Good caring and vocabularies of motive among foster carers

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Abstract

Employing C. Wright Mills' concept of vocabulary of motives, this article examines the motives and attitudes of people who volunteer to foster children with high support needs. Data is drawn from a larger qualitative study involving indepth interviewing of 23 carers. When asked why they had become foster carers participants produced conventional accounts of child-centred altruistic motives–an acceptable vocabulary of motives which satisfied institutional and cultural expectations regarding caregiving. However, closer examination of participants' experiences and attitudes revealed the likelihood that economic motives were also factors in decisions to foster. It is argued that participants chose to exclude economic motives from their accounts so as to avoid the risk of being seen to be 'doing it for the money'.

Keywords
Foster home care, foster parents – attitudes, carers, vocabulary of motives, motives

Introduction

The study of motives and their imputation by social actors has a long history within sociology (Murphy 2004). Weber, for instance, emphasised the notion of meaningful conduct when he defined motive as 'a complex of subjective meaning which seems to the actor himself or to the observer an adequate ground for the conduct in question' (Weber 1947:98-9). He further suggested motivational understanding and explanation

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require that an act or action be placed and interpreted in terms of a 'more inclusive context of meaning' (p. 95).

It has been the theorising of C. Wright Mills, however, within the interpretative school of symbolic interactionism and his exploration of the importance of the linguistic characteristics of motives (Mills 1940) which has formed the foundation for much sociological research concerned with the analysis of motives.

This article critically outlines and explores a new and unique area of sociological interest–motives and meanings which help us understand why people become foster carers. In contrast to most previous research into fostering motives, the focus in this article is on motives as articulated by carers themselves in their personal accounts of becoming and being a foster carer. Employing Mills' concept of vocabularies of motive we examine caregiving motives among foster carers and explore the central tension evident between altruistic and financial motives.

Mills and the sociological study of motives

Building on Weber's definition and emphasising the social character of motives, Mills argues that 'motives are the terms with which interpretation of conduct by *social actors* proceeds' (p 904, his emphasis). The articulation, imputation and attribution of motives through 'words' and the exploration of their relationship to particular social situations and contexts forms the foundation of Mills' sociology of motives.

A key element of the vocabulary of motives approach is the conceptualisation of motives as dynamic and situated social constructs. For Mills, motives are not biological states or mental dispositions, nor are they the abstract, fixed and internal qualities often attributed to motivations. Linking behaviour to personal values and belief systems, he argues motives are the terms used by social actors which organise and guide their conduct. Motive talk can bring order to a situation by justifying and confirming behaviour and mediating the reactions of others. As Crossley (2005) notes, in such situations motive talk assists in re-establishing 'the (mutual) intelligibility of a situation and mapping out a course of action within it' (p. 5). Put another way, the construction and articulation of motives (also referred to as account-making) can bring order to circumstances and events which previously were confused or conflicted (Hopper 1993) or which have been called into question in some way.

Mills has argued that motive talk is best approached as data on the social and moral context in which it is produced and, therefore, should be examined and discussed in terms of its social and cultural context. Accordingly, the task for the theorist is to identify stable vocabularies which can be linked to specific situations, social locations and social groups.

While the notion of vocabularies of motive has been used across a variety of disciplines and discourse, it is within the sociology of deviance that much of the theoretical development of Mills' original formulation has taken place. Theoretical refinement has been accompanied by empirical research covering a broad range of events and circumstances. As sociologists have focussed on the different ways in which

people account for questioned conduct the account-giving framework has developed into techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza 1957), justifications and excuses (Scott & Lyman 1968), remedial work of apologies and requests (Goffman [1971] 1997), disclaimers (Hewitt & Stokes 1975), aligning actions (Stokes & Hewitt 1976), discounting (Pestello 1991), and, contrition and repudiation (Monaghan 2006).

Mills' approach is not without its critics, however. A number of concerns, most notably those put forward by Campbell (1991, 1996, 1998), have been directed at both the vocabulary of motives framework and many of the related concepts referred to above which followed Mills' original formulation.

Of relevance to the present discussion is Campbell's (1996) concern regarding the connection Mills makes between an actor being frustrated in his or her attempts to achieve a goal and being questioned by an observer. Specifically, he disputes Mills' claim that accounts are only required and produced, whether for oneself or another person, when an act is frustrated in some way. Campbell suggests that an act may be questioned without the actor necessarily being frustrated prior to the questioning. More generally, he challenges the assumption contained within the vocabulary of motives framework that 'avowals and imputations are associated with condemnations and indictments' (p. 110); something he believes has led to the majority of motives research focussing on account-making by 'criminals and deviants' (p. 111).

Certainly, there is merit in this claim as Mills does in fact suggest that it is when acts are obstructed that motives are questioned by one's self or someone else. However, he also suggests that avowal and imputation of motives may occur when an act or action is simply 'alternative or unexpected' (1940, p.905) and does not necessarily have to be of crisis proportions (Gerth & Mills 1954, p.115). Crossley (2005) captures this when he suggests motive talk can be provoked simply by disruption to 'the pre-reflective durée and routine of everyday life' (p. 5). Clearly, not the dramatic events, nor the avowals and condemnations to which Campbell refers.

