day responsibility for such children's wellbeing.

The Current Study

The aim of the current study was to further understand some of these challenges facing Australian foster care systems by examining findings from a federally funded research project involving interviews with existing Australian foster carers. The primary findings drawn from the data, and particularly as guided by a psychoanalytically-informed approach to social work (as will be adopted within this paper), is a call for moves towards an increased emphasis upon the unique ways in which foster families are formed, and the promotion of foster care as a viable way of negotiating familial relationships. Whilst acknowledging the potential instabilities created by a foster care system that prioritizes (birth family) reunification, the promotion of foster care as 'family-based care' may thus help to increase the numbers of foster carers available. More specifically, it may increase the number of

people willing to providing a nurturing environment capable of withstanding the considerable pressures placed upon carers as a result of the often competing needs of social workers and children.

Taking the centrality of family as its starting place, this paper explores how issues of identification as, and desire for, family were reported by participants as shaping both their initial and growing commitment to the provision of foster care. Attention is paid to the ways in which the participants often felt that their claims to family were dismissed by social workers, and implications are drawn from this for a psychoanalytically-informed social work practice that values and promotes a range of family forms. By exploring how foster carers negotiate, rework and adopt the category family, it may be possible to understand more clearly how the aforementioned issues of supply, particularly as they shape the current 'crisis' in foster care in Australia, may be addressed through clearer directives for social workers as to how best engage with foster families. Importantly, and in a context where issues of supply are not limited solely to foster carers, but also extend to a social workers due to insufficient staffing and supervision (themselves a result of poor staff retention attributable to inadequate remuneration and case overloading), clearer directives may help to reduce the burden upon social workers by offering ways to work *with,* rather than *against,* foster families.

Language and Social Work Practice with Foster Families

There are many well documented and diverse approaches to the provision of social work practice with families. The vast majority of these, however, have not been

designed with the unique needs of foster families in mind. Most of the existing literature in this area, whilst important, has focused on therapeutic approaches to working with foster families and children in crisis (e.g., Chamberlain, 2003), rather than working with foster families who experience challenges in day-to-day family life. As such, there is little literature that provides the practitioner with information instructing how to best engage the specific needs of foster families *as families in their own right*. One approach to practice that may be well suited to the diverse needs of foster families is that of a psychoanalytically-informed social work model.

As it has been developed in some areas of social work (e.g., Edwards and Sanville, 1996), psychoanalysis represents an opportunity for addressing family-specific dynamics without pathologizing or blaming particular members. Importantly, a psychoanalytically informed approach to working with families builds upon, rather than contradicts, the work of Freud, who across his writings prioritized a primarily social, rather than biological, account of the ways in which identification operates within families. This emphasis holds important implications for practice with foster families, which are most often formed through non-biological relations. A psychoanalytically-informed approach to working with foster families may help to shift focus away from an understanding of foster families as non-normative, or as a place where 'damaged children' are raised, or as marginal to biological families, and may instead focus on the unique ways in which family bonds and group identifications occur within foster families. Importantly, the suggestion within this paper is thus not that all social workers require training in psychoanalysis, but rather that particular concepts and understandings of family from within psychoanalysis may be usefully adapted and utilized to inform social work practice.

Utilizing psychoanalytic concepts to understand foster families may provide one means through which to shift attention away from normative definitions of family as they are typically defined through heterosexual biological reproduction. Lacan (1938), for example, challenged the supposedly *a priori* status of kinship as premised upon heterosexual exogamy, when he emphasized the ways in which social norms shape the category 'family'. Such norms have been identified by Summerfield and McHoul (2005) as reified within Australian family law, where the category 'family' almost exclusively refers to heterosexual, biological relations. In his analysis of South Australian foster care laws, Riggs (2006) similarly found that all foster carers, by definition, are excluded from the categories of 'parent' and 'family'. Both analyses suggest that what is required is a move towards recognizing how the use of particular language often precludes legal identification with particular identity categories.

