The professionalisation of foster care

Recent developments in fostering services have led foster carers increasingly to identify themselves as professionals. Kate Wilson and Julia Evetts review some of the changes in the service which suggest that foster care arguably can no longer be seen as a voluntary activity and that the changes in the role now required can only be carried out successfully in the context of a fully professionalised service. However, the article draws on three sociological perspectives to argue that professionalising foster care may only be a means by which managers can increase control of the workforce ‘from a distance’. The article argues that although professionalisation can be a way of bringing proper recognition, status and standards of practice, carers and practitioners should view cautiously the managerial motivation in moves towards it.

In an earlier article in this journal, Hutchinson and her colleagues at BAAF argued persuasively that a more strategic, whole-systems approach to the provision of fostering services is needed if the present challenges posed to the service are to be adequately addressed. They suggest that the specific needs of the looked after population can only be met by highly trained and skilled carers and that the kinds of changes envisaged are only achievable in the context of a fully professionalised fostering service (Hutchinson et al, 2003).

This view would, we believe, find widespread support among foster carers themselves. In the recent large-scale study of foster care undertaken by one of the present authors with colleagues, foster carers frequently expressed the wish to be seen as ‘part of the team’; they reported dismay when they were not consulted, their views as they saw it discounted and their actions undermined by other professionals. The study, while stressing that in fact turnover among foster carers is surprisingly low (about ten per cent each year leave the service), suggests that if the supply of foster carers is to be improved, carers are likely to need a system of support in order to enable them ‘to see themselves as part of a professional team’ (Sinclair et al, 2004, pp 166–7).

Changes in the perceived task of foster care, the increased difficulty of the clientele and a more detailed and precise regulatory framework have led inevitably to tensions and challenges in how the role of foster carers is conceptualised and how its tasks are carried out. The recent emergence of the non-governmental fostering sector (although still largely confined to England) has offered differing models of provision (Collier, 2005). These, in turn, have underlined the fact that the traditional UK model of a largely volunteer workforce may no longer, as Hutchinson and colleagues argue, be adequate or viable.

However, despite receiving widespread support, the move to professionalisation has not been universally welcomed by foster carers. Nor is it, for a variety of reasons we shall consider, entirely unproblematic. Against this background, this article is intended to contribute to debates about foster care as an emerging profession. It will do this by first reviewing briefly developments in foster care in the preceding decades which can be seen as contributing to moves towards the professionalisation of the service. Then we explore those factors within the service, in particular foster carers’ role as parents doing an ‘ordinary’ activity and the rise of kinship care, which may limit this development. Our main focus is on the discourse of professionalism, which we summarise from three distinct perspectives. We use these to analyse foster care as an occupation, exploring the extent to which each of the models seems to offer a ‘fit’ and highlighting the implications of moves to establish it as a profession.

During the 1980s and ‘90s foster care...
more or less continuously increased its ‘market share’ of looked after children. (More than six in ten looked after children in England and seven in ten in Wales are now in foster care.) Despite its apparent success, however, foster care contained within it a number of tensions arising from major changes in the demands on the service. These changes include:

- **The changing population of foster children** As a result in part of better preventative work, improvements in the number of children entering for reasons of homelessness, delinquency and poor school attendance, reductions in the use of residential care and policies of attempted rehabilitation, the care system has become increasingly concentrated on children who enter because of abuse and neglect, with a higher proportion who have already experienced repeated ‘failures’ at home. Such children frequently, although of course not invariably, pose greater demands on carers and require greater skill in caring for them.

- **A more precise framework of legislation and guidance** (e.g. Department of Health, 1991, 1998, 2000, 2003; National Foster Care Association, 1999) Recent key policy and legislative developments have laid down with much greater precision than hitherto the requirements for the foster care service. Implicit in these changes is a recognition of the complexity of the task and a shift from foster care as an ‘ordinary’ activity similar to everyday parenting to one which requires regulation and, by extension, supervision and training.

- **Changes in the overall role of foster carers** Carers are no longer commonly expected as the norm to ‘bring children up as their own’. The Children Act 1989 reinforced an existing trend in emphasising the need for birth parents to play a continuing and involved role with foster children (Cleaver, 2000). This in turn heightened ‘the expectations of social workers and the aspirations of carers for more professional status’ (Sinclair et al., 2004, p 9).

- **Concerns about the supply of foster placements**, said from time to time to have reached crisis proportions, have led to a range of initiatives on the part of authorities to improve retention by, *inter alia*, improvements in support, training and conditions of service (Wilson et al., 2004).

