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The Recruitment and Retention of Family Foster-Carers: An International and Cross-Cultural Analysis

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Summary

Fostering services across the globe encounter difficulties in recruiting and retaining family foster-carers. Yet, we know little of the international and cross-cultural issues which impact on recruitment and retention. In this article, we draw on previous empirical research, and also on information collected during a recent study of global trends in family foster-care, to present an international comparative analysis of those issues. Three key themes emerged from the study: motivation and capacity to foster; professionalism versus altruism; and criteria for kinship and unrelated carers. Each of these presents a considerable challenge to foster-care services. Here, we explore these key themes further, and reflect on the implications for policy and practice.

Keywords: recruitment, retention, family foster-carers, international analysis, cross-cultural analysis

Introduction

The recruitment and retention of family foster-carers are key to the delivery of effective fostering services (Sellick and Howell, 2003). However, difficulties are experienced on a global level with regard to recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of carers. Given these difficulties, and the dearth of information on recruitment and retention in an international and cross-cultural sense, here we

present an international comparative analysis of prevailing issues. In undertaking our analysis, we draw on the findings of empirical research and also on information collected as part of a much broader study of family foster-care in countries including Argentina, China, France, India, Japan, Poland, South Africa, Sweden, the UK and the USA (Colton and Williams, 2006).

Over the last thirty years, we have witnessed a decline in residential care for children and young people, and a growth in the use of family foster-care (Hellinckx, 2002), with the majority of children in out-of-home care in Ireland, Norway, the USA and the UK now in foster-placements (Colton and Williams, 2006; Colton *et al*., 2002). Local authority social services in the UK, for example, currently look after approximately 65,000 children and young people. In England, some 68 per cent (just over 41,000) of looked after children are in foster-placements (Office of National Statistics, 2005; Department for Education and Skills, 2004). The majority (71 per cent) of the 4,315 children looked after in Wales are also in foster-care (National Assembly for Wales Statistical Directorate, 2005). The decline in residential care, however, is more apparent in some countries than in others. In the Netherlands (Knorth, 2002) and Sweden (Sallnas *et al*., 2004; Hessle and Vinnerljung, 1999), for example, admissions to residential care are increasing.

Although many countries have seen an increase in the use of foster-care as the placement of choice in recent years, there is a worldwide shortage of placements. In the UK, the shortfall has meant that in many cases, placements are simply not available and, when a placement can be found, it is not the placement of choice (Sellick, 2006; Sellick and Thoburn, 2002; Pithouse *et al*., 2000). The majority of placements are made in emergencies (Sinclair *et al*., 2000; Triseliotis *et al*., 2000; Waterhouse and Brockelsby, 1999), with carers operating outside their approved range, and breakdown is commonplace, particularly within the first year (Sellick and Thoburn, 2002). These problems are further compounded in cases of sibling groups; children with behavioural problems; children from ethnic minorities; and those with disabilities (Triseliotis *et al*., 2000).

Our study on global trends in foster-care (Colton and Williams, 2006) revealed three key themes with respect to the recruitment and retention of foster-carers: motivation and capacity to foster; professionalism versus altruism; and criteria for kinship and unrelated carers. Each of these presents a considerable challenge to foster-care services and, accordingly, in this article, we explore these key themes further, with reference to existing literature and the comments made by the contributors to our broader study.

Given the shortage of foster-placements worldwide, and the significance of the recruitment and retention of carers to effective fostering services (Sellick and Howell, 2003), it is crucial that we explore the way these services present to those who may feel drawn to the foster-carer role. What motivates individuals to foster, and how does capacity feature? How can we best address the professionalism versus altruism dilemma—the moral obligation to care as opposed to financial reward? Why, and to what extent, should criteria for kin and

unrelated carers differ? In light of the multicultural nature of today's society, it is essential that we learn of the recruitment and retention problems encountered in other foster-family systems; of the ways in which differing cultural perceptions of the caring role might impact on recruitment and retention; and of the mechanisms through which other foster-care services aim to redress the problems they face. By reflecting in this way on the shared problem of recruiting and retaining foster-carers, we aim to contribute to the knowledge base on foster-family care, and subsequently to the development of more effective and responsive children's services.

Motivation and capacity to foster

Child welfare systems around the world are impeded in their attempts to recruit sufficient family foster-carers by factors such as: cost; difficulties with recruiting suitable candidates; ethnic minority candidates' distrust of systems looking to recruit them; or a lack of government interest in family foster-care. Central to this problem, however, is the fact that so few prospective carers meet the two conditions required to foster: motivation and capacity (Colton and Williams, 2006).