It is worth noting that this is also an issue which does not seem to have been of particular concern for many sociologists who have interpreted Mills' concept in a less restrictive way than has been outlined by Campbell. For example, Murray (2000) in her study of child care workers, does not rely on an untoward act as such, a sense of frustration, or an indictment or condemnation. Rather, she questions their occupational choice on the grounds that it is gendered, of low status and not well paid. There is nothing untoward here and there is no particular 'frustration' experienced. Nevertheless it is a 'question' situation (at the very least because the researcher has thought their situation worthy of research); just not the type that Campbell has attributed to Mills.

It is not too difficult to find examples of sociological research which are less reliant on the notion of deviance and the 'untoward act'. This is important, because precisely what is questionable or problematic in the case of foster caring may not be immediately apparent. In the next section discussion focusses on the ways in which becoming a foster carer constitutes an 'unexpected' act.

Foster carers' accounts and the 'unexpected' act

One of the distinguishing features of accounts within the vocabulary of motives framework, regardless of the type of account, is that they provide socially and culturally acceptable vocabularies and meanings in situations where behaviour is regarded as problematic and has been called into question.

In the present study of caregiving motives, however, participants were not in the position of having to justify or excuse their actions. Indeed, volunteering and fostering are both socially acceptable activities. That said, as carers of unrelated children foster carers occupy an ambiguous cultural and social position. The role of foster carer is a familial one of care, closeness and intimacy; yet, it is a role that plays out in the absence of legal ties and kinship obligations and responsibilities. It is not surprising then that foster carers are a heavily scrutinised social group. Questioning of attitudes and motives, as well as police and medical checks, to determine whether an applicant is an acceptable volunteer is the experience of most potential foster carers. Nor does scrutiny cease on becoming a carer, with periodic assessments and annual reviews of their activities by child welfare professionals a regular occurrence in a foster carer's life. Foster carers know the quality of their caregiving is being continually judged, assessed and reviewed, and they know that what they say and how they present themselves to child welfare professionals can have negative repercussions.

In addition to this kind of regular scrutiny, the activities of foster carers can also go unacknowledged and disrespected (Bourke 2009; Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection in New South Wales 2008a & 2008b), with carers themselves at times distrusted by child welfare professionals (Briggs & Broadhurst 2005). The end result is that at the very least foster carers conduct their caregiving within a climate of suspicion. A subtle one for many perhaps, but nevertheless real.

In this article the accounts of fostering provided by participants have been conceptualised as forms of explanation. Conceptualising them in this way is useful because it does not rely on the presence of an unacceptable or untoward act and there is no sense of their actions being problematic or violating situational and social norms. That said, becoming and being a foster carer is unusual and socially unexpected. It is this which makes explanations for why they become carers of others people's children so interesting, accountable and worthy of research.

Setting and methodology

This article is about foster carers–people who look after children and youth who are unable to live with either their birth family or with relatives; people who volunteer to care for and provide a home for children and young people with whom they have no legal, biological or historical connection.

In Australia foster care is the major form of substitute care for children and young people who cannot be cared for in their own family. Similar programs are administered by the government of each Australian state and territory. Irrespective of governance, the integral role foster carers play in the proper functioning of the overall system of care

(also known as the out-of-home care system) is undisputed within the field of child welfare and within the broader Australian community. However, concerns over rising numbers of young people entering foster care and declining numbers of people volunteering to become carers has meant that talk of crisis and system failure have become commonplace.

Given that foster carers play an essential role within the public care system it is surprising to find that so very little is known about the people who carry out the work of fostering. Equally astonishing is that foster carers themselves are rare voices within the literature.

To date most research concerned with people who put themselves forward to foster has been conducted from social work and psychology perspectives. It is noteworthy that while fostering is relatively prominent within these literatures, there has been little if any empirical or theoretical engagement by sociologists in analyses of either the system of foster care or of the everyday caring practices of those people providing care to young people who cannot be cared for by their parents or relatives.

This article draws on a larger project (Doyle 2010) funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant[3]. The project was a qualitative study involving foster carers from two programs within a leading child welfare agency. Face to face interviews were conducted with 23 foster carers (15 women and 8 men, aged between 31 and 69 years). Average length of interview was around two hours.

In contrast to the majority of foster care research the study employed indepth semi-structured interviewing; an approach which provides the opportunity to "effectively give voice to the normally silenced and can poignantly illuminate what is typically masked" (Greene, 1994, p. 541, quoted in McKie 2002). This was especially important in the context of fostering where accounts by caregivers themselves have been largely absent. In short, semi-structured interviewing helped make carer experiences visible and allowed new light to be shed on some of the taken-for-granted aspects of caregiving motivation.

