

## Economies of Care *Remuneration and Recognition in Foster Care*

*Debates over the remuneration of foster carers in Australia highlight the problems associated with binaries of work and family, public and private. In particular, the role of foster carers in providing family care for children who cannot live with their birth families undermines the presumed distinction between caring for either love or money, and instead calls for an approach to carework that sees the two as inseparable. Drawing upon findings from a national research project on foster care in Australia, this paper argues for two particular understandings of remuneration within the context of foster care. The first recognizes the role of foster carers as professionals, and sees remuneration as an acknowledgment of this and the role of carers in the creation of families with foster children. The second understanding locates foster care within a context of social responsibility, in which the state and its citizens has a duty to child protection, and thus a duty to those who engage in the practice of caring for children removed from their birth parents. Together these two approaches suggest a particular understanding of remuneration that both advocates for increased financial support to foster carers in addition to support for the ongoing professionalization of foster care, whilst not reducing remuneration to a matter of "payment for services." Both approaches may help to ameliorate findings from previous research that highlight the ambivalence that foster carers face in regards to the supposed "choice" between caring or working.*

Feminist research on carework has long elaborated the problematic dichotomization of social life, in which economic and personal spheres are situated as polar opposites (Zelizer, 2002). Such research has demonstrated not only the thorough imbrication of the public and the private, but moreover has highlighted the contingency of the former upon the latter. Yet despite this ongoing body of research on carework, both public and economic policy and family law

continue to promote an understanding of carework that at best constructs it as secondary in comparison to work undertaken in the corporate sector, and at worst as not even work at all. The problems that arise from the perpetuation of binaries of work and family, public and private, are clearly highlighted in regards to the carework undertaken by foster carers. As Derek Kirton (2001b) suggests in regards to debates over the payment of foster carers:

What makes payment in foster care particularly complex is that on the one hand the domains of “work’ and “family’ are assumed to rest upon quite different, even opposing, value systems (including with respect to money), whilst on the other, are required to function seamlessly. (201)

A growing body of research on work and family in regards to foster care has examined the extent to which financial incentives influence people’s desire to become foster carers. These studies highlight the varying ways in which remuneration impacts upon the recruitment and retention of carers. For example, in the UK a 2001 Fostering Network survey of English foster carers found that 72 percent of carers felt they should be appropriately remunerated for their carework (Fostering Network, 2004). The survey findings also suggested that the provision of adequate payments plays an important role in 1) retaining the most qualified carers, 2) reducing the opportunity cost of relinquishing other work commitments, and 3) helping to attract carers with an interest in making a career out of foster-caring. Both Brenda Smith (1988) and Kirton (2001b) in two other UK studies found that while most carers are not highly motivated by any financial rewards associated with care provision, it is nonetheless the case that payment levels must be sufficient to defray the cost of providing care. They found that reduced payment levels do not lead to a loss of carers due to carers feeling underpaid, but rather because insufficient payments do not allow them to provide an adequate level of care.

Similar findings were obtained in the U.S. by Patricia Chamberlain, Sandra Moreland and Kathleen Reid (1992) who examined the effects of enhanced services and stipends on foster carer satisfaction and retention. In their study, three groups were compared: Group 1, who received increased payment and support and training, Group 2, who solely received increased payment, and Group 3, who were provided with no additional services or incentives. This research found that the groups that received increased payments showed greater satisfaction with their role and were more likely to remain in the system.

In studies of foster carers in the Australian states of New South Wales and Queensland, Ciara Smyth and Marilyn McHugh (2006) and Ann Butcher (2005) found that foster carers could be classified into three different groups based on their motivations and aspirations. A first group considered foster care a voluntary job and did not express a strong interest in being paid a salary or having to undertake additional training. A second group wanted the role to

be semi-professionalized. These people suggested that they would continue to provide a traditional form of foster care, but they were open to the possibility of additional training and perhaps additional payments based on their level of expertise. A third group stated a desire for the professionalization of foster care. In this third category, foster carers would be paid a higher salary based on their additional training and expertise rather than just receiving payment for expenses incurred.

