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Exploring the Anti-professional Turn in English Foster Care: Implications for Policy, Practice and Research

Derek Kirton*

School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, Canterbury CT2 7NF, UK

Correspondence to: Derek Kirton, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, Cornwallis East, University of Kent, Canterbury, CT2 7NF, UK. E-mail: D.Kirton@kent.ac.uk

Abstract

Following decades in which professionalisation was widely assumed to be a permanent (and growing) feature of foster care in England, the government signalled a clear anti-professional turn in its 2018 publication Fostering Better Outcomes (FBOs). This rejected the notion that foster carers should be regarded as professionals and indicated that there should be a return to the term foster parent. This article analyses FBO, its feeder reports and evidence submitted by stakeholders to map the shifting debate surrounding professionalisation. This includes both direct commentary on its (de)merits, but also discussion of components such as pay, conditions, motivation, training, expertise, a national college or register and related questions of supporting and valuing foster carers. A number of important flaws are identified within the review process. These include an ahistorical and insular treatment of professionalisation, its conflation with employment, a homogenisation of foster care and deployment of a familial discourse that fails to engage with its complexities and 'hybrid' nature between work and family. The consequence is a confused policy stance where professionalisation is rhetorically rejected while many of its core elements are endorsed. Implications of the anti-professional turn for policy, practice and research in England but also internationally, are discussed.

Keywords: family, foster care, payment, professionalisation, training, valuing

Introduction

In 2018, the government in England (as this is a devolved matter in the UK) made a significant pronouncement on the status of foster carers in

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The professional association for
social work and social workers
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its publication *Fostering Better Outcomes* (FBO) Department for Education (DfE), 2018). The two key elements were first, an explicit rejection of the notion that they should be deemed professionals and second, an unequivocal reversion to the term foster parent. This represents a very significant historical moment, as the professionalisation of foster care has been a trend (albeit partial and contested) over several decades, whilst the initial terminological change from foster parent to carer dates from the last century (George *et al.*, 2003).

In this article, an analysis is offered of the anti-professional turn, exploring the arguments and discursive resources deployed in justifying it. FBO was a response to two reports on foster care (but excluding kinship foster care), one by a House of Commons Education Committee (HCEC, 2017a), the other a 'stocktake' commissioned by the government (Narey and Owers, 2018). The analysis will be contextualised with reference to the history of professionalisation, relevant stakeholder perspectives, research evidence and international developments, whilst implications will be considered in relation to policy, practice and research.

Background

The trend towards professionalisation of foster care in the UK began in the early 1970s when, developing earlier initiatives in Scandinavia, schemes for 'difficult' adolescents were introduced as an alternative to residential care (Hazel, 1981). In such projects, families would receive training, dedicated support and fee payment that recognised fostering as work. This was given a further boost by the formation of independent fostering providers (IFPs) which tended to offer greater support and higher pay than local authorities (Sellick, 2011), although competition between sectors served to diffuse these features. Professionalisation also became a wider international trend in the late 20th century (George *et al.*, 2003).

Professionalisation can be understood as having two distinct, if related meanings. First, it can be defined in opposition to voluntarism (with payment the key marker but also denoting skill, competence and responsibility), while second, it may indicate recognition as a 'profession' (an occupational status typically resting on training, qualifications, an ethical code and state recognition allowing significant self-regulation). The drivers of professionalisation for fostering in the UK have been identified as dealing with more challenging behaviour from looked after children (i.e. children in public care), increasing administrative and other work demands on foster carers, managerialism within fostering agencies, a norm of dual earner households and pressure from foster carers themselves (Wilson and Evetts, 2006; Kirton, 2007). It should also be noted

that the professional domain has always been viewed as 'Janus faced' (Johnson, 1972), with its 'service ethic' countered by images of self-interest and misuse of power.

Support for professionalisation in England appeared to reach its zenith in the New Labour government's Green Paper, *Care Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2006), which proposed fee payments to (all) foster carers via a tiered structure, underpinned by a qualifications' framework (including possible progression to higher education) and mandatory registration, with foster carers clearly incorporated into 'the children's workforce'. However, this professionalising agenda was never implemented and subsequent Conservative(-led) governments had not revisited the issue until the review, reflecting a mixture of austerity measures (Turner, 2017) and a move away from New Labour's 'social investment' approach to children's services.