In the analysis that follows, the previous points about the centrality of language to understanding foster families will be applied in the interpretation of a range of accounts provided by foster carers. Particular emphasis will be given to the ways in which foster carers view the role of language in various accounts of their families, and more specifically in social workers' failure to validate the importance of their families. The accounts also demonstrate how, in the face of this, foster families continue to claim a space for themselves.

Study Findings

Data and Method

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 through which the research was conducted and the foster care organizations with whom the foster carers were registered. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with men and women from a range of cultural backgrounds and with a broad range of care experiences across four Australian states using a semi-structured interview schedule focusing on experiences of foster care provision, motivations to provide care, and suggestions for change within Australian foster care systems. Interviews and focus groups were audio taped and transcribed orthographically, and all participants were allocated a pseudonym following transcription to ensure anonymity.

Following a thematic analytic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006), dominant themes were identified within the data set, and these themes were then examined to identify salient sub-themes. The process of thematic analysis involves several research phases. The first phase requires that the researcher become familiar with the data. This is best achieved by reading and re-reading the data, while making note of any initial ideas. The second phase involves generating initial codes from the data by "coding the interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set" (Braun & Clarke, p. 87). The third phase entails collating the

initial codes into potential themes and gathering all the data relevant to each potential theme. The fourth phase requires that the researcher review the potential themes, and assess whether or not they work in relation to both the coded extracts and the entire data set. Finally, the fifth phase entails refining the specifics of each theme and the "overall story that the analysis tells" (Braun & Clarke, p. 87).

Across 500 pages of transcribed text the theme of 'family' was identified with considerable frequency (n=55 references to family). Within these 55 instances of the theme 'family', 3 sub-themes were identified: 1) the systemic negation of foster families (n=25), 2) foster families claiming family (n=15), and 3) what are termed here 'conception narratives', in which the speaker accounts for how their foster family came into being (n=15). These three sub-themes were then examined through the lens of the psychoanalytic concepts of group identification and desire, with particular emphasis on the ways in which these concepts played out in potentially unique ways in the narratives of foster families. The three sub-themes are presented here utilizing representative extracts, and are analyzed in order to explore the implications of the findings for social work practice in relation to foster families.

Analysis

Theme 1: The Systemic Negation of Foster Families

This first theme predominated in all interviews and focus groups, and foster carers often spent considerable time elaborating personal experiences of feeling slighted or being explicitly denied a location within the category 'family' by social workers.

Carers spoke of a refusal on the part of social workers to treat their family respectfully, often expecting carers to engage in practices that carers did not feel were child-focused. This often appeared to result from social workers putting bureaucratic or systemic obligations ahead of what many foster carers consider to be the needs of children in care. As noted in the introduction, whilst matters of (birth) family reunification often take precedence across Australia, and whilst social workers must therefore practice in a context of considerable (legal) restrictions, it is nonetheless the case that foster carers require support for long term placements that acknowledge the family basis of many such care arrangements. In this first extract Emma elaborates her concern as to the actions of social workers:

Extract 1

Emma: I think in many ways I was naïve about what was involved with agreeing to a permanent placement, as I find now that whilst I want to care for this child and raise it normally I feel that this organisation doesn't really want to do that. I think their view of normality is removed from their own personal normality. Not that they have interfered with me, but they have talked a lot of talk.

Interviewer: It sounds like they expect you to do things with foster children that they would never do with their own children.

Emma: No. Imagine putting your own child in a limousine and sending them away. Now I don't do that but my sister has with her foster children. When

would you take a child out of school for 3 hours to go visit a parent when you want them to be normal and value education?

In this extract Emma clearly draws attention to the power of language and its role in shaping the reality of her family. Her reference to raising a child 'normally' is contrasted with her perception that the government organization with whom she must negotiate her family does not respectfully engage with her 'normal' child-rearing practices: as she states, 'their view of normality is removed from their own personal normality'. Emma concludes with a rhetorical statement about normality in which she reiterates that it is absurd to deny a child the ability to be 'normal' and to 'value education'.

In Extract 2, Dan asserts even more forcefully that his experience of foster care provision has been one where children in care are 'forced into difference' by social workers:

Extract 2

Interviewer: Does your foster child see himself clearly as a foster child or does he see himself as your son?

