Introduction

This article recounts the narratives of main caring (primary) foster-fathers who formed a sub-group of a larger study on foster-fathers in England (authors own, date). Foster-fathers play an important role in foster care though their stories are all too infrequently recounted in literature (Wilson, Fyson, & Newstone, 2007). Foster care, through non-related and kinship families, has increasingly become the most common placement type for children in need of out-of-home care in the United States of America (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017) and in Britain (The Fostering Network, 2018). Traditionally, the attention afforded non-related foster care has been on recruitment and retention rather than the negotiation of caring and family roles so little is actually known about the relational context of foster families (Orme & Combs-Orme, 2014). In their study on American fostering families Rhodes, Cox, Orme, and Coakley (2006) suggest the shortage of fostering placements in the United States (US) is exacerbated by the underutilization of existing foster families. Considering most foster family households include a man fostering alongside a woman (McDermid, Holmes, Kirton, & Signoretta, 2012; Orme & Combs-Orme, 2014) it is surprising there is little work focusing on foster-fathers or how foster carers negotiate their parental roles.

Main caring foster-fathers' stories were chosen to be re-examined to help identify how roles are negotiated within foster families. Their stories showcase the varied and diverse ways men care for children as foster-fathers and indicate how their utilization in foster care could be improved. This is of interest when it has been argued foster families represent idealised notions of family life that replicate traditional gender, and particularly mothering, roles (Nutt, 2002) which are therefore assigned rather than negotiated. Indeed, sociological approaches which see families and gender as fluid, flexible and dynamic (Butler, 1990, 2004; Giddens, 1992; West

& Zimmerman, 1987) are not always applied to foster families. Underpinning this article is Judith Butler's (1990) conceptualization of performing gender, performativity and the production of roles within foster families.

The organization of foster care

There is considerable diversity in the organisational means employed to meet the needs of vulnerable children which range from being voluntary carers to professionalized care-workers. For instance, in Sweden foster carers are state employees (Hojer, 2004) while extended family and community networks in Sub-Saharan Africa have been shown to meet the needs of orphaned children through utilizing social capital (Ssewamala, Karimlii, Chang, & Ismayilova, 2010). In England, the organization of looking after children in need of out-of-home care is largely provided by non-related foster carers arranged through local authorities. Currently, there are over 75,420 children and young people in the care of English local authorities with most (55,200) placed in foster care where the majority live with non-related foster carers and only eighteen percent (9,700) live with related foster carers (CoramBAAF, 2018). Studies show that most fostering households involve women and men as carers, with married and co-habiting couples predominant. While single caring families makeup in excess of twenty percent of English fostering households, few men (as little as 2 percent of all households) foster as a single person or with a male partner (McDermid et al., 2012). The formation of families who foster, whatever their composition and arrangements, is important to family social work because they provide support to vulnerable children and their families as well as undergoing a process of reorganization and negotiation to care for children. Jones and Hackett (2011) have reflected on how adoptive parents display family while the ways parental roles are negotiated within families have been shown to impact on children's understanding of family roles and gendered relations (Sinno, Schuette, & Hellriegel, 2017). The negotiation of non-gendered parental roles

within families has been shown to occur through the families of choice discourse (Weeks, Heapy, & Donovan, 2001), through homemaking roles taken on by men as stay-at-home dads (Fischer & Anderson, 2012) and the negotiations of domestic labor and childcare can challenge gendered household practices within LGBTQ+ families (Barrett, 2015).

Gendered discourses in foster care literature

Although most fostering households include a foster-father, the foster care literature principally focuses on foster-mothers, either as main carers (McDermid et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2007) or through sample bias when studies tend to rely on data from women (McDermid et al., 2012) and the relationship with gender and sex has received little attention in the literature (Brown, 2014). It has also been suggested that research information about foster-fathers may be gathered from women partners rather than men directly (Inch, 1999). Unless specifically focusing on men, the literature tends to reflect on women as carers and maintain the perception of conventionally gendered parenting roles in foster care whereby men are not seen as carers in their own light. The literature which does focus on foster-fathers highlights the importance of men in the lives of children and young people living with foster parents (Gilligan, 2000, 2012; Hicks, 2006; Newstone, 2000; Riggs, Delfabbro, & Augoustinos, 2010; Wilson et al., 2007) and that men are becoming more involved as foster carers (Hojer, 2004; Lewis & Boffey, 2010; Newstone, 2000; Riggs et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2007).

