Kent Academic Repository

Kirton, Derek (2013) *What is work? Insights from the evolution of state foster care.* Work Employment & Society, 27 (4). pp. 658-673. ISSN 0950-0170.

What is Work? – Insights from the Evolution of State Foster Care

Derek Kirton

University of Kent, UK

Abstract: This article focuses on state foster care as a case study in the (re)configuration and negotiation of boundaries between work and non-work. Foster care can be seen as occupying a liminal position between the domains of 'work' and 'family', requiring management of the tensions presumed to exist between competing value systems. Through a review of research and policy developments, the relevant boundary issues are contextualised and explored, drawing examples from areas such as remuneration, taxation and benefits, employment status, work-life balance and the labour process. It is argued that while foster care shares the hybridity and ensuing tensions of care work more generally, the spatial and temporal integration of work and family and high level of state regulation give them a particular intensity. In turn, this offers great potential for the study of work/non-work boundaries and possible research avenues are set out.

Keywords: care work; emotional labour; foster care; work-family boundaries; work-life balance; commodification

Recent history has witnessed a dramatic transformation in the conceptualisation of work, broadening its scope beyond the domain of employment and emphasising the contested nature and permeability of boundaries between work and non-work. Whether in emerging discourses of emotional labour or work-life balance, gender and care have been pivotal to this transformation. With its highly distinctive liminal position between 'family' and 'work', state foster care offers an intriguing case study within the 'new sociology of work' (Parry et al., 2005), providing myriad examples of 'the messiness, the mutual imbrications – of the relation between paid work and other life concerns' (Wolkowitz, 2009:847).

Drawing on analysis of policy development and relevant research, this article explores the reconfiguration and negotiation of work/non-work boundaries within foster care. As will be explained, state foster care *as work* has been shaped by a progressive distancing from 'ordinary' parenting and family life, even while its main virtues are held to reflect their normalising potential. Ungerson's (2005) work on the commodification of care work has highlighted its hybridity, but it will be argued that the constellation of factors at play in state foster care creates a particularly deep and intense form of hybridity. These factors include its limited temporal and spatial separation between the domains of 'family' and 'work' and the multifaceted role of the state. This in turn, affords opportunities to explore the tensions associated with care work, including the 'limits' of formalisation and commodification in family-based care, and the wider construction of work itself. To date, however, foster care has occupied a shadowy place in conceptualisations of work, not readily seen as an occupation, nor easily identified within understandings of care work, where it has rarely figured in research (Brannen et al., 2007). Meanwhile, the study of foster care has been dominated by child welfare concerns and although a modest literature has developed on its 'professionalisation' – the passage from voluntarism to paid work and quest for status and

recognition – this has only engaged fleetingly with its conceptualisation as work (Corrick, 1999; Wilson and Evetts, 2006).

Following a brief setting of context and discussion of conceptual issues relating to family, parenting and (care) work, the tensions surrounding foster care and its work/non-work boundaries are explored in relation to key markers of work, namely remuneration, taxation, benefits, employment status and work-life balance. Observations are also made on foster care's labour process and patterns of occupational control, with reference to Ungerson's (2005) schematic representation of care work and Glucksmann's (2005) articulation of work/non-work boundaries. Building on the case study, further avenues for research are proposed.

State foster care – a brief overview

Contemporary state foster care reflects a series of, albeit uneven, historical developments. Although advocacy of fostering as a paid activity can be traced at least as far back as the 1940s (Curran, 2006:386), this remained very much a minority view until the 1970s, with relationships overwhelmingly construed in (quasi-) familial terms. However, this began to change as foster parents (as they were then known) were encouraged to be less 'possessive' and work more inclusively with both children's birth relatives and social workers. Defamilialisation was extended by the emergence of 'professional fostering' schemes, which broadened the scope of foster care (typically to troubled or troublesome adolescents) with provision of training, dedicated support and crucially, an element of commodification through payment of a fee (Shaw and Hipgrave, 1983). Training and support gradually became mandatory for all foster carers, while fees have become more common though far from universal (with receipt estimated at between 50 and 60 per cent of foster carers (Tearse,

2010)). The principle, however, that foster care should be regarded as a job is now endorsed by a clear majority of carers and enjoys wide (though not unequivocal) support among fostering stakeholders and politicians (Robson, 2008; Harber and Oakley, 2011).

Beyond consistent advocacy spearheaded by the Fostering Network (an umbrella group for foster carers and other stakeholders) the key drivers for 'professionalisation' have been recognition of the growing demands of foster care – whether in terms of more challenging behaviour from children and young people or the formalities of the child welfare system – and the threat of a diminishing supply of volunteer carers as the norms of 'dual earner' families have taken hold and concerns regarding the cash-nexus in care have eased (Wilson and Evetts, 2006). A progressive shift from residential to foster care (which accounts for 74 per cent of the care population (Department for Education (DfE), 2011a) reflects a combination of the perceived benefits of the familial over the institutional, and foster care's cost advantages, although in turn, there is 'competition' from cheaper and even more strongly familial alternatives such as adoption and special guardianship. However, foster care's majority position means that as public care has been identified as a conduit if not source for numerous social problems - such as unemployment, homelessness, offending, early parenthood and substance misuse (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2006) – so has foster care become central to their amelioration. Broader managerialist trends in social care are also relevant here, generating significant bureaucratic tasks for foster carers in terms of recording or meeting regulatory requirements and shaping the context within which their work is supported and supervised. In sum, a number of 'supply' and 'demand' factors have contributed to fostering's progressive formalisation and partial commodification, both reflecting and facilitating its construction as 'work'.