Dan: I don't think he has ever seen himself as my son. But I think he has seen himself as a child that I am parenting, but as more and more time goes by, he has the category of foster child thrust upon him. He used to say to me 'what does foster mean', because his sister would say it and I would say, 'what do you think it means'. He would never apply it to himself. Now he

sometimes seems to see himself as a foster child. Yet to kids at school he often refers to me as Dad, even though he doesn't call me Dad himself.

Interviewer: Why do you think the term 'foster' is so prominent?

Dan: I think it all comes about because of the way the system imposes itself upon our lives. We would have done whatever he wanted, name wise, but the system was very much foster, foster, foster. His sister who is also in care says to him 'they are not your real parents, they are just your foster parents'.

Interviewer: That certainly seems very alarming.

Dan: Last time our child's worker gave him the new charter of children's rights with her number on it, so the other day he said to me 'I want that charter, I want that book, so I can ring [my worker] and say I am not happy that you won't let me do what I want'. So basically the message he was being told to give me was 'I will go over you as my parent and I will go to this worker because I know she has got more power than you'.

In this extract, Dan makes it quite clear that despite the child he cares for seeing 'himself as a child [Dan is] parenting', he nonetheless finds the label 'foster child thrust upon him'. As Dan states at the end of his first turn, whilst the child he cares for 'often refers to me as Dad' to children at school, this is in contrast to the foster care system and the child's sister who are reported as constantly deploying the category 'foster', often in negative ways. Dan reports that the stability of his family was undermined by a social worker who, despite attempting to ensure that the child

had access to support and knew their rights, nonetheless reinforced the idea that the person acting as their parent (and who they sometimes called 'Dad') had little authority.

The analysis of this extract thus holds important implications for applications of 'best interests of the child' and 'child-focused practice' in the context of long-term foster placements. More specifically, the disjunctures that often exist within foster care between encouraging carers not to become 'too attached' to children (especially during short-term placements), and encouraging carers to assist children in developing 'healthy attachments', may present problems for long-term foster placements. As psychoanalytic theories would suggest in regards to parent-child relationships, identification with primary caregivers and the desires that come from this constitute the central role that families play in the nurturing of children's sense of self (Goldstein, *et al.*, 1996). For families providing long-term placements, the rhetoric of 'best interests' (which, currently in Australia, is primarily focused upon reunification) may do very little to actually support a child-focused approach to care that prioritizes the things that children in long-term placements typically need (i.e., stability, continuity of care, and consistent parental figures). In another paper focusing on this same data set we have emphasized that foster children will often negotiate complex relationships with biological and foster parents, and that children often do not feel compelled to prioritize the former over the latter, but instead may recognize the multiple opportunities that exist for having their emotional and developmental needs met by a range of parental figures (Riggs, Augoustinos & Delfabbro, under submission). Thus, importantly, social workers must listen to the voices of *individual* foster children when they speak about the care they require and

receive, rather than promoting a homogenous model of child protection that ignores the specificities of individual foster families.

To return to Extract 2, then, we may see such an approach to developing specific relationships to foster children on the basis of their needs where Dan and the child he cares for have developed a unique relationship as a family that appears both mindful of their status as carer and child (in a context of statutory child protection), whilst nonetheless negotiating a *familial* relationship that is utilized to suit the child's needs (for example when the child uses the term 'Dad' to refer to Dan when talking with schoolmates).

In Extract 3, Emma again questions the terminology associated with foster care, and highlights how it serves to marginalize or delegitimize foster families:

Extract 3

Emma: I don't understand why foster care has to be so different. Why, once the child is absorbed into your life, is this term 'foster' made to be so important? There is such disparity between where my foster child lives now and where his birth family live. It is a sliding door thing. I could have lived here or there. They have already got all that happening in their head about their life is different from what it could have been, so why need another label? Why are we not a parent but a carer, you can't be the guardian but guardian is a nicer word than a carer. But I think it is fundamentally because they have not sat down to the core of what foster care is and if you take their

phrase 'we want to normalize this experience for children', then make that
your banner and then figure out how do we do that, and consider what we
need to remove to make that occur.