Much of this existing research on the remuneration of foster carers has primarily centered upon the dilemma of “love or money,” and has outlined what are presented as conflicting, and seemingly irreconcilable, positions in regards to remuneration. On the one hand, a focus on “love” centers upon the altruistic or emotive reasons why people engage in care provision. From this perspective, research suggests that both foster carers and social workers question the motives of those who would care for more “mercenary” reasons. On the other hand, both foster carers and policy makers emphasize the importance of supporting foster carers financially.

Yet, as we suggest in the remainder of this paper, these two positions in regards to the remuneration of foster carers do not exhaust all possible avenues for reconsidering the work/family binary as it applies to foster carers. Drawing upon findings from an Australian research project seeking to examine what motivates people to become, and remain, foster carers, we outline two interrelated, yet conceptually distinct, understandings of remuneration that go beyond current debates over “love or money,” and instead locate the work that foster carers do within a wider framework of social justice and child protection. In so doing, we propose that foster carers may be understood both as people who require recognition of their professional status (with one form of recognition being monetary “rewards”), and also as people who fulfill a unique role in creating families with children to whom they are most often not biologically related. From these two perspectives, the carework that foster carers undertake in Australia may be understood not as *either* work or family, but as very much both at the same time, with work being framed as a commitment to a relationship not only with children, but with the state and its role in protecting children.

### **Professionalization and recognition**

In a recent summary of theories of carework, Paula England (2005) outlines five theoretical frameworks through which carework is currently understood. Of these, two are particularly relevant to the data presented in this paper. The first of these refers to what England terms “rejecting the dichotomy between love and money.” Rejecting this dichotomy, she suggests, involves developing an understanding of the often rewarding nature of carework, and ensuring that the rewards associated with carework are not undermined by poor remuneration and the impact of this upon the quality of life of the care provider, a suggestion that echoes the findings of both Smith (1988) and Kirton (2001b)

in regards to the remuneration of foster carers. To this end, England (2005) suggests that appropriate remuneration that is constituted as one part of a supportive care environment strengthens, rather than undermines, a commitment to care provision:

Acknowledging rewards [such as remuneration] are those that send the message that the recipient is trusted, respected and appreciated.... [Previous research findings] suggest that the more that pay is combined with trust and appreciation, the less it drives out genuine intrinsic motivation. (395)

The data presented in this first section of the paper echo this suggestion that remuneration must be intimately related to recognition of the important role that foster carers play in the lives of children. This is particularly salient in Australia, where foster care most often does not serve as a stop-gap measure until parental rights are legally terminated and children placed for adoption. Rather, foster placements for children on long-term orders are on the whole considered permanent. Whilst legal responsibility does not transfer to foster carers in most instances, long-term foster placements are considered the primary family context within which children removed from their birth parents will live.

A focus upon recognition in conjunction with remuneration was the topic of many of the focus groups conducted as part of the research project presented here. Many carers spoke about their opinions in regards to the professionalization of foster care, and importantly, spoke of the recognition they desire of their current role as professionals and their active role in creating family with foster children. In the following extract a carer outlines how she already considers herself to be acting as a professional, and how this shapes her motivations as a foster carer:

### **Extract 1**

Interviewer: If your current placement ends will you take on another child?

Rose: Yes. Hopefully I will get another child before she leaves, otherwise we can't afford to pay for food, mortgage, and things like that without that extra child to support the household income, and it just can't be done. That was something I wanted to bring up today: I feel as though when I mix with a lot of foster carers, a lot of foster carers say they only do it because they love children. I feel sometimes they are not being truthful.

Martin: I think you have to love children to do it, but you don't do it for love alone. You have to be compensated.

Ella: You have to be paid for the work you do, that is what we think.

Rose: I feel that because it is not spoken about the government says “well let’s put that away.” Because when I say to people I am compensated for looking after these children, they say you are wonderful for doing it. I love doing it and I can’t imagine doing anything else now but I do get compensated for looking after these children. I am a professional foster carer. It is a 24/7 job.