QSR Nvivo was used to analyse and code the data, although at various points there was a return to working with hard-copy transcripts. Analysis of motives began with open coding the data, mostly using participants' own words to identify broad thematic trends and patterns. As various categories and concepts emerged, the data was then coded 'vertically' to make connections between categories and sub-categories. Throughout the analysis concepts and categories were compared and contrasted within and across interviews. Emergent categories and themes formed an interpretive framework consisting of five categories of motives: economic, relational, moral, self-related and material. In this article we are focussing on the category of economic motives.

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Altruism and motives to foster care

The notion of altruism[4] occupies a central place within care and caregiving discourse and figures prominently in discussions of motivations to foster. The importance placed on altruistic motivations is due in large part to the way in which caregiving within the domestic sphere has been conceptualised.

Theories of caregiving in the home (including foster care) have been shaped by approaches based on a traditional view of the world; a world divided into two strictly separated private and public spheres (Tronto 1996). Within this framework foster caregiving is regarded as a private sphere activity motivated by private sphere characteristics and values–love and affection for children and the desire to parent. Importantly, foster carers are also regarded as volunteer parents. This voluntary or unpaid aspect of fostering motivation has come to be interpreted as acts of and behaviour demonstrating selflessness. Within the foster care context love and nurturance (associated with parenting) and selflessness (associated with volunteering) are referred to as child-centred altruistic motives and regarded as necessary to successful fostering and good caring.

Importantly, the notion of self interest, the counterpart to child-centred altruism, is also often to be found in discussions of motivations to foster. However, while self interest and financial gain are regarded as admirable motives in the public sphere, within the private sphere they are regarded as dubious at best, and within the context of foster caring are seen to be highly suspect. This understanding of the altruism/self-interest dichotomy is a key element in our discussion of fostering motives.

The practice wisdom of child welfare professionals is that people who volunteer to foster are motivated by altruism. The perception that foster carers are primarily motivated by altruism also finds expression at the level of popular discourse in at least two popular stereotypical images of foster carers. Swartz (2005) describes the positive caricature as 'do-gooder saints who selflessly care for needy children' and the negative one as those who 'take in children for their own self-interested motives for profit, and…[who] often neglect, abuse, or endanger the children' (p. 65). Focussing on popular positive images of carers, Wozniak (1997) has examined newspapers and women's magazines finding that foster mothers are portrayed as what she calls the Victorian ideal of 'True Woman' (p. 359). Depictions and portrayals of both contemporary foster mothers and those of Victorian times conform to this idealised cultural archetype– virtuous, selfless and giving. At the core of these positive caricatures is child-centred altruism.

Tension between the notions of altruism and self interest also finds expression in debates over the issue of 'love' and 'money' and the potential negative effects remuneration is said to have on the quality of care. This type of debate is not uncommon within foster caring literature and in research concerned with professionalising foster caregiving. McHugh (2007) captures the dilemma when she questions whether there is

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[4]   Altruism is 'unselfish action in the interest of others' (Bilton 2002:475).

congruence between 'the dual and conflicting aspects of "love" and "money" in paid care work' (p.3). When discussing the notion of compensating carers in the form of a wage for the indirect costs of fostering, she notes that she 'found support for the contention that altruism ('love') and carer pay ('money') are not incompatible' (p. iii) and that 'caring can be paid for and still be loving' (p. 269).

Detailed discussion of the various approaches to the 'love versus money' issue which can be found in the child welfare and social work literature is beyond the scope of this paper. It is raised here, along with examples of the public portrayal of caregiving, simply to indicate the important place altruistic motives occupy in the cultural representation of foster caregiving and in the majority of child welfare research.

Conventional vocabularies for becoming a foster carer

In this section the accounts participants provided when asked why they had become a foster carer are examined and a short discussion of some of the drawbacks associated with putting this type of question to participants is presented.

A range of motives were provided, with each participant giving more than one reason. Explanations for becoming a foster carer were: having the necessary resources such as appropriate space and sufficient time; noticing and responding to an advertisement; desiring to be active in the welfare field; being encouraged by acquaintances (friends, agency workers, fellow students) to become a carer; making a decision after having thought about it for a long period of time; transferring from another child welfare agency or Department of Community Services, or, having undertaken care on an informal basis before deciding to become a formal carer; liking and relating well to young people and wanting to help young people 'in care'. Of this last group two couples (Carla and Scott, and Charmaine and her partner) had been unsuccessful in having children of their own. Some participants referred to personal experiences during their childhood as having influenced their decision; and, a small number spoke of missing the company of young people now that their own children had left home or were about to leave.

Were these motives to be categorised according to the love/money dichotomy, they would fit comfortably under the altruistic heading of love, and would confirm previous research. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained from taking a more holistic approach when examining motives. On first reading the explanations provided by participants suggest that personal decision-making regarding becoming a foster carer is a fairly straightforward process. However, while important to our understanding of some of the practical considerations and conditions operating when people decide to become a carer, these sorts of explanations go only so far in helping us understand why people become carers.

