Exploring the emotional experiences of foster carers using the photovoice technique

Despite the wealth of literature on foster care, limited attention has been given to investigating the subjective, everyday experiences of the carers themselves. **Lauren Pickin**, **Vivienne Brunsden** and **Rowena Hill** report on research into the emotional experiences of foster carers using the photovoice method as reconfigured for psychological research (Brunsden and Goatcher, 2007). The resultant visual and verbal data were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Five super-ordinate themes emerged: 'Angry frustration', 'Promoting security and well-being', 'An ambiguous life', 'The impact of the children' and 'Coping?'. The research provides a greater understanding of the emotional needs of foster carers and has practical implications in terms of provision for their support.

Lauren Pickin is an Outreach Worker for Nexus Fostering and a Special Educational Needs Teaching Assistant, Hartford Learner Centre, Cambridgeshire County Council, UK

Vivienne Brunsden is Principal Lecturer and Rowena Hill is Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

Key words: foster care, emotions, photovoice, interpretative phenomenological analysis

Introduction

The valuable role of foster carers has been frequently acknowledged (eg DfES, 2006), yet there is limited research into their lived experience (Pithouse *et al*, 2004). Fostered children often come from abusive or neglectful backgrounds and are placed with foster carers in the hope that they will receive a supplementary experience of parenting; one seeking to reverse developmental damage and enable more positive future outcomes for the child (Andersson, 2001; Schofield and Beek, 2005). Recent years have seen increased regulation and monitoring, formalising the foster caring role (Rhodes, 1993). This shift to the pseudo-professional has arguably constrained carers' sense of self-determination (Plant, 1970). Further, demands have increased due to the placing of children once viewed as unsuitable for fostering, because of the perceived benefits to the child of personalised over institutionalised care (Warman *et al*, 2006). Foster carers now need more trained professional skills, but, with the perceived links to voluntarism (Smith, 1988; Marcellus, 2008)

some criticise the shift towards professionalism as detracting from fostering's intended ideals (see Testa and Rolock, 1999). They also caution against the managerialism that motivates this change (Wilson and Evetts, 2006).

Foster carers share their home, possessions, family and everyday experiences with their foster children (Westermark *et al*, 2007). While not considered employment, foster carers do receive pay and the introduction of 'work' into the private domestic world creates ambiguity (Walker *et al*, 2002). Care can be highly demanding as children regularly present with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Orme and Buehler, 2001; Gilbertson and Barber, 2003). Responding to these can evoke a range of negative emotions (Gilbertson and Barber, 2003; Pithouse *et al*, 2004) that may contribute to caring becoming viewed as a burden (McCarthy *et al*, 2003). The negative impact of caregiving stress on psychological well-being is well established (Cohen and Eisdoffer, 1988; Mullan, 1992), as caregivers struggle to balance their own social and emotional needs against those of others (Beach, 1993; Shyu, 2000). Regardless of such conflicts, carers are expected to respond tenderly to the children they look after. Ironside (2004, p 39) described fostering as 'living a provisional existence', suggesting that the child's painful feelings can be taken on by their carers, similar to the secondary traumatisation seen in occupations such as social work and counselling (Collins, 2003; Cairns, 2004; Hesse, 2004). Foster carers are expected to provide emotionally safe, secure environments (Buehler *et al*, 2006), providing a substitute experience of healthy family life (Nutt, 2006). They are encouraged to form attachments with the child, nurturing the child's ability to form future attachments

(Corby *et al*, 2001; Edelstein *et al*, 2001). The emotional bonds formed through such intimate provision of care create the notion of 'family' (Wasoff and Dey, 2000), suggesting that 'family' is a social construction with its meaning dependent upon individual context (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990).

The research literature on foster care is dominated by a focus on the children rather than the carers (Sigrid, 2004; Ackerman and Dozier, 2005) with the limited research on carers appearing to neglect their own subjective interpretations of the role. This seems an oversight given that the child's experience is likely to depend on their carer's emotional well-being (Simons and Johnson, 1996). Consequently, the present study sought to explore this phenomenon. Because of both the lack of previous research and the focus on emotional experience, it was felt a qualitative approach was needed.

Generally, qualitative methods utilise verbal data. However, it can be argued that words alone are insufficient for understanding something as complex as emotion (Brunsden and Goatcher, 2007). Individuals encounter the world as a sensory experience (Banks, 1998) and visual imagery offers a way of articulating the ineffable, allowing access to inner worlds that language cannot capture (Brunsden *et al*, 2009). It has been suggested that using photographs can facilitate discussions around difficult, abstract concepts and sensitive issues (Curry and Strauss, 1994; Hazel, 1995; Hagedorn, 1996) and may stimulate emotional release (Cronin, 1998). Although there are a variety of research methods incorporating photography, photovoice has been considered explicitly for emotion-based research (see Brunsden and Goatcher, 2007).

Photovoice asks individuals to document photographically their everyday lives and experiences, after which the resultant photographs are used as a catalyst for discussion. The participant has control over how her or his life is documented and recorded, as well as over the direction and pace of the discussion (Brunsden and Goatcher, 2007; Brunsden *et al*, 2009). Equal analytic value is given to the visual and verbal data, facilitating holistic understandings.