In this extract Rose, a single female carer, speaking in a focus group along with a married couple, elaborates an understanding of her own role as a professional. Yet in so doing, she does not appear to separate love from compensation. Indeed, she challenges the claims of other carers who state that they are “only do[ing] it because they love children.” In so doing, she challenged the love/work binary where she suggests both that she “can’t imagine doing anything else now” but also that she should “get compensated for looking after these children.... It is a 24/7 job.”

All three carers in this extract appear to agree that loving children does not negate the need for compensation. Moreover, Rose emphasizes that the role she plays as a foster carer is a professional one—she approaches children placement in a pragmatic way (“otherwise we can’t afford to pay for food, mortgage...”) that warrants remuneration for work undertaken. Nonetheless, and most importantly for our argument within this paper, she appears to see such remuneration as “supporting the *household* income”—the placement of a children in her care contributes to a *shared* household or family income that benefits all of the family members. In this sense, and as Kirton (2001a) suggests: “payments ... are *both* part of the household budget *and* a delegated form of public expenditure” (305, original emphasis). Foster carers, like Rose, are paid for their work in the form of public expenditure on child protection, but this payment is part of a *household*, rather than *individual* income *per se*.

In the following extract a group of carers in another focus group talk about the professionalization of foster care and the relationship between familial and professional identity:

## Extract 2

Interviewer: Have you heard of the suggestion that foster care should be professionalised?

Dan: If it was like a job you would have to figure out what that means about being parents and being a family, if it is a job. You would have training and get paid a wage or something rather than just reimbursement like we get now. I wonder what would that mean, how would that shift, how might it be better for foster carers or the kids?

Meg: Certainly the idea of any training that is available would be good for sure. It does help.

Wayne: “Professionalizing” is a nice word, it seems like a positive idea to me

Meg: For us it would be good for if we were freed up and didn’t need to have to work, couldn’t we provide a better quality of care for our child and for more kids in fact? Why does it have to change the relationship you have with your kids?

In this extract the carers engage directly with the idea of professionalization and explore what it would mean in the context of their families. Meg suggests that professionalization would allow her more (and better quality) time to care for children. Importantly, she questions why it is that being properly remunerated or given more training would necessarily change the family relationships that foster carers create with children. This leads us to suggest that perhaps more adequate remuneration may, at least in part, serve as a form of recognition for foster carers. Elsewhere (Riggs, Augoustinos and Delfabbro, 2007) we have suggested that foster carers require forms of recognition other than simply support or money. Yet, at the same time, we acknowledge here that monetary recognition may function not simply to recognise foster carers through a “work for pay” logic, but rather may serve to recognize the important work that foster carers do in building family relationships.

Kirton, Jennifer Beecham, and Kate Ogilvie (2001), in a paper on foster carers and payment, ask what it is that foster carers require in order to meet their needs as both parents and people fulfilling a particular professional role. In this section we have suggested one particular answer to this question, namely that foster carers appear to seek both recognition of their status as professionals, *and* recognition of their status as parents. Appropriate remuneration may achieve this goal in two ways. First, by providing payment that recognizes the professional status of carers, while also providing opportunities for further training. Many parents have professional skills (other than child rearing) that they perform for their families without pay. Increasing the professional (and specifically counseling or child care) skills of foster carers will further equip them to perform the role of the professional *as part of their parenting or family life*. Second, adequate remuneration may serve as a form of recognition for carers of their role in creating families with foster children. This particular aspect of remuneration is one that we further elaborate in the following section with an emphasis on child protection and social justice.