Individuals may be motivated to foster for a number of reasons: altruism; the desire to have a child of their own to raise and love; the sense of duty or obligation experienced by many kinship carers; or, in a minority of cases, the desire to improve their own condition through exploiting the child or system. In China, where population growth is checked through a one-child-only policy, family foster-care is in its infancy. Here, carers are motivated to foster in order to obtain a second child (Glover, 2006). In Japan, many who foster actually wish to adopt. However, few children are available for adoption, and there is an unclear distinction between adoptive foster-carers and non-adoptive foster-carers (Iwasaki, 2006). Family foster-care appears to be dying in Japan—first, because of the value placed on blood-ties and individuals' reluctance to have unrelated children living in their homes; and, second, because, historically, religious traditions have not promoted social care (Iwasaki, 2006).

Few families in India are prepared to consider caring for unrelated children because there is no tradition of doing so. With one of the largest child populations in the world—estimated at 400 million—India has a long history of kinship care which has proved vital in meeting children's needs (Goriawalla and Telang, 2006). Caring for a related child is a conventional, socially supported activity; however, caring for an unrelated child is not. The difficulties associated with care may be much the same in either case but they may seem surmountable when social support is provided and quite insurmountable when it is lacking.

Social support for fostering may be a matter of wider cultural norms or it may be provided by the carer's own ethnic or religious community. Cox *et al.* (2002) used data from the *National Survey of Current and Former Foster*

Parents to examine how foster-parents in the USA first found out about the need for foster-parents, and how this affected the foster-family service. Respondents who became aware of the need for foster-parents through religious organizations fostered for more years than those who became aware through the mass media. One explanation for this is that the former are likely to derive support from a network which helps them through the challenges of caring (Cox *et al*., 2002). Perhaps the lesson here is a greater emphasis upon recruitment of foster-carers through religious and ethnic communities where informal support systems are already in place.

Capacity to parent

Charity to non-relatives is a valued tradition in France. Yet, recruitment remains a problem because motivation without capacity is not sufficient (Corbillon, 2006). Indeed, recruitment has proved especially difficult in cities like Paris, given the housing conditions and the resulting lack of space (Corbillon, 2006). Foster-carers in Japan and the USA must be healthy, knowledgeable about child rearing and financially comfortable (Iwasaki, 2006; Martin *et al*., 2006). These same conditions apply in most other countries and are usually enforced through licensing standards.

Licensing standards address adequacy of parenting and, in this context, the words 'capacity' and 'ability' are often used interchangeably. Polgar (2001, p. 17), however, has postulated that there is a difference between parenting *ability* and parenting *capacity*. Thus, he describes parenting ability as 'existing parenting knowledge, skills and competence in their persistent application'. He considers ability to be a constantly evolving process which responds to the changing developmental needs of the child. In contrast, parenting capacity is defined as an individual's potential to acquire ability. It might be argued that potential foster-carers—perhaps particularly kinship carers who tend to receive less training than unrelated carers—are often assessed in terms of their ability rather than their capacity and that this has a negative effect on recruitment.

Even if we were to agree that capacity is the thing to look for in prospective foster-carers and ability should be cultivated through ongoing training, there remains the question of how we should define capacity in culturally diverse societies. Research has found differences in parenting beliefs and practices associated with socio-economic status, race, ethnicity and religion (Garcia Coll *et al*., 1995; Harkness and Super, 1995; Hoff-Ginsberg and Tardif, 1995). These factors do not contribute to 'better' or 'worse' parenting; rather, people of different groups have different beliefs, values and behaviours which lead them to parent in different ways. For example, practices such as spanking and children sleeping with adults are viewed as inappropriate in some cultures and normal in others (Craig *et al*., 2000). These differences exacerbate the difficulties inherent in reaching consensus over what attributes or behaviours ought to constitute

good parenting—or minimally adequate parenting, or good enough parenting, or optimal or adaptive parenting—whatever terms are used.

Comparisons of levels or adequacy of parenting have been conceptualized in various ways (Bornstein, 1995; Maccoby, 1992). For example, the maladaptive–adaptive continuum (Azar *et al*., 1998; Belsky, 1984) focuses on the link between the parent's functioning in particular domains (e.g. physical, cognitive and social/emotional) and his or her competence in childcare. Other models (Reder and Lucey, 1995; Grisso, 1986) use different terms (e.g. the continuum may run from inadequate to good enough to optimal) and also have different definitions of what is meant by the various terms.

It might be argued that lack of definition of terms has resulted in licensing standards for foster-carers which not only vary widely from place to place, but are also unnecessarily restrictive. The term 'good enough' parenting (Winnicott, 1965) was coined to distinguish an adequate ability to meet the child's physical and emotional needs from a more optimal provision of nurturance. It may be the case that some licensing standards confuse 'good enough' with 'optimal' parenting and have higher than necessary expectations of prospective carers—thus, obviously affecting recruitment.