Here Emma elaborates her understanding of a foster family as being one where a
foster child is 'absorbed into your life'. Whilst throughout the interview Emma made
it quite clear that she did not want to 'own' the child she was caring for (and indeed
she recognizes this in the extract where she says 'you can't be the [legal] guardian'),
she nonetheless expressed a desire to be able to claim her relationship to the infant
in her care as one of parent/child. Emma expresses a desire for this relationship to
be recognized and respected as such, rather than being downplayed as a result of the
title 'foster' being appended to their relationship. Emma makes an important point
where she states that if social workers really do 'want to normalize this experience
[of care] for children' then this needs to be accompanied by an examination of the
institutional barriers that prevent this. Her suggestion is an important one as it
signals a need not necessarily for *more* intervention into the lives of foster families,
but potentially *less*. As Emma states, children in care already experience a life that
will most often be shaped by the fact that it is 'different from what it could have
been' so, as she questions, why does this need to be compounded by further labelling
from *within* the foster care system?

In this first sub-theme, both of the carers presented here display considerable
concern about how their families are: 1) forced into non-normality, 2) treated as 'just'
foster families, and 3) constantly labelled by the category 'foster'. Both of the carers
highlight through their narratives a concern to create family with the children in

their care, but report that this is often thwarted by social workers and 'the system'. Yet, despite this, Dan continues to care for a child who sometimes calls him 'Dad', and Emma cares for an infant who, in her terms, is 'absorbed into [her] life'. Whilst acknowledging the limitations that social workers experience in supporting foster families in a context of birth family reunification, it is nonetheless important to note that social workers may play a significant role in supporting foster families in claiming an identity as a family, and moreover in creating spaces where the important role that familial identifications play in children's development can be recognized. As the following sub-theme highlights, despite a considerable lack of institutional support, foster carers continue to assert the validity of their families and their right to be recognized as such.

Theme 2: Foster Carers Claiming Family

Much like the extracts in the previous section, the extracts in this section are widely concerned with issues of group identification: How do foster carers claim a recognized family identity and how is this negotiated between family members? As psychoanalytic understandings of families suggest, a family is perhaps the primary context within which one learns one's place in the world, where one knows one's relationship to other significant people, and where one can potentially find safety through those relationships. The fact of a non-biological relationship does not appear to negatively shape the experiences of family reported by the participants in this research. Whilst many carers certainly report negative experiences associated with care provision and negotiating the foster care system, they nonetheless express a

desire to continue as parents. These findings reinforce research from the past three decades that has extended Bowlby's psychoanalytic account of the centrality of biological (maternal) relationships by emphasizing the possibilities that exist for children who have received little nurturing in infancy to regain lost ground by establishing nurturing relationships with (often non-biologically related) caregivers in early childhood and onwards (see Rutter, 1991 for a review of research on this topic).

In Extract 4 we see an example of one carer speaking in a focus group about how group identifications shape her family, and the implications of this for the wider relationships the family are involved in:

Extract 4

Interviewer: Do you refer to yourselves as parents?

Meg: I say foster mum or carer.

Interviewer: I was just wondering, some carers are quite clear that they are the parent and some people have different ways of thinking.

Meg: We are more about the way [our foster child] sees us, really. He always used to say when people said 'your mum and dad, no they are my foster mum and dad' or 'they are my foster carers', but nowadays he doesn't correct people as much about it I notice. The other day he said to you [speaking to her husband] he wished you were his dad.

In this extract, and in contrast to Emma and Dan's comments in Extracts 2 and 3, Meg appears quite comfortable with the term 'foster' being appended to her identity as 'mum'. Importantly, however, she clarifies that this title is one introduced by the child she and her husband care for. As she states: 'We are more about the way [our foster child] sees us, really'. Meg thus appears comfortable with the term 'foster' precisely because it is the way in which the child she cares for claims her as family. Yet despite being comfortable with this, Meg nonetheless clarifies that whilst the child in her care had previously corrected people who failed to use the word 'foster' when describing Meg and her husband, he 'doesn't correct people as much' now. Meg thus again signals her willingness to create family in ways that are mindful of the child's shifting conceptualisation of what a family is, and how he chooses to refer to their family.

