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# ***MOTHERING FOR THE STATE Foster Parenting and the Challenges of Government-Contracted Carework***

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*This article draws on ethnographic research with a nonprofit foster family agency to examine how payment affects caregivers' motivations and performance, as well as how state bureaucratic organization and professional supervision affect their carework. Findings suggest that contrary to conventional thought, economic interests and altruistic motives coexist for foster mothers. Although monetary compensation is a concern for these mostly working-class women, impetus for caring also stems from traditional gendered ideals of mothering, nurturing, and staying at home with their biological children. However, state regulations and rules (designed to protect children) intervene in foster mothers' parenting and private lives and undermine their intrinsic motivations and rewards. The conclusion reflects on what this case reveals about the challenges of paid carework, especially under conditions of government supervision and regulation.*

**Keywords:** *carework; foster care; work-family balance; social services*

We are witnessing a major reorganization of the ways that care is administered in the contemporary United States. Because demographic shifts have escalated care needs at the same time as women, who have traditionally provided care in families, have moved into the labor market, care is becoming more frequently performed by paid workers. Consequently, one-fifth of the total workforce now works in the “care industries” (Folbre 2001, 55). Among the many questions precipitated by this major social transformation, some of the most immediate and controversial revolve around the impact of pay and market rationality on the quality and character of care (Cancian 2000; Evers, Pijl, and Ungerson 1994; Folbre and Nelson 2000;

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Harrington Meyer 2000; Nelson 1999; Waerness 1996). Reflecting classic modernist assumptions about the need for a private sphere separate and protected from the ravages of competition and self-interest (Lasch 1977), it is feared that economic incentives and care cannot coincide but are in fact oppositional. My own experience as a researcher of foster care provides a case in point. When I tell people that I am doing research in the area, one question inevitably comes up: "But," someone interjects, "do foster parents do it for the money?"

Informed by such concerns, some policy-minded economists have argued that compensation to careworkers should remain limited so that altruistic motivations remain predominant and workers primarily interested in paychecks are not attracted to the work. Furthermore, there is a concern that financial remuneration will change even those initially inspired by benevolence by crowding out caring feelings and replacing them with self-interested considerations. The worry becomes that caregivers will provide services for money, rather than altruism, ultimately diminishing the quality of care. Such assumptions may have contributed to the "care penalty" charged to wages for occupations that involve carework (England, Budig, and Folbre 2002).

Feminist scholars challenge the necessary dichotomy between altruism and payment, pointing to its gender bias—that this concern about extrinsic rewards undermining intrinsic motivations is applied to caregiving work traditionally performed by women and is not similarly applied to intrinsically rewarding work historically performed by men (Nelson 1999; Ungerson 1990). The social construction that women are naturally suited to be care providers reproduces gender inequalities by burdening women with greater care responsibilities and justifying no or low pay for carework (Abel and Nelson 1990; Harrington Meyer 2000, 6; Hooymann and Gonyea 1995). Waerness (1984) argued that all caring is work and payment itself will not inevitably alter caregiver-receiver relationships. Folbre and Nelson (2000) asserted that pay will not necessarily flatten social relations or make care impersonal but that money flow can be embedded in rich social relationships and is shaped by social norms and policies (see also Nelson 1999). Rather than the mere existence of payment, other features associated with the organization of care in states and markets shape care quality (Abel and Nelson 1990; Cancian 2000; Ungerson 1990). Thus, feminist scholars argue that care can be provided for both love and money, for reasons associated with both the public and private spheres. The literature on the social psychology of work supports this view, demonstrating that economic and altruistic motivations are not incompatible but are relatively independent dimensions (Mortimer and Lorence 1995).

Our understanding of the ways in which payment and social organization influence the distribution and quality of care would be further enriched and deepened by more empirical research. Foster care provides a rich setting for this kind of research. Although the number of children under state protection continues to

grow, very little is known about the motivations and experiences of the foster parents who care for them. What we hear from the media about foster families often includes horrific stories about neglectful and even abusive foster parents who take in children for monetary gain, reflecting cultural suspicions of paid care in private families. Despite these portrayals, empirical research finds that nationally, children are not more likely to be abused in foster homes than in birth homes (Gelles 1996) and that foster children report positive relationships with their foster parents (Barbell 1999). Yet the concern over a foster care crisis is justified given the escalating numbers of foster children, the instability of placements, and the poorer health and well-being of foster children. It is unclear how foster family intentions and the ways these interact with the system contribute to these problems. This article draws on several years of ethnographic research with foster parents in a state-contracted nonprofit agency to investigate foster parents' motives, as well as the effects of compensation and state supervision on foster parents' carework.

This article is divided into two parts. In the first, I discuss why individuals became foster mothers for Hope Children's Services. I show that foster mothers came to this work for instrumental purposes and nonmaterial rewards and argue that self-interest and child-centered altruism coexisted as payment enabled those who already cared about children to do work that they found intrinsically rewarding. In the second part of the article, I address the ironies that emerged from state-supervised care in family settings. Through foster care, the state intervened in and disciplined families—both the biological families whom the state deemed unfit and the foster families. As a gendered state care system, foster care appropriated and regulated foster mothers' domestic labor. Within this context of state organization and supervision, the very motivations that drew foster mothers to this work were often compromised and contradicted. By examining these tensions, this study can contribute to increasingly relevant discussions concerning the ways in which payment and bureaucratic organization influence the quality of paid carework, especially care that intentionally mirrors the care provided in family settings.