In the 1960s and 1970s, there were two significant American studies by Fanshel (1966) and Davids (1973). Fanshel in his research on foster families interviewed 81 men (and 101 women) using a separate interview schedule for men and women. In line with prevailing gendered discourses of the time, Fanshel's interview with men was half the length of the women's interview and a typical foster-father was presented as being a "rather retiring, passive person

who relies on his more energetic wife for leadership in family affairs" (p. 45). This notion of foster-fathers as not fully involved in foster care has not been held by more recent research when they have been identified as providing a range of roles and motivations. Davids' research on foster-fathers identified there were different paternal motivations for foster-fathers compared to biological-fathers and concluded men are underused in foster care. Developing on the male motivation to foster Inch (1999), in his doctoral thesis on American foster-fathers, applied Erikson's conceptualization of generativity to suggest foster-fathers seek to promote values in children with a desire to guide younger people and contribute to the next generation. Furthermore, Inch suggested men choose to foster to fulfil personal interests to become a father or to seek to retrace their fathering. In England, Newstone's (2000) examination of foster-fathers' self-perception of their fostering responsibilities found they frequently referred to themselves as positive role models to children and Boffey (2011) affirms men can contribute positively to foster care by being good role models. Gilligan (2012) promotes the idea that foster-fathers replicate gendered norms by engaging children in socially worthwhile activities which prioritize acceptable behaviour. Therefore, foster-fathers appear to enact and affirm normative masculinity when they adopt specific roles, such as male role modelling and supporting children in activities (Gilligan, 2000, 2012; Newstone, 2000; Wilson et al., 2007). However, Riggs et al (2010), in their Australian study and citing Newstone (2000), argue foster-fathers negotiate child-focused parenting roles that challenge and rework what it means to be a father and suggest they parent in non-normative ways to counter possible abusive experiences of fathering in birth families before foster care (Riggs et al., 2010).

Internationally many foster care models involve social work and environmentally they receive multiple levels of support (Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011). English foster carers are supervised by social workers (Department for Education, 2011) and studies show foster carers largely

value the support they receive from this specialist social work support (Brown, Sebba, & Luke, 2014; Sellick, 1999; Sinclair, Gibbs, & Wilson, 2004). However, Warde (2008) suggests African American foster parents prioritize caring responsibilities over working with partnering agencies, which may subsequently be misunderstood by practitioners working with foster parents. Orme and Combs-Orme (2014), research on foster parenting couples in the US, suggest foster-fathers are possibly more effective gauges of family functioning than women because women are more likely to want to succeed as foster-parents. Interestingly, a Flemish study highlights the diversity of fostering arrangement by reporting that there were no differences concerning the support needs and satisfaction between foster-fathers and foster-mothers (Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, De Maeyer, Gypen, & Belenger, 2016). Alternatively, studies also highlight foster carers, men and women, do not feel valued or trusted, experience difficulties with the fostering system, have a preference for peer support (Rosenwalde, 2008) and that foster families use their own resources rather than rely on those provided by support agencies (Hendrix & Ford, 2003).

It appears foster-fathers perform diverse masculinities which both affirm and challenge gendered norms (Gilligan, 2000, 2012; Newstone, 2000; Riggs et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2007). Hicks suggests gender practices are performed through everyday activities and whenever gender is enacted differently that this is dependent upon context (Hicks, 2013). The ongoing connection with fathering and masculinity is demonstrated when foster-fathers provide positive male role modelling (Gilligan, 2000; Newstone, 2000) and produce non-violent masculinity (Riggs et al., 2010) to counter children's perceived negative pre-care experiences of birth-fathers. While men may produce non-normative roles as foster-fathers, studies generally highlight how men represent themselves as reproducing traditional gender roles (Fanshel, 1966; Hojer, 2004; Wilson et al., 2007). The preservation of a gendered

discourse is maintained not only by foster-fathers' self-perception as traditional men but by new roles they take on as foster-fathers (Wilson et al., 2007). Walby's work on gender transformation acknowledges men take on new roles, such as driving cars and transporting families, though she argues these roles retain the gender divide within families because women continue to be seen as carers (Walby, 1997). The literature on foster-fathers suggests fostering roles are allocated, somehow, by gender differences though there is some flexibility how these roles are practiced (Hojer, 2004; Riggs et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2007). This flexibility in roles, taken on by foster-fathers, falls within contemporary held views of fatherhood because diverse masculinities do not require any real revision of gendered relations (Dermott & Miller, 2015). The production of multiple and diverse masculinities (Connell, 1995; Dermott & Miller, 2015; Hearn & Pringle, 2006) allows foster-fathers to care in non-traditional ways.