Photovoice has its philosophical roots in hermeneutics and phenomenology. The hermeneutic approach is interpretative and concentrates on the meaning of experiences and their developmental and cumulative effects on the individual and on society (Polkinghorne, 1982). The phenomenological approach focuses on specified human phenomena, with the aim of describing and understanding rather than explaining these by focusing on the meaningfulness of perceived experience for those concerned. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA – Smith and Osborn, 2003) shares these same hermeneutic and phenomenological roots, thus making it an appropriate analytic technique for data elicited using photovoice (Brunsden and Goatcher, 2007). In IPA, which is idiographic in its focus on individual experience while recognising the resonance that individual experience can have for others, the participants' internal hermeneutic understandings are overlaid by the researcher's external hermeneutic interpretation (Smith and Eatough, 2008).

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to gain a sample of five carers – four caring full time and one respite. In purposive sampling, participants are chosen because they exhibit particular features or experiences (in this case foster caring, both full time and respite) that will enable a detailed understanding of the central themes under consideration. IPA generally uses small samples; this has been defended as enabling a competent theoretical perspective to be developed, as long as adequate contextualisation is preserved (Chapman and Smith, 2002). Four of the participants were female, including the respite carer.

'Susie' was a full-time carer living

with her husband and their own son. At the time of the research she had been foster caring for four years and was looking after a baby girl. 'Megan' was also a full-time foster carer living with her husband and had two adult children who had left home. She had been caring for four years and was looking after two teenage boys. 'Michael' lived with his wife and had been a full-time carer for ten years. They had recently been granted a permanent placement for the two children they had most recently fostered and also had their own grown-up children who lived elsewhere. 'Jo' was a respite carer alongside her day profession and had been fostering for just over a year. She lived alone and had no children of her own. 'Sally' had been caring for five years and lived with her partner. At the time of the research, they were looking after two teenage boys.

Data collection

Participants were provided with guidance on the photo-taking process and given a 27-exposure colour disposable camera. They were asked to take photographs which they felt were a reflection of their own emotional experience of being a foster carer. These were then used as the basis for interviews in which participants were asked to choose which images they wished to discuss and in what order. This meant that no fixed number of photographs was discussed in any given interview and allowed for the amount of time spent talking about a particular image to be at the discretion of the participants themselves. Thus, they had the freedom to explore their own experiences in as much or as little detail as they wished. All interviews were then transcribed and, along with the photographs, were analysed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis previously described.

Ethical considerations

Past research involving the use of photographs has highlighted issues of privacy and anonymity (Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001; Barrett, 2004). Therefore, participants were informed before they took any photographs that, although they were free to take and discuss whatever images they wished, for reasons of privacy any depicting actual people would not be disseminated. In addition, all transcripts were de-identified and participants were given pseudonyms.

Analytic process

Both the verbal and visual data were subjected to an IPA (Smith and Osborn, 2003). This involved an initial analysis of individual's transcript and accompanying photographs in isolation of other individuals' data. The transcript was read and re-read, and the photographs repeatedly scrutinised, in order to obtain a holistic overview of the participant's account. During this examination, unfocused research notes were made relating to anything within the data that appeared to be significant. This information was then subjected to a closer consideration in order to identify any conceptual themes that it was felt depicted the essence of that individual participant's account. Following this stage, the analysis across participants' accounts began. Connective themes were sought across accounts, with related themes from individual reports being clustered together and organised under superordinate conceptual headings. Throughout this process of data organisation, the original transcripts were continually referred to in order to ensure that themes remained representative of the participants' original accounts and intentions. The resultant structure of themes was then used to facilitate the creation of the written analysis which, again, involved a continuous reflection on this thematic framework and a return to the original transcripts to ensure a representative account.

Validity

The key concern regarding validity of qualitative research is not on issues such as sample size or generalisability but rather on the resonance and the applicability of the concepts for describing similar experiences in other situations (Conrad, 1990). The validity of qualita-

tive research is achieved through the processes involved during data collection and analysis meeting a number of different criteria. In this research, it included using reflective listening skills to check understanding and interpretations during the interview (Stiles, 1993) and clear documentation at each stage of analysis to open interpretations to the scrutiny and reflection of others. In order to ensure the internal coherence of the analytic arguments, loose ends and contradictions in the data were examined and included in the analysis, and the interpretations were constantly checked to ensure that they were warranted by the data. Finally, a member of the research team who was not involved in the primary analysis, acted as an auditor to ensure that the final interpretations were valid and justified by the data.

Findings

Five superordinate themes emerged – 'angry frustration'; 'promoting security and well-being'; 'an ambiguous life'; 'the impact of the children'; and 'coping?' – each of which contained a collection of sub-themes (see Figure 1).

Angry frustration

An 'angry frustration' emerged overwhelmingly from the data of all five participants. This was rarely generated by the child but instead was directed at the adults surrounding him or her. Three sub-themes were identified: 'Conflict', 'Impotence' and 'Incompetence'.

Conflict

Often, the foster carers felt they were in conflict with the many other adults involved in the child's life. Liaison with the 'army' of professionals with whom they had to deal was often fraught with turbulence and feelings of animosity were not uncommon. Michael's comments were echoed by those of all the other participants:

Social services not doing what they say they're going to do. Or changing their mind about something or dragging their feet and . . . mental health advocates, who are there for mum's benefit, interfering . . .