## DATA AND METHOD

This article is based on a larger ethnographic project involving several years of research conducted in the mid to late 1990s of a private, nonprofit children's agency contracted by Los Angeles County to provide foster care. Los Angeles County is a particularly important site to investigate foster care in that it is the largest foster care system in the nation, with higher rates of foster child abuse and death than national averages (The Alliance for Children's Rights 2004; Anderson 2003). For 22 months, I engaged in intensive participant observation with the agency, 15 months as a foster care social worker. The ethnography focused on 42 foster families and 25

foster care professionals. My fieldwork was supplemented by observations and interactions with hundreds of other foster families and dozens of professionals associated with the agency during five years of contact. On leaving the field, I conducted semistructured, in-depth interviews with 18 foster parents and 13 professionals averaging 1½ to 2 hours. The agency's and individuals' names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

The 42 foster families at Hope Children's Services are the focus of the research reported here. They were predominantly working-class, high school educated, married couples with children. Specifically, the foster parent sample consisted of 22 working-class heterosexual couples, 6 lower-middle-/middle-class heterosexual couples, 10 single working-class women, and 4 single middle-class women. Some 24 of the 28 couples and all of the single working-class women had biological children. Half of the foster parents (35) identified as Latino/Hispanic, 26 identified as white, and 9 identified as Black. Hope foster families earned a median annual income of \$31,080 in 1995 when the median family income was \$45,200 in Los Angeles. Most foster parents who worked outside of their homes labored in blue-collar or service occupations. All of the 28 foster fathers and 14 single foster mothers worked outside of their homes, as did 2 of the married foster mothers. Most of the married Hope foster mothers (26 of 28) stayed home full-time, including 10 who generated income from their homes in addition to foster care stipends through in-home day care or babysitting. Hope foster parents received a stipend of \$500 to \$600 per month per child for foster care.

The foster families in this study were similar to other U.S. foster families in terms of their working- and lower-middle-class background (Barbell 1999). However, Hope foster parents were a select group in many ways. Hope Children's Services held more stringent screening standards than required by Los Angeles County, and the agency rejected hundreds of applicants who could have qualified to be licensed by the county. Hope foster families received a layer of agency supervision not required in county-contracted foster homes, which likely prevented those who would endanger children from staying with the agency. Also, the foster parents who agreed to be interviewed were likely to be more focused on and articulate about the care they provided to children than other Hope foster parents. Because Hope Children's Services had higher standards of monitoring than county licensed foster homes, the potential for foster parent child abuse was minimized. Therefore, the foster parents featured in this study do not represent all foster parents, but their voices and stories highlight important tensions in the system experienced by even the best foster parents.

Beyond what foster parents expressed in interviews, fieldwork enabled me to witness actual behavior and situate these families and their motives in the context of their labor. In a variation of Burawoy's (1991) extended case method, this study is intended to produce and develop a deep understanding of the ways in which the multiple motives of foster parenting interacted with the institutional structures and context of state-contracted care.

## PART 1: THE MULTIPLE MOTIVATIONS TO FOSTER PARENT

### **Economic and Family Care Realities of Contemporary Working-Class Foster Families**

Most foster parents at Hope Children's Services were from the working class. Generally, they had spent their adult work lives laboring for hourly pay at jobs in factories, restaurants, retail, and other manufacturing and service positions. The economic restructuring of the late twentieth century and the economic downturn of the early 1990s fostered employment instability and feelings of financial insecurity in these families (Newman 1993). In addition, declining real wages and decreased government benefits combined to require these families to expand the total number of paid work hours. Couples relied on dual earners, while single mother-led families looked for second jobs or other ways to increase income.

Several strategies have been taken up by mothers seeking to balance provider and caregiver responsibilities. Some families purchase childcare and other domestic services, engage in split-shift childcare, or rely on extended family and fictive kin for support (Rubin 1994; Uttal 1996, 1999). Others attempt to work and earn money from home, combining paid labor and unpaid family labor in the same location (Christensen 1987). Many Hope foster mothers attempted this strategy as they dealt with the dilemmas of coordinating work and family. Most Hope foster mothers viewed their participation in foster care as their work, albeit a multifaceted kind of work. Foster parenting was heavily gendered, as foster mothers provided the majority of care to children and bore the daily responsibilities of organizing foster children's lives, interacting with social workers, and managing relations with biological parents. Like other forms of home-based work, foster mothering reflected the class educational and employment experiences of the women who pursued it. Hope foster mothers considered their previous work histories, their current opportunities, their skills, and their competing obligations when they decided to pursue foster care as an option. The ways in which Hope foster families attempted to reconcile economic and family care needs through foster care is illustrated with a few of their stories.

Rosa and Jaime Hernandez were a lower-working-class Latino couple in their mid-forties and the parents of two teenagers. When I met Jaime, he was a dockworker who worked long hours for pay that could not fully support his family of four (\$1,000 per month for more than 40 hours per week). Although they both held traditional family ideals and wanted Rosa to remain at home full-time with their children, Rosa had to work throughout their marriage. When their children were young, Rosa worked at McDonald's, scheduling her hours opposite to Jaime's schedule so that one of them could be home with their children. However, Rosa quit when the managers changed and refused to consider her family needs. Given Rosa's education, her skills, and the job market, she was limited to low-paying service-sector work. When her teenaged son was arrested and required to wear an

ankle surveillance band, Rosa decided that she had to find some way to stay home. Reflecting her adherence to traditional gender ideologies, Rosa blamed herself for her son's trouble and believed that if she had stayed home, this would not have happened. A friend encouraged Rosa to become a foster mother so that she could earn needed income while at the same time being an at-home mother. Foster care enabled Rosa, and foster mothers like her, to fulfill her perceived maternal obligations while at the same time earning needed income.