Butler's conceptual framework

Judith Butler, by theorising how gender is performed, argues there is some flexibility about how we understand gender as individuals *do* and *undo* gender. Butler is concerned with the troubling of gender and the subversion of identity and the doing and undoing of gender through performance and performativity. By performing gender, the individual mimics and acts out a gender role while performativity produces a series of effects that consolidate an impression of being a gender (Butler, 1990). In this way Butler argues people perform gender by way of mimicking and repeating expected gender norms. Butler's work has been applied to social work in relation to power, accepted fluidity of gender and anti-discriminatory practice (Green & Featherstone, 2014; Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). Kelan has applied Butler's work to the male-centric information and communication technologies (ICT) industry to look at gender performances by women working in ICT and found they undo and enact gendered relations through flexible ways of understanding masculinity and femininity (Kelan, 2009, 2010). Butler

argues gender performances are not purely voluntary and she has conjectured on the construction and recreation of hegemonic gendered norms and heteronormativity, despite identity and agency. Importantly for Butler, the heterosexual binary matrix creates masculine and feminine norms; these norms can be challenged by performances that undo gender. Butler suggests gender performance is more complex than a simple division between two genders as alternative variations of masculinity and femininity can be created (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004).

Foster care has evolved and parenting roles have become more fluid and diverse. The men's stories and narratives in this study highlight how gender is re-enacted by foster-fathers who both do and undo gender. The application of Butler's work to foster care can help to understand foster-fathers' identities, gender performance in foster families, the process and limits of agency in negotiating parenting roles. Improved understanding of how children may experience or be responding to differing roles among caregivers, as well as understanding how foster families organize and negotiate caregiving roles, will inform social workers' responses to foster families and this understanding may help facilitate improvement in the utilization of families who foster children living in out-of-home placements. The purpose of this article is to reflect on how foster-fathers negotiate their parental/ caring roles in families who foster. By focusing on main caring foster-fathers in England and how they negotiate their roles, and the limitations of these roles, they are seen to both do and undo gender as foster carers.

The Study

Originally the study set out to examine the experiences of foster-fathers in England and more specifically has expanded to explore how foster-fathers negotiate parenting roles as foster carers. The original study involved the collection of data through a social worker questionnaire

(n=70), foster-father interviews (n=23) and foster-father diaries (n=16). Foster-fathers were classified into three sub-groups: main caring (n=7); shared caring (n=11) and working partner (n=5). Data were gathered from foster-fathers registered with a nationwide fostering agency which had over 2000 approved fostering households. The interviews were transcribed, read, coded and themes identified by thematically analysing the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). The stories recounted by foster-fathers, during their interviews, demonstrate strong motivation to look after children and become foster carers. Their motivations to foster are varied and often involve childhood, maturation, employment, relationships and partnering, parenting and endings. This motivation to foster evidence a commitment to engage in foster care which contrasts sharply with the suggestion foster-fathers are hard to reach (Dickerson & Thomas, 2009) and the limited attention afforded them in the literature.

Method

For this article the interview transcripts from the main caring (primary) foster-fathers (*n=7*) have been revisited using narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) to examine how they configured themselves as fathers who *do* and *undo* gender. Main caring foster-fathers were chosen from the original study's sample (n=23) because they are more likely to renegotiate family roles to become main carers and take on less traditional parental roles. Rigour, reliability and credibility (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, & Spiers, 2002) were maintained during the initial study through a reflexive journal and data reflected on and analysed within the research team. During the current narrative analysis, data were solo coded with analytical memos and reflected on with a professional colleague (Saldano, 2009 (reprinted 2010)). Narrative analysis was selected because this approach encourages the researcher to reflect on the stories recounted by participants and consider the whole narrative as well as parts of it from more than one angle.

The narrative, in social science research, has gathered increasing legitimacy due to the ability to reflect on individuals and small social groups (McCormack, 2000a, 2000b; Riessman, 2008; Saldano, 2009 (reprinted 2010))

Sampling and data collection

Foster-fathers were originally recruited to the study through self-selection by applying to participate in the study. The seven foster-fathers selected for this article were chosen because they identified themselves as main carers in their fostering households (see Table 1).