Michael used the metaphor of a knot to describe these problematic issues and

Figure 1
The structure of superordinate and subordinate themes arising from the analysis
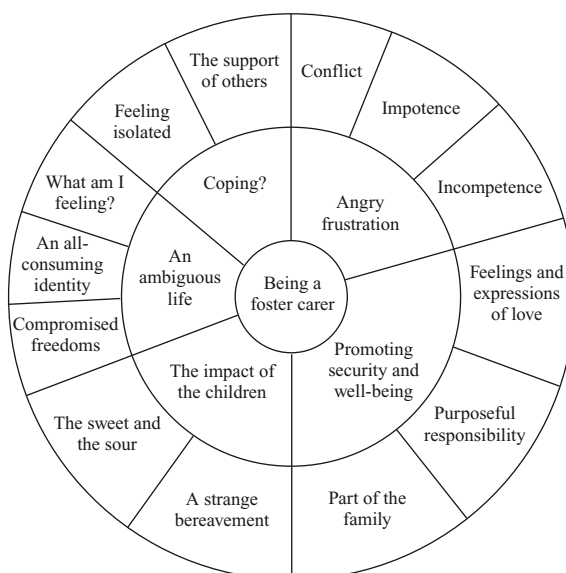
articulate how things do not always run smoothly but instead can become tangled and difficult (see Image 1).

Participants' frustrations would often result in anger when the decisions made by social services were considered hasty and injudicious. The carers felt that they were regularly battling with other professionals. Occasionally they would win these 'battles' and succeed in creating changes:

I managed to delay it by a week. I managed to get an extra week for them because they wanted it done within ten days or something and I just said, ' No, that's too soon. The children won't be able to adapt that quickly.' (Susie)

The motivation for their struggles came from the desire to protect and represent the needs of the foster children. However, these frustrations were magnified when their campaigns proved ineffective.

Impotence
Participants recounted multiple instances of feeling powerless, in terms of situations or events over which they had no control. When limits were imposed on their ability to protect their foster children, intense frustration and anger would often follow:

. . . the fostering does make you want to just scream and shout and makes you

Image 1
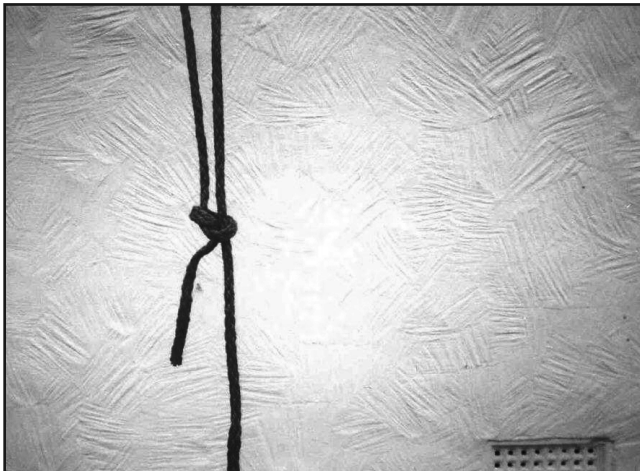
feel really angry, partly because of like, the . . . the frustrations of it and the things you can't change. (Susie)

All of the carers described feeling frustrated in the face of bureaucracy. They recounted feeling as if their efforts were too easily overridden and this would leave them feeling dejected:

You feel rubbish and dismissed really because we could do loads and loads of work and everything's running smoothly within fostering and then one person can come in and it could all change. (Megan)

However, the participants demonstrated resilience in the face of these feelings, choosing to work around them and make the best of difficult situations, rather than letting imposed decisions defeat them.

Incompetence
Perceived incompetence from the people whose responsibility it was to nurture and protect the children fuelled feelings of intense frustration within the carers. While sensitive and sympathetic towards their foster child's birth parents, they also became annoyed at their lack of parental responsibility, expressed by Megan:

But they have got the opportunity to contact and things cos one parent should keep contact and will blame everybody except himself and doesn't take any responsibility, so that's really frustrating.

Susie described feeling similar frustrations, not only at the lack of parenting but also the apparent disregard for her own time:

. . . when parents don't turn up for contact and it's all arranged and you drop things to fit in with them and then they don't even bother showing up . . .

Parents were not the only individuals causing frustration. Sally recalled interactions with trained staff at a pupil referral unit:

Sometimes, they, they're the one people that can make me blow actually! I get really angry, I got really angry on the phone with them.

Participants shared a firm view that adults have a responsibility to protect and shelter children from harm. The perceived failings of other adults in terms of their commitment to the children appeared to add to the burden of responsibility they felt.

Promoting security and well-being
All participants communicated a desire to nurture a sense of security and stability within the children for whom they cared. This superordinate theme is comprised of three sub-themes: 'Purposeful responsibility, 'Part of the family' and 'Feelings and expressions of love'.

Purposeful responsibility
All carers felt a significant amount of personal responsibility for the children in their care. Even in times of respite, they spoke of a preoccupation with their welfare:

But it's very hard because of their autism; if they go off on their own what do they do when they don't know how to approach people or they might do it wrongly or . . . they're quite vulnerable really. (Megan)

Their sense of responsibility was purposeful in terms of developing the child; participants were aware of the difficulties the children had faced in the past and were concerned for their coping abilities:

On some occasions they may be placed with you because they're not coping with all them things that are going on in their lives . . . they can't communicate that for whatever reason or it's just overwhelmed them so you've got all that to try and sort of separate out. (Jo)

Participants felt responsible for establishing self-esteem and self-confidence within the children to enable them to cope more effectively, feeling the children were dependent upon them to achieve this.