Prior to the review, however, there had been moves to unionise foster carers and (as yet unsuccessfully) to seek worker or employee status (*Bullock v Norfolk County Council EAT/0230/10; National Union of Professional Foster Carers (NUPFC) v Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and Others UKEAT/0285/17/RN*). As explained below, these efforts proved significant within the review.

Methodology

In exploring the anti-professional turn, this article comprises an analysis of the arguments and discourses deployed in FBO, and how this response draws on its feeder reports. Additionally, secondary analysis of the HCEC's oral (involving thirty-eight witnesses) and written evidence (hundred and one published submissions) was undertaken to provide a more developed sense of debates among fostering's stakeholders (submissions to the stocktake were not published). Sessions of oral evidence all took place in 2017 and are referenced below by month and question number. Written evidence follows the HCEC's numbering system for submissions with the prefix FOS. All quotes are from foster carers or their representatives unless otherwise stated. Access details are included in the reference list (HCEC, 2017b).

Thematic analysis was used to examine evidence submitted to the HCEC (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data set comprised all direct references to professionalisation, but also 'known' (from previous literature) components such as pay, training and support, employment status, conditions, qualifications, registration and debates relating to motivation. Thus, in Braun and Clarke's terms, the analysis was an amalgam of theory-driven (with elements of a pre-existing framework) and data-driven, i.e. open to responding to the ways in which participants addressed professionalisation. Examples of the latter included delegated

authority, expertise, the fostering market, recruitment, participation and respect. Initial coding was used to identify and refine themes within (and later across) these areas, with particular attention paid to patterns of stakeholder perspectives. For the reporting stage, these themes and perspectives were analysed in terms of their significance within the policy process as it developed through the feeder reports and FBO and in turn, used to structure the sections below. Finally, FBO itself is analysed in terms of its discursive construction of professionalisation, in the context of available domestic and international research evidence, and for its implications.

Fostering better outcomes

FBO (DfE, 2018) addresses a range of issues including children's experiences, stability and permanence, improving practice, sufficiency and markets. While these interconnect with debates on professionalisation in various ways, it is addressed most directly in a short sub-section entitled 'employment status and professionalisation' (pp. 28–30). This linkage is telling because both FBO and its feeder reports chose to largely conflate the two—when in practice, they are quite different, with employment status a much narrower issue—and in dismissing employment status also rejected the wider notion of professionalisation.

FBO places the issues of respect for, and valuing of, foster carers centrally, but discursively, this is framed in familial terms. This is most obvious through the unacknowledged and unexplained reversion to the term foster parent, but the familial is also strengthened by granting foster carers parental bereavement leave entitlements, aligning their access to free childcare 'with other working families' and facilitating them taking other work alongside fostering (DfE, 2018, p. 26).

The two main substantive reasons for rejecting professionalisation also have strong familial elements. First, the stocktake's view is cited directly that, however, skilled (or even professionally qualified) foster carers may be, and, however, 'important and vital' their views, they cannot be dispassionate, though no evidence is produced to support this (DfE, 2018, p. 24). Rather, they should be 'biased and tenacious' in pursuing the interests of their foster children, but the nature and scope of these interests are not explained. The Ministerial Foreword to FBO (DfE, 2018, p. 5) similarly contends that they will want to become experts and the 'fiercest advocate' for their child, but crucially this is as 'any parent' would do, while a later section indicates that advocacy is not a role for foster carers, who instead should establish a strong relationship with the advocacy provider (pp. 13–14).

A second argument against professionalisation was opposition from (former) looked after children. This is strongly employment focused,

with young people said to have reacted with confusion and dismay on hearing what would constitute employment status for foster carers (DfE, 2018, p. 29). However, no details are given of this finding and this may well not have been an unbiased exercise. For example, there is reference to young people being required to leave the foster home when the carers take annual leave, but this oversimplifies a situation where such entitlements have long existed in fostering agencies and been flexibly managed. One care leaver's complaint of being told by his foster carers that he was 'just a job' is also used to critique the idea of professionalisation (DfE, 2018, p. 29), but no evidence is provided that professionally oriented foster care correlates with such attitudes or messages.