### **Foster families as child protection practice**

To return to the typology of theories of carework provided by England (2005), we focus in this section on England’s category of “care as public good production.” In regards to this category, England (2005) summarizes her own previous work and that of others when suggesting that:

Having and rearing children benefit people in society other than the

children themselves.... [Therefore,] if the unpaid care work that goes with motherhood is creating a public good, then the inequity is more unjust and the state should intervene to lessen the penalty. (385-388)

In another paper from this research project we have similarly suggested that an understanding of the role of the state and its citizens as one of “non-indifference” towards child protection may help to foster a more productive understanding of the role of foster carers (Riggs, 2008). From this perspective, we suggest that rather than seeing child protection as the responsibility solely of social workers (or foster carers acting as their proxies), it is important to see child protection as a form of social justice, whereby *all* people are responsible for the care and protection of children. Obviously such an approach would not function in practice as a form of “community care” in the context of an individualist society such as Australia. Yet it is nonetheless possible to consider child protection as at the very least a social responsibility incumbent upon all people. By this logic, some people will opt into actively working with children (i.e., by acting as foster carers), whilst other people will help through the supporting of child protection agendas, the paying of taxes that are used to fund government child protection programs, and the supporting of foster carers more generally to undertake child protection practice.

From this approach, and taking as its starting place the needs of children, the attendant costs of foster care may be more accurately understood as a social responsibility of both the State and its citizens to foster children and carers. In the instance of foster care, then, the state and its citizens primarily bears the financial costs, whilst foster carers bear the emotional costs and labour—the state supports carers to create family on their behalf, something that the state should, but cannot, do on its own for children under its protection. Understood in this way, remuneration for foster carers has little to do with “wages” or “pay” *per se*, and instead serves as a form of recognition of foster carers as the key providers of child protection labour within the country. Thus in contrast to debates over remuneration and the reported ambivalence of foster carers who see payment as potentially undermining their role as parents (see, for example, carers reported in Kirton [2001b]), an understanding of child protection as a practice of social justice may result in the reconceptualization of remuneration not as a wage, but rather as a form of social responsibility *to foster carers* for their role in child protection.

In the following extract two women speak about their commitment to child protection and the role of remuneration in it:

### **Extract 3**

Interviewer: What do you think about the payment you receive as foster carers?

Mary: I have heard some people suggest that foster carers do it for money. I always laugh at that.

Bette: We hear that from a lot of people. We hear it from social workers.

Mary: I always say that the payment we receive doesn't cover anything. Our foster daughter goes to an independent school, which we pay for because we think it is the best place for her, and the payment doesn't even part cover her school fees.

Bette: We had a colleague who worked for [the child protection agency] and she said she thinks most people do it for money.

Mary: My sense is that if you do this as a foster carer then you are suddenly not in the category of parent. I still have all the same responsibilities as any other parent, but what people don't at times realise is that we don't always get the choice in what we do because you have to get permission to do things.

Bette: I have got birth children and I don't feel any different about issues of caring between my birth children or our foster child—children's needs have to be met and that is what we are trying to do.

In this extract the two women speak about their commitment to caring for children in ways that highlight the inadequacies of the current remuneration system. Not only are they insufficiently paid, but the very fact of payment somehow makes them “not in the category of parent.” Despite Bette reporting her commitment to meeting children's needs, and despite this being depicted as the same commitment she has to her birth children, she is nonetheless aware of other people (including social workers) who dismiss foster carers as “in it for the money.” Fortunately, such undermining of the important carework that foster carers undertake has not stopped either of the women in their commitment to caring for children within a framework of state-mandated child protection.

In the following and final extract, a group of carers talk about the ways in which creating family is constrained by economics, and their commitment in the face of this, to supporting foster children.

#### **Extract 4**

Interviewer: What do you think about payments for foster carers?

Terri: Financially I find that it is almost not feasible to provide for children on the money we receive. For a lot of families or younger people who would be considering fostering the low levels of payment would make it daunting, I think. I think too we are becoming a less community orientated society. I think people's focus is going the other ways now than it did 20-30 years ago around volunteerism.

Jan: Proper payment is so important. I need it as I have taken 12

months off without pay so I can support my foster child so I don't feel any guilt because I actually really need it. I take him to school every day. Whilst that makes life much harder for me not having a proper income, it is what he needs.