Part of the family
There was a common feeling amongst participants that the foster children had become emotionally entwined into the dynamics of the family and family life. Image 2 denotes this feeling of unity and this is expressed by Michael's discussion of this image:

Image 2

Although this is not an emotion it's a feeling of being. It's a family orientated type of object and that's my feeling, I feel we are, as a family.

A sense of family was also expressed by Megan who discussed the happy and fun times shared as a 'family' during holidays away. She used a photograph of a Mickey Mouse lamp as a representation of these happy times together as a holistic unit:

Everybody, yeah um . . . it's quite funny really cos you turn it on and off and it says . . . welcomes you, and it's a stupid thing but Mickey makes us all happy and smile and we liked, we like to go to Disney and take the whole family with him really.

The decision to involve foster children in family holidays is a clear demonstration of the view that these children exist as part of the family, to be loved, included and respected in the same ways as biological children.

Feelings and expressions of love

Expressions of love for the foster children were evident throughout the data. This appeared to be a particularly pertinent aspect of foster caring, so symbols of love were captured photographically in an attempt to display this:

. . . and this obviously represents the love that we feel for them, the heart. It's just a glass ornament but it says a great deal about how we feel about these children. (Michael)

Participants created environments that allowed for the development of both the feeling and expression of love, where before this may not have been possible for the children, as Megan describes here:

The oldest one, Frankie, he shows affection now, now he does it, by putting his hand on Keith's bald head there and he leans his whole body on top of him, because he doesn't like to be touched or held.

Although the full-time foster carers unanimously expressed feelings of love for their foster children, their emotional expression also acknowledged awareness of the children being only temporarily in their care.

An ambiguous life

Ill-defined boundaries between work and the domestic sphere caused feelings of confusion for the carers. Three sub-themes were identified: 'What am I feeling?', 'Compromised freedoms' and 'An all-consuming identity'.

What am I feeling?

This ambiguity between foster care as work and fostering as family resulted in a lack of clarity when reflecting upon personal feelings. Susie purposefully created a blurred image in an attempt to denote her ambiguous feelings towards the children for whom she has cared (see Image 3).

Image 3

This blurred image acts as a metaphorical representation of Susie's confusion at not feeling an instinctive and immediate love for one so evidently vulnerable and in need of affection as a young baby:

I think with the opinions and feelings and things that sometimes your emotions do get a bit blurred and um, you try and work out . . . sometimes it's difficult to work out how you feel . . . about the child as well sometimes.

She described these blurred emotions as 'strange' and contrasted this with the love she felt instantly at her own baby's birth.

Participants would form loving bonds with the foster children but were then required to break them. Michael reflects on the apparent absurdity of the situation and the resultant conflicted emotions.

You love them. And it's like someone's just taken them away. Which is what it is but with your permission! [Laughs] You know? You're encouraging it really! That's very very hard. Very very hard.

The transitory nature of the foster family created a lack of clarity for participants when trying to interpret their own emotions and their transitory parental role.

Compromised freedoms

It was clear that foster caring removed any clear divide between a professional and home life which resulted in freedoms being compromised. Susie expressed how this fusion of lives had created impositions on both her and her own child, raising issues of safety:

. . . but they wanted the parents to come into my house five days a week um, and the parents you know um . . . there's lots of issues you know and I was kind of also saying, you know, how safe am I and my two-year-old son?

In considering her different roles as foster carer and mother, Susie struggled to balance the competing responsibilities. All of the full-time foster carers commented upon their lack of freedom, with the majority of their time and energy going into fostering. Megan photographed the sky to denote this, commenting:

This is the sky which everybody probably does that for freedom just, just, just to be free and have space around you, really on your own . . . that's . . . which we don't often get really, we don't get a lot of time and being on your own.

The yearning for some personal space and freedom arose from the caring role which appeared to consume participants.

An all-consuming identity

Fostering impinged upon all areas of the participants' lives. It thus became less of a role and more of an all-consuming identity. Susie expressed an intermittent desire to escape from this identity:

. . . when I go to toddler groups . . . sometimes you kind of think, I'm not here with any foster children, I'm here with my son and I just want to come and be a normal parent like everybody else.

Susie felt that fostering had come to constitute her social identity. At times she appeared to begrudge this, express-

ing a desire to be defined occasionally as something else.

Caring for the children even resulted in everyday activities having to be altered:

There's no let-up at all. In fact, I've been to the shops with one of them and I've thought I can't do shopping, what's happened? (Megan)

Megan describes how something that was once a simple, everyday routine had become instead a challenge, causing her to question herself and her abilities.

The impact of the children

The children were of paramount importance in the lives of the foster carers. Every effort was made to accommodate their needs. Two sub-themes were clear within this area: 'The sweet and the sour', and 'A strange bereavement'.

The sweet and the sour

The demands of fostering evoked a range of emotions within the carers. Image 4 depicts a gelatine sweet which Susie had manipulated and twisted in order to symbolise the emotional twists and turns of fostering:

Sometimes that's what the emotions feel like because sometimes, well it's kind of like a rollercoaster with this being up and down and all over the place.