Professionalisation (framed as employment) is portrayed by FBO as a siren call (p. 28), a misplaced response to a felt lack of respect and support. According to the report, these issues need to be addressed directly. Concrete measures include strengthening guidance to ensure foster carers' involvement in meetings relating to their foster children and further delegation of authority to carers over day-to-day decision making.

HCEC and stocktake

Like FBO, both feeder reports were wide ranging, but also directly addressed the question of professionalisation (HCEC, 2017a, pp. 24–26; Narey and Owers, 2018, pp. 26–28). Without exception, all foster carers and their representative bodies giving evidence to HCEC supported it, emphasising the requisite dedication, skills and training and rejecting voluntarism.

> Foster carers are professionals. There is no doubt about it (Oral Evidence (OE) Feb Q16).
>
> As long as fostering is treated as some sort of kind-person volunteering then it will not be successful (FOS0020).

However, several expounded on how their professional status was often not recognised, or only selectively—'unless they want to make a point' (FOS0014)—to emphasise duties. Support for professionalisation also came from some social workers and academics, local authorities and IFPs, including the National Association of Fostering Providers (NAFP), while unsurprisingly, professionalisation (in its 'work' sense) was espoused by trade unions.

Those expressing opposition to professionalisation comprised mainly umbrella/professional bodies such as the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), British Association of Social Workers, National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers (NAIRO), children's charity CoramBAAF, two IFPs and two care experienced adults. The common theme was that professionalisation threatened the

familial 'essence' of fostering. This was expressed in various ways, for instance, ADCS emphasising that foster carers did not 'need to be social workers' (FOS0099) or pointing to the dangers of 'professionalising family life' (OE, Feb, Q54—Professor Harriet Ward). The themes of altruism and vocation were also deployed. One IFP representative (FOS0048—ABC Fostering) argued that:

> the most inspiring foster carers I have worked with have pushed against the professionalization agenda…[prioritising]….love and nurture more than accredited training and a career pathway.

Interestingly, the same IFP's website asked enquirers if they are 'interested in a professional career that makes a difference', one of several such anomalies. Two care experienced adults also stressed the primacy of love and family, rejecting the notion that foster care was a job.

> Foster care is about offering your home and creating a family life for the young person who for whatever reason can't live with their birth parents (FOS0106).

However, Become, a charity representing those (formerly) in care was more equivocal, suggesting that their views were mixed (FOS0089).

In its 'strong' form, anti-professionalisation framed fostering clearly in terms of family and parenting. Andy Elvin from IFP TACT (Oral Evidence (OE), March, Q121) advocated 'parentisation' of the role, aiming to match respect for foster carers with that for birth parents, with both seen as 'experts on the child' but as 'general population families'. Similarly, ADCS argued for 'good quality ordinary parenting' (FOS0113), rejecting long standing (and seemingly accepted) arguments that the demands of fostering far exceed this. Their submission also highlighted the additional costs of (further) professionalisation. For others, opposition was more nuanced, for example CoramBAAF juxtaposing the centrality of familial relations with the demands of corporate parenting (FOS0081).

In rejecting professionalisation, HCEC gave no reasoning for its verdict, nor evaluation of the competing views expressed. This is particularly striking because in a then very recent report, they refer to foster and residential carers together as professionals (HCEC, 2016). The stocktake argued the need to arrest a 'shifting philosophy'—

> which has seen 'foster parents' being called 'foster carers'; children being discouraged from calling their long-term carer Mum or Dad; and sometimes carers being framed as just another professional in a child's life (Narey and Owers, 2018, p. 11).

However, little supporting evidence was provided for some of the claims, which are considered further below.

Employment and unionisation

As noted above, formal rejection of professionalisation rested significantly on its conflation with employment and threat to the familial. Stakeholder testimony to the HCEC, however, presented a more complex picture, with foster carers and their representatives expressing mixed views on employee status.

> Foster carers should not be classified as 'self-employed' but as employees and receive appropriate benefits (FOS0044).

> I know that it is impractical from minimum wage standards to treat a foster carer as an employee. I just don't think that would work (OE, Feb, Q13).

Similarly, although two unions, the GMB and a branch of the IWGB gave evidence—calling for greater standardisation, improved pay and conditions and 'employment' flexibility (FOS0056; FOS0061)—their fostering membership remained very small.