Clearly, licensing standards present as an issue for many prospective foster-parents. Today, a single income—traditionally that of the male partner—is no longer sufficient to raise a family. Both partners may need to be in the work-force in order to provide the standard of living required by licensing standards. Caring for a foster-child with relatively high needs may impact on income, as one partner, at least, must devote work time to child-related tasks. Thus, although recruitment conditions may appear reasonable, it is understandable why there is a dearth of prospective foster-carers who satisfy all of them, and are also prepared to take in a child.

Those wishing to foster face a 'complicated choice', and close scrutiny (Hendrix and Ford, 2003, p. 26). While attempts have been made to identify factors affecting retention (see, e.g. Denby *et al*., 1999), little attention has been paid to the hardiness—or 'internal strengths'—of foster-families. Hardiness is demonstrated by families' belief that they have control or influence over events, by deep commitment, by the viewing of change positively and by confidence in ability. Using the *Family Hardiness Index* (McCubbin *et al*., 1986), the authors found higher levels of hardiness to be significantly associated with intent to continue fostering. Given this, they proposed that the quality hardiness be included in recruitment protocols.

Orme *et al*. (2004) have noted the dearth of knowledge on the characteristics of foster-family applicants. Thus, we have limited understanding as to the best means of recruiting, assessing, training and supporting them. The authors examined the psychosocial functioning of 161 foster-care applicants with regard to parenting; family functioning; marital quality; psychological problems; and social support. Demographic characteristics were also explored, and the implications for recruitment, assessment, training and support were considered. Some 50 per cent of married couples demonstrated three or more

problems in psycho-social functioning, indicating that attention should be paid to the way in which a couple function as a 'unit' during assessment.

In recent years, we have witnessed a growing emphasis in empirical research on the difficulties experienced in recruiting and retaining carers; the support needed to care; the characteristics of carers; and their potential resilience. Nevertheless, it is still the case that one challenge in evaluating the fitness of potential foster-carers is the dearth of appropriate assessment measures. Traditional psychological instruments were not designed to measure parenting adequacy. Tests of intelligence and personality provide information on adult adjustment but bear, at most, an indirect relationship to parenting issues (Brodzinsky, 1993; Melton *et al*., 1997). Some instruments specific to parenting competency, with varying levels of psychometric soundness, have been developed (Budd and Holdsworth, 1996). However, the majority were designed for families with a range of parent–child problems and are not appropriate for use with current or potential foster-carers.

Support services for foster-carers

Mounting recognition of the difficulties experienced in recruiting and retaining foster-carers—in particular, due to the increasingly complex needs of children looked after, and the impact on viability of placements—has resulted in widespread acknowledgement of the need to provide carers with a range of support services (Sellick and Thoburn, 2002; Sinclair *et al*., 2000). The social worker role proves pivotal here (Sellick and Thoburn, 2002), with foster-carers appearing most positive about those social workers who, amongst other things, display an interest in how carers manage; are easily contacted and responsive; listen and encourage; and pay heed to the family's needs and circumstances (Fisher *et al*., 2000; Sellick, 1999). Moreover, research has shown that foster-carers want to be treated as equals; and to have access to support which has a clear foster-carer focus (Burgess *et al*., 2003). They call for respect and recognition of their task, together with an acknowledgement of the ambiguous nature of the relationship between themselves, agencies and the children cared for (Hudson and Levasseur, 2002).

The foster-care experience—for both foster-parents and foster-children—is improved where there is a clear understanding of role (Fees *et al*., 1998; Pasztor, 1985). Differing expectations, however, have contributed to 'role conflict and ambiguity' (Rhodes *et al*., 2003, p. 936), causing problems for foster-parents, children and agencies. Rhodes and colleagues examined the role expectations of 161 foster/adoptive family applicants (157 mothers and 103 fathers), and sixty-seven workers using *The Foster Parent Role Performance Scale* (Le Prohn, 1994), to measure 'perceived responsibility'. Findings indicated agreement about the importance of parenting. However, a lack of agreement was evident both within and between groups in a number of areas. First, although workers had similar expectations regarding parents' responsibility for working

with the agency, they differed in terms of their expectations for foster-parents with regard to parenting. Second, foster-family applicants felt they had more agency and parenting responsibilities than were expected of them by workers. Finally, while foster-family applicants agreed more about parenting responsibilities than workers, the latter agreed more about agency responsibilities than applicants. The authors assert that such differences can have a detrimental impact on working relationships.

Parenting ability is only one of the factors taken into consideration during the assessment of potential foster-parents. Another, as already noted, concerns the matter of adequate income. This brings us to the second key theme derived from our study (Colton and Williams, 2006): professionalism versus altruism.