Some of the difficulty lies in the nature of the question itself. Being asked to provide an account of why you have done something can easily be perceived as a challenge and encourages a 'comfortable' explanation (Katz 2001 p. 445). It is quite possible that some foster carers in this study may have felt something akin to what Katz

described when the 'why' question was posed. This is not to suggest that their responses were somehow wrong, insincere, or purposely misleading. Rather, it is that their responses only tell part of the story and require further investigation.

For instance, most of the reasons and conditions described above could apply to many people in the wider population, yet they do not foster. For example, although many said that they had the time and the space to foster a young person, we are none the wiser about why they chose fostering when there were probably other options available to them. Many referred to responding to an advertisement. However, it is not clear why they were moved to respond or what they were responding to. Presumably many other people read the advertisement and did not respond. Similarly, mention was made of the effect of encouragement from friends and so on. Again, this raises the questions of why that encouragement was offered in the first place and why it had such an effect on them. In short, responses such as these often simply raise more questions about their motivation.

Economic motives and accompanying vocabularies

It is important to state at the outset that when asked why they had become fosterers no participants identified need of income or looking for work as a reason. This does not mean, however, that evidence of financial considerations was not to be found elsewhere in the accounts they provided.

The remaining sections examine the way participants spoke about their economic circumstances at the time they became carers, their economic needs and their understanding of the nature of foster caring. Findings and discussion are presented in thematic categories. We set the scene for this discussion of economic motives by first showing the difficulty many participants experienced when talking about and expressing their opinions on the issue of payment for caregiving, and the way in which denials of being personally motivated by money were common to most accounts. We then focus on a number of elements in participants' accounts which, although not necessarily in direct opposition to these denials, nevertheless suggest the presence of financial needs and motivations. First, we examine whether participants regarded the foster care allowance as income earned from their caregiving, or whether they regarded it as primarily reimbursement for their expenditure on the foster child. Second, we investigate the possibility that participants initially approached and thought of becoming a foster carer as an employment opportunity. Third, we examine the way in which participants used the language of job search and the labour market when talking about how they came to fostering; language which suggests that financial needs and motivations were operating. Last, we discuss how these difficulties render examination of carers' attitudes and opinions about the nature of fostering and the labour market status of a foster carer considerably more complex than first appears.

Although the data presented are open to interpretation and do not constitute 'incontrovertible evidence' of financial motivations and meanings, they do allow us to

begin to question some of the assumptions outlined earlier which are to be found in the foster care literature.

We are not attempting to assess or judge the quality or standard of care provided by participants. As all participants had undergone rigorous assessment and been approved by an established child welfare agency and were subject to periodic review, it is reasonable to assume that each provided good quality care to the young people placed with them. This is noteworthy because data will be presented in this section which suggests financial motives were important to many participants, thus challenging the assumed conflict between 'love' and 'money', and the negative influence financial motives are said to have on the quality of caregiving.

Remunerate foster caregiving?

When asked directly, many participants had difficulty talking about money and about being paid to care, with two carers in particular providing tentative responses. The first, Charmaine, was not sure how to answer when asked whether carers should be paid a wage for what they do. After the interviewer [JD] explained that some people support the idea and others do not, and that it was important to find out what the people who actually work as carers think about it, she said:

> I think it would be nice. [*Said hesitantly. We laugh.*] But I'm sort of not a greedy person either. Like I'm sort of happy with what I get. But I mean if I got paid naturally I think it would be great. Yeah. Sometimes I think, oh yeah, I wish I was paid. But I think that some of the things I do, like just other things, like I won't go into it, for them, sometimes I think, yeah, it would be nice to have my own little wage I could be happy with. Yeah. But no. But I don't, yeah.

Charmaine's response was cautious and conflicted. There was initial uncertainty about the financial value of her caring activities, followed by recognition that she probably did deserve to be paid when she took into account all that she did as a carer. However, she associated advocating for and accepting a wage to care as an indicator of personal greed, something which implied fostering 'for the money'. Although she said that at times she had thought that her caring activities should be paid for, she used the language of 'the diminutive' when she described potential carer earnings as *'my own little wage'*. Nevertheless, she was aware of the volume of caring work she carried out and, thus, was forced to admit that she would have liked to be paid a wage in her own right. Also important to note is that any hesitation she experienced regarding being paid did not stem from fears that the relationship she had with the young person in her care would change as a result of money being included in the caring equation. In fact she was very clear that it would have no effect on the quality of relationships.

Similarly, Gina had not given much thought to being paid in her own right as a carer. When asked for her opinion on whether carers should be paid for their labour in addition to reimbursement she said she thought reimbursement was adequate. However, when she considered payment for her work in terms of an hourly rate she said:

> Yeah, well I'd have to say probably yes. Because you don't do it for the monetary side so……No I think……I don't know. *[laughs]* But when you sit and really think about it and you think 'Oh hourly rate' if you look at it like that. But you don't sort of go in to it like that. Yeah.