The context to these debates was the sense of grievance felt by many foster carers about their ambiguous status, classified as self-employed for tax purposes, but lacking the associated freedoms to negotiate payment or work with different agencies (FOS0011; FOS0056—GMB). There were also concerns about lack of employment rights, including pensions, sick and holiday pay, national minimum wage entitlement and protective rights when faced with allegations of abuse, victimisation, dismissal/deregistration or as whistleblowers.

The HCEC (2017a, p. 23) adjudged it 'unsatisfactory' that foster carers had the responsibilities of self-employment without the benefits. The government dismissed these concerns, emphasising tax and benefit advantages (DfE, 2018, p. 47), but left wider issues of restrictions, pay and conditions unresolved.

Remuneration

Professionalisation has been inextricably linked to payment for foster carers, although a sizeable minority receive no fee, and many receive low payments (Lawson and Cann, 2019). How then was remuneration treated in the review? With one exception (a care experienced adult) (FOS106), no contributor argued against, or for its reduction. However, the spectre of pecuniary motivation was apparent inregular reassurances about foster carers' altruism.

> Almost none of the carers we met prioritised pay as an issue (Narey and Owers, 2018, p. 44).

In evidence to HCEC, however, foster carers elaborated the theme of low pay, with reference to high-level commitment, and below minimum wage levels (FOS0020).

> We do one of the most demanding jobs you could ever conceive of….yet in general carers are paid an absolute pittance (OE, Feb, Q5).

> Many carers would earn more working 9 to 5 receiving the Minimum Wage than they receive for a 24/7 job (FOS0070).

Several called for a national pay structure, tiered on the basis on skills and experience or qualifications, though some favoured differentiation reflecting placement 'difficulty' (FOS0003). Other stakeholders, including some individual local authorities and IFPs, were also supportive (on grounds of recognition and recruitment and retention) (FOS0079—Action for Children).

  Both feeder reviews considered issues of payment. While appearing sympathetic to claims of 'underpayment', the HCEC (2017a, p. 21) report ultimately focused on enforcing national minimum allowances and inviting (unsuccessfully) the government to review taxation arrangements. The stocktake rejected any notion of underpayment, but argued forcefully that there is 'no conflict between being a caring or loving foster carer and being adequately compensated' (Narey and Owers, 2018, p. 44). The authors write of how no-one believes nursing ('a dedicated occupation') should not be paid, overlooking the fact that nurses are overwhelmingly regarded as professionals. Following endorsement in the stocktake, FBO indicated support in principle for a tiered payment system linked to skills and experience (DfE, 2018, p. 53), offering no challenge to one of the key principles of professionalisation and implicitly constructing it as a 'job'.

Training and support

Training and support also constitute enduring pillars of professionalisation. Training is clearly not incompatible with voluntarism, but rests more easily with a work/professional ethos, especially when linked to progressive reward systems. Training also underscores distance from 'ordinary parenting' and FBO notes its contribution to foster carers' often 'in-depth knowledge of children's social care' and 'incredible range of expertise' (DfE, 2018, pp. 24, 29). Research has also shown a positive correlation between professional orientation and carers' participation in training activities (Kirton *et al.*, 2003). Again, it is useful to gauge how commentary on training matched the anti-professional turn. Training was addressed in around 30 written contributions to HCEC, mostly from fostering agencies (especially IFPs) and umbrella bodies, with relatively few (6) from foster carers. Regardless of perspectives on

professionalisation, contributors almost universally emphasised the importance of training with many indicating the need for improvement.

> There definitely needs to be an element of professional training (OE, Feb, Q20).

> Provision of further training and support is needed to improve the support available to foster carers (FOS0050 - Local Government Association (LGA)).

Specific recommendations related mainly to more structured training, integration with other children's professionals (FOS0014; FOS0087—International Centre, University of Bedfordshire) and developing a nationally accredited qualification (FOS0045; FOS0058—Excel Fostering).

There was little sign that discussion of training was aligned with an anti-professional turn. A limited exception came from the ADCS, which called for more structured training, but 'caution(ed) against over-professionalisation' (FOS0099). Strangely, however, they advocated fostering following residential care with national quality standards, which have a strong 'professional' strand, in relation to qualifications, development and judgement. FBO rejected an accredited qualification, but agreed to review post-approval training (DfE, 2018, p. 48), effectively adopting a 'neutral' position, neither rolling back nor extending training provision. Likewise, there was no sense that support should be de-emphasised, a point made strongly in the Chief Social Worker's foreword to FBO (p. 6).