Although most of the families in this study were working class, this strategy was used in some middle-class foster families as well. For example, white middle-class Debbie Watson also aspired to provide around-the-clock mother care to her child. "Before I started with foster care, I had a career in word processing. But Cassie would cry every day when I left the house for work. . . . I want to stay home and be a mom. . . . I think it's important that I stay home with Cassie. I know she needs me" (white, married, middle-class woman, 30s). To sustain a middle-class lifestyle, Debbie needed to earn an income, but she also wanted to stay home. Debbie tried home-based medical billing but said she wanted to do something more meaningful. Thus, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations including her preferred traditional family structure, beliefs about her daughter's needs, her need for income, and her desire to make a meaningful contribution led her to foster parenting.

According to this subgroup of traditional foster mothers, nineteenth-century gender roles with the separation of spheres still applied at the close of the twentieth century. Although their structural position required them to earn an income, they attempted to "claim a right to mother" through their participation in foster care (Michel 2000). Foster fathers joined their wives in actively seeking out foster care. Foster parenting enabled these couples to construct a "family myth" defining men as the exclusive breadwinners and women as the full-time nurturers (Hochschild 1989). These traditional families masked women's economic contribution, as foster mothers' work remained invisible in the private sphere and resembled the work they did daily as mothers.

Working-class single mothers who fostered expressed similar motivations to their married, stay-at-home counterparts. Economic difficulties also forced these women to look for options to augment their income. These single mothers saw foster care as a means to maximize time with their children while increasing their resources. For example, white single mother Tracy Greaves worked as a cashier at a large supermarket. At first, Tracy was very happy with her job, citing the fact that her manager scheduled her hours so that she could be home with her seven-year-old daughter after school. However, a new supervisor refused to consider Tracy's family responsibilities in scheduling, arguing it would not be fair to childless coworkers. Tracy found that she spent more on babysitting than she could afford, and she hated not being able to spend afternoons with her daughter. Tracy took up foster parenting to enable her to be home with her daughter and new foster child some days after school. Like many foster mothers, Tracy also found this work much more meaningful than the kind of paid work she had previously done and appreciated the work-family balance it facilitated.

Both married and single women became foster mothers for the important tangible rewards of simultaneously meeting family financial and care needs. However, a multitude of intangible rewards also motivated these women to become foster mothers.

### **The Gendered Expertise of Family Carework**

One of the worries about paying care providers is that money will attract people who do not care about recipients or who are incompetent at the work, but the evidence from this case study contradicts these presuppositions. Hope foster mothers understood themselves as skilled caregivers. Indeed, this was the area in which they felt most competent because they had years of experience doing this kind of work. They relayed a work history that detailed specific experiences through which they had developed the skills relevant to their informal careers as caregivers. While other occupations may not have valued these skills, they believed that foster care offered them paid work not only in which they were competent but in which they were experts.

Foster mothers developed caregiving skills through gender socialization and the gender modeling of their mothers. As Alisa Ramsey describes, "I've had a lot of experience with babies and children. When I was growing up, my mother took care of her own kids and foster children. . . . She was so busy, but it was wonderful. I would help my mother take care of the babies. . . . So I wanted to grow up and be a mother, and that's what I did. I grew up and had four children. And now I have foster children too" (white, working-class, single woman, 50s). Not only did these women watch and identify with their mothers, they learned to provide care through hands-on practice. As they grew up, they helped take care of younger siblings, and babysitting was a regular part of their preadolescent and adolescent life. Thus, caregiving was an important aspect of how they learned to do gender. Similar to the women in Nelson's (1990) study of day care providers, foster mothers did not separate their current work from the ways in which they have always lived as girls and women. From their perspective, caring for foster children was a continuation of what they had spent their lives doing. Take, for instance, Glenda Frederickson: "After my mother passed away when I was nine years old, I had to take care of myself and my brothers and sisters. . . . I know how to take care of children and a house; I've been doing it all my life. Then I raised my own eight kids . . . and now I can take care of these kids who need me" (white, working-class, married woman, 60s).

Hope foster mothers understood their caregiving skills as developed through experiential learning and believed experience made them competent caregivers. Given their class backgrounds and their relationship to formal education, it was not surprising that they considered experience more important than credentials or formal training or that they questioned the legitimacy of advice from childless social workers, like myself at that time.

These foster mothers constructed their sense of self and assessment of their caregiving expertise in relation to their opportunities in the market and social structure. Most of these women had experienced paid employment that was heavily monitored, controlled, and inflexible. They frequently expressed sentiments such as, "When I'm a mother and watch kids, I'm my own boss. I control what I do and set my own schedule" (Mindy Lewis, white, working-class, single woman, early 30s). These comments were made in comparison to their previous work experiences in food service, retail, and factory work. Like other domestic workers, they believed this work offered greater flexibility than other occupations available to them (Romero 1992). Within the context of family cultural systems and economic structures, class and gender interacted and prompted these women to seek paid opportunities that allowed them to utilize their well-developed caretaking skills within the home, which they expected would offer greater autonomy and authority than they had experienced in other work environments.