In Extract 5, Robert provides another clear example of how carers are invited into family relationships with foster children, and in this instance, with members of a child's birth family:

Extract 5

Robert: When [my foster son] was 21 I threw him a big party and invited the grandparents, aunties and uncles and the whole thing and [his] mother turned around and said 'well I suppose this really means you are part of our family'. I thought that was a really nice thing for her to say, because it must

have been bloody hard for her to have to acknowledge that I have a closer

relationship with her son than she has.

Here Robert clearly acknowledges the concession made by his adult foster son's birth mother in recognizing him as family. This was particularly salient for Robert, as he discussed later in the focus group, as his identification as a gay male foster carer had often resulted in him experiencing negativity or outright dismissal from both social workers and birth families who had refused to recognize him (as a gay man) as a legitimate parent or as part of a family. For Robert, an acknowledgment of his role as part of his foster son's family, and the connections being drawn between himself and his foster son's (biologically related) 'grandparents, aunties and uncles', was significant.

In the following extract, Jan makes it quite clear that the care she provides legitimates her claim to an identity as both parent and as family. International readers should note that the precariousness of Jan's situation in regards to her foster son is a result of the relative scarcity of residency orders for foster carers within Australia. Although it is possible, as outlined in the Introduction, for foster carers (in some Australian jurisdictions) to apply for a form of guardianship once they have cared for a child for more than 4 years, this is rarely undertaken as it presents carers with further problems in regards to monetary compensation for care and it can place carers in antagonistic relationships with both social workers and the State.

Extract 6

Jan: What I think what has to change is they have to give some genuine credibility to the relationships between foster parents and children, because when I was speaking to the Crown Solicitor about an issue a while back I was told; 'of course you realize that if in a few years time [the birth] father gets his act together [the child] could still go back,' and I wondered how they could possibly believe that would be in his best interests. I thought 'what about the value of my relationship with [the child]'. I have been his mother since he was 2. I have cared for him, I have loved him, I have made him safe and he is very strongly attached to me and my family, but there is no recognition of that. As far as I am concerned I have as much or more right than his biological parents to have him because of that relationship. But it is not recognized and it should be. If it was you would have a lot more foster parents coming into the system. We have a country full of people that can't have their own children, can't afford to adopt, who would love to give these kids homes. And fair enough if you want them to have ongoing contact with their biological parents but allow them to stay permanently in a situation where they can feel secure. And the parents feel secure enough to be able to give their hearts to those kids and know they are not going to be taken away.

In this extract Jan directly challenges the logic of reunification by asserting that there is a greater value associated with the child remaining in her care. As she states: 'I have been his mother since he was 2. I have cared for him, I have loved him'. Jan goes on to explicitly evoke the category 'biological parent' only to dismiss biology as being no more important than the relationship she has built with the

child. Jan is quite clear that one of the reasons why more people do not engage in foster care provision is that biology is often prioritized over the relationships built by foster families. For Jan, to 'give [your] heart to [foster] kids' requires security in the knowledge that this will be respected and valued. Throughout the extract Jan is very clear that family relationships are ones built over time through love and caring, not ones that are assumed automatically through shared biology. In so doing Jan emphasizes not only the specific language that she finds exclusionary within the foster care system, but also provides insights into how such exclusion may be addressed by social workers.

In these three extracts the carers, speaking this time within the context of focus groups, spoke clearly and often emphatically about their claiming of family. Whilst some claimed this for themselves, others spoke of recognition being given by birth families or foster children (at least in the context of these extracts). Nonetheless, there is a shared voice *across* the extracts that accepts as rightful the relationships between carers and children as *family* relationships. Importantly, the carers do not appear to deny the concurrent validity of birth families. Though Jan claims her relationship with the child in her care as potentially having 'more right than [the] biological parents', she nonetheless acknowledges that there is often a need for ongoing contact. Meg is clear that the child in her care is entitled to use the term 'foster' at various times to signal his location as both within a family, but potentially as a member of another (birth) family, and Robert's narrative makes it clear that he has an ongoing relationship with his foster son's birth family. Working with birth families thus requires social workers to be mindful of the claims to familial

identification that foster carers often make, and to ensure that these are engaged with respectfully.