Professionalism versus altruism

The lack of adequate remuneration for unrelated as well as kinship carers has had a detrimental impact on recruitment and retention. In the UK, much research has focused on foster-carer payment (see, e.g. Kirton, 2001; Pithouse *et al*., 1994; Sellick, 1992; Bebbington and Miles, 1990), with some commentators highlighting the 'confused and confusing' systems of payment associated with foster-carers' status as employees, volunteers or professionals (Pithouse *et al*., 1994, p. 45). It is clear that, in some cases, although payment did not motivate foster-carers to care, the adequacy and efficiency of payment systems sustained them when they were faced with children's challenging behaviour or lack of progress (Kirton, 2001).

In a survey undertaken by the Fostering Network Wales (2003)—a UK charity which works with foster-carers and fostering services to improve foster-care—the majority of foster-carers in Wales reported that the allowance they received did not cover the full cost of fostering. In particular, there were issues around the need for adequate petrol allowances; payment for skills; and payment for damages to household items. In Sweden, foster-carers are remunerated for the child's board and lodging, and receive payment for their work which is taxable, and deemed pensionable income (Hojer, 2006). Half the foster-carers surveyed by Hojer (2001), however, felt that the payment they received was too low. Further, some expressed fears that they would be perceived as greedy and that their foster-children would feel they were being looked after for financial reasons rather than personal commitment. As is the case elsewhere, foster-carers in private agencies in Sweden generally receive higher fees than those in the public sector. They receive a 'paid commission' as opposed to being 'paid employees' of social services and are, therefore, not eligible to receive unemployment benefits when placements cease. There is thus a degree of financial insecurity attached to the foster-carer role in Sweden—a situation acknowledged by the government and subject to investigation (Hojer, 2006).

Ramsay (1996) compared the characteristics of current and past foster-carers, assessing the impact of professional and financial support on turnover and recruitment. Although the foster-care service in Fife, Scotland, had been 'fully professional' (Ramsay, 1996, p. 44) since 1990, carers' socio-demographic characteristics were found to be similar to those of foster-carers in other studies (see, e.g. Bebbington and Miles, 1990). Some financial reward, together with the support provided by link social workers and foster-carer groups, proved key to recruitment and retention. Indeed, payment of a professional fee to carers resulted, to some extent, in 'financial freedom', thus enabling them to care (Ramsay, 1996, p. 46).

The conflict between professionalism and altruism presents as a real issue for fostering services today, and recruitment may become even more difficult if foster-carers continue to be inadequately paid. In some countries, for example, the rate of pay for a foster-family providing full care to a child aged four to eleven years amounts to less than it costs to keep a dog in a kennel. One of the justifications for this is that a higher rate of pay will attract those who want to foster for financial as opposed to altruistic reasons (Martin *et al.*, 2006).

The amount of money expended on foster-children also proves contentious. In addition to monthly payments to cover the child's living costs, foster-carers in Japan receive payments to cover the entire costs of the child's schooling (Iwasaki, 2006). Here, as in other countries, reimbursement varies according to the level of difficulty experienced by the child and the corresponding skill level required of the foster-parent. Specialized foster-carers receive an allowance almost three times that of other foster-carers. Historically, this has resulted in conflict both between public and private agencies, and also between family foster-care agencies and residential centres. There have been calls for the amount of money generally paid to foster-carers in Japan to be increased with regard to salaries and child maintenance (Iwasaki, 2006).

Foster-carers in France receive a monthly allowance to cover educational, medical and living costs. The philosophy here is that people should neither make nor lose money from fostering. Whereas France appears to have made significant progress in the professionalization of foster-carers with regard to reimbursement and employment benefits (Corbillon, 2006), in India, inadequate financial allocations for family foster-care have seriously undermined the quality of service (Goriawalla and Teleng, 2006). Foster-carers in the UK receive an allowance to cover clothing, food, sports, cultural and leisure activities, and birthday and other gifts (Sellick, 2006). Yet, payments are often not sufficient to afford the foster-child the same opportunities as other children who are not 'in care'.

There are those who would question whether such payments ought to be sufficient. The argument here is that if children from failed families—foster-children—have more advantages than those from struggling families, the latter might give up their struggle, thus ruining society and bankrupting the state. This is a somewhat extreme position, although there is some truth in the notion that conflict is likely where foster-children's new possessions are brandished on

visits to birth parents and siblings. Furthermore, will the expectation that foster-children will relinquish their new standard of living when reunited with birth parents negatively impact on reunification? If one is of the view that reunification and contact with birth families will be adversely affected by the provision of material goods to foster-children, it is easy to justify the position that treats and pocket money should be provided to a lesser extent than those provided to foster-carers' birth children, and perhaps not to a greater extent than siblings left at home.