A register and/or national college

The related ideas of a register of, and/or college for, foster carers received significant attention in evidence to the HCEC. Foster carers (and others) supported a representative body to give them status and voice, portability between agencies and protection rights.

> Some kind of organisation that represented foster carers in a more formal way to government, local government and others would be a helpful development (OE Mar Q124 - NAIRO).

> It would make it easier for foster carers to transfer between agencies and would have the safeguarding benefit of preventing unsuitable carers merely going to a different agency and hiding their past (FOS0006).

Wider potential benefits highlighted included workforce planning, regulation, and more controversially, matching between foster carers and children (FOS0047; FOS0085—Fostering Network). Against these, LGA argued that:

> the last thing that's needed ….is a top-down, national solution, because it tends to be time consuming, expensive and bureaucratic (OE, March, Q130).

The thread of professionalisation ran strongly through these debates, for instance, when some foster carers referenced 'professional standards' (OE, Feb, Q17). In opposition, an LGA representative voiced concern that a national college would effectively recognise fostering as a profession, when carers saw themselves simply as 'good people trying to do very good work in the community' (OE, March, Q130). Despite this, and paradoxically talking in terms of 'along the lines of . . ..other care professions', the HCEC (2017a, pp. 28, 30) recommended consultation on a national college. Meanwhile, the stocktake supported the establishment of a register, primarily to aid matching (Narey and Owers, 2018, p. 12).

The government, however, sidestepped this by committing to a 'digital discovery' phase to consider the use of technology to address a range of foster care issues, but this seemed far removed from ideas of a register or college (DfE, 2018, p. 36).

Valuing foster carers—and their expertise

As noted earlier, the issue of valuing foster carers became pivotal to the debates on professionalisation, with all parties subscribing to its importance, yet generating polarised views on how to achieve it. The core manifestations of valuing were stated as participation in decision-making, recognition of expertise, respect for views, trust and provision of information, but extended to assumptions about carers' availability and readiness to perform tasks allocated by (professional) others.

A powerful theme emerged in which many foster carers were allegedly treated as 'a resource to be utilised' (OE, March, Q11) or 'glorified babysitters' (FOS0029). Others spoke of being 'gagged' or 'bullied' (FOS0070; FOS0100) when disagreeing with decisions. The most common complaint, however, concerned being marginalised in decision making with vital knowledge ignored.

> We are the people who know the children in our care best, but we are generally not treated as part of the 'Professional' team (FOS0049).
>
> Foster carers are at the bottom of the pecking order (FOS0044).

This point was conceded by all stakeholders—with foster carers as 'the expert on the child' becoming close to a mantra—and new guidance (DfE, 2018, p. 24) promised to ensure their participation.

However, consensus broke down on the routes to, and currencies of, valuing. Supporters of professionalisation were clear that it was integrally linked to professional status and recognition (FOS0016; FOS0101—NAFP). Opponents, by contrast, typically drew on the currency of parenting, speaking of foster carers not being properly recognised as parents and framing their expertise as 'like any parent' (OE,

March, Q120). Discursively, expertise was almost invariably confined to individual children, seeming to deny the wider knowledge that experienced foster carers develop over time, multiple placements and ongoing training. Surprisingly, this point was scarcely made by supporters of professionalisation, and although mentioned briefly in FBO (DfE, 2018, p. 24), it is otherwise absent.

The stocktake makes an audacious attempt to address valuing by capturing and inverting the language of the professional. Having declared its meaning to be 'vague', Narey and Owers (2018, p. 11) contend that foster carers' aspirations are in essence simply a desire to be 'treated professionally'. This passive formulation is clearly at odds with their widely expressed claims to be treated 'as professionals', but the stocktake's view is echoed elsewhere in the review, with HCEC (2017a, p. 5) referring to treatment with 'professional courtesies', while FBO opted for the arguably less mischievous 'treated properly' (DfE, 2018, p. 29).