The lifetime familiarity, identification, and expertise with caring for children provided them with an intimate understanding of the norms of this kind of work. This enabled them, as we will see in the following section, to reap rich rewards from caregiving. On the other hand, we will also see that the fact that carework had not previously brought financial rewards or outside intervention infused this familiar work with unfamiliar problems and tensions.

#### **Called to Care: Tangible Successes, Gendered Desires, and Giving to the Community**

Cancian and Oliker (2000, 87) argued that women are more often drawn to caregiving work than are men because it utilizes skills they learned growing up and because they have learned to view altruistic, emotionally sensitive caregiving as confirming their feminine identity. Foster care enabled Hope foster mothers to do work that they believed to be highly valuable and that confirmed their gendered identities as caring and other-centered people. "There are so many children out there now who need a safe and loving place to live. So many parents on drugs, who don't pay any attention to their kids or who abuse them. . . . We can help these kids. We can show them what it is like to have a loving family so that maybe when they grow up they can make a loving family too" (Diana Ortega, Latina, lower-middle-class, married woman, 20s).

Specific aspects of this work made it meaningful in different ways for different parents. First, foster mothers gained satisfaction from the positive changes they observed in their foster children. Foster parents viewed these changes as resulting from the love and quality care they offered that they believed was missing from the children's biological homes. Debbie Watson discusses how her love changed children: "We have really helped the children that have stayed in our home. I think we have given life to lifeless children. Like Michael, he came to me as a limp noodle. He was three months old and had no life in him. I just loved him and gave him room

to grow. I have so much love to give, and it really changes children's lives when all you do is give them love" (white, middle-class, married woman, 30s).

Of course, definitions of quality care varied by class and race. Debbie's comments reflected white, middle-class notions of intensive motherhood that emphasized love and attention (Hays 1996). Many Latino and white working-class parents in this sample stressed other elements in their childrearing, focusing on the discipline and practical skills that had proved valuable in their own lives (Kohn 1969; Lareau 2003). Yet for both working-class and middle-class families, foster care was meaningful work because it changed children in ways perceived to be important.

There were several differences between the cultural perspectives and life situations of the working-class mothers and the few middle-class women without biological children. One particularly noteworthy difference, given the controversial nature of foster family payments, was that the middle-class women without biological children did not need the money. Even so, these women's stories were similarly gendered, involving their desire to mother.

The case of Gina Tilly illustrates the experiences of this group of women. Gina was a single, white, 36-year-old, college-educated woman who constructed a life history oriented around helping others, including a childhood filled with volunteerism and babysitting. Aspiring to go into a helping profession, she was dissuaded by a college counselor who advised her to go into business instead. Gina always assumed she would marry and become a mother but felt that at 36, her chances of getting married and having biological children were fading. Gina became a foster parent to fulfill her life ambition of helping others and mothering:

Ever since I was in junior high, I wanted to help people, but a college counselor talked me out of it. . . . I always expected to have a lot of children—I wanted 10 kids. So far, I've had 9 foster children. . . . I had no grand dreams; I just expected to be married and have children . . . but as I got older, it was clear that I was not going to get married. But I still wanted kids. . . . My whole life I wanted to hold babies. . . . When I first got into foster care, I thought I'd have just one child. But I didn't realize what it would bring to my life. (white, middle-class, single woman, 30s)

Gina's successful business career brought her several times the income she earned foster parenting, yet her dream was to stop working in business and devote her life to nurturing children. "If it was possible, I wouldn't work and would take care of these kids full time. . . . My dream is to open a group home. . . . It's in the works. I'm getting a house with my sister that is big enough for us and six kids."

Like other foster mothers in this study, Gina needed money to do the good work of caring for children, but it did not stand as the primary rationale for fostering. A cynic might suggest that these foster parents used the culturally acceptable rhetoric of care for children but really were driven by financial concerns. I would argue against this perspective. The case is clearest for Gina and other middle-class foster mothers who had more lucrative options for employment. She regularly spent more

money on the children than the stipends provided. Foster payments were fixed, with no market incentives for better care, yet she (and others) continually tried to improve the care.

Based on a mothering model, both working-class and middle-class foster mothers reaped rich rewards as they built affectionate bonds and deep emotional attachments with foster children. Caring for foster children became integrally tied with caring about these foster children (Abel and Nelson 1990). Rather than having their feelings for children flattened out due to payment, these foster mothers grew personally attached to the children they cared for daily. Hope foster mothers experienced these loving relationships with foster children as important rewards of their work.

A final source of meaning some women derived from fostering involved the ways that race and ethnicity intersected with gender and class. Because the families consisted of about half Latinos and half whites, and because there were so few Black foster mothers at this agency, I will focus on Latino and white families. Policy priorities of cultural matching and the disproportionate number of children of color in the system meant that Latino families most often cared for Latino children, while white families cared for white, Latino, and Black children. In contrast to white families, Latino families explicitly spoke of the ways they understood foster care as a kind of ethnic community care. They believed by taking in Latino children that they were helping Latino families and ultimately the Latino community: "We want to do this because we want to do something for our people—you know, Mexicans. There are a lot of Mexicans in our old neighborhood [East Los Angeles] . . . that we see that have a lot of problems with their families and with money. We can help them" (Albert Flores, working-class, Mexican American, married man, 60s).