- **Increasing attempts to professionalise foster care** This has been promoted by the growth of professional foster care schemes and demonstrated by the expansion of the professional association (formerly the National Foster Care Association and now the Fostering Network).

- **The sharp increase in foster care provided by the independent agencies**, with resulting concerns about the impact of services on costs and their ability to lure foster carers from local authorities, which hitherto had held a monopoly on provision. Foster carers in this sector typically report higher levels of support and more generous financial rewards, including payments when no child is in placement (Sellick, 1999; Kirton et al., 2003).

- **Debates about the role of payments to foster carers rather than the traditional schemes of allowances notionally based on costs** (Oldfield, 1997) Earlier perceptions of the role as one primarily motivated by altruism and therefore not undertaken for financial reward have given way to the present intricate and variable system of payments, with most authorities using a combination of allowances and fees allocated on the basis of the needs of the child or on the level of training and experience of the carer, or both. The study referred to above suggests that one possible response would be to redefine foster care as ‘work’ and pay a salary accordingly (Sinclair et al., 2004).

- A growing argument for the desirability of qualifications and training Traditionally, the educational base of foster carers has been rather low. Most training was conducted at local or regional level and there has been an absence of any recognised national qualifications and training. Accordingly, there have recently been moves to establish nationally recognised
qualifications with the introduction of NVQs and university certificates/diplomas and additional higher level university qualifications as a means of strengthening the professional standing of foster carers (see Sellick and Howell, 2003).

- Greater emphasis on the provision of support and supervision and on the importance of being respected as equals in a team of professionals (Triseliotis et al, 2000; Farmer et al, 2004). The comments of foster carers in the Sinclair et al (2004) study already cited suggest an ongoing concern on the part of foster carers that they should be treated as partners in a professional relationship rather than workers with inferior training and status. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction was found to be directly related to what the social worker may have done or failed to do to empower the foster carers, by being kept informed, appropriately consulted and having their views taken seriously.

Overall, the study suggests that supportive relationships between local authority social workers and foster carers, based on mutual respect, consultation and training, are key factors in the provision of a committed and effective service.

Taken together, these trends suggest major changes both in the requirements of foster care and in the status and role of foster carers. Carers in general see themselves as important partners in a shared endeavour. They consider they are carrying out a demanding professional role that has implications for remuneration, training and status in the provision of information and care in making practical arrangements. They want recognition for their expertise and competencies and to have the right to make discretionary assessments of what is in the best interests of the child in highly complex situations. All these factors argue the need for a highly trained, professional workforce.

Two counter trends within the service suggest, however, the need for the retention of some flexibility in implementing these developments.

First, there is evidence that not all carers would welcome the move towards professionalisation. Although it seems unlikely that any would actively discourage improved levels of reward/payment, if offered, a number of foster carers are anxious to maintain the voluntary status of foster care. As one carer in our study commented, ‘couples who foster should remember this job is voluntary’, a view that seems also likely to receive support from those carers who feel that their relationship with their foster child would be compromised if they were seen to be receiving financial reward for what they were doing (see National Foster Care Association, 1997). Against this view, of course, must be set the fact that many other practitioners looking after vulnerable children and adults are nonetheless ‘paid to care’. It may be the historical origins of foster care, and the fact that foster carers receive and look after children in their own families, that have given rise to these concerns about payment.

Alongside this, there are those carers who, as a body, seem less inclined to position themselves as part of an occupational group. Although not universally the case, there was some evidence from the study that kinship carers were less likely to regard themselves as members of an aspiring professional group; a minority, around 25 per cent, did not see themselves in this way. The use of kinship carers has grown markedly in recent years – around 17 per cent of English children are reported to be looked after by friends and family, in contrast to six per cent a decade ago (Rowe et al, 1989; Wilson et al, 2004). Many of these foster carers would arguably not position themselves as part of a professional group, suggesting that there may need to be recognition that there are various kinds of fostering and that these are undertaken on a different financial basis.

This ambiguity of role is not peculiar to foster care. It would find parallels in arguments, for example, about social work as a professional activity, where the diverse character of social work and the relational character of much direct practice may for different reasons have made it more difficult for the workforce to assert claims for recognition as a profession (see, for example, Healy and Meagher, 2004).

Given the inherent tensions in these
arguments – that is, between those advocating moves towards professionalising, as against those who continue to see it as ‘a kind of loving’ which should not be done for professional or career reasons – it may be helpful to consider what sociological perspectives can contribute to these debates.