Henry: It always seems to me like a mismatch between the fact the government is meant to be looking after these kids and providing for their best interests, but their best interests are often ignored it seems. What parent would say "oh well they can just do without" about their children? Yet that is the position we seem to be put in when it comes to providing for children with the current payments.

The carers in this extract talk clearly about the ways in which poor levels of remuneration work counter to their commitment to child protection agendas, yet they nonetheless continue to prioritize the needs of children in their care. As Terri suggests, it will continue to be hard to attract new carers (especially in a social context whereby community mindedness is undervalued) if remuneration is not appropriately given. Whilst some carers, such as Jan, make do with insufficient payment, others may not be so willing to do this. Moreover, and as Henry suggests, how can governments claim to meet the needs of children if the families within which the children are placed are under-resourced? Foster carers thus need adequate remuneration not as "payment for services rendered," but so as to allow them the economic security in which to create families with foster children that meet the children's needs. If, as the carers in this extract indicate, it is the state's responsibility to care for children, and if neither the state nor most of its citizens engage in the practical work required to make this agenda happen, then foster carers are left with a considerable financial burden that they are often not equipped to meet.

In this section we have highlighted a second understanding of remuneration—one that recognises child protection as a social responsibility held by all people and one that, if only directly met by a small percentage of the population (i.e. foster carers), must be adequately supported. In this sense, and as opposed to concerns raised in other research that the payment of carers will result in the subsuming of carers (as parents) within a broader framework of a state-managed "care team," a focus on foster carers as the primary people who meet foster children's daily needs for family and stability will result in recognition of the fact that it is foster carers who provide the very basis or framework for such a "team," rather than simply being members of the team. The role of the state and its citizens in this "team" is thus to make it possible for foster carers to play their role in the best way possible, which requires adequate financial support. Understanding foster carers as operating as agents of social justice for foster children may thus help to enable an approach to remuneration that shifts the attention solely away from work or love, and instead locates carework within a broader context of child protection.

## Conclusions

In this paper, and drawing upon two particular understandings of carework provided by England (2005), we have outlined two distinct, yet interrelated, approaches to reconceptualizing the provision of payment to foster carers in Australia. The first approach considers payment in a somewhat more pragmatic manner—it understands payment not only as recognizing foster carers' role as professionals (and to encourage the appropriate professionalization of foster carers), but also as recognizing foster carers' role in creating family with foster children. Remuneration thus creates opportunities for recognition that are less to do with payment for services, and more to do with acknowledging the important, if not central, role that foster carers play in the lives of foster children. The second approach extends upon this by introducing a focus upon child protection in a context of social responsibility, and suggests that if child protection is the responsibility of the State and its citizens, then foster carers must be remunerated for their role as “team players” in a national child protection agenda, rather than simply as individual people being paid for their time. Acknowledging the centrality of foster carers to the Australian child protection system is thus central to a reconfiguration of how we understand payments to foster carers.

In this regard, McHugh (2006) outlines a number of forms of monetary recognition that would not constitute wages *per se*, but which may instead be seen as forms of State-based reciprocity for foster carers in a context of social responsibility. These include tax breaks for foster carers, the provision of superannuation or retirement pensions, and opportunities for the funding of higher education relevant to care provision. The federal government's recent decision that foster carers are exempt from legislation that requires recipients of parenting payment to undertake part time work signals one such move towards the recognition of a social debt to foster carers, and the work that they already undertake as parents.

So to conclude: in this paper we have extended previous research on foster care and remuneration in two ways: 1) by supporting the previous finding that whilst carers are not primarily motivated by any purported financial gain, they are nonetheless disadvantaged by inadequate remuneration and desire opportunities to further develop skills, and 2) by providing alternate ways of conceptualizing the provision of foster care that break down the supposed borders between public and private spheres. We have highlighted the ways in which Australian foster carers cross these borders, and in so doing we suggest that they demonstrate the complex nature of carework that is most often undertaken as a result of a genuine desire to care for another person, but one that nonetheless should be adequately remunerated and recognized.

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