Connected with this, Latino families often identified with Latino biological families in ways that white foster families seldom did. Latino foster families recognized that they shared with children's biological families similar ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, as well as experiences with oppression and discrimination. What is more, they had experienced economic and other hardship in their own lives and believed that a supportive family was essential to overcoming adversity. Sympathizing with the often young, single mothers who had their children removed, they tried to serve as surrogate extended family networks not only for the children but often also for the mothers. In short, many Latino families subscribed to a communal ideal of families that included "fictive kin" (Stack 1974). The nature of this family vision was evidenced by the way children often referred to their Latino foster parents as *tia* and *tio*—aunt and uncle.

Many Latino foster parents relayed that they wanted to help children maintain cultural and linguistic ties to their biological families and their broader ethnic community with such activities as speaking Spanish to foster children, teaching them Mexican cooking, and taking them to Catholic Mass. In my experience, children felt more at ease in these families with familiar cultural patterns. These relationships facilitated reunification by keeping mothers involved with their kids rather than feeling isolated from them.

All of this was also an important motivation for Latino foster parents in this work and stood in contrast to white foster parents, who did not bring up ethnic and racial motives. I suggest this was due to the invisibility and “taken for grantedness” of whiteness and inattention to race more generally in the white families (Frankenberg 1993). In addition, white respondents more commonly adhered to a private, nuclear family ideal that did not include, or necessitate, fictive kin support systems.

Nakano Glenn argued that caregiving is devalued in the United States due to its relegation to the private sphere and to women (2000, 84-85). It is even further devalued, she continued, because caregiving is often performed by people with low status with regard to race, class, or immigration (p. 86). While foster parenting, and carework in general, carries little respect in the larger public culture, Hope foster mothers believed they were doing some of the most important work in society. These findings suggest that even though economic interests are important to foster mothers, they pose little danger of crowding out other deeply embedded intrinsic motivations. However, what did threaten to crowd out or undermine intrinsic motivations were the arrangements of state regulation and professional supervision that I will discuss in the following section.

## **PART 2: FOSTER PARENTS AND THE CHALLENGES OF STATE-SUPERVISED CAREWORK**

Hope foster parents and professionals (echoing U.S. foster care policy as a whole) assumed that children in the system should be placed in private families and care should be based on an intensive mothering model. However, this ideal was never fully realized in actual foster parenting practice because the state and professionals regulated and supervised their mothering. At least four challenges to foster mothers emerged in the context of state oversight. These included the undermining of foster mother competence, their lack of authority, the disruption of their traditional families, and pervasive suspicions about foster mother commitment due to financial interests.

### **Undermining Foster Mother Competence**

To ensure child safety, agency and state regulations required parenting training, weekly social worker home visits, professionally developed and supervised treatment plans, and mandated reporting of all health, psychological, or behavioral problems. At Hope foster parent orientation, the agency director informed foster parents that “monitoring of your childrearing with the foster child will be done by our agency.” In so doing, she conveyed the message that ultimate authority remained with the agency. Thus, although foster mothers were drawn to foster care because it utilized their caregiving expertise, agency and professional childrearing guidance challenged their competence. Because foster mothers valued experiential knowledge over formal knowledge, they often questioned such advice: “I know

more about kids than most social workers. Most social workers that I've met don't even have kids. How are they supposed to tell me what to do if they don't have any children of their own? They might read a lot of books, but if you haven't had a kid in your house 24 hours a day, you really don't know what you're talking about" (Glenda Frederickson, white, working-class, married woman, 60s). Through foster mothers' eyes, Hope professionals did not really understand children because they had little experience raising children themselves. Working-class foster mothers became especially annoyed with social workers' middle-class expressive communication and discipline styles, which they found unfamiliar and ineffective. Foster mothers experienced the assertion of expert perspectives as discounting their abilities in the domain at which they felt most competent.

On the other hand, social workers viewed their expertise, grounded in science (and validated by their white, middle-class childrearing ideologies and experiences), as more legitimate than foster parents' experiential knowledge. One social worker describes such friction: "[A challenge] is with foster parents that can be strong willed, well you know the attitude that 'I know what I'm doing, I've raised so many children'" (Sue, white, middle-class woman, 30s).

It was not just social worker advice that challenged foster mother competence at caregiving. Foster mothers experienced state and agency reporting expectations as unwarranted micromanagement and an indication that their parenting skills were not trusted. State regulations, aimed to protect children, mandated that foster parents report every illness and injury, regardless of the severity. Given the frequency of children's minor ailments, compliant foster mothers were regularly informing agency workers of these problems.

It's ridiculous that we have to report every scraped knee or runny nose. Kids . . . are constantly falling down and bumping into things. It doesn't mean that I'm a bad parent. . . . Like when Jimmy was here, he was learning to walk, so he fell down. Nicole [her social worker] said that there were too many incidents and that I had to put him in a playpen. Well, I don't believe in playpens. How is he supposed to learn to walk if he's in a playpen? Well, Nicole wouldn't know; she may be the social worker, but she doesn't know about kids, she doesn't even have any. (Debbie Watson, white, middle-class, married woman, 30s)

Foster parents worried that too many incidents would be interpreted as poor caregiving and would lead to unfavorable evaluations by social workers who had the institutional authority to remove children and decertify their foster homes. Despite the worthy goal of keeping children safe, foster parents felt that the majority of incidents involved minor childhood problems that should be left to them to handle without the interference of professionals or excessive judgment. "With Hope FFA, the kids can't be kids. They can't ride skateboards or bikes because of course they will fall and get scrapes and bruises, and you have to report it as an incident. And if there are too many incidents, they treat you like you are doing something wrong" (Maria Ramos, Latina, working-class, married woman, 30s).

