

Contextual Dimensions of Fostering

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Child welfare workers express criticism of the child-in-isolation model of child welfare practice. At the same time, however, they often persist with a "foster mother-in-isolation" model of fostering. The authors of this paper were conscious of an increasing interest in fostering by policy makers who however, often seemed to see little difference between the "staffing" implications of fostering and of family day care. This way of thinking about fostering is at odds with practitioner's experience. A small scale empirical study was initiated which posed the question "Who are foster families". The findings from this study make it clear that foster families have qualities and methods of functioning which become evident only when the foster family is understood as a whole and not merely as a foster mother who has connected to her various dependents beside the foster child. An appreciation that there are "foster families" and not just foster mothers actively engaged in the fostering process can make for more sensitive welfare policies and more appropriate service delivery models.

Because of the unique features of foster care, there has been official encouragement to expand foster programmes coincident with expressions of concern that there may be long term social trends likely to diminish the supply of foster parents. The trends usually cited are demographic, occupational, economic, political and cultural. The quantitative evidence for these changes is massive. However, other forces such as insensitive welfare policies and

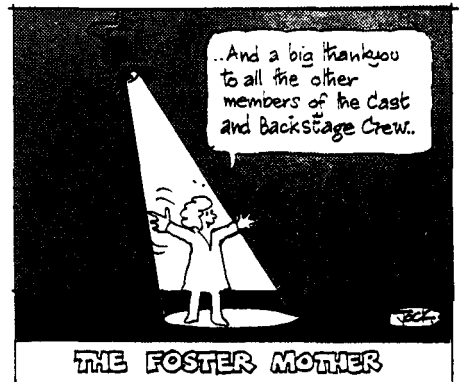
inappropriate service delivery models, could diminish the supply of foster parents.

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The authors do not have sufficient data to speculate upon secular trends in family life but using a method of interviewing whole families (parents and children together) have learned much not previously known about foster families and the fostering process. In the course of this questions are raised about welfare policies and practices. Beyond this the findings may have a wider application because of the way they relate to the language and reasoning used in more general discussions of the family. Phrases such as "marriage and work in Australia" tend to convey ideas of an emergence of a single pattern. Terms such as "public-private balance" suggest that we are quite clear about what we mean by "public" and "private". Our findings question the emergence of a single pattern and suggest a lack of clarity in some of the terms used in debates. Foster families have their own distinctive and firm styles of relating marriage and work. They appear to present a paradox in the public/private debates as while family activities are central for foster families, fostering is also an aspect of public life.

Whole family interviewing of a purposefully selected set of families introduces data which draws attention to the problem of deducing beliefs and motivations from easily accessible evidence, particularly demographic and survey data. These latter data tend to

smooth away differences between families and to exclude important social processes from attention: processes occurring between the family as a unit and its environment, and processes involving relations between the generations and the processes of socialisation. If so much of the social space of families is excluded from notice, the risk is that families will scarcely be seen in their complexity and come, instead, to be referred to in some kind of short-hand ways. The authors of this paper have secured findings illustrating that families can maintain "little traditions" over long periods of time, that they seek to arrange their occupations to further the more valued goals of child rearing and intimacy and that they have typical patterns of task allocation, boundary maintenance, decision making and community connectedness.



In view of the importance assigned to fostering, the literature (including official guidelines and standards) on foster parents, reveals a surprising lack of attention to their family life. For example, in a highly regarded text edited by Triseliotis (1980) there is one reference only to whole family involvement in foster care and this is restricted to a discussion of the possible negative effects of child placement upon foster families. Fanshel (1982), using indirect measures of foster families concluded that relations in foster families were good but familial

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processes were not examined. In a widely used handbook Wiltse (1985) reveals the dominant interest as focused upon the welfare of the foster child as if foster families were to be regarded only as a possible resource. Australian studies have the same preoccupation, for example, the O'Brien (1984) and Webster (1986) studies focus upon the organisational relations between agency staff and foster parents. There are exceptions in the literature such as Berridge and Cleaver (1987) but this literature is slight and tends to imply the significance of family relations without exploring them.

Population and Method

A decision was made to interview eight families systematically selected from a pool of one hundred foster families in two urban agencies. The pool was reduced to thirty-five families by applying the following criteria:

- families should have their "own" children mainly over eight years of age and with most still living at home.
- the families should have not less than six months experience of fostering.
- the families should have been involved in a range of fostering situations.