Theme 3: 'Conception narratives'

In this final sub-theme, the participants focused on matters of desire in relation to foster care provision, and in particular the desires that motivated them to become parents to children. Such narratives are important as they provide foster families with an understanding of 'conception' that is not based upon biology, nor is it necessarily one based upon replacing a child's birth family. Rather, these narratives celebrate the unique ways in which foster families are conceived, and in so doing render visible the varying desires for family experienced by carers. Some of these are quite straightforward, as for example in this extract from Jan:

Extract 7

Interviewer: The first question I want to ask is why did you want to be a foster carer?

Jan: I always wanted to be a mother and for various reasons I didn't have my own and because I am single I couldn't adopt so that was my reason.

Across all of the focus groups and interviews conducted for this project, Jan was one of 15 people who clearly stated that their motivation for care provision was a desire to be a parent. All fifteen people cited lengthy histories of wanting to conceive

biological children, finding this not possible or too emotionally challenging, exploring many avenues, and finally finding foster care to be the best fit for them. In so doing these carers elaborated a narrative that explained not only the conception of their foster family (of which Jan's is a simple summary), but which also expressed how their own desires shaped their commitment to care for children. Meg makes this very clear in the following extract:

Extract 8

Interviewer: What do you say when people say you must be an angel to care for children?

Meg: Well I go 'no I did it for me actually'. We don't have kids, I did it for me. And it just happens that it is good for him as well. We had a massage therapist here last night and she has been coming to us for 12 months and she said [to our foster child] 'oh you are such a lucky boy. Do you know how lucky you are' and I just want to smack her. I wanted to say 'no he has the same rights to a family environment as any other kid'.

Interviewer: That would be a hard thing to hear.

Meg: Yeah. And I don't like the concept of being an angel. It used to be that when people found out that you were a welfare worker, they would say 'oh that is so hard, you are a mother Theresa'. I would say 'no it is nothing', and I always hated that kind of attitude and I particularly hate it now with the concept of fostering because we did do it for us. We did but we also knew we

had some skills and something to offer and all of that. But that was the thing

we did it for us and it just worked out fabulous.

In Extract 8 Meg is explicit that she is not an 'angel', but rather that she 'did it for me': she became a foster carer because that is what she and her husband wanted to do – they wanted to have kids. However, in saying this Meg is clear that children in care also have needs and wants that they are entitled to have met. Thus, she takes offense to the notion that foster children are 'lucky' – she asserts that children in need of care have 'the same rights to a family environment as any other child'. In so doing, Meg makes a claim that the environment being provided to the child she cares for is a 'family environment'. Whilst Meg does concede that 'we also knew we had some skills and something to offer', she is emphatic that her primary motivation was a desire to have children, and she does not apologize for or attempt to hide this desire. In the final extract, Emma provides a conception narrative that is somewhat less about her own desire, but which nonetheless highlights the rightful status of her relationship to her foster child as one of family:

Extract 9

Emma: I was at the point of saying this system is not listening, not getting it right. I didn't take what they had offered in that year because the mix wasn't right. I hadn't known terribly well if I would cope with an older child. I didn't want to be a social experiment where you brought a child in who had been abused and neglected and you were out of your depth. I had already worked out that I wasn't going to get the help I needed. I was looking at permanent

long-term placement. So I wasn't going to take a child and give them back. Whoever I got was going to be the deal. Then they rang about [a child] and offered [him] straight out of hospital that was Thursday, on the weekend there was a nursery and by Monday he was there and it was a done deal. It was like a meant to be situation. This child was meant to be and I hadn't felt that with any of the others.