The state depended on the skill and labor of foster mothers to provide day-to-day care for foster children, and professionals often referred to their relationships with foster parents as partnerships, yet social workers' perspectives dominated. Foster mothers who entered foster care in part because they were skilled caregivers and because they thought the work offered autonomy not permitted in other available jobs found their proficiency challenged by professional and state directives.

### **Mothers without Power**

Although the rewards and meaning derived from this work resembled those received from mothering, fostering lacked the power and permanence of motherhood. Foster mothers became frustrated when they were not able to make decisions about the children in their care or when decisions were made by those far removed from the children (such as courts, professionals, or the birth parents) that went against their judgment. Foster mothers complained that although they were charged with the daily care of children, they sometimes were denied permission to make everyday care decisions such as those about haircuts, ear piercings, or whether children could go to a friend's home after school. While these examples may seem trivial, women experienced such restrictions on their authority as undermining the power earned through motherhood.

The case of two brothers, Juan and Oscar, illustrates how decisions concerning foster children created feelings of disempowerment. Juan and Oscar were seven and eight years old, respectively, and had been in foster care with the Ortega family for two years at the time of this incident. The boys, along with their two younger brothers (placed with a nearby Hope family), were placed in foster care due to severe neglect by their mentally ill mother and her family. The boys were found locked in a room filled with their own waste, and Oscar had to crawl out the window to forage for food from other people's garbage. The youngest child, two years old at placement, came into foster care with burns the shape of an electric stove burner on his bottom from being placed on top of a hot stove. The boys later revealed more stories of burnings, beatings, and their fear of a "bad uncle" who lived with the family.

Given this background, Diana Ortega was stunned when a county worker new to the case recommended to the court that unsupervised weekend visits commence followed by family reunification. Despite the foster mother's concerns and the boys' own declaration that they did not want to return to their birth family, a judge ordered overnight weekend visits and eventual reunification.

Although the boys returned safely from their first weekend visit, and said they wanted to visit their family again, Diana began to suspect that something was not quite right during visits a few weeks later. The boys became uncharacteristically secretive and defiant; they whispered, cried, sometimes sexually touched other children, and oscillated between being aggressive and being withdrawn. From the children's drawings and confused statements, Diana suspected possible abuse of some kind, which she reported to the social workers. However, the bureaucratic

layers, institutional hierarchy, and reunification plan muffled the voice of the foster mother, and no change was made until state-recognized experts became involved. After Juan sexually acted out at school, a police investigation was initiated against the seven-year-old boy that concluded with the child's therapist determining that his uncle had been sexually abusing him during home visits. Only when the credentialed professional advised ceasing visits did the court stop unsupervised home visits.

Throughout the unfolding of this incident, Diana reported her concerns. She was heard but not heeded. Reports to child protection officials recorded what she saw, her interpretations, and her recommendations, but since authority rested with the relatively more distant county workers and court who sought objective proof, the family reunification plan continued as ordered. With the pressures of heavy, crises-laden caseloads, Diana's concerns could be hastily filed and essentially ignored. From the point of view of the system, all she had were suspicions. Although Diana's close familiarity with these children signaled that something was not right, her intimate, particularistic knowledge did not hold weight with authorities who viewed them as the unfounded inferences of a "mother," someone swayed by emotions and intuition. Intimate knowledge and individual responsiveness, so important in the private sphere and the reason the state placed foster children in families in the first place, lacked persuasiveness in the public system. Although Diana was given the responsibility for the daily care of these children, she was not granted authority. This caused great pain for Diana as she watched children whom she loved suffer through this confusing time—especially given her belief that if she had been listened to initially, this would not have happened.

An important irony of this situation was that while Diana had very little power over these decisions, she was left with the responsibility of dealing with the consequences of this situation. She was the one who had to help the boys deal with the abuse, the guilt that they expressed for betraying their family, the termination of the weekend family visits, and the extensive sexual acting out that followed.

This episode reveals both the level of responsibility of foster mothers and their lack of power and influence. Similar situations regularly occurred in serious and not so serious circumstances. Although mothering entailed protecting children from harm, foster mothers experienced powerlessness as state authorities made decisions that discounted foster mothers' intimate knowledge and remained unresponsive to the particular children they cared for deeply.

### **Disrupting Traditional Families**

Paradoxically, the foster family strategy of maintaining a traditional family lifestyle through caring for foster children carried with it unanticipated disruptions and public interventions into their private family lives. This happened in two primary ways.