Who then are the workers? Statistical data on the foster care population are patchy, but a recent OFSTED (2011) survey identified 38,157 fostering households in England. Snapshot

surveys (see Sinclair, 2005 for summary) have found that (main) carers are overwhelmingly female and older than the wider population with dependent children, with an average age of over 50. Between 25 and 30 per cent are lone foster carers. Survey data on class backgrounds are mixed, with some suggesting an over-representation of working class carers, others a broadly 'representative' population, albeit with lower than average levels of educational qualification and household incomes. Typically, around two thirds of men and one third of women in foster families have other paid work, though for a majority of the latter the work is part-time, highlighting the gendered links between domains. Many foster carers have previous or ongoing experience of paid care work (Sinclair, 2005). In terms of ethnicity, OFSTED (2011) reported 85 per cent white (almost all British) carers, 8 per cent black (a majority of Caribbean heritage) 4 per cent Asian and 2 per cent 'mixed'. Thus there is an over-representation of white British and black Caribbean foster carers relative to the wider population and for white carers to the care population where 22 per cent of children are of black and minority ethnic (BME) origin (DfE, 2011). Roughly three quarters of foster carers work for local authorities, but the number of independent fostering providers has grown rapidly over the past two decades. Initially based mostly around small, not for profit agencies, this sector is now overwhelmingly privately owned and dominated by a handful of large providers, often backed by private equity capital (Sellick, 2011). While its heterogeneity cannot be adequately reflected throughout the article, it is important to note that foster care is extremely diverse, in the number and age groups of children fostered, timescales from emergencies to 'permanent' placements and possible 'specialisms' (e.g. therapeutic care, young offenders, mothers and babies). A significant minority of foster placements is also provided by family and friends as carers (FFAC), adding further complexity to the work-family juxtaposition.

Conceptualising Foster Care – Work, Family and Parenting

Key to foster care's liminal position is its minimal temporal and spatial separation of domains, with the work of foster care deeply embedded within, and largely delivered through, the medium of the family. Boundaries do exist in various ways but are extremely diffuse. For instance, foster carers have no legal parental responsibility for foster children, but sometimes acquire this through adoption or other legal orders. Diffusion gives rise to a number of conceptual challenges relevant to boundaries between work and non-work. For example, while some have attempted to gauge work in terms of the 'additional' time commitment arising from fostering (estimated at an average of 13-14 hours by Oldfield (1997)), others emphasising its 'on call' nature, will frequently describe it as a '24/7' job, thereby giving all activities a work inflection. This, in turn, leads on to the interaction between foster care and other forms of (paid) work. Many fostering agencies require that one carer is available 'full-time', but this is neither universal nor always enforced (Kirton et al., 2003) and also raises questions regarding the desirability of 'outside work' (see below). Although there is usually a designated 'main carer', fostering is in important ways a 'family enterprise', with approval of partners and varying degrees of 'working' involvement from children and often extended family (including as back-up carers). Once again, the diffuse nature of work-family boundaries is highlighted. It must be remembered of course, that in the above and the following discussion of parenting, such phenomena are highly gendered. Although Wilson et al (2006) often found significant involvement of male carers in fostering activities, this generally followed conventional gendered roles within the family and in external relations, with the authors noting ongoing debates about forms of desired masculinity.

.

'Ordinary parenting' has provided a crucial reference point for foster care in its transformation towards 'work' - with differentiation based on requirements for training, dealing with challenging behaviours, teamwork and a plethora of bureaucratic tasks. Such challenges are not unknown to 'ordinary parents', but a combination of their frequency and fostering's more formalised context is widely held to establish a clear difference (Triseliotis et al., 1995:49). The degree of differentiation from 'ordinary parenting' is also relevant to the strength of a work ethos, where in brief the greater and less 'familial' the demands, and the lower the assumed intrinsic satisfactions, the more likely foster care is to be viewed through the lens of work. Clearly, perception of difference does not necessarily construct foster care unequivocally as 'work', as is apparent in minority dissent in the UK (Wheal, 2005), but moreso comparatively, where in many societies, the notion of fostering as a (paid) job is anathema (Colton and Williams, 2006). Moreover, embeddedness in the parental and familial is important in other ways. Although a clear majority of UK foster carers (and other stakeholders) now view their role as a job meriting payment, they are nonetheless likely to identify parenting as central to it (Sinclair, 2005). Of crucial importance here is the value paradox that lies at the heart of parenting, namely that in market exchange terms, it has little or no value while, especially in late modernity, it is often held to represent the highest form of intimacy or 'pure' relationship (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), the most 'demanding' yet 'worthwhile' job in the world (Crittenden, 2001; Hays 1996). Refracted through the world of foster care, the paradox becomes one between a professional nexus founded in remuneration for skills and knowledge and a familial one that accords the highest value to enduring 'real family' relationships, including the (quasi) adoptive and preference for FFAC (Schofield, 2003). This is underpinned by child welfare research emphasising the quality of 'parenting' as central to the success of foster care and how children value the 'normality' of family life over systems and being 'worked with' (Sinclair, 2005; Walker et al., 2002). A

long standing challenge of emotional labour for foster carers has been to balance an 'objective' detachment in their work with commitment and perhaps love for the child (Nutt, 2006). Thus, even while a work orientation has strengthened, there have been regular warnings about the potential loss of the parental and the need to understand foster families *as families* (Kjeldsen and Kjeldsen, 2010).