This extract comes at the end of a long narrative in which Emma elaborated the many problems she faced in securing a placement that worked well for her. The narrative very much focused on Emma coming close to resigning herself to not being able to provide care, as 'the system' was not able to meet her needs. Emma's desire here is very much couched in terms of functional needs – a child could not be 'older', nor one where the 'mix wasn't right'. Emma also did not desire a child she would have to 'give back'. Fortunately for Emma her desire for a particular child was finally met: just when it appeared it was not going to happen she received a call, the child arrived, and 'it was a done deal'. Emma is clear that 'this child was meant to be' – that in contrast to other children she had been approached to care for, this child was the one she was meant to have. The fact that throughout the interview Emma identified so strongly as a parent appears to come from this particular formation of her family. Emma's 'conception narrative' is thus clearly marked by the inevitability of her family coming into being.

In these three extracts the women, albeit in varying ways, narrated the conception of their family in ways that celebrate them as unique and inherently meaningful. All three women spent considerable time sharing the hardships they had faced since

taking on a child, but they all reiterated the 'meant to be' nature of their families. The women were clear about the role that desire for family played in the formation of their families, and recognized the ongoing role that such desires played in their commitment to raising children. Identifying as a family thus entailed for them identifying a *desire for* family, alongside identifying the ways in which this desire brought about their own conception narrative. Their desire thus circulates within these narratives as being no less important as a result of their status as non-biological parents. Indeed, their desire often appears to legitimate their identities as parents.

Drawing on psychoanalytic accounts of parent-child relationships, the analysis of this sub-theme highlights how a desire for family is a precusor to many foster families, much as it is for many biological families. Moreover, the accounts that the foster carers provide highlight the ways in which providing care in the context of statutory child protection renders visible their own desires *to the carers themselves*. To be a desiring person, and to seek to have one's desire met, is to be confronted both with the limitations of one's desires, and to acknowledge one's indebtedness to those through whom our desires are made possible. The narratives that foster carers provide as to the formation of their families tell us much about the complexities of familial desire in the context of foster care, and the reciprocity that many foster parents and children feel towards one another in regards to having their needs for family met. The narratives reported here thus contribute an important voice to which social workers are well advised to attend: although desire can always be used to negative ends (e.g., to justify the mistreatment of children), it can also be a

significant factor that brings families together and which provides them with support in the face of adversity.

Practice Implications

As this paper has demonstrated, foster carers have considerable and justified concerns relating to the ways in which their families are acknowledged. Most of the carers who spoke as part of this research project felt that social workers either did not, or refused to, understand the importance of being able to claim a family identity for themselves. Of course it must be recognized that all of the carers who spoke had long-term placements, and carers who provide short-term, respite or emergency care for children may not share the same concerns in regards to family. Nevertheless, a significant majority of children in care in Australia are on long-term orders (12 months or greater), and many of these children will benefit from a supportive and safe family environment in which to live.

With the aim of foster carer recruitment and retention in mind, the findings presented in this paper show that people who seek significant relationships with children may be more likely to become and remain carers. The existing research on child-carer relationships clearly indicates that the stability and positivity of this relationship is central to the viability of long-term placements (e.g., Wilson *et al.*, 2003; Colton *et al.*, 2006). Focusing on foster families as cohesive units based on unique forms of group identification may thus help to strengthen and support such families. More specifically, a psychoanalytically-informed approach to social work may assist the practitioner in providing services to foster families that are attuned

to the ways in which language functions to exclude and include. As was highlighted throughout the analysis, particular forms of language are seen by foster carers as exclusionary. Yet particular forms of language (particularly those relating to desire) were used to narrate the experience of positive adult-child relationships, and to create a form of familial identification that validated foster families.

Such negotiations around biology and family exemplify what Hicks (2006) has recently highlighted in his research with (lesbian and gay) foster carers, where he suggests that foster carers are often involved in new and innovative forms of family that refuse or rework the biological/non-biological hierarchy and which provide children with opportunities for creating uniquely supportive family networks (see also Riggs, 2007). Hicks suggests that social workers must be willing to rethink the values accorded to differing family forms and to constantly assess their practice for instances of bias against foster families, particularly where this involves dismissing the vital role that carers may play in the lives of children.