This, of course, is reminiscent of the concept of 'less eligibility', and Victorian Britain, where public relief benefits amounted to less than the wages of the lowest-paid worker to discourage dependency on the Poor Law. Today, this principle is evident in the idea that the benefits afforded to foster-children should be less than those received by other children in order to ensure that unfit families do not relinquish responsibility, leaving the raising of their children to others. The consequences of this are apparent in the stigma associated with family foster-care, and in foster-children's poor health; generally low levels of educational attainment; poor self-esteem; and worse prospects overall when compared with children outside the child welfare system.

The preceding argument assumes that the foster-family enjoys a higher socio-economic status than the birth family. Although this is usually the case because licensing standards require evidence of some economic security from unrelated foster-parents, it is not always so. In Sweden, for example, Hojer (2001) found that 61 per cent of carers were working-class; 26 per cent middle-class; and 13 per cent upper-class. This may be because working-class people tend to place less emphasis on career aspirations, which might act as a barrier to foster-carer recruitment. Perhaps, in addition, the payment provided for foster-care is more meaningful to working-class families than it would be to better-off families.

If it is true that the desire to better one's own condition is a greater motivating factor among working-class families than among middle- and upper-class families, we might ask ourselves whether this is a bad thing. If we believe that it is not possible to love a child for whose care one is paid, then we will continue to reject foster-care applicants whose own financial security is enhanced by—or even dependent upon—the fees received for foster-care. Conversely, if we believe that love and money can complement each other, we might embrace applicants who would financially profit from the venture, while still taking steps to ensure that the 'love' component is actually present.

The professionalism versus altruism dilemma is reflected, at a macro level, in the role played by for-profit agencies in welfare systems. The idea that some people are prepared to take steps to profit from the misery of others is just as unpalatable whether the 'people' are individuals or organizations. Yet, for-profit agencies increasingly feature in public welfare, particularly in North America, where they are acclaimed because: they do not use public money; they are in tune with the philosophy that people ought to be responsible for their own welfare; and they are seen as more 'professional', and not subject to

the inefficiencies of government departments. In Britain, too, the New Labour government has sought a 'third way' by encouraging local authorities to commission foster-care services from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including agencies in the private sector (Sellick, 2006).

It would appear that we are, to some extent, overcoming our revulsion towards allowing organizations to profit from the miseries of children in need. But we are not overcoming that same revulsion in relation to allowing individual foster-carers to profit. We might ask ourselves why that is. Do we value organizations which have money and seek to make more over individuals who have little and seek to improve their condition? Do we assume that poverty on an individual level indicates a lack of moral worth whereas private agencies ought to be free to pursue their own goals in accordance with their own value systems? There are various answers to these questions—to some extent dependent on one's position on the political spectrum—but there can be no doubt of their impact on the way that we assess the suitability of potential foster-carers.

Criteria for kin and unrelated carers

Kinship care plays a vital role in the family foster-care systems of many countries around the world, with commentators in the USA and the UK noting the increased levels of stability and continuity experienced by children in kinship care when compared with those in non-kin placements (Colton *et al*., 2001; Greef, 1999; Berrick *et al*., 1994; Rowe *et al*., 1984). Notwithstanding this, however, there are wide variations in the way kinship care is regarded by local authorities, and in the financial and other forms of support provided to carers (Waterhouse, 1997).

In countries such as India and Poland, it is traditionally expected that relatives will provide care, and the majority of foster-placements are in kinship care (Goriawalla and Teleng, 2006; Stelmaszuk, 2006). Other countries have seen an increase in such care due to wider acceptance of the idea that children are best served by keeping them in their own communities and within their extended families wherever possible. In the UK, the use of kinship care has increased steadily to a rate of 12 per cent in 1997 (Waterhouse, 1997). Some 16 per cent of children looked after in England live with relatives or friends (Department of Health, 1999): however, in some areas—in particular London—rates are as high as 30 per cent. Recent years have also seen a marked increase in kinship care in the USA (Scannapieco and Hegar, 1999), with such care accounting for 50 per cent of placements in urban areas (Needell *et al*., 2000).

Concerns have been expressed over the assessment, training and services provided for kinship carers in the UK, some of whom live in poverty (Family Rights Group, 2001). There is no basis to the supposition that kin carers are less needy with regard to training and support than other carers (Waterhouse

and Brocklesby, 1999). Yet, there is a lack of consistency in terms of policy and practice in these areas (Waterhouse and Brocklesby, 1999). In the USA, Terling-Watt (2001) highlighted the need to consider the unique barriers facing kinship carers when designing services. Other commentators (see, e.g. Schlonsky and Berrick, 2001) have noted the difficulties kinship carers experience in contact with birth families, and the need for the formers' strengths and weaknesses to be acknowledged in order that their services may be most appropriately drawn on.