The wider discourses and practices of parenting are, of course, far from static. Hegemonic neo-liberalism and welfare retrenchment have sharpened a classed, gendered and racialised focus on parents, who are expected to help children acquire various forms of capital to boost their competitiveness (Silva and Smart 1999) and/or charged with ensuring that they avoid myriad forms of deviance (Churchill, 2011), prompting claims of a 'professionalisation of parenting' (Bryson, 2007; Gatrell, 2005). Similar forces have been apparent in the care system where perceived chronic under-achievement and (post-care) deviance and social exclusion have been targeted by reforms designed to promote an aspirational culture and conformity (Garrett, 2003). The work of foster carers has been central to this agenda, but this has also prompted a focus on their 'quality', with clear class undertones. For instance, beyond calls to act as 'pushy parents' (DfES, 2006), Jackson and McParlin (2006) have advocated the recruitment of more highly qualified foster carers in order to boost children's educational prospects, while a recent think tank report (Harber and Oakley, 2011) has expressed concern that foster carers who are 'dependent' on state benefits will adversely affect aspirations, noting tellingly, the dangers for children 'who never see an adult going out to work' (:37)

Fostering and Care Work

In the academy and in policy terms, foster care has generally been treated separately from care work, but the latter is relevant to its evolution and construction as work in important

respects. Like care work more broadly, foster care can be set in the context of (spatial and temporal) flexibilisation and destandardisation of work (Beck, 2000; Coyle, 2005; Hochschild, 1997), which allied to policy goals such as deinstitutionalisation has seen an historical trend towards payment for care work previously regarded as familial or informal. Feminist analysis has opened spaces to explore the (gendered) workings of care across boundaries of the public/private, (in)formal and (un)paid, highlighting the nexus of exploitation faced by women (Brannen et al., 2007; Crittenden, 2001; Glucksmann, 2005). Beyond contextual relevance, however, such concerns have only rarely been raised in relation to fostering, usually in the context of professionalisation promoting gender equality (Nutt, 2006; Smith, 1988). The wider literature on care work is also relevant to fostering through deconstruction of care (as 'being' and 'doing' etc) and exploration of the limits of its commodification (Fink, 2004; Lynch, 2007). While potentially damaging effects are acknowledged, there is a refusal of simple dualisms (love versus money, self-interest versus altruism) between market values and the supposedly 'genuine' care hitherto provided unpaid by women (Daly and Rake, 2003; Folbre and Nelson, 2000; Stone, 2000). Folbre and Nelson emphasise that 'commodification is a matter of social understanding' (2000:134), with variable implications for motivation, while Radin (1996) rests her distinction between work and labour on the premise that the former has elements of giving that cannot be reduced to commoditised exchange.

If the discourses and debates associated with care work have considerable resonance within foster care, the latter can nonetheless be seen as having distinctive features. In particular, (sacralised) care of children and embeddedness in the family bring expectations of affective bonds which are markedly more normative than in other areas of social care (Stone, 2000). Foster carers are required to look after children 'as if they were a member of the family' and although they are expected to operate with a degree of detachment, the threshold for 'over-

involvement' is likely to be set much higher than elsewhere (up to and including adoption). In addition, the regulatory and supervisory role of the state and its penetration into the family makes child foster care quite distinct from any form of adult social care, a difference considered later in relation to its labour process.

Remuneration in Foster Care

In addressing the question 'what is work', there is clearly much to be gleaned from understanding remuneration – where principles, structures and levels can yield crucial insights. In this instance, these relate both to the internal constitution of foster care and its place within a wider nexus of (paid) work.

In addition to any remuneration for their work, foster carers also receive allowances to cover the costs of looking after children. Historically, these were often set at levels to avoid the possibility of 'profit', but after lengthy campaigning led by the Fostering Network, the government established a national minimum allowance in England in 2007. However, there is no legal requirement for foster carers to be paid for their work, this being left to the discretion of individual fostering agencies. As a consequence, remuneration varies widely between and within agencies. Fees are the most common mode of payment and these are typically paid on a per child (or 'piece rate') basis, but some agencies make reduced payments for second and third children or sibling groups on the (contentious) premise that their care does not entail the equivalent time and effort required for the first (Walker et al., 2002:50). Salaried foster care is rare, both in the UK and elsewhere (Colton and Williams, 2006), with agencies and foster carers alike wary about their own economic advantage and issues of control and autonomy, again perhaps reflecting the power of the familial. Nonetheless, payment security remains an important issue when foster carers have vacancies, with Tearse (2010) reporting that only

around a quarter of foster carers receive 52 week payment, usually through the use of retainers.

As to their level, weekly fees, where paid, may vary from as little as £20 per child to over £500 in the case of some specialist foster care, for example involving therapeutic care or young people on remand (Tearse, 2010). While a few agencies make their pay rates public, there is a general paucity of data on remuneration for foster care. The Fostering Network has, however, carried out periodic surveys of foster carers and in the most recent, 54 per cent were reported as earning below a national minimum wage (NMW) equivalent based on 40 hours per week, which the Network has called for as a statutory minimum (Tearse, 2010). In the longer term, it has advocated parity with residential social work (currently around £21,500 per annum), with Tearse reporting that only 15 per cent of foster carers approximated or exceeded this level and female median earnings.