Professionalism and professionalisation: contrasting sociological interpretations

The concepts of profession, professionalism and professionalisation have received considerable (sometimes critical) attention in sociology. Two classic perspectives have emphasised what might be termed the optimistic and pessimistic views of what professionalism and the process of professionalisation of work entail. The former, derived from Parsons (1951) but with earlier roots in Marshall (1950), is based on the principle that the work is of special value either to the public or to the interests of the state or an elite (Freidson 2001, p 214). The practitioners have special knowledge and skill and (particularly if its practice is protected by licensing) there is a need to trust professionals’ intentions. As a result, according to Freidson:

. . . the ideal typical position of professionalism is founded on the official belief that the knowledge and skill of a particular specialisation requires a foundation in abstract concepts and formal learning. (Freidson 2001, pp 34–5)

Education, training and experience are fundamental requirements but once achieved (and sometimes licensed), then the exercise of discretion based on competences is central and deserving of special status. Fox (1974, pp 26–35) has shown that discretion implies being trusted, being committed, even being morally involved in one’s work. As a consequence, externally imposed rules governing work are minimised and the exercise of discretion and good judgement, often in highly complex situations and circumstances and based on recognised competences, are maximised.

A second, more pessimistic interpretation of professionalism, however, grew out of the more critical literature on professions prominent in Anglo-American analyses in the 1970s and 1980s. This argues that professionalisation is intended to facilitate market closure (Larson, 1977) and to promote professionals’ own occupational self-interests in terms of their salary, status and power as well as the monopoly protection of an occupational jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988). This was seen to be a process largely initiated and controlled by the practitioners themselves, mainly in their own interests even if some aspects of it serve the public interest (Saks, 1995, pp 26–35).

A third and later development has involved the analysis of professionalism as a discourse of occupational change and control – especially in work organisations where the discourse is increasingly applied and utilised by managers. Fournier (1999) considers the appeal to ‘professionalism’ as a disciplinary mechanism in new occupational contexts. She suggests that the use of the discourse of professionalism in a large privatised service company of managerial labour serves to inculcate ‘appropriate’ work identities, conducts and practices. She considers this as ‘a disciplinary logic which inscribes “autonomous” professional practice within a network of accountability and governs professional conduct at a distance’ (1999, p 280).

One of the present authors (Evetts, 2003) has used categorisation developed by McClelland (1990, p 170) to differentiate between professionalisation ‘from within’ (ie successful manipulation of the market by the group) and ‘from above’ (domination of forces external to the group). In this interpretation, where the appeal to professionalism is made and used ‘from within’, ie by the occupational group itself, the returns to the group can be substantial. In these cases, historically the group has been able to use the discourse in constructing its occupational identity, promoting its image with clients and customers and in bargaining with states to secure and maintain its (sometimes self-) regulatory responsibilities. In these instances, the occupation is using
the discourse largely in its own occupa-
tional and practitioner interests as well as
a way of promoting and protecting the
public interest. We see this, for example,
in the resistances of teachers and doctors
to target-setting and performance
measures where, it is argued, this is not
for the public good.

In the case of most contemporary
service occupations, however, the de-
velopment of professionalism is rather
different. While the discourse (of dedica-
ted service and autonomous decision-
making) is part of the appeal of profes-
sionalism and is grasped and welcomed by
the occupational group as a way of
improving the occupation’s status and
rewards collectively and individually, for
the most part, professionalism is imposed
‘from above’, that is by the employers and
managers of the service organisations in
which these ‘professionals’ work.

At the level of individual practitioners,
the appeal to professionalism can there-
fore be seen as a force of control ‘at a
distance’ (Miller and Rose, 1990;
will be achieved through increased
occupational training and the certification
of the workers/employees – a process
labelled as credentialism by Collins
(1979, 1981) – and the appeal to profess-
ionalism is a powerful mechanism for
promoting occupational change and
social control. The attraction for man-
gers in work organisations is to an
ideology of professionalism that includes
aspects such as exclusive ownership of an
area of expertise, autonomy and discre-
tion in work practices and the occupa-
tional control of the work.

However, despite its expected benefits,
the realities of professionalism ‘from
above’ may be very different. Here, a
selective discourse is used to promote and
facilitate occupational change (rational-
isation) and as a disciplinary mechanism
over autonomous practitioners to ensure
appropriate conduct. The effects are not
the occupational control of the work by
the workers but rather control by the
organisational managers and supervisors.
The appeal of professionalism for man-
gers most often includes: the substitution
of organisational for professional values;
bureaucratic, hierarchical and managerial
controls rather than collegial relations;
managerial and organisational objectives
rather than client trust based on compet-
encies; budgetary restrictions and fin-
ancial rationalisations; the standardisation
of work practices rather than discretion
and performance targets; accountability;
and sometimes increased political con-
trols. In short, organisational objectives
define practitioner/client relations and set
achievement targets and performance
indicators. They also regulate and replace
occupational control of the practitioner/
client work interactions, thereby limiting
both the exercise of discretion and the
service ethic that has been so important in
professional work.