All the foster carers gave examples of the 'up' stage of this 'rollercoaster'. Happiness and feelings of fulfilment

Image 4

were expressed in terms of having created the environment in which the children could be happy and fully experience childhood:

He just became a 12-year-old boy and you know . . . the best thing I think for me is like seeing children laugh, it's really kind of fulfilling and makes it worthwhile. (Jo)

Conversely, participants also all described aspects of the 'down' stage of the ride:

Well, he's peed all over the carpet so the carpet got chucked out . . . you know he's torn the wallpaper off, he's gouged holes in the wall and scribbled over it. If he's got, basically if he's got something nice he will destroy it. (Sally)

Sally was not alone in describing children's difficult behaviours. The emotional difficulties of the foster children and the impact this had on the carers recurred throughout. However, the children caused other more subtle problems for the participants. Listening to the personal disclosures of the foster children created great sadness in them. Megan photographed a running tap to represent how the intense nature of these disclosures leaves her feeling drained and perpetually emptying (see Image 5)

Image 5

A strange bereavement

The bonds that are formed between foster carer and foster child meant that the child's eventual removal form their care had a profound impact upon them emotionally. The resulting feelings of loss were described by Susie:

I suppose in a way, you have to go through a grieving process because for so long they're your children and then you kind of lose them.

Articulating this sense of bereavement could be difficult since the children leaving were going to a 'better' situation. The pain felt at the foster children's removal was described by Michael, who recognised that it was shared with the children:

I mean they were screaming and hollering and . . . we just had to sort of push them off of us you know and we shut the door . . . and that was one of the hardest things . . .

Although the emotions experienced as a result of the loss were profound, it was not always appropriate for them to be openly expressed. Such a situation was again described by Michael:

. . . were laughing like that, 'Goodbye, goodbye', and as soon as we shut the door [Makes sad, sobbing expression] . . . But you had to keep this smile on all the time – this really great happy thing's happening, which it is you know. It's for us . . . we were devastated, absolutely devastated.

Here Michael acknowledged that his pain needed to be weighed against the interests of the child, drawing upon this to present the appropriate emotions and reducing the child's emotional burden.

Coping?

Foster caring can be very emotionally demanding. Participants were determined to prioritise the needs of the children in their care. However, this appeared to come at the cost of

addressing their own needs. Two sub-themes emerged in this area: 'Feeling isolated' and 'The support of others'.

Feeling isolated

Due to the need for confidentiality surrounding the foster children, some participants felt cut off from the rest of society.

Image 6

Image 6 shows Susie's attempt to capture a flower, which is smaller than the other flowers and less visible. She felt that this little, almost broken flower was a metaphor for her role as carer, being unable to express freely significant aspects of her life:

Sometimes I feel like I'm hidden in the back . . . Just by not being able to talk about things openly . . . with the fostering there are so many parts of it that you can't talk about.

Similar feelings of isolation were expressed by Jo, but this related to a lack of perceived support:

. . . also again, sometimes, you know, you can feel quite lonely yourself as a carer cos I, I'm a single carer and sometimes it can feel, you know if you've got a problem or . . . you can sort of feel a bit like, by yourself really.

Jo was the only single carer interviewed in the study. The other participants all had partners who shared in the caring role and could be turned to when they needed support.

The support of others

Support from people who were close to them was very important for participants. Susie describes how friends helped her to relax and escape the burden of her responsibilities as a carer:

There are friends who I see during the week who don't put them kind of pressures on me . . . I've got lots of good friends in the church I go to and they know what I do . . . I just go and we just have a chat about everything [Laughs].

Those participants in relationships also described feeling supported by their partners. This support came through verbal reassurance but also from the physical presence of their loved one:

We walked round [named town] and I don't know, for an hour-and-a-half just held hands and walked round and never spoke to each other. We never said a word, never said a word. (Michael)

All of the participants spoke of the support that they received from the Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). They had very positive things to say about this organisation and expressed confidence in accessing its help when needed. To quote Michael:

You just have to rely on your support as well from people like the IFA, you know we . . . They're our middle man if you like.

In contrast, the carers held a somewhat negative opinion of social services in relation to accessing support. Sally expressed thanks that she worked for the IFA as opposed to social services for that reason:

I think we're luckier being with an agency, I think working for social services themselves would be a nightmare because you can't get hold of

them, the offices are closed. Yeah, I wouldn't want to work just for social services I don't think. I think you would be struggling.

It appeared that the increased levels of support and personalised care provided by the IFA gave participants confidence that they had a reliable support mechanism.

Discussion

The combination of photovoice and IPA worked well for the exploration of emotional experience, with the visuals facilitating emotional expression in ways that words alone could not. During the interviews one participant struggled to find words to articulate what was felt. To combat this, he repeatedly referred to the photograph physically, as if attempting to materialise what he was struggling to say. The photographs facilitated this discussion of the ineffable by allowing participants to employ metaphorical representations (Curry and Strauss, 1994; Brunsden *et al*, 2009). The use of metaphor has been described as pervasive in everyday life, and the ways in which we think and act have been described as fundamentally metaphorical in nature (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p 2). The combined visual and verbal sharing of experience allowed deepened insights into how participants came to comprehend their own reality. The provision of a physical object to handle also appeared to ease the discussion of difficult emotions and prompted recall (Cronin, 1998; Salmon, 2001; Brunsden and Goatcher, 2007). As well as acting as a route into the shared understanding of participants' emotional experiences, the creative aspects of the photographic process facilitated novel understandings for the participants themselves. They frequently expressed the view that they had found the process a cathartic and liberating experience, supporting the sentiments of Hagedorn (1996). As intended, the combined visual and verbal data provided a richer and more comprehensive account of carers' emotional experiences (Hurworth *et al*, 2005;

Brunsden and Goatcher, 2007), eliciting insights that would provide a platform for further research into their experiences.