Gina's comments capture the ambivalence that surrounds the issue of paying for care and accepting money for caring labour. Her response reflected the fact that she had never really thought about being paid to care for children. Having raised the idea and suggesting hourly rates (simply as an example) she could see some merit in it. However, she returned to the not uncommon theme of the 'right motivation' when she remarked that a carer did not *'go in to it like that'*; that is, with thoughts of financial gain. Gina was clarifying her position as a fosterer–she had not entered fostering thinking about the possibility of monetary reward; or, to paraphrase, she had not gone into it for the money.

Both Gina and Charmaine show how difficult it can be for carers to talk about money and payment in the context of fostering. A number of participants raised this as an issue. For example, Kevin, a carer who by his own admission was outspoken, passionate and forthright on most care issues, remained silent when it came to discussion of financial issues with the agency. Although he held strong views regarding various aspects of fostering, he explained this self-imposed silence in the following way:

> …I've never ever had big debates on money with any of them. I mean, on other issues, I mean, they might dislike me fairly intensely, because I will be very, very fierce and determined. But not about money. But you still have this hang up about it. You know, it's crazy.

Although Kevin was very confident about his caring abilities and in his role as a carer, he was also somewhat bewildered by his behaviour when it came to the issue of money; behaviour he described as evidence of a *'hang up'*. Both he and his partner Sonia were well aware of the cultural expectation that care and money 'don't mix' and the ideology that the best form of foster care is that which is provided voluntarily. This is not to say that they themselves accepted this argument, simply that they were aware of cultural expectations surrounding payment and fostering, as Sonia commented with quiet exasperation:

> And people think you should do it for nothing *[Kevin, her partner, agrees]* because you are a nice person and a good person.

These are just a few examples of the way carers experienced discomfort regarding the issue of being paid to care and it is not inconsistent that they avoided mentioning financial considerations when discussing motives. The next section continues this theme and examines how participants positioned themselves as foster carers with appropriate motives.

Demonstrating the 'right' motivation

The majority of participants (Matt, Liz, Rosalind, Corinne, Julia, Paul, Carla, Scott, Damien, Martin, Janine, Sonia, Kevin, Tanya, Graham and Cassie) were not averse to the idea of carers being paid to foster. Yet, despite holding relatively progressive views regarding payments to carers and believing foster carers deserved such payments, these same participants could also be reticent when it came to discussing 'money and motives'. Supporting carer payments was one thing; arguing for carer payments in the context of discussion about motives was another.

As recipients of a relatively generous care allowance (one which is regarded as reimbursement for expenses incurred on behalf of the foster child and not for carrying out caring work) all participants nevertheless ran the risk of being seen to be financially motivated. Given the strong cultural expectations that care in the home and especially care of children should be motivated by love and altruism, the possibility of being accused of 'doing it for the money' was ever present. Given these factors (supporting carer payments and receiving above average amounts of allowance), combined with strong cultural expectations that caregiving be altruistically motivated, it is not surprising that participants at some stage during the interview denied being motivated by financial considerations. This was accomplished in a number of different ways.

a) Possessing the 'right' motivation

One way participants distanced themselves from anyone who might be 'doing it for the money' was to deny it outright. For example, when talking about the desirability or otherwise of payments to carers (whether as an allowance or wage) most participants asserted that they had not become fosterers 'because of the money'. When talking about the larger payments for professional carers, Scott, for instance, said he and Carla had not known how much money was involved and had not been *'looking for children for that reason'*. After saying he could command much higher earnings in any of the occupations for which he was trained, Damien concluded *'I'm clearly not here for the money'*. Cassie said she *'was going to do it for nothing'* when she applied to foster (although she had since changed her mind on this and felt carers deserved to be paid). When Rosalind had decided to be a respite carer she *'didn't know any payment was involved';* while Gina qualified her acceptance of the idea of a wage with *'you don't do it for the monetary side'.*

A variation on this theme of being seen to possess the 'right' motivation was to refer to the 'right' motives of other carers. Sonia and Kevin, for example, provided the example of a couple who had given up fostering because they had not received any support from the Department. To demonstrate what a loss to the system this was Kevin remarked that they had 'good motivation'. When asked what he meant by this he included in his definition of 'good motivation' that they *'weren't foster caring because they were looking for slave labour. They weren't doing it because they were desperately short of money.'*

Comments such as these were to be found in most accounts and indicate that participants were aware of the possibility that they might appear to be 'doing it for the money'. It seems reasonable, therefore, to interpret these comments as an attempt on their part to reduce the likelihood that they might be seen (even if only by those involved in the study) as primarily motivated by the carer allowance.

b) Referring to other carers possessing the 'wrong' motivation

There were other ways in which participants sought to reduce the likelihood of being judged as financially motivated. This was achieved by participants distancing themselves from other carers whom they believed were only concerned with financial gain. Some participants referred to the motives of other carers and potential carers which aroused their suspicion or even condemnation. For example, were a carer wage to be introduced Fran said she knew quite a few people whom she suspected would *'do it purely and simply for the money and have no interest in kids',* Janine spoke about attracting *'the wrong sort of people'*, while Martin said *'you don't want people just doing it for the quid... because a lot of people would see it as money for nothing'.*

Agency carers were also not immune to criticism and judgement by their peers. Tess, for instance, described a situation in which a carer had to be told to spend the allowance on the foster child. She explained:

> Like I do things different from other carers. Like just going on Kal's carer, Gwenn, she never spent no money at all on Kal. It actually had to be brought up at a planning meeting, that she buy him clothes, because he didn't have nothing.