Discussion

In policy terms, FBO clearly represented a pivotal moment in a long, complex history, although its likely impact is unclear. The anti-professional turn can be understood as comprising both resistance to further professionalisation and pushback against its earlier consolidation. Perhaps the central question in national policy terms is how professionalisation moved from being seen as part of the solution to providing good care for foster children (and an 'unstoppable force'; George *et al.*, 2003) to part of the problem in just over a decade. In terms of the two meanings of professionalisation outlined earlier, recognition as a 'professional' occupation appeared to have almost disappeared from the agenda, with attention focused on whether fostering constituted an occupation at all.

In exploring the governmental turn, the limitations of textual analysis should be acknowledged. For example, the HCEC report gives no reasoning for its rejection of professionalisation, while as critics point out, the stocktake's use of evidence is opaque and sometimes anecdotal (Fostering Network, 2018; OE, November, Q110—care experienced adult). Additionally, cost factors may have carried more weight with decision makers than is stated. Nonetheless, the key texts are revealing in their indications of different stakeholder perspectives and the broad positions debated in the review.

Here, it is important to acknowledge that professionalisation of foster care is both a legitimate and important topic for debate. While foster care has many commonalities with other domains of child social care, its familial location generates distinctive issues relating to immersion, relationships, belonging and boundaries. These are always likely to draw

close(r) attention to the motivations and practices of foster carers, topics further complicated by the heterogeneity of professionalisation. However, the review can be seen as a missed opportunity to assess the latter's characteristics, history and (potential) impact due to a number of factors. First, the coverage is almost entirely ahistorical, casting professionalisation implicitly as a new trend or demand, rather than as having several decades of influence over a fostering system that was widely praised within the review. Secondly, it is largely equated with employment which allows the perceived negative impact on family life to be accentuated. Thirdly, the review offers no 'deconstruction' of the term professional and its complex meanings (i.e. as paid work, particular skills, knowledge and attributes and/or holding the status of profession) nor balanced appraisal of its contested or hybrid nature between family and work. Fourthly, there is no consideration of how the professional domain relates to the heterogeneity of foster care (e.g. different placement timescales, or 'specialisms').

It is therefore, perhaps unsurprising that the review lacks coherence, despite the strong headline message. Thus, the core historic tenets of professionalisation—payment, support and training—are endorsed, while the label professional is rejected and an attempt is made to (re-)construct foster care in more familial terms. Payment and training are discursively decoupled from professionalisation, despite approval for a tiered system based on skills and experience.

Central planks in the familial shift were that foster carers overwhelmingly saw themselves as substitute parents rather than professionals, that they could (and should) not be dispassionate, and that professionalisation threatened the familial 'essence' of fostering, notably in relation to physical affection, expressions of love and use of parental names. However, these propositions tended to be over-simplified and poorly aligned with available evidence.

In relation to touch/physical affection, the inhibiting effects of formalisation, fear of abuse allegations and risk management have often been highlighted as having potential adverse effects on the care and well-being of looked after children (Pithouse and Rees, 2011). However, research has also emphasised the significant challenges for foster carers in 'reading signals' from children who are initially strangers to the family and may have complex and difficult prior experiences relating to touch (Pithouse and Rees, 2011; Luckow, 2020). The stocktake assesses risk of allegations as 'remote' (Narey and Owers, 2018, p. 12), but foster carers may view this differently, with annual rates of 3 to 4 per cent (Biehal, 2014a) and career experience over a third (Lawson and Cann, 2019). Crucially, there is no extant evidence that approaches to touch or fear of allegations are linked to professional orientations among foster carers, while it should be noted that this issue affects a range of children's professionals (Piper *et al.*, 2006).

FBO also posits a conflict between professionalism and loving relationships (DfE, 2018, p. 29), but although research on love in foster care is limited, relevant studies suggest that it can co-exist with professional identities on the part of foster carers (Nutt, 2006; Schofield *et al.*, 2013). This is supported by Vincent (2016), who argues persuasively that the relationship between love and professionalism is more a matter of interpretation of the latter than one of inherent conflict. Finally, on naming practices, Biehal (2014b) reports that use of parental terms is very common in long-term placements, while like other researchers (De Wilde *et al.*, 2019) noting that this remains a very sensitive issue.