There has been no systematic study of what shapes pay levels within fostering, but it is reasonable to assume that they reflect a number of factors - including the broader (gendered) 'care penalty' highlighted by England et al (2002); naturalisation of women's caring skills and capacities; lack of militancy; continuing moral 'unease' and cost control concerns - albeit partially offset by continuing shortages of foster carers and competition between agencies. Research has consistently found fairly high levels of dissatisfaction with fostering remuneration, and moreso among BME carers, a reflection of both greater reliance on the income and sometimes higher costs relating for instance, to hair and skin care, religious observance or holidays in 'countries of origin' (LE Wales and the Hadley centre, 2010). Surprisingly perhaps, satisfaction has not been found to correlate significantly with social class, although Sinclair (2005) reported that those with (higher) alternative incomes viewed fostering remuneration as 'less generous'.

The basis for payment also varies significantly, offering different implicit understandings of what constitutes work. Arguably the pivotal clash has been that between payment based on 'difficulty' of placements and the skills, knowledge and experience of foster carers respectively. The former has a strong intuitive appeal, appearing to reflect both demands and disruption to family life. However, difficulty is notoriously challenging to calibrate and critics have argued that this system stigmatises children and creates perverse incentives, whereby improvement in the child's situation would lead to reduced payments, and deterioration to financial 'reward' (Corrick, 1999).

By contrast, advocates of professionalisation have favoured a focus on the qualities of foster carers themselves, mirroring others working with children. The most widely adopted model is the Fostering Network's *Payment for Skills* which links tiered payments to career progression, based on formal qualifications, training and assessed competence within the work. Those at the highest levels are likely to be deployed as trainers and mentors for less experienced foster carers. This approach has, however, proved contentious due to concerns over what constitutes 'good foster care' and the difficulties of matching pay levels with responsibilities. Interestingly, a recent report for the Welsh Assembly has advocated a combination of both models in its proposed fee structure, highlighting the thorny nature of this issue (LE Wales and the Hadley centre, 2010).

Remuneration for foster carers has been significantly shaped by a conflict between differentiation – typically based on distance from the 'familial', lower intrinsic satisfaction (Strangleman and Warren, 2008:275) and 'supply and demand' – and homogenisation, with reluctance to make or sustain distinctions between children and/or carers. A notable example is the treatment of family and friends as carers, who historically were (and in many countries are) typically paid lower allowances than other foster carers due to assumptions of familial responsibilities and fears of crowding out (Colton and Williams, 2006). Homogenisation is

apparent in the so-called Munby judgement [R v Manchester Council [2001] EWHC], which ruled this discriminatory, yet FFAC still often receive lower payments, especially when these are linked to training requirements or career progression.

In understanding foster carer remuneration, it is also important to acknowledge the continuing (albeit diminished) wider value conflicts surrounding commodification. While for some the cash-nexus is a tainting influence, for others its position as 'the measure of all things' (Beck, 2000:126) casts remuneration as marking the value placed on foster care and vulnerable children themselves (Triseliotis et al., 1995:39). The associated fears – that paid care may be impersonal and mechanical, attract the 'wrong people', undermine altruistic motivations and create dependency - are widely acknowledged (Swartz, 2004), but as noted above, both theoretical deconstruction and a changing social context have served to temper them . In relation to foster care, remuneration has often been constructed as facilitating ('we don't do it for the money, but we can't do it without it the money' (Tearse, 2010) and the co-existence of economic interests and altruistic motives affirmed (Swartz, 2004). Advocates of professionalisation frequently observe that among those who work with children, foster carers are uniquely placed under suspicion, and it is pertinent to ask whether Kassem's (2009:104) assertion that 'caring for children to pay off the mortgage is unacceptable' would be levelled elsewhere. Yet perhaps such worries also reflect the power of the familial, wherein the day-to-day power and intimate role of foster carers can make 'mercenary motivation' appear much more damaging.

Taxation, Benefits and Employment Status

Regulatory treatment of foster care for tax and benefit purposes offers further insights into its status as 'work'. Such treatment is shaped both by work-family hybridity and importantly, broader policy goals to encourage foster care.

Where identified as in receipt of (fee) earnings, foster carers have in principle long been regarded as self-employed for tax purposes. However, in order to address (intentional) opacity about the division between taxable remuneration and tax-free child allowances, HMRC introduced new rules in 2003 that effectively dissolved this boundary, setting an annual (£10,000) and weekly (£200 for children up to the age of 11 and £250 thereafter) disregard, above which any payments are taxable. Whether due to the generosity of this framework and/or low earnings, only 12 per cent of foster carers in Tearse's (2010) survey reported paying tax. As typically low earners, foster carers are often not liable for self-employed National Insurance contributions, but this in turn precludes certain entitlements for example relating to incapacity and maternity benefits. In 2003, the 'discovery' that many long serving female foster carers had little or no state pension entitlement led to home responsibilities protection being granted, although there is a striking familial connotation here in the link to parental and caring roles.