Although not said, Tess was clearly suspicious of Gwenn's motives and the way she handled the allowance. She was critical of Gwenn's caregiving because she appeared to be putting her own needs first and Kal's second, when Tess felt it should have been the reverse.

Relating these kinds of stories had the effect of placing the participant in the 'right' motivation camp. By talking authoritatively about other carers' motivations participants were able to put some ethical distance between themselves and those who fostered for the money. Furthermore, all of the extracts and examples provided above show how the majority of participants conveyed in one way or another that successful carers were not motivated by the money; the implication being that when they became fosterers they had not been motivated by the allowance.

Foster carer allowance: income or reimbursement?

This discussion primarily focusses on the allowance of AUD$930 specialist carers received per fortnight. The official purpose of this allowance was to reimburse carers for what they spent on the foster child; it was not intended to be a payment to carer(s) in their own right. With carers only entitled to whatever amount happened to be left over after paying for the young person's costs reflects the fact that the time and labour foster

carers contributed to fostering and the skills needed to adequately care for a foster child were not factors considered particularly important in the design of this allowance.

All study participants were in receipt of a foster care allowance, the official purpose of which was to reimburse carers for the costs involved in caring for their foster child. However, as carers spoke about the allowance and related issues it became clear that it also fulfilled other purposes. First, at least one carer, Liz, unambiguously regarded the allowance as payment to her and her family for the time and effort devoted to fostering. When asked whether the allowance was for her labour or reimbursement she said:

> Oh, there's so much that you have to spend on a child. Mostly, yeah, it's work, for my time, my labour, my stress. *[laughs]* Yeah, I deserve it. *[we laugh]*

Earlier Liz had said that she regarded her occupation as that of 'mother'–for her mothering and fostering were 'work'. It is not altogether surprising then that she also regarded the allowance as payment for her caregiving labour rather than as reimbursement for what was spent on foster children.

Second, a number of other carers described the allowance as income and spoke of juggling and balancing the needs of the young person with those of the household, using the allowance in the same way that they would income from other forms of paid employment. Tanya, for instance, regarded the allowance as more than reimbursement. Referring to her initial decision to foster she remarked:

> I guess, sort of in a way, it was more my idea. Of doing something that I thought I could do plus an income at the same time. I mean it's not, not a huge income. But it's making do...If it had been half when I first started, I don't think there would have been an incentive.

Describing the allowance as income, Tanya emphasised its importance suggesting that it was not simply the presence of the allowance but the level of the allowance which served as an inducement; one which was crucial to her decision to become a carer. Tanya went on to provide examples of how she spent some of the allowance fulfilling Leon's needs. While she was conscious of this responsibility, she regarded the allowance primarily as payment for her labour; as she said *'that money's more or less a wage for me, plus living expenses for Leon'.*

Cassie too provided many examples to demonstrate how she spent much of the allowance (such as paying for specialist medical care for some of the young people she had cared for, replacing household items, including repairs to her car, which were damaged by foster children) as well as examples of fulfilling the more mundane financial needs of foster children (such as food, clothing, sport and other recreational activities, travel, and so on). That said, it was also clear that Cassie regarded the allowance as 'her allowance' when she said:

Cassie: I look upon this as, I'm putting something back into the community, looking after a child. But I also look at it as, this is my job. At the moment. That's how I look at it. Yeah. Just a twenty four hour day! *[both laugh]* Heaps of trouble and you don't get good pay. You don't get holiday pay, you don't get superannuation, you don't get nothing. I think that needs to be looked into, too. Superannuation and things like that. Because we put a lot in. The government - what would they do without us? What would they do? It would cost them a fortune!

JD: What would they do?

Cassie: Yeah. Exactly. What would they do? They'd have to reopen homes again, wouldn't they!

Like Tanya, Cassie also sought to balance the needs of the young person with her needs. At various times she had spent large proportions of her allowance on a foster child, and had often found it inadequate to meet the needs of particular foster children. Nevertheless, as shown in this extract, she considered it to be income (*'pay'*) from working in a poorly paid occupation.

Paid employment

An advertisement placed by the agency in local regional newspapers calling for specialist carers was mentioned by at least nine carers as an important influence in their decision making. Yet with the exception of Corinne (who said *'I'll be honest with you. When I applied I thought it was a job.'*) no one said that they had been looking for work. This is noteworthy given that the advertisement appeared in the 'positions vacant' section, a placement which suggests paid employment or payment of some kind.