More broadly, the review can be seen as reflecting over-simplified binaries, ignoring a substantial body of work that shows a complex 'hybridity' within foster care. Schofield *et al.*'s (2013) study of long-term placements shows how carers managed the tensions of being 'professional foster carers and committed parents', and though stressful, how the roles can also be 'complementary and mutually rewarding'. In similar vein, McDermid *et al.* (2016, p. 21) refer to foster care operating in a 'unique space between the professional and the personal', while Wubs *et al.* (2018) note how their respondents rejected the binary of professional distance and parental/maternal warmth. Engaging with these tensions has given rise to some important conceptualisations, including Cameron and Maginn's (2008) 'authentic warmth', Nutt's (2006) 'detached attachment' or Boddy's 'professional heart' which she describes as an 'emotional connection between carer and child, a connection which neither undermines nor substitutes for the carer's professionalism' (2011, p. 121).

Hybridity appears to enjoy brief recognition when FBO (DfE, 2018, p. 29) notes that children's needs for love, safety and care, but also someone who is 'highly skilled' at catering for their particular needs, are not mutually exclusive. Elsewhere, however, the review does not recognise hybridity, instead emphasising the dispassionate nature of the professional domain from which foster carers are excluded (Narey and Owers, 2018, p. 27). Evident in phrases such as 'biased and tenacious' (see above), this draws on an established, yet ultimately paternalistic discourse often used to describe the work of foster carers in effusive yet circumscribing terms. For example, the ADCS president refers to how a passionate contribution from a 'fantastic foster carer' can be 'difficult to square with professionalism' and that consequently [professionals] 'have to say and do things that are quite hard for other people [foster carers] to hear' (OE, March, Q135). Such framing seems more likely to marginalise foster carers than meaningfully involve them in decision-making and their subordinate position is confirmed in the stocktake (Narey and Owers, 2018, p. 27). Similarly, it is implausible that loss of a professional status which clearly matters to many foster carers will increase their sense of being valued (Lawson and Cann, 2019).

References to foster carers being 'treated professionally' or with the same respect and courtesies 'as a birth parent or other care professional' (HCEC, 2017a, p. 5) mask obvious power dynamics between those parties and raise important questions about status and positioning. As noted earlier, the anti-professional turn distanced foster carers (further) both from social work and advocacy roles. It also marked a significant divergence from residential child care, after many years of convergence, but this is not acknowledged or discussed in FBO or feeder reports. Similarly, the impact of fostering's (de)professionalisation on birth parents is not addressed (Weitz and Karlsson, 2021).

In the absence of any nuanced clarification, endorsement of a substitute parenting model in which foster carers regard children 'as their own' (Narey and Owers, 2018, p. 27) hints at a return towards an 'exclusive', quasi-adoptive model of foster care long regarded as problematic, where carers were reluctant, or even obstructive, in working with birth families and social workers (Boddy, 2011). Such a move would be consistent with Narey's well-known sceptical view of the value of birth family contact for looked after children, a position reiterated in the stocktake (Narey and Owers, 2018, pp. 82–92), but contrary to both its research summary (DfE, 2017, pp. 143–148) and the expressed preferences of foster children themselves (Narey and Owers, 2018, pp. 113–115).

A striking feature of the review was its limited use of research relating to professionalisation, not only domestic findings on hybridity, but also international literature which could have provided valuable contexts for English debates. Here, developments have usefully been summarised in several studies and reports over the past decade (Laklija, 2011; Family for Every Child (FfEC), 2015; Thomson *et al.*, 2016; Cording, 2019; European Commission (EC), 2021; Reimer, 2021). Collectively, these show that movement towards professionalisation, if often limited, can be found in most countries, driven by concerns with deinstitutionalisation (typically but not exclusively in low- and middle-income countries (FfEC, 2015)), increasing complexity of care demands, and addressing declining availability of 'traditional' (unpaid) foster care. Wider appraisal of professionalisation highlights both commonalities and differences. As commonalities, Cording (2019) notes that the relationships of 'love and money', 'parent or professional' are always contested (see also De Wilde *et al.*, 2019), while this is also frequently reflected in relatively low pay and status (EC, 2021). An additional, though not necessarily insurmountable, challenge has been reconciling the hybrid nature of foster care with labour law frameworks (e.g. delineating working hours; EC, 2021). Finally, there is widespread recognition that professionalising foster care requires a wider professional infrastructure for child welfare (FfEC, 2015; Reimer, 2021).