As Smith (2009) argues, the benefit/tax credit system tends to treat foster carers 'generously', suggesting governmental support for fostering. This is apparent in a number of ways. First, all payments are disregarded for major means-tested benefits (contrasting sharply with typical disregards in the range of £5-£25 per week) and do not affect employment and support allowance or carer's allowance. Second, breaking a long history of parity, lone foster carers of children under 16 are still exempted from signing on, whereas for lone birth parents the age limit has been reduced to five. Third, and perhaps most significantly in terms of boundaries, work qualification rules are interpreted in quite different even contrary ways, seemingly to aid entitlement. Thus, for income support, a means tested benefit designed for

those not (significantly) involved in paid work, foster care does not breach the 16 hour per week work limit that precludes entitlement. Conversely, however, for tax credits which support those in relatively low paid work, foster care is assumed to exceed the *minimum* threshold of 16 hours for a single parent (24 hours if in a couple) and allow for any 'reasonable' claim as to hours worked. Nevertheless, availability for work can cause difficulties for foster carers when they are temporarily without foster children, in which case they can be required to attend work-related interviews. With the introduction of universal credit, the Fostering Network has been campaigning for exemption on 'availability for work' or at least longer benefit 'run-on' periods following the end of a placement.

If many of the above measures can be taken, if sometimes tacitly, as recognising foster care as work, the familial remains important, as do the very flexible boundaries between the two domains. Using such measures to support foster care (and the 'availability' of female carers in particular) has been attacked from the political right, with a recent report (Harber and Oakley, 2011) raising concerns about the 'dependency' of many foster carers and the placement of children into households that would be in poverty in the absence of fostering income, although predictably the wider context of gendered inequalities is ignored.

While treated as self-employed for tax purposes, the wider work status of foster carers is much less clear. An employment lawyer (Millen, 2010) has suggested that unpaid foster carers might best be considered as 'office holders', where the post has its own (often statutory) existence (e.g. company directors or ministers of religion) and when paid, as falling between the statuses of 'worker' and 'employee', lacking the typical self-employment rights to fix prices, delegate or (except in Scotland) work with different fostering agencies. Yet to be tested in court, this has potentially significant implications, such as NMW entitlements although the vagaries of working hours could allow exception under 'daily average hours'

provisions for unmeasured work. (In France, payment is based on a notional three hours per day at the national minimum rate (Corbillon, 2006)).

Work-life balance in foster care

The distinctive hybrid nature of foster care throws up both conceptual and policy challenges relating to work-life balance (WLB), which has become increasingly prominent in recent years (Lewis and Campbell, 2008; Warhurst et al., 2008). In particular, fostering can be understood as part of 'life' vis a vis other paid work among family members and/or as itself work that may require bespoke 'life balance' (Nutt, 2006). In some respects, paid foster care may be seen (like childminding) as an ideal solution for WLB, allowing (usually female) carers both to work and be 'home-based', and many foster carers do view their work in this light (Brannen et al., 2007; Swartz, 2004). However, not only are foster carers likely to experience the boundary challenges faced by homeworkers and co-located family businesses (Seymour, 2005), but these are inevitably heightened by the temporal and spatial integration of fostering and the lifeworld of the family, especially when it may lead to disruptive and even dangerous experiences and impact on foster carers' own children (Sinclair, 2005).

Little is known regarding the treatment of foster carers or partners by their 'other' employers, though unlike adoptive parents, they are not formally recognised for 'parental leave' purposes. Wilson et al (2006) note that many male carers adapted work routines and hours to fit with fostering demands. However, as foster care has itself increasingly been construed as work, so too have WLB measures come to the fore - including 'paid holidays' (typically 2-4 weeks annually) and entitlements to short breaks from placements (Walker et al., 2002: 82). However, these remain familial in important respects, not least that implementation must usually be negotiated with respect to the effects of separation on foster children. Issues of

WLB in foster care have received little research attention and there is scope for more detailed work to look at some of the strategic options for boundary management as discussed by contributors to Warhurst et al (2008).

Negotiating the Boundaries of 'Work' in Foster Care - Observations on the Labour Process

The dominance of child welfare concerns in fostering research has meant little consideration of its labour process, and although space does not permit a full account here the intention is to focus on the articulation of work and non-work within foster care, drawing on the work of Ungerson and Glucksmann. As has been argued, the embeddedness of foster care within the family poses distinct challenges for the drawing and maintenance of (non)work boundaries. Such boundaries are likely to be diffuse (although there are readily identifiable 'work' tasks such as report writing or attendance at meetings) and will vary not only according to the nature of the foster care (i.e. its approximation to the 'familial') and the orientations of foster carers, but be highly contingent and subject to re-negotiation as events occur and relationships develop.

It is both interesting and challenging to locate foster care on Ungerson's (2005) regulation/non-regulation and care/work axes as a means of mapping commodified care work. She identifies two aspects of the former, deriving from work regulation and care standards respectively. As witnessed in the earlier discussion of tax, benefits and employment status, the work regulation of foster care is quite weak and blurred, with for example no stipulations as to pay or working hours and complex interaction with social rights. Conversely, regulation from care standards is high, though tempered by the limits of intervention in families (discussed further below). Location on the care/work axis is similarly

complex. While usually involving the care of strangers, expectations on foster carers closely approximate the characteristics Ungerson attaches to the care end of the spectrum - informality, temporal flexibility, affect and holistic care - which is associated with kinship or friendship. Yet it is simultaneously highly formalised and often paid work with contractual elements, even if these are not entirely aligned with those of (self-)employment.