Training plays a key role in foster-care services (Colton *et al*., 2003; Friesen, 2001; Fees *et al*., 1998), in assisting carers to deal with challenging behaviour, promote the child's education, and manage contact with the birth family. Indeed, training is a 'viable and valuable resource' in foster-carers' development, and assists in quelling any doubts that might arise in terms of an individual's ability to foster competently (Colton *et al*., 2003, p. 38). Some degree of training is now widely required of foster-carers. Professional training is compulsory in France, with the foster-carer paid during the training period (Corbillon, 2006). Moreover, in Poland, professional foster-carers are required to complete appropriate training and to obtain a license to foster (Stelmaszuk, 2006).

There is a clear distinction, however, between kin and unrelated foster-carers in terms not only of training, but also standards, accountability and remuneration. Even when, as in Sweden, all placements must be licensed, licensing standards for kin and unrelated foster-parents may not be identical (Hojer, 2006). In the USA, only fifteen states have identical standards for kinship placements, with twenty states having less exacting requirements (Martin *et al*., 2006). In Japan, the condition that unrelated foster-parents be financially comfortable is waived for kinship carers (Iwasaki, 2006).

Where the kinship home fails to meet licensing standards, it often does not mean that the child cannot be placed there—only that kin carers will not receive allowances or payments. Thus, 'cash-strapped' authorities are advantaged in that, first, they are serving children's best interests by complying with the accepted idea that they are best cared for by their own families; and, second, standards are upheld through denial of funding to families who fail to meet them (Colton and Williams, 2006).

Berridge (1997, p. 78) has referred to kinship care as 'a proven success', with others (see, e.g. Colton *et al*., 2001) noting that it preserves the extended, if not the nuclear, family and also ensures the safety of the child. However, there are issues in terms of standards and resourcing when comparisons are made with non-related carers. Indeed, although the numbers of children in these placements in the UK now exceed those in residential care (Department of Health, 2000), it is often the case that kinship carers are neither formally recognized nor supported by social services (Morris, 2005). Broad *et al*. (2001), for example, in a study of kinship foster-care in a London local authority, found that around half of kin carers were experiencing difficulty in coping with the behaviour of the children whom they were caring for. Most wanted more

support financially, and also from social workers. Social workers, however, were confused as to their responsibilities to kin carers, and reluctant to support them adequately due to the possibility that this would result in a demand that could not be met.

The difficulties associated with reimbursement and standards are intensified by the current move to professionalization of foster-parents. Unlike professionals who accept training as one of the pre-requisites for becoming a professional, kinship carers—many of whom are grandparents—perceive training as unnecessary, patronizing and intrusive. Moreover, while professional foster-carers expect to be held accountable in their role, kinship carers will often not have chosen to care for a child, and do not see why they should be accountable. This issue, together with others relating to professionalization, such as the employment status of foster-carers, and the ramifications of such for both carers and children, warrants further examination.

In all countries, people receive money either because they exist or because they contribute to the labour market. Whereas 'existence' money is provided through various welfare systems, 'contribution' money depends on the perceived level of contribution associated to training and accountability. Child rearing and housework—work outside the labour market, and predominantly still performed by women—are not viewed as contributions worthy of recompense. Therefore, those who perform such work are reliant either on a partner who contributes to the labour market for support, or on welfare payments. It might be argued that unrelated foster-parents fall into the 'contribution' category, and kin carers, who are largely untrained and unaccountable, into the 'existence' category.

Obviously, the solution lies in raising kin carers from the 'existence' to the 'contribution' category by paying them for their work in addition to payment for the child's keep. Some progress has been made with this: in some countries, kin carers are paid. In Poland, for example, equal financial help has been provided for related and non-related carers since 1993 (Stelmaszuk, 2006). However, before they are eligible for financial help, kinship carers' status as foster-carers must be formalized by a court order. In the USA, unlicensed kinship carers are not eligible for payment. Yet, many are unable to meet licensing standards due to factors related to poverty (Martin *et al*., 2006). Indeed, some 40 per cent of kin carers fall below the federal poverty level (Martin *et al*., 2006).

It is not unreasonable to expect either that kinship foster-carers achieve formal recognition as foster-carers before they are paid for providing foster-care, or that formal recognition will involve the attainment of some standard. It does appear, however, that regulations prevent many kinship carers from receiving benefits that would enable them to offer foster-children opportunities which would have a positive impact on their life chances.