This analysis is not confined to work
organisations. As a discourse of control of
individual professionals it can also be
interpreted as an ideology that ensures
self-control and sometimes even self-
exploitation. An account of the world of
French contemporary music practice
(Born, 1995) illustrates this. Once the
artist is self-defined as a professional
artist, Born argues that imposing time or
other restrictions on his or her efforts is
rendered illegitimate. The expectations by
the performer and others of the profess-
ional have no limits. For the professional,
the needs and demands of audiences,
patients, clients, students and children
become paramount. Professionals are
expected and expect it of themselves to
be committed, even to be morally
involved in the work.

The professionalisation of foster care
In our first section, we showed how
changes in the role of foster care have led
to demands for a more highly trained and
professional workforce, demands which,
although not invariably supported or seen
as personally relevant, still gain appar-
tently widespread support from comment-
ators, researchers and carers alike. Given
these evident moves towards professional-
isation, how may the above discussion of
sociological interpretations help us to
understand better the process in order to
improve the outcomes both for children in
care and for foster carers themselves?

In some respects, the first, ‘optimistic’
interpretation seems promising. This involved empowering the practitioners and the occupational control of the work. Thus, foster carers would be educated and trained; they would apply and develop their expertise under the guidance of experienced colleagues and in partnership with other professionals such as social workers. These experienced (possibly licensed) colleagues would control the work and determine the training and the credentials. Training and experience would enable the exercise of discretion in the work and decisions could be left to the practitioners, carers and social workers. Competence would be acquired that would facilitate trust in the practitioners. Careers could be developed which included the involvement of the experienced in the training of new recruits. The community of fellow foster carers would control the work, maintain a system of collegial support and, in some cases, discipline those who fall short of the professional ideal. The importance of the work would be recognised and properly acknowledged in terms of status, income and power.

The growth of the independent foster care agencies, which could be seen to embody and reflect these principles, is evidence that many foster carers do indeed see themselves as professionals with specialist knowledge and skills, carrying out tasks that demand the exercise of a level of discretion, judgement and moral commitment beyond the routine. Many of the comments of foster carers recruited to the independent sector, and interviewed in Sellick’s study (Sellick, 1999), suggest that they were motivated to change employer as much by the opportunity to provide a better-quality service to foster children as by personal reward. These developments, while perhaps illustrated more graphically in the independent sector, are also visible in many of the local authority employed workforce, with their increasing demands to be seen as partners in a shared endeavour, with discretion to act as they think appropriate based on trust, commitment and professional expertise.

As discussed elsewhere, this perspective on professionalism has been criticised on the grounds that it is based on false assumptions concerning the motives of professionals. Nonetheless, the personal narratives of many foster carers suggest that some – but not all – do indeed see themselves as undertaking a worthwhile and challenging occupation, which fits in with the needs of, and brings benefits to, their own families:

*I enjoy the challenge of being part of the care process. Also it allows me to bring in income which allows me to be here for my own children.*

*It has taught my children that there are people out there who haven’t all the benefits they have had, ie happy, loving, caring homes.* (Sinclair et al, 2004, pp 1–55)

The second, more ‘pessimistic’ interpretation, of market closure by the occupational group in order to promote practitioners’ salary, status and authority, would anticipate and expect foster carers themselves to be the driving force behind the professionalisation initiatives. For this interpretation, the critical question would be how far and to what extent foster carers are demanding or requiring market closure for this work. Are foster carers active in seeking to certificate and/or license the work, perhaps with a view to developing a monopoly market for their expertise which could improve their bargaining powers in respect of their income, status and work conditions and practices? To a modest extent, this is the case. There is as yet no discernible trend to increase the monopoly powers of the workforce. At the same time, many foster carers, as discussed earlier, have been active in seeking improved working conditions and pay. As one foster carer put it, ‘We might not do it for the money, but I wouldn’t do it without the money’ (Wilson et al, 2004, p 59). However, as we have seen, improvements in the conditions of service for foster carers have been driven extensively by the shortage of foster placements and the need on the part of agencies to recruit and retain more foster carers in what is a sellers’ market. The wide range of recruitment and retention schemes (for example, innovations in training, career
choices and developments, loyalty payments, ‘buddying’ arrangements, stress management and services for the carers’ own children), while congruent with the carers’ own aspirations to be seen as professionals, have been developed predominantly in response to the need to improve the availability of both general and specialised placements (Sellick and Howell, 2003, 2004). So the professionalisation initiative is largely coming from elsewhere (local authority social services departments) and constitutes professionalisation ‘from above’ (McClelland, 1990) which will not empower the professional group (Evetts, 2003).