In her discussion of the articulation of work and non-work activities, Glucksmann (2005) identifies three elements: 'embeddedness versus differentiation', 'emotion' work and 'aesthetic labour', and consumption 'work'. The first has already been discussed at various points in the context of a growing 'work' ethos in foster care, but is also relevant to the setting and implementation of care standards. Ostensibly in the cause of child welfare, but also operating as a form of 'occupational control', such standards have served to govern foster families through a managed balance between differentiation and embeddedness, judged against the norms of 'ordinary families'. Thus, the (in)famously exhaustive process for assessment and approval of foster carers seeks to gauge both suitability *as a family* to care for a child, but also capacity to adapt to the (work) demands of foster care, whether these pertain to foster children or other stakeholders (Johansen, 1999). Signalling a directional shift towards work, the process has adopted the language of competencies but remains very similar to that for prospective adopters in its focus on family dynamics.

The evolution of training demonstrates similar tensions associated with hybridity, within an overall shift towards a work orientation. Originally linked to initial approval, training has been extended to post-approval requirements, but remains controversial. In particular, opinion divides between those who regard training as an unequivocal good and critics who question its value or express concerns that it may detract from the embedded tacit knowledge and parenting core of foster care, especially when linked to progression and reward (Cameron et al., 2002). However, training remains integral to the professionalising project, with for

example the promotion of foundation degrees or current discussions as to whether foster carers should adopt the philosophy and techniques of social pedagogy (Cameron and Petrie, 2011; DfES, 2006). Recruitment and training are also sites for contestations of knowledge and expertise between the 'parental' and 'professional'. Efforts to encourage recruitment have often emphasised the 'ordinariness' of foster care and minimal experience needed, sitting uneasily with professionalising forms of differentiation.

Governmentality in foster care is also framed by general and placement-specific agreements covering the respective roles of carers and agencies (see e.g. Fostering Regulations (England) 2011), a framework that also highlights the tensions of differentiation and embeddedness. The former is apparent in rules that represent significant state control within the family, including an extensive checklist of health and safety requirements in the home; a non-smoking environment; eschewal of a range of punishments - including the physical and typically shouting, confinement, deprivation of food or pocket money - and the practice of 'safer caring' (measures designed to minimise the risk of abuse allegations). With regular supervisory social work visits (some unannounced) and extensive duties to record and report 'relevant events', the foster family can easily be construed as a 'public space', with household lives 'virtually owned by the local council' (Nutt, 2006:100). Yet, considered as a place of work, the potential for activities to go unobserved and unreported is obvious, not least due to boundaries (however diffuse and contested) that are ultimately rooted in the 'privacy' of the family. Moreover, there are counter trends which seek to retain or restore the familial, although they can also be interpreted as transferring work and responsibility from the state. An example has been the drive towards 'delegated authority' which would give foster carers greater control over decisions on education, leisure activities, health care, overnight stays, holidays and personal care. Recent guidance makes regular reference to

reliance on the benchmarks of the 'good', 'responsible' or 'reasonable' parent as a means of reducing unnecessary and stigmatising bureaucracy (Dunster, 2011).

Such tensions reflect the historically 'uneasy and unequal relationship' (Johansen, 1999) between foster carers and social workers, often overlain with class- and/or ethnic divisions and tensions over parenting (Swartz, 2004). Raising the status and improving the treatment of foster carers has long been a policy theme, but is difficult to reconcile with managerialist concerns to closely scrutinise and sometimes micro-manage activities within the family. Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the dominant paradigms of child welfare research, there has been little investigation of the workings of power and resistance or with limited exceptions the indeterminacy of labour and the wage-effort bargain (Rodger et al., 2006). What is known from research is that while grievances are commonplace among foster carers, their expressed 'job satisfaction' is generally high, usually reflecting intrinsic factors relating to the foster children (Triseliotis et al., 2000).

Both emotion work and consumption work are also highly relevant to foster care, in ways that reflect its hybridity. In the only account to directly address emotion work in foster care, Nutt (2006) has described the relational challenge with foster children as one of 'detached attachment'. However, a wider lens on work invites attention to both the management of emotion in dealings with other stakeholders (such as birth family members or professionals) and the emotion work required within foster carers' own families. Similarly, consumption work spans a wide and complex terrain. On the one hand, foster care entails the child entering into the family's lifestyle and consumption, whether in terms of domestic labour or participation in its routines and activities. On the other, it is subject to specific governance, for example, through the monitoring of expenditure on the child and associated rules (e.g. on savings, pocket money or clothing) and indirectly through requirements on healthy eating or dedicated activities.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to examine the reconfiguration of foster care (acknowledging its heterogeneity) as a case study in the articulation of boundaries between work and non-work. It has been argued, through engagement with conceptual questions and analysis of some of its key markers, that foster care has taken on a stronger work ethos – manifest in progressive formalisation and significant (though far from universal) commodification – yet remains significantly shaped by the familial.

The tensions are apparent in relation to policy. The argument that foster care constitutes 'work' that in principle should be financially rewarded seems largely to have been won (despite deep public sector cuts there is no trend towards, nor serious advocacy for decommodification). However, successive governments have pointedly refused to mandate payment beyond allowances and the investment case (based on longer term savings) for further professionalisation seems unlikely to progress in the current economic climate (Holmes and Soper, 2010). Recent guidance has also emphasised the importance of the parental and the legacy of 'voluntarism' (and paternalism) remains strong. Launching the coalition government's *Foster Carers' Charter* the Children's Minister describes them as 'unsung heroes' and as doing a 'fantastic selfless job' (DfE, 2011b), while the Charter itself, with its emphasis on their treatment by agencies and rights to information, positions foster carers ambiguously between workers and consumers/service users. Overall, there is no clarity as to the status of foster care vis a vis work, creating boundaries that are at best blurred, sometimes contradictory and almost invariably unstable and contested.