Morris (2005) has drawn our attention to a judicial review—'the Munby judgement'—which ruled it unlawful for local authorities in the UK to treat 'friends and family carers' differently from 'stranger carers' with regard to support and payment (*L. [A child] v. Manchester City Council* [2002]). The

Council's line of discriminating against kin carers in payment terms was deemed neither 'necessary nor proportionate', and to have breached the child's right to a family life under Article 8 of the European Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Fostering Network has noted that this judgment resulted in local authorities reviewing their policies on foster-carer payment (Fostering Network, 2004).

There is a well defined pattern to the profile of kinship carers. They are often grandparents (Morris, 2005); live in poorer accommodation; and experience greater economic difficulties than non-kin carers (Ehrle and Green, 2002; Gebel, 1996). Minority children are over-represented in the child-welfare populations of many countries, and a similar over-representation is evident among kinship carers. Thus, cultural factors may compound issues relating to the training, licensing, reimbursement and accountability of kinship carers. Unfortunately, it appears that in the majority of countries, family foster-care systems are enmeshed in the argument that in order to reach required standards, kin carers living in poverty need to be paid; however, they also need to reach those standards before they can be paid. This results in a situation in which standards are either reduced or waived; and payment is minimal or withheld altogether. The consequences of this on the life chances of children cared for are dire.

Of course, one might ask the same question in relation to kin carers as we asked earlier in the article in relation to working-class unrelated carers. If it is true that the desire to better one's own condition is a greater motivating factor among poorer families than it is among better-off families, is this necessarily a bad thing?

We commenced our task by highlighting the increased use of foster-care as the placement of choice, and the dearth of placements worldwide. We then moved on to focus on the three key themes implicit in our analysis, including empirical research on recruitment and retention. Finally, in our conclusion, we consider the implications of our work for policy and practice.

Conclusion

The recruitment and retention of family foster-carers present a major challenge for fostering services across the globe. Given the dearth of information on recruitment and retention of carers in an international and cross-cultural sense, here we have presented an international comparative analysis of prevailing issues. In doing so, we focused on three key themes: namely the motivation and capacity to foster; professionalism versus altruism; and criteria for kin and unrelated carers.

Our analysis has shed some light on the impact of cultural norms on the recruitment of foster-carers. Moreover, the financial implications of caring have clearly emerged as a global issue, with much debate focusing on the need for enhanced remuneration for carers in the UK, the USA, Sweden, Japan and India, for example. Conversely, in any consideration of remuneration to

foster-carers, one is also confronted with the professionalism versus altruism dilemma which is characterized by the perceived conflict between moral obligation and financial reward. Moreover, although the search for culturally appropriate placements has led to an increase in kinship care, there are clear disparities in the manner in which such placements are regarded when compared with non-kinship care, with issues around standards, payment and accountability evident.

Our international and cross-cultural analysis of the recruitment and retention of family foster-carers has uncovered shared problems, and the considerable challenges facing foster-care services today. It is clear is that there is much yet to be resolved across foster-care systems if we are to enable those motivated to care to undertake the task. Given this, we next explore the implications of our work for policy and practice.

Implications for policy and practice

For some years now, the child welfare policy and legislative emphasis in the UK has centred on 'permanence'. The pursuit of 'permanence', however, requires a population of skilled foster-carers who are able to safely care for a child, and, where possible, enable return to the birth family (Sellick and Thoburn, 2002). Foster-carers in the USA are 'a critical, national resource that is in short supply' (Orme *et al*., 2004, p. 307). There is an acute shortage of placements in Sweden (Hojer, 2006) and, prior to a national recruitment campaign, the dearth of foster-carers in the UK constituted a crisis (Sellick and Thoburn, 2002). UK Government efforts to recruit 7,000 new carers have fallen short of target, and if nothing is done to address retention, with 10 per cent of foster-carers leaving the service every year, social workers will continue to find themselves in situations in which they are unable to match children's needs with available carers (Thompson and Rickford, 2000).

The failure to recognize and acknowledge the nature and needs of the looked after population contributes to the current difficulties in recruiting foster-carers (Hutchinson *et al*., 2003). In many cases, methods of recruitment, retention and support of foster-carers reflect 'historical, now inaccurate' perceptions of fostering (Hutchinson *et al*., 2003, p. 8). If we are to address the capacity issue which results in so many carers taking children outside their approval range, then sensitive and sophisticated support mechanisms are essential (Thompson and Rickford, 2000). Commentators across the globe note that support is crucial to retention (MacGregor *et al*., 2006; Rhodes *et al*., 2001; Sinclair *et al*., 2000; Nixon, 2000), as carers who are satisfied with a service will be more likely to recruit others. In the UK, for example, there is evidence that experienced local authority carers join the independent sector in order to gain better support, leaving less experienced carers in the former (Sellick and Thoburn, 2002; Waterhouse and Brockelsby, 1999). The extent to which local authorities are able to tolerate such losses is a matter of concern. In Australia,

carers' frustration centres on the lack of support from social workers and agencies, and the inability to participate in decisions about the child's future (Delfabbro *et al*., 2002). Here, the solution is seen to lie in: viewing carers as 'para professionals' as opposed to support workers; role clarification; increased co-operation and contact between case workers and carers; and the availability of peer support (Delfabbro *et al*., 2002, p. 36).