However, comparative study also reveals wide variations. In part, these reflect available financial resources, but also cultural and (child)

welfare regime factors that facilitate or circumscribe the 'professionalisation of family life' (George *et al.*, 2003). For example, highly professionalised foster care in France reflects its role in supporting birth family relationships rather than as providing 'substitute family' care (Renault *et al.*, 2015). More broadly, in a European context, Laklija (2011) argues that support for professionalisation is strongest in the Nordic and Northern European countries and less developed in the South and East. Her detailed survey of 12 European countries also maps uneven development, both in overall degrees of professionalisation, and between its different components. These include pay, levels of training, qualifications, employment, benefits, leave, required tasks (e.g. report writing), legal parenting status and regulation. As Reimer (2021) has noted, important tensions often remain over whether professionalisation should be reserved for more 'complex' care or implemented more broadly.

Whilst it is important not to have unrealistic expectations over evidence-based policy (Cairney, 2016), this limited engagement with both domestic and international research is regrettable. However, it should also be acknowledged that the knowledge base is in need of expansion. First, it is important to better understand, quantitatively and qualitatively, how (prospective) foster carers (and other stakeholders) see their role in respect of family, work and professionalisation (It is noteworthy that sweeping and diametrically opposed claims were made in evidence to HCEC (e.g. OE, March, Q121–122)). Does this, for instance, vary in relation to factors such as length of fostering careers, types of fostering, family structure, alternative employment, social class, gender or ethnicity and how may these factors impact on recruitment and retention? Secondly, how do different orientations shape foster carers' work and family lives, including in areas such as displaying physical affection or managing risk. Thirdly, how do orientations relate to outcomes for children? Fourthly, it is vital to explore further the nature and workings of love in foster care, building on work undertaken in relation to childminding (Page, 2011) and within the wider children's workforce (see e.g. Scottish Journal of Residential Care, volume 15(3)).

FBO was clearly intended to influence practice, most obviously steering it towards a more familial/parental construction of the fostering role. Yet, this vision is barely articulated and there is to date little sign of any significant impact on foster care. At the level of language, for instance, it appears that few fostering agencies have followed the terminological move from carer to parent in their recruitment information, whilst government agencies such as OFSTED (2020) and the ongoing independent review of children's social care (https://childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/) have continued to use the term foster carer.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the handling of professionalisation within a wider review of foster care in England and identified a number of flaws in its 'anti-professional' turn. In this process, the contradictory amalgam of endorsement and rejection highlights simultaneously the fragility and the embeddedness of professionalisation and, additionally, the complexity and flexibility of fostering discourse. Despite considerable recognition (apparent through regular official use of professional terminology to describe foster carers), it is doubtful whether the case was ever fully accepted by policy makers, managers and social work practitioners. This appeared to facilitate a reversion to a more familial/parental (and paternalistic) discourse with relatively little explanation. Conversely, professionalisation is clearly too embedded in foster care—in its core features, the perspectives and identities of many foster carers, among stakeholders and within institutional practices—to be easily dismissed. This is unsurprising as its key drivers have not noticeably changed, while public care in England remains overwhelmingly reliant on foster carers to deliver for looked after children, leading Oakley *et al.* (2018, p. 31) to conclude that this is unlikely 'without at least some form of formal professionalisation'.

In some ways, the anti-professional turn represents another episode in an enduring struggle to promote the (authentically) parental and relational and avoid impersonal and bureaucratic state care. Crucially, however, this rested on a failure to acknowledge the hybrid nature of foster care and relatedly, the contrary faces of professionalisation itself. This review shares with a wider one of children's care in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2020) an almost entirely negative portrayal of the 'professional', that is as a barrier to loving relationships, implicitly denying any positive aspects and offering an over-simplified and deterministic account of professionalism.

In the English context, it is important to address these flaws in considering the future of foster care, although it is not clear how far the ongoing independent review of children's social care will do this. Internationally, both opponents and proponents of professionalisation may cite the English case in support of their own positions, emphasising the strength of the familial and the professional, respectively. Policy translation in an area such as foster care is always very challenging due to the plethora of social, political and cultural factors that shape policy and practice and their variable configurations within national (and sometimes local) domains.

However, the issues framed, debated and analysed here and the research agenda proposed should have a wider relevance in supporting the international development of (professional) foster care.

Funding

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