The location of the advertisement raises the question of whether participants had been in search of employment and income when they came across it (as Corinne's comments imply). This issue is not straightforward, however. Perusing 'the classifieds' simply out of interest (as opposed to searching for work) is not an uncommon pastime. Consequently, it is an activity which cannot be interpreted as necessarily indicating financial, employment-related or job-seeking motives.

That said, some participants who responded to the advertisement were unemployed at the time and actively looking for work (for example, Matt, Liz, Carla and Scott), or in search of a change of employment (Tanya) and therefore likely to have been regularly checking the employment section of the newspaper as part of their job search activities. Given these personal situations and circumstances it is not unreasonable to suggest that some participants were probably looking for work (a job and income) in the local newspaper when they came across the agency notice. All of these reasons–location of the advertisement, participants' personal circumstances and labour market status–raises the possibility that some participants may have interpreted fostering as paid work, been financially motivated, and approached the carer positions being advertised as job vacancies.

The language of employment, job search and the labour market

Aside from the placement of the advertisement, there are other elements within participants' accounts which suggest financial motives. When talking about how they became carers most participants used language not usually associated with volunteering and unpaid caregiving.

Some carers used the language of job search and the labour market as they described their experience of becoming a carer. Matt, for instance, used the words *'position'*, *'learning'*, *'training'*, and referred to topics associated with unemployment and job search as he talked about becoming a carer. He said:

> It was just seeing the ad there. And I mean, I didn't really know whether I'd get the position or not. Because, I mean, there's so many people that are out of work in this town. When I did first start the training it sort of really scared me to start with because I thought "Oh, no, what have I got myself in to!" *[M and J laugh]*. It certainly opens your eyes when you start learning the training.

Matt also spoke of fostering as a job at various points in his account. However, as this one extract indicates he discussed the process of becoming a carer in the same way one might when applying for a job, referring to high levels of local unemployment and competition amongst job seekers.

Several others also used the word 'work' to describe fostering (for example, Paul, Carla, Scott, Cassie, Fran and Corinne, as well as Sonia, Kevin and Damien). For example, Scott described how he and Carla decided to *'work for [name of agency]'* and Fran described monetary payments especially in the form of a wage as *'an incentive for caring individuals who want to work'*. Cassie described being a carer in terms of working and a job, giving the example of a social situation where people talk about what they do for a living, where they work and so on. She did not see herself as 'not working', but as having the occupation of foster carer and working at home. In social situations she identified as a foster carer and spoke of fostering as her employment.

Other participants referred to possessing suitable qualifications and skills. Tanya, for instance, spoke of having needed to find something for which she felt qualified to do and that would not require significant amounts of retraining. She said:

> Went in to the cooking [area] and spent probably twelve or fifteen years cooking. Just in resorts and hotels. And a couple of years ago decided that it was too much. The body couldn't take any more. *[laughs]* So I thought, well, what can I do that I don't have to go out and totally retrain myself?

Clearly, Tanya did not see herself as exiting from the labour force. Instead she was looking for an occupation that was less physically demanding and did not require a large amount of retraining. In short, she was transiting from one sort of employment into another and clearly still saw herself as being employed.

Liz's understanding of being a carer displayed all of these characteristics–she regarded foster caring as a job, caregiving as an occupation, and assuming and fulfilling

caring responsibilities as work. When asked whether she thought of fostering as a volunteer activity she responded:

> I don't see it as providing a support to the community. I see it as work. I'm getting paid for work.

When asked what she got out of fostering she said *'an occupation'*.

When talking about becoming a carer, participants such as Matt, Scott and Carla, Damien, Charmaine, Tanya, Liz and Corinne, regardless of whether employed or unemployed at the time, spoke of having wanted to try something new and different, something more enjoyable and more personally challenging than they were experiencing in their working life at the time. Common to all was that there was no sense of wanting to exit the labour market, or that they saw themselves as having retired from working. All of the participants needed or wanted to continue working; but in a way which could accommodate their needs, including their financial needs.

Discussion: financial motives?

Although when asked why they had become a foster carer no one nominated need of income as a reason for applying to become a carer, data have been presented indicating that for some participants at least financial motives were probably operating when they decided to apply to foster. Several carers said that the allowance was important to household finances, most said they needed an income and almost all said the allowance was necessary in order to provide adequate support of the foster child. No one said the allowance was too high, or that it contributed to a decline in the quality of their caregiving. If anything, there was overwhelming support for an increase in the allowance, with many also open to the idea of a wage being provided for carers.[5]

In terms of this study, how many participants were like Corinne who admitted to having applied to become a carer thinking it was a paid job or Liz who unambiguously regarded fostering as a job and career choice, but unlike either of these participants, chose not to disclose this to me, is unknown.

Even though the majority of participants believed carers should be paid, most participants indicated they were aware of the social expectations that fostering should be voluntary and unpaid, and that carers should be altruistically motivated. They were also aware of the ever present possibility of being seen to be 'doing it for the money'. It is not altogether surprising, then, that they did not mention or include financial needs and considerations when asked why they had become foster carers.