First, the foster children themselves sometimes changed the lives and routines of foster families. As to be expected, foster families tried to accommodate the needs

and desires of foster children as they would any new addition to the family, but they also had to incorporate treatment and bureaucratic requirements such as therapist appointments, social worker visits, court appearances, and birth family visitation. In addition, foster children's frequent mild to severe emotional and behavioral problems sometimes strained foster families. While a violent tantrum from a preschooler may not constitute a real threat, such behaviors from adolescents understandably alarmed foster families. Several such incidents arose during this ethnographic research. For example, on one occasion, two 12-year-old girls locked their babysitter in a room, claiming they had knives and threatening to burn down the house. Similarly, an 11-year-old girl swung a baseball bat at her foster mother and shattered their curio. At times, foster parents felt these children threatened their families' safety and feared that this behavior would rub off on their own children. Even if most foster children's behavioral issues were minor and could be addressed effectively over time, many children came with problems that tested their care providers and threatened the idyllic family experience they desired.

Second, a great deal of foster family disruption was created by the bureaucratic, regulatory, and supervisory nature of the foster care system. Beyond having to adopt professionally approved childrearing methods, foster families were made to feel that they lived in glass houses as social workers routinely intervened and policies regulated foster homes, collapsing the public-private distinction and undermining family autonomy and authority. The state became a matriarch as differently located professional women intervened in many aspects of foster mothers' family management. Regulations institutionalized middle-class biases that assumed ample resources and space specifying, for example, sleeping arrangements, closet space, and minimum children's wardrobe. State licensing required Hope professionals to conduct quarterly inspections and unannounced foster home visits beyond regular weekly social worker visits. While these rules aimed to protect children and may have prevented the kinds of abuses that have been documented in the county foster care system, it paradoxically also resulted in foster parent dissatisfaction and threatened foster placement stability. Foster mothers felt intruded on when social workers came in with checklists detailing how they needed to reorganize their homes. Foster mothers, who conceived of themselves as caring, child-centered service providers, experienced this regulation and surveillance as excessive and invasive.

Foster care regulations and white, middle-class social workers assumed an isolated, independent, nuclear family that did not reflect the lived reality for many foster families. For instance, in an effort to safeguard children from predators, all regular foster family visitors were required to be fingerprinted and to undergo a criminal background check. In the anti-immigrant atmosphere of Southern California in the 1990s, many Latino families were especially hesitant to impose this requirement on friends and family, whether they were documented or undocumented. Foster families faced a dilemma as they resisted subjecting loved ones to state scrutiny. One Latina foster mother explained to me how state regulations left her uneasy and forced her to lie. Because she had taken in some temporarily homeless relatives—a

family of four who lived in her den as they saved money for housing—she was violating rules that specified where people could sleep and thus lived in fear of unannounced visits. She said that she could not abandon her relatives but, at the same time, she did not want to lose her foster children. This kind of situation emerged for families who relied on informal and reciprocal services, arrangements common among working-class and ethnic minority families (Stacey 1990; Stack 1974). Perhaps the state could not trust people they did not know with children under its protection, but these foster families felt that they could trust the individuals whom they regularly helped and who also helped them get through their daily lives.

### Money versus Love

A final tension between foster parent motivations and the institutional context of their labor involved the ways in which compensation sparked suspicions about foster parents' commitment to children. Accompanying the historical and ideological split between the public and the private spheres came the assumption that women engaged in reproductive work within homes should be unconcerned with money. Illustrating this point, although people have not been shy to ask me whether foster parents "do it for the money," no one has ever asked me whether the social workers, lawyers, or judges involved in the foster care system do it for the money. The fact that carework has been conventionally equated with social value in opposition to market value left foster mothers disempowered in negotiating financial issues and vulnerable to accusations of ulterior, and presumed inappropriate, motives.

Agency and state workers questioned foster parents who called about late stipend checks or requested reimbursement for health care costs that were supposed to be covered by Medicaid. For example, this Hope worker complained about a foster mother's call to the agency when her check was late: "That Diana Ortega is always calling to make sure that the check will arrive on time, or if it's late just one day, she calls to complain. Makes me wonder why she does this and how much she needs this money" (Pammy Gover, agency receptionist, white, working-class, married woman, 40s). Similarly, the agency director questioned the foster mother's commitment when, after paying \$200 for medical expenses due to a Medicaid bureaucratic error, she requested reimbursement: "Why couldn't she just pay it and forget it? She should be willing to pay for the children's health. If she's not, we should question whether she is an appropriate foster mother." When middle-class professionals suspected foster mothers lacked devotion to children because they indicated financial needs, they reinforced white, middle-class assumptions that caring for children could and should be exclusively a selfless labor of love and failed to recognize the material realities of care. Nelson suggested that "the notion that anyone could live somehow above the financial struggles of this world may be a vestige of the image of the white, middle class femininity idealized in the Victorian 'angel of the house'" (1999, 49).

One of the most difficult situations I saw working-class foster parents endure was when they were faced with the decision to adopt foster children they dearly loved at the cost of losing stipends they depended on as part of their monthly income. Such parents felt great pains when they were accused of not loving the children and doing it only for the money. This situation faced Rosa Hernandez when she could not afford to adopt the two-year-old boy, David, who had lived with her family his entire life. "It will break my heart when he is adopted. There is no way you can't get attached if you're supposed to love them and nurture them and give them a good home. But then they turn around and say if you can't adopt them then we'll take them; you must not really care about him after all. But we can't afford it; we would lose his MediCal, and he has asthma. We might lose everything; then we couldn't take care of anybody" (Latina, working-class, married woman, 40s). Rosa desperately wanted to continue to take care of David and her other foster son. It was not that she lacked emotional commitment; rather, she feared unpredictable financial hardship. The foster parents knew it could prove too difficult to provide for the family of six (including the two foster children) on the father's \$1,000 monthly wage, especially as the boys grew. What is more, they feared they would not be able to afford the health care needs of these medically fragile children without the guarantee of health insurance. Nevertheless, the caseworkers and lawyers accused Rosa of fostering only for the money and not truly caring about the boys if they did not adopt. (Once policies changed a year later and permitted continued health care coverage and minimal stipends for adopted children, the Hernandez family did adopt the boys.)