Finally, a psychoanalytically-informed social work may help lead the way in developing foster care-specific accounts of child development, parenting models and interventions for working with foster families, particularly in a therapeutic setting. A social work practice that truly engages with foster families requires a research base that recognizes the specific ways in which children develop in foster families, appreciates the complex needs of foster families, and which responds with forms of practice that are suitably equipped to work with the day-to-day problems of foster families, rather than just those in crisis. Whilst it is always important to be mindful of the limitations that social workers experience when working in a context of

statutory child protection in Australia and internationally, there is still considerable scope for creating opportunities for validating and honouring foster families without placing social workers or foster families in conflict with the mandate for reunification.

In conclusion, then, as a heuristic for reading any individual's thorough imbrication in their extended family relations, psychoanalytic concepts may assist social workers in negotiating *with* foster families a space where their narratives are valued and respected. If the creation of such spaces becomes the norm rather than the exception in the context of foster care provision, issues of supply may be significantly reduced through the increased number of people being willing to work with children to create unique forms of family that meet all of the family members' needs and desires.

Acknowledgments

References

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2005) *Child Protection Australia 2003-04,* Canberra, AIHW.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2006) Australia's Health, Canberra, AIHW.

Australian Senate (2005) *Protecting Vulnerable Children: A National Challenge. Second Report on the Inquiry into Children in Institutional or Out-of-Home Care,* Canberra, Community Affairs References Committee, Commonwealth of Australia.

Barber, J. G. and Delfabbro, P. (2004) *Children in Foster Care*, London, Taylor & Francis.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* **3**(2) pp. 77-101.

Chamberlain, P. (2003) *Treating Chronic Juvenile Offenders: Advances Made Through the Oregon Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care Model*, Washington, American Psychological Association.

Colton, M., Roberts, S. and Williams, M. (2006) 'The recruitment and retention of family foster-carers: An international and cross-cultural analysis', *British Journal of Social Work.* Advanced Access published December 13, 2006, doi:10.1093/bjsw/bc1375.

Delfabbro, P. H. and Barber, J. G. (2002) 'The microeconomics of foster care in South Australia', *Children Australia*, **27**(2), pp. 29-34.

Edward J. and Sanville, J. B. (1996) *Fostering Health and Growth: A Psychoanalytic Social Work Approach*, New Jersey, Jason Aronson.

Goldstein, J., Solnit, A. J., Goldstein, S. and Freud, A. (1996) *The Best Interests of the Child: The Least Detrimental Alternative*, New York, Free Press.

Hicks, S. (2006) 'Genealogy's desire: Practices of kinship amongst lesbian and gay foster-carers and adopters', *British Journal of Social Work*, **36**(5), pp. 761-776.

Lacan, J. (1938). Les complexes familiaux. Translated by C. Asp in *Critical Texts*, **5**(3), pp. 25-42, 1988.

Layton, R. (2003) *Our Best Investment: A State Plan to Protect and Advance the Interests of Children*, Adelaide, Government of South Australia.

Riggs, D. W. (2006) 'Developmentalism and the rhetoric of 'best interests of the child': Challenging heteronormative constructions of families and parenting', *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, **2**(2), pp. 857-73112.

Riggs, D. W. (2007) *Becoming Parent: Lesbians, Gay Men, and Family,* Teneriffe, Post Pressed.

Riggs, D. W., Augoustinos, M. and Delfabbro, P. H. (2007) "Basically it's a recognition issue': Validating foster parent identities', *Family Matters,* **76**, pp. 54-69.

Riggs, D. W., Augoustinos, M. and Delfabbro, P. H. (under submission) 'Foster fathers and carework: Engaging alternate models of parenting', *Sex Roles.*

Rutter, M. (1991) Maternal Deprivation Reassessed, 2nd edition, Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Scott, D. and Swain, S. (2002) *Confronting Cruelty: Historical Perspectives on Child Protection in Australia,* Melbourne, Melbourne University Press.

Summerfield, T. and McHoul, A. (2005) 'Family as a commonsensical device and its place in law', *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, **18**(3-4), pp. 243-261.

Wilson, K., Petrie, S. and Sinclair, I. (2003) 'A kind of loving: A model of effective foster care', *British Journal of Social Work*, **33**(8), pp. 991-1003.