From this a list of families, eight were selected on an objective basis. Between them they had fostered some two hundred children. Five of the eight families had commenced fostering when their own children were young. They had an average of 3.4 children. Foster father occupations fell mainly in the range of skilled trades and semi professions (skilled trades, foreman, family small business, public servant, and company director).

The representativeness of this group is an issue. Three qualifications should be made. The first refers to the public presentation of what is the purpose of foster care. At various times foster care has been publicised as including or excluding the interests of natural parents. Different presentations may attract a pool of foster parents with different qualities. It is current policy in Victoria that foster parents be informed, from the beginning, that children will be going home and that they should

expect regular contact with the child's parents. The second qualification refers to agency practice rather than official policy. As foster care has been developed in Victoria over the past fifteen years, it has been committed to staffing policies which facilitate professional leadership and good staff ratios. Regular supportive contact between foster parents, agency staff and natural parents is a feature of the programmes. It is reasonable to suggest that the way in which a programme is publicised and managed may influence the composition of the population of foster parents both in terms of those who are attracted and those who are retained.

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The third qualification refers to the question of how representative the eight families are of the total pool of foster families in Victoria. They were selected from two urban agencies according to restrictive criteria. It would take a larger study to determine this question. However, there is persuasive evidence that the families are representative. The restrictive criteria tend to indicate life stage rather than different family types. groups of foster parents who find the behaviours of the study population consistent with their own experience. In addition, in a larger study being conducted by Tierney and Evans, the foster families possess similar qualities. A more speculative argument is that the requirements of foster care practice could not be met unless foster families displayed levels of coherence and flexibility similar to the families included in this study.

The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in the family home with spouses and, as a rule, all "own" children. The interviews were not just directed to respondents as informants, but served also as an observational opportunity for witnessing family processes. Particular care was necessary to guard against the tendency to address the more articulate and deliberate

efforts were made to convey to children that their comments were valued. An attempt was made to put family members at their ease in presenting their different accounts. The interviews were lively with all family members participating, a behaviour which seems characteristic of the families.

Family Organisation

Five areas were selected for investigation; family careers, social group participation, family integration and adaptability, type of marriage orientation and family values.

The concept of **family career** is rooted in the theoretical concepts associated with family development. Families and individuals change and develop in different ways according to life processes within environments over which families have greater or less influence. The notion of family development also implies goals towards which families strive and which vary depending upon family membership, life stages and resources. The concept has affinities with life-course analysis which Elder (1978) has defined as "a concept of interdependent careers that vary in synchronisations".

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The relevance of family career to foster care is two-fold. On the one hand it is a way of looking at family organisation qua organisation. On the other hand it may provide foster care agencies with insights about assessment, recruitment, and child placement. Thus family life can be seen in relation to the timing of events, changing configurations and the synchronisation of individual transitions with family transitions. As the family moves through its life course the content and activities of members change in relation to others. Foster care can be seen as an activity taken on by families at a point in their life course. How this relates to other life events can be studied and a better understanding of the family career can be used by agencies to help in recruitment and assessment. More expansive family policy questions might also be explored.

The concept of **small group participation** was used to examine ways in which foster families relate to their social world. The questions were: "In what social groups does this family participate?" and "What is the manner of their participation?"

Fostering can be viewed as a "crisis" of accession where a family admits a child and, to some extent, the family of that child, into the family organisation. The ability of families to cope with the unexpected, to be comfortable with the individualism of family members while retaining family cohesion and, simultaneously, to engage with the community has been summarised under the headings of **family integration** and **family flexibility**. These related concepts had their origins in studies of families in the Great Depression, studies by Angell (1936) and Cavan (1938) which were complemented by the work of Reuben Hill's (1949) studies of families during World War 2. Although the work of these theorists has been substantially developed by David Olson (1983) and others, the less elaborate conceptualisation of Hill seemed better suited to the case study method used in a first study.