Participants expressed a wide spectrum of emotions ranging from feelings of distress, anger and sorrow, to elation, happiness and delight. This emotional diversity was predicated upon the central significance of the fostered child. The responsibilities of caring permeated all areas of participants' lives, transcending boundaries of work and home (Rhodes, 1993; Nutt, 2006). As a result, the participants could feel consumed by their task, which became their identity rather than a role. Carers portrayed their lives as dictated by external forces and restricted in their personal freedoms. These findings support previous research that shows how family caregivers schedule their social activity around the demands of the foster child (Archbold, 1982). The blurring of work and home meant that participants experienced difficulties in trying to balance the needs of the child against those of themselves and their biological families, resulting in a prioritisation of the foster child's emotional well-being. Again, this striving for balance and prioritising of others' needs is common in the literature (eg Beach, 1993; Shyu, 2000) and can be considered in relation both to Hochschild's (1983) Emotional Labour Theory, which describes how certain professions require the inducement or suppression of certain emotions, and to 'carer burden', a term used to describe the physical, emotional and financial toll on individuals who provide care for others (Burns and Rabins, 2000; Tarrier *et al*, 2002). However, carers' own emotional needs do matter, as the demands of caring are high. Foster children often come from an abusive or neglectful background and can present with a number of emotional difficulties. The participants in this study described how the children's feelings influenced their own emotions detrimentally, generating sadness and distress and leaving them drained (see Cairns, 2004). This was exacerbated by the confidential nature of

fostering which placed restrictions on the carers, limiting their opportunity to seek social support. This is problematic as such support has been found to be crucial for improving caregivers' quality of life, regardless of the level of severity of the caregiver burden (Chappell and Reid, 2002).

Participants experienced ambiguous emotions about their foster children. They expressed feeling love but also confusion about the nature of this love. Feelings of uncertainty and doubt appear to weave themselves into the very fabric of the fostering experience (Nutt, 2006). Carers appear to live in a daily world of contradictions, grappling with the encouraged formation of loving, intimate attachments but simultaneously recognising the temporal and professional nature of their care. Nutt (2006, p 76) describes foster children as being 'bureaucratised', which can affect how carers perceive the children in their care. However, the participants did regard their foster children as accepted family members. They felt a great sense of responsibility to nurture feelings of well-being and belonging within their foster children and expressed the need to provide for them, supporting the conclusions of Wasoff and Dey (2000). This provision encompassed the physical, psychological and emotional, with an emphasis on protecting children from future harm. The ways in which 'family' can be created through something other than biological ties has previously been discussed (Triseliotis et al, 1997; Jordan-Marsh and Harden, 2005). However, the sense of responsibility created by these familial bonds could result in carers' preoccupation with the children's welfare, generating feelings of concern and worry. This supports van Manen's suggestion that parental caring is interconnected with worrying, describing worry as 'the active ingredient of parental attentiveness' (van Manen, 2000, p 318) and positing that caring and worrying are inter-related concepts, arising from having responsibility for a vulnerable other.

Caring is unavoidably intimate and necessitates the formation of loving bonds between the carer and the cared for. As fostering is inherently temporary, a time must come when these bonds have to be broken. This places heavy emotional demands on the carers (Urquhart, 1989). As in previous research (Edelstein et al, 2001; Buehler et al, 2006), participants who had experienced a foster child leaving their care expressed the distress and intense pain they had felt at the child's departure. The intense emotions encountered during separation mirror the feelings commonly experienced by the bereaved, including sadness, disconnectedness and feelings of isolation (Payne et al, 1999). However, the mourning process for this type of ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999; Betz and Throngren, 2006; Thomson and McArthur, 2009) could be regarded as more psychologically complex than that of a death. The loss is intangible and generally unrecognised by society, yet the intensity of these feelings deserves attention. It has been suggested that ambiguous losses can affect one's sense of personal identity and social roles (Tshudin, 1997; Betz and Thorngren, 2006). Participants' grief did appear to contain elements not only of their loss for someone else, but also for something which had come to define them.

Frustration and anger were common emotions felt by all of the participants and appear to be commonplace in the foster care literature (see, for example, Wilson et al, 2000; Buehler et al, 2006). Work relationships appeared at times to be less than satisfactory and the view was expressed that the professionals involved could be less than competent (see Brown and Calder, 1999; Farmer et al, 2005; Maclay et al, 2006, for similar findings). Previous research has demonstrated how a perceived lack of support from others contributes to the burden experienced by carers (Sharpe et al, 2005; Maclay et al, 2006) and this was also evident here. It should be noted that participants did place a high value on the support they received from friends, partners and the fostering agency for whom they worked, but this was contrasted

with the lack of perceived support from other organisations. Fostering necessarily requires co-operation with a number of different organisations and it appears that poor working relationships here could cause problems even when support was provided elsewhere. This is clearly an area that would benefit from further research, which explicates the specific nature of any problems in order to advance to a solution.