The third interpretation seems to be more compelling. The need to professionalise the work of foster care is largely coming from the social services or children’s services departments which are purchasers as well as providers of this work and which currently face recruitment and retention problems, partly because of competition from the independent sector. The intention is not to give to the workforce the occupational control of the work but rather to regularise and, as far as possible, to standardise it. The control of the work, the selection of the carers and determining what constitutes successful practice and achievement will remain with the social service managers who operate the budgets. This service work will need to be provided within budget and discretion can only be exercised within strict budgetary limits. Similarly, performance by the carers will need to be checked, monitored and constantly demonstrated. The needs of the children continue to be part of the practice ideology but only within the financial limits of the service. The independent sector agencies, while apparently working to drive up standards and working conditions for foster carers, are themselves subject to the exigencies of the market place, since they are dependent on local authorities as purchasers of their services, and they also operate within their own internal independent fostering provider market. Thus their ability to professionalise the workforce (ie ‘from within’) is severely circumscribed.

One further characteristic of foster care lends credence to the ‘fit’ of this third perspective. Foster care by and large takes place ‘out of sight’, ie in the homes of the foster carers. It cannot then be directly managed or supervised as, say, social workers or health professionals can be, and therefore can only be controlled ‘at a distance’. It is important that being a professional is also a discourse of self-control. To paraphrase the earlier discussion, once the foster carer is self-defined as a professional, the imposition of time or other limits on his or her efforts are rendered less legitimate. The expectations by the self and others of the professional carer have potentially no limits: the needs and demands of the child are paramount. These professionalised foster carers are morally involved in their work and feel responsible for and committed to the children they foster. For example, as found by the study discussed above, foster carers are much more likely to leave the service when a foster child has left the placement, suggesting that they put commitment to a particular child above their own wishes for a career change (Wilson et al, 2000). As professionals, foster carers need to want to do well for the child and to strive endlessly for this even where – and particularly if – support from children’s services departments is lacking. When things go wrong, it also becomes possible to blame individuals (carers and/or children) rather than the organisation (social services departments) or procedures and processes (eg lack of resources).

Conclusion
Sinclair and colleagues’ review concluded:

The most important and impressive feature of fostering is probably the commitment of the foster carers. (Sinclair et al, 2004, p 155)

This much acknowledged, there are widely different views on the roles foster carers play and how they should be paid, reimbursed and supported. The discourse of professionalisation explored here provides an interesting counterpoint to some of the
discussions currently taking place in professional and academic settings and referred to in our opening paragraphs.

The third interpretation we discussed regarded professionalism more as a management tool of motivation and occupational rationalisation. In these cases, professionalism is used as a discourse of managerial as well as self-control through which work and occupations can be changed, rationalised and regularised. At the same time, workers who are professional continue to maximise time, effort and commitment in the service they provide. We have argued that, although it is possible to discern elements of all three sociological perspectives in the professionalisation of foster care, this third interpretation, namely as a managerial means of getting and controlling a highly motivated and conscientious workforce ‘on the cheap’, offers the most convincing explanatory interpretation.

It may be that this process of managerial control is no more than a reflection of what happens now – foster care is arguably, as it always has been, a cheap service, carried out by a highly motivated, committed and self-directed workforce who put ‘professional’ issues, such as a commitment to a particular child, above their own interests. However, we suggest a note of caution in the face of the arguments for developing a professional identity put forward by Hutchinson and colleagues, among others. Foster carers need to be aware that professionalisation ‘from above’ is unlikely in itself to result in their empowerment as practitioners.

Recognition of the ‘managerial motivation’ in some of the moves towards professionalisation may allow foster carers to argue more strongly for commensurate improvements in as well as the occupational control of the work. This means that such requirements as structured, award-bearing training programmes, professional supervision and the demonstration of competences must be at a minimum, accompanied not only by proper, professional conditions of service (pensions, fees based on a 52-week year, respite, holiday entitlement, career development and so on) but also recognition of foster carers as equal partners in a shared endeavour, exercising equality in decision-making over such things as placements, extra help for children and the timing of moves to other destinations.

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