What then, can study of foster care offer to the wider sociological study of work? It has been argued that consideration of fostering as work has been marginalised in research, including

the study of care work. Such neglect may in part reflect its enormous complexity as a form of care work, but this can also be seen as an opportunity to explore relevant conceptual and empirical questions. Foster care shares significant common ground with other forms of care work, notably shifting hybrid relationships between state and family in the contexts of deinstitutionalisation and declining supply of 'traditional' female care. Yet crucial differences arise from the status and perceived needs of children and from the multifaceted role of the state and its agencies. With a relative lack of temporal and spatial separation between 'work' and 'family', this creates what might be termed as a 'deep hybridity', where both domains come under very close scrutiny and management and tensions between the two are sharpened.

This constellation of factors provides a terrain that can be productively utilised and developed, in particular to explore the 'limits' of formalisation and commodification within family-based care work. At present, relatively little is known about the 'working lives' of foster carers and the factors that shape them, including their intersection with divisions of class, gender and ethnicity. Some of the potential areas of interest have been highlighted earlier, such as experiences of work-life balance, emotional labour (or embodied labour following Rees and Pithouse's (2008) work on 'safe caring'), resistance and occupational control and the wage-effort bargain. Across the interlinked domains of the domestic/familial, fostering and other forms of paid work, how do foster carers (paid and unpaid, in private and state sectors) understand their work and navigate potentially conflicting value systems within particular economic and cultural contexts. How are claims regarding family and work mobilised by fostering's various social actors, from micro to macro levels? The rich scope for applying Glucksmann's (2005) 'total social organisation of labour' approach here is obvious. There is also potential to examine these issues comparatively, developing Colton and Williams's (2006) review of international trends which shows similar 'professionalising' influences, but with ongoing tensions and varied policy responses. In mapping the relevant

territory, this case study is intended to mark the first step in the process and to encourage further contributions.

References

Beck U (2000) *The Brave New World of Work*. Cambridge: Polity.

Beck U and Beck-Gernsheim E (1995) *The Normal Chaos of Love*. Cambridge: Polity.

Brannen J, Statham J, Mooney A and Brockmann M (2007) *Coming to Care: The Work and Family Lives of Workers Caring for Vulnerable Children*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Bryson V (2007) *Gender and the Politics of Time: Feminist Theory and Contemporary Debates.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Cameron C and Petrie P (2011) Social Pedagogy and Foster Care: A scoping paper. London: Institute of Education

Cameron C, Mooney A and Moss P (2002) The child care workforce: current conditions and future directions. *Critical Social Policy* 22(4): 572-95.

Churchill H (2011) *Parental rights and Responsibilities*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Colton M and Williams M (2006) Overview and conclusions. In Colton M and Williams M (eds) *Global Perspectives on Foster Family Care*. Lyme Regis: Russell House, 99-120.

Corbillon M (2006) France. In Colton M and Williams M (eds) *Global Perspectives on Foster Family Care*. Lyme Regis: Russell House, 19-28.

Corrick, H. (1999) The professionalisation of foster care. in A. Wheal *The RHP Companion to Foster Care*. Lyme Regis: Russell House, 57-63.

Coyle A (2005) Changing times: flexibilization and the re-organization of work in feminized labour markets, *Sociological Review* 53(s2): 73-88.

Crittenden A (2001) *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued*. New York: Henry Holt.

Curran L (2006) Feminine women, hard workers: foster motherhood in midcentury America (1946-1963). *Journal of Family History* 31(4): 386–41.

Daly M and Rake K (2003) *Gender and the Welfare State: Care, Work and Welfare in Europe and the USA*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Department for Education (2011a) *Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England (including adoption and care leavers) - year ending 31 March 2011*. London: DfE.

Department for Education (2011b) *The Foster Carers' Charter*. London: DfE.

Department for Education and Skills (2006) *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care (Cm 6932)*. London: DfES.

Dunster N (2011) *The New Fostering Standards, Regulations and Statutory Guidance (England): What's New? What's Changed?* London: British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

England P, Budig M and Folbre N (2002) Wages of virtue: the relative pay of care work. *Social Problems* 49(4): 455-473.

Fink J (2004) Care: meanings, identities and morality. In Fink J (ed.) *Care: Personal Lives and Social Policy*. Bristol: Policy Press, 145-158.

Folbre N and Nelson J (2000) For Love or Money – or Both?. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14(4): 123–40.

Garrett P (2003) *Remaking Social Work with Children and Families*. London: Routledge.

Gatrell C (2005) *Hard Labour: the Sociology of Parenthood*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Glucksmann M (2005) Shifting boundaries and interconnections:Extending the 'total social organization of labour'. *Sociological Review* 53(s2): 19-36.

Harber A and Oakley M (2011) *Fostering Aspirations: Reforming the foster care system in England and Wales.* London: Policy Exchange

Hays S (1996) *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood.* New Haven. Yale University Press.

Hochschild A (1997) *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. New York: Henry Holt.

Holmes L and Soper J (2010) *Update to the Cost of Foster Care*. London: Fostering Network.

Jackson S and McParlin P (2006) The education of children in care, *The Psychologist* 19(2): 90-93.