The emotional and psychological demands of fostering, teamed with arguably inadequate support services, has been suggested as a reason for the lack of foster care availability (Wilson *et al*, 2000; Farmer *et al*, 2005). The increasingly common view that fostering is a skilled profession (Rhodes, 1993; Pithouse *et al*, 2004) places greater demands and responsibility upon carers. Findings suggest that they would benefit from a continually accessible network of support, especially as their self-esteem and self-confidence have been shown to improve when given the opportunity to share experiences with and learn from other carers (Warman *et al*, 2006). It is suggested that promoting such support networks could reduce the feelings of isolation and provide validation for carers' emotional experiences. Further, it is evident that the role of foster carers in creating successful outcomes for foster children needs to be emphasised. Recognising foster carers as respected members of the professional team may act to clarify their own role concept, reducing feelings of powerlessness and ambiguity.

References

Ackerman JP and Dozier M, 'The influence of foster parent investment on children's representations of self and attachment figures', *Applied Developmental Psychology* 26, pp 507–20, 2005

Andersson G, 'The motives of foster parents, their family and work circumstances', *British Journal of Social Work* 31, pp 235–48, 2001

Archbold P, 'An analysis of parent caring by women', *Home Health Care Services Quarterly* 3, pp 5–26, 1982

Banks M, 'Visual anthropology: image, object and interpretation', in Prosser J (ed), *Image-based Research: A sourcebook for qualitative researchers*, London: Falmer Press, 1998

Barrett D, 'Photo-documenting the needle exchange: methods and ethics', *Visual Studies* 19:2, pp 145–50, 2004

Beach D, 'Gerontological caregiving: analysis of family experience', *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* 19:12, pp 35–41, 1993

Betz G and Thorngren JM, 'Ambiguous loss and the family grieving process', *The Family Journal: Counselling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 14:4, pp 359–65, 2006

Boss P, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999

Brown, J and Calder P, 'Concept-mapping the challenges faced by foster parents', *Children and Youth Services Review* 21:6, pp 481–95, 1999

Brunsden V and Goatcher J, 'Reconfiguring photovoice for psychological research', *The Irish Journal of Psychology* 28:1–2, pp 43–52, 2007

Brunsden V, Goatcher J and Hill R, 'Photographic methods: an under-used approach', *Social Psychological Review* 11:1, pp 45–50, 2009

Buehler C, Rhodes KW, Orme JG and Cuddeback G, 'The potential for successful family foster care: conceptualizing competency domains for foster parents', *Child Welfare* 85:3, pp 523–58, 2006

Burns A and Rabins P, 'Carer burden in dementia', *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 15(S1), S9-S13, 2000

Cairns B, *Fostering Attachments: Long-term outcomes in family group care*, London: BAAF, 2004

Chapman E and Smith JA, 'Interpretative phenomenological analysis and the new genetics', *Journal of Health Psychology* 7:2, pp 125–30, 2002

Chappell NL and Reid RC, 'Burden and well-being among caregivers: examining the distinction', *The Gerontologist* 42:6, pp 772–80, 2002

Cohen D and Eisdoffer C, 'Depression in family members caring for a relative with Alzheimer's disease', *Journal of the American Geriatric Society* 36, pp 885–89, 1988

Collins S, 'Working with the psychological effects of trauma: consequences for mental

health-care workers – a literature review', *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 10:4, pp 417–24, 2003

Conrad P, 'Qualitative research on chronic illness: a commentary on method and conceptual development', *Social Science and Medicine* 30, pp 1257–63, 1990

Corby B, Doig A and Roberts V, *Public Inquiries into the Abuse of Children in Residential Care*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001

Cronin O, 'Psychology and photographic theory', in Prosser J (ed), *Image-based Research – A sourcebook for qualitative researchers*, Falmer Press, 1998

Curry TJ and Strauss RH, 'A little pain never hurt anybody: a photo-essay on the normalisation of sports injuries', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 11:2, pp 195–20, 1994

Department for Education and Skills (DfES), *Care Matters: Transforming the lives of children and young people in care*, London: TSO, 2006; available at www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/_files/Green%20Paper.pdf (accessed 10 January 2007)

Edelstein SB, Burge D and Waterman J, 'Helping foster parents cope with separation, loss and grief', *Child Welfare* 80:1, pp 5–25, 2001

Farmer E, Lipscombe J and Moyers S, 'Foster carer strain and its impact on parenting and placement outcomes for adolescents', *British Journal of Social Work* 35, pp 237–53, 2005

Gilbertson R and Barber JG, 'Breakdown of foster care placement: carer perspectives and system factors', *Australian Social Work* 56:4, pp 329–39, 2003

Gubrium J and Holstein J, *What is Family?*, Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1990

Hagedorn MIE, 'Photography: an aesthetic technique for nursing inquiry', *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 17, pp 517–27, 1996

Hazel N, 'Elicitation techniques with young people', *Social Research Update* 12, 1995; www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU12.html (accessed 19 April 2008)

Hesse AR, 'Secondary trauma: how working with trauma survivors affects therapists', *Clinical Social Work Journal* 30:3, pp 293–309, 2004

Hochschild A, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of human feeling*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983

Hurworth R, Clark E, Martin J and Thomson S, 'The use of photo-interviewing: three examples from health evaluation and research', *Evaluation Journal of Australasia* 4:1 & 2, pp 52–62, 2005

Ironside L, 'Living a provisional existence: thinking about foster carers and the emotional containment of children placed in their care', *Adoption & Fostering* 28:4, pp 39–49, 2004