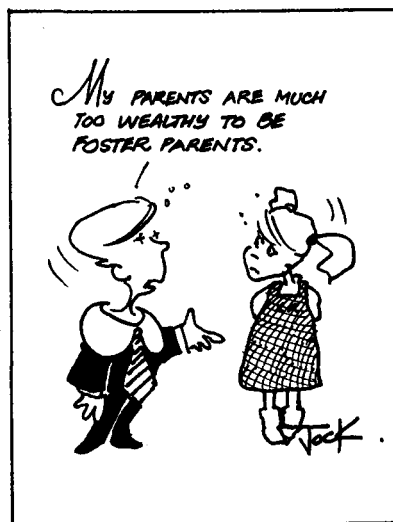
The assumption of many foster care workers that it is necessary to focus only upon foster mothers could be a matter of administrative convenience, but it implicitly suggests a sharp division of family roles along the instrumental/expressive axis. On the one hand there are "**traditional**" families and on the other hand "**companionate**" families. In the former case roles are determined by gender, in the latter, roles are determined by choice and competence. In the former, there is a sharp division of labour, in the latter there is a flexible division of labour. These distinctions extend to the allocation of authority, decision-making, expression of affect and family values. The criteria for testing this typology as used in this study were based upon those of Altrocchi (1989). Although both types of families are regarded as workable, the companionate family is thought to fit better with the values and the demands of modern societies.

The fifth area of investigation was that of **family values**. What was it about

the general goals of foster families which lead them to provide personal assistance to others? Where did they stand with respect to receiving payment for services. How did family values and practice come together? These questions are the stuff of everyday practice and policy debates in foster care and beg answers for better guidance of the field.

Findings

In general, the families were found to be planful about their futures, extensively connected in the community and their integration and adaptability was high. The "traditional" and "companionate" typology of marriage relations are "ideal types", a typology difficult to apply to the individual families as features of both types tended to be present. In addition, the typology did not appear to allow for subtleties in the nature of work. The significant feature of family value orientation was a non-materialistic philosophy.



In the family career or life course, children were produced soon after marriage and before home purchase was attempted. All commenced home purchase after several years of savings. None of the mothers was employed while their children were under eight years of age. In each family, fostering commenced after child bearing was completed although two patterns were distinguished. In the first pattern there were five families who commenced fostering while still caring for their own pre-school children and in a second

pattern there were three families who commenced fostering when their own children were adolescent and home purchase was completed or nearly so. The combination of child rearing, limited income and fostering is evidence of a high degree of planfulness and control over the family life course.

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With respect to **social group participation** the families were extensively engaged in natural communities; friends neighbours and relatives. They were, in addition, actively engaged in organised groups such as the church, sporting clubs, school organisations and organisations connected with their work. There was a marked emphasis upon being active in organisations which enriched children's lives, including their own children. Four of the eight sets of foster parents participated in the foster care programme as members of the committees of management and assisting in the training programmes. The participation of the families in organisations was quite strenuous but it was participation of a special nature. In the first place it was oriented to organisations which nurtured and sustained the development of family goals and, in the second place participation was valued largely for affective rather than instrumental reasons. The foster parents did not see themselves as "committee types". Even when members of committees, they tended to emphasise the more socio-emotional aspects of the organisation. In short, participation in secondary groups was of the style usually regarded as distinctive of primary group settings.

Family integration or the "bonds of coherence and unity" was high. Families saw themselves as pulling together and engaging in concerted family work. They were sensitive to each other's needs and encouraged open expression of opinion. They were adaptable and

contingencies and there was impressive evidence of them having overcome crises in their own lives. With this integration and adaptability there was a firm and willing leadership provided by the parents but a leadership exercised in a democratic matter.

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It would seem unlikely that families with the patterns of integration and social participation as previously described would be characterised by the sharp division of roles postulated in the ideal traditional family. Nevertheless families were examined to test this possibility. In some instances it appears that the real world of "work" is not in fact, divided up in such a way as to allow us to speak separately of "breadwinners" and "home makers" as in the case of the small family business or the family farm. Central to these families, however, was an orientation that work is undertaken to benefit the family. There were instances of father's arranging their working hours so that they could be at home at crucial times. In addition, mothers typically undertook some paid work at a stage in the family's career. There was some specialisation of household tasks particularly in the daytime but this specialisation tended not to be maintained in the evenings and weekends. At these times all members of the families were expected to "pitch in" and assist with cooking, baby and child care.