Similarly, Glenda Frederickson struggled with this dilemma when the caseworker and lawyer asked her to adopt her two foster children:

These boys are my life. I would do anything for them. They're my boys. I love them like they were my own, and they love me like I was their own grandma. Of course I want them to stay here until they're grown. But if I lose their foster payment, then I have to go back to work as a sewer [seamstress]. . . . I wouldn't be here to take care of my boys. Me and Steven can take care of ourselves, but we can't take care of the boys, especially as they get bigger and things get more expensive. We need the foster money to buy them food and clothes and everything growing boys need. (white, working-class, married woman, 60s)

Contrary to the belief that paying for care would diminish the quality of care and preclude authentic affection, foster family feelings of attachment for foster children most often increased over time. Foster mothers anguished when children left their homes, not because they would lose their payments (there were always children in state protection waiting for foster placements) but because they came to love the particular children they cared for. So while some foster parents resisted adopting children without stipends, this pointed to the material realities that coexisted with care but did not indicate lack of affection.

## CONCLUSION

As markets and states take over more responsibility for care, financial compensation, regulation, and oversight are certain to become important and contentious issues in care provision. It is also certain that retaining naturalized and deeply gendered assumptions of care offered selflessly and freely as a labor of love fails to recognize contemporary and future realities. Feminist scholars have begun to attend to the multifaceted complexity of carework by moving beyond a simplistic dichotomous view that people provide caregiving either for love or for money or that financial motives will necessarily diminish care quality.

This fieldwork supports these assertions. Hope foster mothers came to foster care for both self-interested and altruistic reasons and received both pecuniary and nonpecuniary rewards from their carework. In so doing, they delivered high-quality, nurturing care to children under state protection. At the same time, findings in the second half of this article also demonstrate a need for careful consideration about how carework is organized. The conditions of government-contracted foster care with its hierarchical, bureaucratic structure posed serious challenges for foster mothers, making their carework less ideal than they originally had imagined.

Gender stands at the center of all of this. First, the gendered construction of separate private and public spheres shapes these tensions. The assumption of gendered spheres justifies unequal rewards for paid carework in part because it is performed by women with little status in terms of class and race but also because it resembles unpaid work that women have always done in families and is understood to stem from feminine nature. But more than this, the myth of gendered separate spheres suggests that they operate on mutually exclusive and opposing logics. The fear is that injecting individualistic, market motives—traditionally associated with masculinity—into caregiving—traditionally associated with femininity—would undermine the core logic and value of the private sphere rather than adding new dimensions and complexities. To guard against this threat and to preserve the authenticity of caring feelings and the quality of caring acts, the state paradoxically intensifies public surveillance and control of foster mothers' parenting and private lives. Although intended to protect children, this creates an unsupportive context for foster mothers' carework that compromises not only the caregiving experience of foster mothers but the stability and quality of child care itself.

In this study, the numerous regulations and professional interventions diminished foster parent satisfaction and increased foster parent stress and retention problems. In addition, foster parent and social worker attention was diverted away from kids' specific needs and toward compliance and documentation issues. Consequently, children's security and placement stability suffered. While children were certainly safe in Hope homes (there were no substantiated cases of child abuse in Hope foster homes during the time of this research), numerous foster parents resigned, and a few were terminated due to conflict over compliance with agency workers. Foster parent turnover had serious consequences for children, especially

when it forced them from families whom they had come to trust and love and required them to move to new homes, new schools, and new communities.

This tension between child protection and caregiver autonomy is not easily resolved, but I would suggest that some measures can be taken to improve conditions for foster parents while agency representatives remain vigilant about child safety. First, policies and professionals need to recognize that the kind of particularistic, loving care that they are asking foster mothers to provide occurs in families with divergent understandings and practices of family management and childrearing. Caregiver experience and expertise should be acknowledged, valued, and incorporated into the range of acceptable childrearing approaches, even if they differ from ideals espoused by professionals. In addition, regulations that require foster homes to maintain the one-size-fits-all standards of out-of-home care institutions are excessively restrictive and inflexible for family life and aim at a level of social control and micromanagement that is not possible to accomplish with policy (Glazer 1988) and, as we have seen, contribute to other unintended consequences. Initial screening and clear rules about safe discipline methods and parental supervision should persist, but ongoing professional contact should primarily focus on supporting caregivers and children rather than monitoring and compliance. As has been done in some locations, foster parents themselves should be called on to support and evaluate their peers as well as inform professionals and policy makers about the issues that they face as care providers.

Given the reality that more and more care will be provided for pay, it is important to seek ways to enable and support careworkers who must meet their own material needs at the same time as providing other-centered care. Better pay and adequate benefits would be a good place to start. But as we have seen, the organization of carework is equally important. While safeguards to protect vulnerable populations are imperative, public care programs, policies, and discourse must also recognize and reward careworkers' real skills, knowledge, labor, and devotion as well as integrate and appropriately value an ethic of care in these more public realms.

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