Johansen S (1999) Working in partnership: social workers and carers. In Wheal A (ed.) *The Companion to Foster Care*. Lyme Regis: Russell House.

Kassem D (2009) Life as a looked-after child: the parent of last resort. In Kassem D, Murphy L and Taylor E, (eds) *Key Issues in Childhood and Youth Studies*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Kjeldsen C and Kjeldsen M (2010) When family becomes the job: fostering practice in Denmark. *Adoption and Fostering* 34(1): 52-64.

Kirton D, Beecham J and Ogilvie K (2003) *Remuneration and Performance in Foster Care.* Canterbury: University of Kent.

LE Wales and the Hadley Centre (2010) *Foster Carer Payments Schedule and Fees Framework: Final Report for Welsh Assembly Government.* Cardiff: LE Wales.

Lewis J and Campbell M (2008) What's in a name? 'work and family' or 'work and life' balance policies in the UK since 1997 and the implications for the pursuit of gender equality. *Social Policy and Administration* 42(5): 524-541.

Lynch K (2007) Love labour as a distinct and non-commodifiable form of care labour. *Sociological Review* 55(3): 550-570.

Millen D (2010) *Gainfully Employed: Issues of Employment Status and Pay for Foster Carers*. Paper given to Joint Forum of Independent Fostering Providers and the Fostering Network Conference, 19 May.

Nutt L (2006) *The Lives of Foster Carers: Private Sacrifices, Public Restrictions*. Abingdon: Routledge.

OFSTED (2011) *Fostering Agencies and Fostering Services dataset 2010-11*. London: OFSTED

Oldfield N (1997) *The Adequacy of Foster Care Allowances*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Parry J, Taylor R, Pettinger L and Glucksmann M (2005) Confronting the challenges of work today: new horizons and perspectives. *Sociological Review* 53(s2): 1-18.

Radin M (1996) *Contested Commodities.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rees A and Pithouse A (2008) The intimate world of strangers – embodying the child in foster care. *Child and Family Social Work* 13(3): 338-347.

Robson R (2008) *Couldn't Care Less: A Policy Report from the Children in Care Working Group.* London: Commission for Social Justice.

Rodger S, Cummings A and Leschied A (2006) Who is caring for our most vulnerable children? The motivation to foster in child welfare. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 30(10): 1129-42.

Schofield G (2003) *Part of the Family: Pathways Through Foster Care*. London: British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

Sellick C (2011) Privatising Foster Care: The UK Experience within an International Context. *Social Policy and Administration* 45(7): 788-805.

Seymour J (2004) Entertaining guests or entertaining the guests: children's emotional labour in hotels, pubs and boarding houses. In Goddard J, McNamee S, James A and James A (eds) *The Politics of Childhood : International Perspectives, Contemporary Developments*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 90-106.

Shaw M and Hipgrave T (1983) *Specialist Fostering*. London: Batsford

Silva E and Smart C (1999) The 'new' practices and politics of family life. In Silva E and Smart C (eds) *The New Family*. London: Sage, 1-12.

Sinclair I (2005) *Fostering Now: Messages from Research*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Smith A (2009) *Fostering: A Benefits Handbook*. London: British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

Smith B (1988) Something you do for love: the question of money and foster care. *Adoption and Fostering* 12(4): 34-38.

Stone D (2000) Caring by the book. In Meyer M H (ed) *Care Work: Gender, Labor and the Welfare State*. New York: Routledge, 89-111.

Strangleman T and Warren T (2008) *Work and Society: Sociological Approaches*: *Themes and Methods*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Swartz T (2004) Mothering for the state: foster parenting and the challenges of contracted carework. *Gender and Society* 18(5): 567-587.

Tearse M (2010) *Love Fostering – Need Pay: A UK-Wide Survey of Foster Carers About Fees*. London: Fostering Network.

Triseliotis J, Sellick C and Short R (1995) *Foster Care: Theory and Practice*. London: Batsford.

Triseliotis J, Borland M and Hill M (2000) *Delivering Foster Care*. London: British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering.

Ungerson C (2005) Care, work and feeling. *Sociological Review* 53(s2): 188-203.

Walker M, Hill M and Triseliotis J (2002) *Testing the Limits of Foster Care: Fostering as an Alternative to Secure Accommodation*. London: British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

Warhurst C, Eikhof D and Haunschild A (eds) (2008) *Work Less, Live More?: Critical Analysis of the Work-Life Boundary.* Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Wheal A (2005) Conclusion. In A Wheal (ed.) *The RHP Companion to Foster Care (2nd edition)*. Lyme Regis: Russell House, 113-117.

Wilson K and Evetts J (2006) The professionalisation of foster care. *Adoption and Fostering* 30(1): 39-47.

Wilson K, Fyson R and Newstone S (2006) Foster fathers: their experiences and contributions to fostering. *Child and Family Social Work* 12(1): 22-31.

Wolkowitz C (2009) Challenging boundaries: an autobiographical perspective on the sociology of work. *Sociology* 43(5): 846-860.

Derek Kirton is Reader of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Kent. He has written widely on child welfare policy, especially relating to substitute family care. A particular research interest has been exploration of the working lives of foster carers, where he has carried out a number of projects including '*Remuneration and Performance in Foster Care'* (2000-2003) funded by the Department of Health, in addition to writing more theoretical accounts of fostering's 'professionalisation'.