In spite of recruitment efforts, the number and characteristics of foster-carers in the UK have remained constant over recent years (Sinclair *et al*., 2000; Bebbington and Miles, 1990). The vast majority of foster-carers in the UK and France are women, many of whom are single carers (Corbillon, 2006; Sellick and Thoburn, 2002). Colton *et al*. (2003) have argued that the difficulty of combining foster-care with paid employment proves a limiting factor in terms of recruitment. Any attempt to widen the market requires a change in the relationship of foster-care to work: namely by treating foster-care as work and increasing remuneration or assisting carers to take outside work through, for example, the use of after-school schemes. We may no longer look to altruistic tendencies as sufficient incentives in the recruitment of carers (Colton *et al*., 2003). Rather, appropriate financial support together with efficient payment systems is key to the motivation and retention of carers in today's labour market, which employs increasing numbers of women.

It will doubtless be some time before foster-carers are accepted as professionals, paid appropriately and accorded the same status as professionals in foster-care teams. What is clear is that the conflict between raising children and pursuing a career is having major impacts, both in the area of family foster-care in which recruitment is affected, and in the increasing numbers of young adults who are choosing to have children later in life or not at all. In Sweden, 'women's participation in the labour force is among the highest in the world' (Hessle and Vinnerljung, 1999, p. 4), at 80 per cent in 1995, against 85 per cent for men. Hojer (2006) has noted the marginalization experienced by the unemployed in Sweden, where state support is dependent upon employment. Thus, any decision about parenthood needs to take into account the potential risk to one's 'professional position' (Colton and Williams, 2006, p. 103). Here, and also in Japan, for example, low birth rates appear indicative of a reluctance on the part of young women to renounce their careers, and stay at home to care for their children (Colton and Williams, 2006). Women reluctant to stay at home with their own children will be less likely to stay at home with a foster-child. The obvious impact on the recruitment of unrelated foster-carers means that the recruitment and support of kin carers are even more essential. Agencies face a considerable challenge here, given that such a clear distinction exists, on a global level, between kin and unrelated foster-carers in terms of remuneration, training, standards and accountability.

In the UK, the pursuit of placement choice and stability is dependent for its success on the availability of a skilled foster-carer base (Colton *et al*., 2003). Targeted recruitment, involving existing carers, sound assessment and effective training, are key to recruiting and retaining foster-carers (Perez-del-Aguila

et al., 2003; Rhodes *et al*., 2001; Friesen, 2001; Fees *et al*., 1998). Payment of salaries is proving an increasingly important issue, in part due to the increase in independent agencies (Sellick and Thoburn, 2002), with some local authorities rewarding carers financially by means of grants to extend property, car loans and a loyalty or long-service bonus (Colton *et al*., 2003). Others are working to develop a range of retention schemes around 'buddying' arrangements and stress management, and it is encouraging to note that this development work includes services for foster-carers' own children (Sellick and Howell, 2003), who play such a significant role in the success of placements (Ames, 1997; Pugh, 1996). Moreover, the announcement, at the end of July 2006, that a national minimum allowance for foster-carers—including 'family and friends'—is to be introduced for the first time in England is a welcome, albeit overdue, development. It is to be hoped that the intended outcome of a fairer payment system in which regional differences are eradicated is soon accomplished.

Notwithstanding the above, however, it is clear that much remains to be achieved, and that family foster-care services worldwide experience shared problems with regard to the recruitment and retention of foster-carers. Our analysis is not exhaustive; nor was it intended to be, particularly given the constraints of space. We have, however, highlighted some of the prevailing issues. Additional topics which might be addressed in a future research agenda include: the extent to which the age of, and problems presented by, children entering foster-care impact on the recruitment and retention of carers; and consideration of the recruitment and retention implications, in today's increasingly urbanized society, for countries such as Sweden, where there is a long-held tradition of placing children from urban districts with rurally located foster-families (Vinnerljung, 1996).

There is, undoubtedly, much we can learn from reflecting on the recruitment and retention problems encountered by others, and on how they are overcome. Our analysis represents a first step in this learning process, however. For, only by undertaking further research will we attain a real understanding of how best to recruit and retain those who are motivated to become foster-carers.

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