Families promoted values which not only provided an orientation within their families but an orientation which was maintained beyond the boundaries of their own families. The care and nurturance of all members of the family was a central value while children were regarded having intrinsic worth, their needs overriding material wants. These values spilled over to the parents conception of fostering. There was a "fair" way in which children ought to be treated and foster parents were active in their advocacy for foster children where they considered their interests were being overlooked. The several notions of care and nurturance as being provided by all members of

the family, of children as having intrinsic worth and of fairness about their treatment were combined in family statements that fostering could never be a matter of care in return for wages. Family members' common adherence to these values emerged as one of the factors in the families' resilience in the face of the difficulties of fostering. Foster care agencies are familiar with the phenomenon of families withdrawing from fostering during or after a crisis. The families studied had persevered through many crises and had in common a number of features which appear to act as buffers. Common values between family members seemed important as did acceptance of the free expression of feelings and opinions. A range of well-tested boundary maintenance mechanisms helped to preserve family integrity and it was clear that a major support in overcoming crises was the knowledge that the work of fostering is greatly valued by the society. The bestowal of acknowledgment was felt to be one of the significant rewards for persistence through difficulties.

Implications for practice

It is vital to the success of fostering that foster care staff understand that they are dealing with primary groups whose leisure, occupational and community activities are arranged so as to complement the expression of family ideals and child development. These families cannot and will not become part of a formal organisation.

It is important too that foster care staff undertake a bridging role between the primary groups and the secondary groups with which fostering brings them in contact. The foster care worker must assist the family to deal with formal organisations such as courts, C.S.V. and large hospitals, must interpret their primary group processes to secondary groups and must act as buffers between primary and secondary organisations when their purposes conflict. Internally, agencies should consider carefully their styles in preparing families for the work and be critical of attempts to "train" them into something new or ask them to function as part of a formal organisation. Unfortunately, several prominent government policy documents take an instrumental

view of foster families which misunderstands and potentially misuses them.

Foster families are not "foster mothers". These families participate in the work of fostering in a highly co-ordinated manner which must be understood by the worker if the worker is to support and guide a family effectively. To focus on the foster mother at assessment, preparation, support or review stages is to devalue the family's mode of functioning and to place the mother in the position of an intermediary between the agency and other family members. Just as the foster mother has a particular perspective and contribution, so does the father and each other member. Without whole family contact the worker is excluded from opportunities to understand and support the family's functioning especially when a crisis arises suddenly. This study highlighted many serious consequences of neglect of the whole family. These families have high degrees of competence as families and they should be complemented by staff who have competence in relation to them.

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Worker records of support to foster families suggested a reticence to intrude into family life. If this is so it overlooks three things: fostering as a whole family matter; the expectation of the families to undertake tasks collectively, leading to a perception by foster fathers and their children that officials and professionals do not acknowledge their contributions.

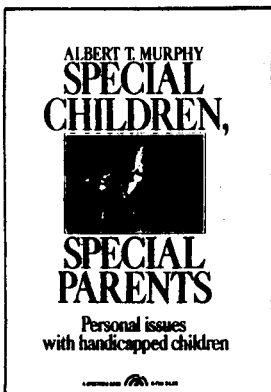
From a social policy perspective, foster families are bearers of cultural values which do not have their origins in formal political systems. To see foster families in instrumental terms only, or merely as performing "functions" for the macro society can wash away the significant of intimacy, culture and family organisation. Welfare agencies may expect too much of foster families and fail to recognise their nature. A greater understanding of them may avert policy and practice mistakes. ♦

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Spender, Lynne

Kids and the law : a guide for parents, youth workers and teachers

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Jones, Mary Ann

A second chance for families : five years later : follow-up of a program to prevent foster care

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Berridge, David & Cleaver, Hedy

Foster home breakdown

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Wallerstein, Judith S. & Kelly, Joan Berlin

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Crim, Lotties R.

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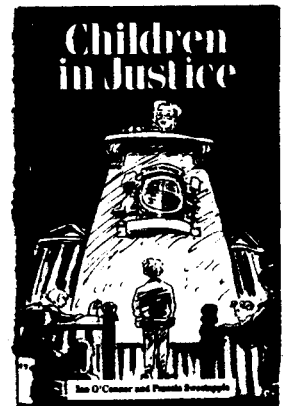
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