Jordan-Marsh M and Harden JT, 'Fictive kin: friends as family supporting older adults as they age', *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* 31:2, pp 24–31, 2005

Lakoff G and Johnson M, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003

Maclay F, Bunce M and Purves D, 'Surviving the system as a foster carer', *Adoption & Fostering* 30:1, pp 29–38, 2006

Marcellus L, '(Ad)ministering love: providing family foster care to infants with prenatal substance exposure', *Qualitative Health Research* 18:9, pp 1220–30, 2008

McCarthy G, Janeway J and Geddes A, 'The impact of emotional and behavioural problems on the lives of children growing up in the care system', *Adoption & Fostering* 27:3, pp 14–19, 2003

Mullan T, 'The bereaved caregiver: a prospective study on changes in well-being', *The Gerontologist* 32, pp 673–83, 1992

Nutt L, *The Lives of Foster Carers: Private sacrifices, public restrictions*, New York: Routledge, 2006

Orme JG and Buehler C, 'Foster family characteristics and behavioral and emotional problems of foster children: a narrative review', *Family Relations* 50:1, pp 3–15, 2001

Payne S, Horn S and Relf M, *Loss and Bereavement*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999

Pithouse A, Lowe K and Hill-Tout J, 'Foster carers who care for children with challenging behaviour: a total population study', *Adoption & Fostering* 28:3, pp 20–30, 2004

Plant R, *Social and Moral Theory in Casework*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970

Polkinghorne D, 'What makes research humanistic?', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 22:2, pp 47–54, 1982

Rhodes P, 'Charitable vocation or 'proper job'? The role of payment in foster care', *Adoption & Fostering* 17:1, pp 8–13, 1993

Salmon K, 'Remembering and reporting by children: the influence of cues and props', *Clinical Psychology Review* 21:2, pp 267–300, 2001

Schofield G and Beek M, 'Providing a secure base: parenting children in long-term foster family care', *Attachment & Human Development* 7:1, pp 3–25, 2005

Sharpe L, Butow P, Smith C, McConnell D and Clarke S, 'The relationship between available support, unmet needs and caregiver burden in patients with advanced cancer and their carers', *Psycho-oncology* 14:2, pp 102–14, 2005

Shyu YL, 'Patterns of caregiving when family caregivers face competing needs', *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 31:1, pp 35–43, 2000

Sigrid J, 'Why do foster care placements disrupt? An investigation of reasons for placement change in foster care', *Social Service Review* 78:4, pp 601–27, 2004

Simons RL and Johnson C, 'The impact of marital and social network support on quality of parenting', in Pierce GR, Sarason BR and Sarason IG (eds), *Handbook of Social Support and the Family*, New York: Plenum Press, 1996

Smith B, 'Something you do for love: the question of money and foster care, *Adoption & Fostering* 12:4, pp 35–39, 1988

Smith JA and Eatough V, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, London: Sage Publications, 2008

Smith JA and Osborn M, 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis', in Smith JA (ed), *Qualitative Psychology: A practical guide to research methods*, London: Sage Publications, 2003

Stiles WB, 'Quality control in qualitative research', *Clinical Psychology Review* 13, pp 593–618, 1993

Tarrier N, Barrowclough C, Ward J, Donaldson, C., Burns, A. and Gregg, L, 'Expressed emotion and attributions in the carers of patients with Alzheimer's disease: the effect on carer burden', *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 111, pp 340–49, 2002

Testa MF and Rolock N, 'Professional foster care: a future worth pursuing?', *Child Welfare* 78:1, pp 108–24, 1999

Thomson L and McArthur M, 'Who's in our family? An application of the theory of family boundary ambiguity to the experiences of former foster carers', *Adoption & Fostering* 33:1, pp 68–79, 2009

Triseliotis J, Shireman J and Hundleby M, *Adoption: Theory, policy and practice*, London: Cassell, 1997

Tshudin V, *Counselling for Loss and Bereavement*, Philadelphia, PA: Bailliere Tindall, 1997

Urquhart LR, 'Separation and loss: assessing the impacts on foster parent retention', *Child and Adolescent Social Work* 6:3, pp 193–209, 1989

van Manen M, 'Moral language and pedagogical experience', *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 32:2, pp 315–27, 2000

Walker M, Hill M and Triseliotis J, *Testing the Limits of Foster Care: Fostering as an alternative to secure accommodation*, London: BAAF, 2002

Wang C and Redwood-Jones Y, 'Photovoice ethics: perspectives from Flint photovoice', *Health, Education and Behaviour* 28, pp 560–72, 2001

Warman A, Pallett C and Scott S, 'Learning from each other: process and outcomes in the Fostering Changes training programme', *Adoption & Fostering* 30:3, pp 17–28, 2006

Wasoff F and Dey I, *Family Policy*, Eastbourne: The Gildredge Press, 2000

Westermark PK, Hansson K and Vinnerljung B, 'Foster parents in multidimensional treatment foster care: how do they deal with implementing standardised treatment components?', *Children and Youth Services Review* 29, pp 442–59, 2007

Wilson K and Evetts J, 'The professionalisation of foster care', *Adoption & Fostering* 30:1, pp 39-47, 2006

Wilson K, Sinclair I and Gibbs I, 'The trouble with foster care: the impact of stressful "events" on foster carers', *British Journal of Social Work* 30, pp 193–209, 2000