Only one participant, while not saying she had been motivated by the allowance, was explicit in numerous other ways as she spoke of fostering as a job and an occupation, and the allowance as her *'pay'*. However, Liz also made a number of claims

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[5] Damien, a professional carer, was ambivalent about a wage for carers because of the administrative problems he could envisage for carers. Tess was the only participant who did not feel that carers should be paid a wage or that the allowance should be increased. However, this was because she felt the allowance was *'pretty good'* and the level of payment adequate.

and observations which had the effect of reconciling conflict between financial motivation and caregiving. First, she explained her desire to care and her suitability for caregiving in terms of the quality of her performance of mothering activities, invoking the judgements of those whom she felt were most qualified to judge her caring skills; namely, her children. She said:

> My kids think I'm a good mother. They like me. I've got the older two thanking me for being the mom that I am on certain times. And they think that we're good parents.

Second, conflict between a caring attitude and the desire to be paid was further reconciled by the satisfaction and enjoyment Liz said she derived from performing caring activities. Third, she was able to justify her position by arguing that even though she had tertiary qualifications in business administration, an occupational area in which she could have attracted a reasonable wage, she preferred to work as a carer. In other words, she had chosen the financially inferior occupation; an act which served to authenticate her sincerity and motivation. Last, she claimed her background and social status provided her with knowledge and understanding of young people in foster care.

In summary, Liz had found a way of combining two groups of motives which ideologically were in opposition. She fostered because she needed an income and because she was a career carer and mother. It was something she chose to do, it was what she felt she did well, and it was an activity she enjoyed. Liz was able to effectively counter possible accusations of (or the suspicion that she might be) providing inferior care because of the presence of economic-related motives by focussing on the quality of her mothering, her sincerity, her expertise, and her suitability.

Aside from Liz's account, none of the others can be regarded as having explicitly contravened cultural and social expectations that foster caregiving be motivated solely by love. As has been shown, participants did not transgress these expectations when asked why they had become fosterers, with each participant articulating the conventional vocabulary of love and altruism; a position that they further consolidated by providing personal denials of financial motivation and by identifying and distancing themselves from other carers they judged as 'in it for the money'.

Conclusion

This discussion and the research on which it is based make a number of contributions to the foster care literature and the sociology of motives. First, employing the vocabulary of motives approach has placed first-person explanations and motive talk centre stage–an important feature given the absence of foster carers' perspectives within the literature. Second, using this framework has enabled examination of the ways participants explained their decision to become a foster carer and identification of stable

vocabularies.[6] Importantly, taking this approach has also allowed for contextualisation of motives, with accounts being linked with the system of foster care and broader cultural aspects of caregiving.

The foster carers who participated in this study were experienced and respected carers working within a leading child welfare agency. The purpose of analysis has not been to question or discredit the quality of care that each provided, nor to judge the authenticity of their motives. Rather, the aim has been to show some of the ways in which participants, in much the same way as Hopper's divorcing couples (1993), made sense of complex and conflicting circumstances and conditions.

Participants were aware of the dominant cultural expectation that fostering should be altruistically motivated and that the mere mention of financial motivation on their part (even when accompanied by non-financial child-centred motives) had the potential to cast doubt on their caregiving reputation. It is not altogether surprising that all but one provided conventional accounts consisting of child-centred motives, omitting any mention of financial factors when asked why they had become carers. As the broader examination of accounts shows, however, the presence of financial motivation cannot be dismissed. Indeed, there is considerable evidence which indicates otherwise.

This analysis shows that participants' explanations functioned as rhetorical devices providing plausible and persuasive vocabularies. Each carer chose to position themselves in a way that helped avoid or disguise tension between opposing motivations in their accounts. As the conventional vocabulary of child-centred altruistic motives evident in their accounts indicates, all participants advocated the primacy of the foster child and their right to receive love and to be nurtured. That said, each carer received a relatively generous caregiving allowance, the majority believed that those who fostered should be remunerated for their labour, and many used the language of the labour market when relating how they had become a carer. To circumvent suggestions that as carers they were contravening the cultural expectation that care of foster children should be motivated solely by love, participants not only denied it outright, but also aligned themselves with those they described as possessing the 'right motives' and distanced themselves from those they believed possessed the 'wrong motives'. This enabled them to fulfil and reinforce the cultural expectation that fostering should be altruistically motivated and to construct themselves as good carers.

This study has focussed on carers of teenage foster children. Although the results point to the presence of economic motives, we can say little about the motives of other foster carers. Future research into fostering motives directed towards those who foster young children (pre-teenage), infants and babies, would help us identify similarities and differences among carers. Furthermore, future research which also took into account the pervasive influence of ideologies concerning caregiving in the home and the family, and

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[6] In this article we have focused on the financial aspects of fostering. However, as noted previously, participants also provided a variety of non-economic motives relating to personal history, ethical considerations and self identity.

their impact on the way we think about and articulate our motives, would greatly enhance our understanding of fostering motives.

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