[Table 1 inserted here]

The transcripts from main caring foster-fathers were chosen because they could be assumed to have transformed gendered relations and undergone a process of role negotiation more than other men in the sample. Data were initially gathered for the larger study which was completed in 2015 and analysed for this article in 2018. Ethical approval was provided by [named] University, each man was provided with an information sheet before agreeing to participate in the study. The identities of the men have been anonymised with fictionalised names attributed to each one. Each man provided written consent, which could be withdrawn at any point during the study.

Data analysis

The original qualitative study applied narrative interviews to gather data which were thematically analysed, data for this article were investigated through narrative analysis. Through this analysis, a story teller creates a plot from unstructured experience, the events structure the story and actions are viewed as consequential for the next action creating an overall narrative (Riessman, 2008) and specifically relate to their stories of becoming foster-fathers. Narrative data can often be quite cumbersome and apparently chaotic. McCormack (2000a & b) provides a framework to analyse the narrative data through the lenses of language,

narrative processes, context and moments. Interview data were coded using first cycle and second cycle coding methods to generate narrative coding which explored personal participation experience themes and narratives (Saldano, 2009 (reprinted 2010)).

Findings

The main caring foster-fathers' reflections suggest they undergo a process of role re-negotiation which challenge traditional parenting but also reveal how discursive practices affirm the continued hegemony of gendered norms within foster families. The themes emerging from the men's stories are classified as: foster fathers' narratives and performing gender differently and the reproduction of gendered norms by foster fathers.

Foster fathers' narratives and performing gender differently

The ways main caring foster-fathers perform gender are multifaceted because they not only *do* gender they also perform it differently. Each of the men had considered fostering for some time before applying to foster. Peter described himself as the *"homemaker"* who was responsible for the household tasks because he did *"the cooking and the cleaning"* while his wife worked full-time. Following a career in the armed services and because his children had grown up, Peter explained:

> *it's something [partner's name] and I thought about many, many years ago when I was in the forces and we thought about doing it [fostering] then...but because I always moved around so often and so frequently that I was told no [by partner] wait until you come out of the forces and you are settled ... so a couple of years after I came out that's exactly what we did [applied to foster]... she [partner] was working with old people and she said alright let's start fostering, we can look after some young people.*

With his partner working full-time out of the home Peter took on the main caring duties as a foster-father. Peter's narrative is very much concerned with wanting to look after children and

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to find employment which fitted in with his wife's working hours. During his interview, he talked about acting as the *'homemaker'* and experiencing a reversal of roles with his partner. He also presents himself as the main motivator to apply to become foster carers.

Chris, similar to Peter, had thought about fostering for some time. However, his motivation is much more personal than Peter's when:

> *"I myself was fostered, then adopted as a child and my experiences through child, adolescence and adulthood has given me an insight into the problems, the joy and the hard aches of being a child in care. So I want to give a little bit back to what I have taken out of society"*

Chris' narrative is one of hardship and survival and once he became a parent he felt able to care for fostered children. Chris presents himself as a survivor who "*would let anybody cry in my house*" and successful person with a sense of civic duty to help vulnerable children because he identified with them due to his own childhood experiences. Both Peter and Chris, along with the other men in this sample, described foster care as a vocation which is personally important to them.

The roles foster-fathers undertake appear to reflect their partnering relationships and most of the main caring foster-fathers presented their situations as gender *'role reversals'* with women. Alan, in agreement with his wife, left employed work to become the *'househusband'* following her work-based promotion. Alan's narrative involves several stories which intertwine to motivate him to foster. Firstly, a family member fostered; secondly, his son's life threatening illness; thirdly, his partner's promotion and finally a desire to care for a specific foster child all merged to motivate him to foster:

> *"We never had any intentions I don't think of fostering. The sister in law fostered but we didn't have much to do with her and we had our own son… we found out how poorly he [son] was and we were so grateful when he came back [home] we thought right we are going to do something… we've got a big house we've got a lot of love to give and we are going to do something so we contacted the Social Services Department… in between time…her [partner] boss was retiring and she was taking over his position… so we had already agreed I'd be a househusband…this kid [fostered by sister-in-law] was a lovely girl, she had problems but I kept saying 'I can't understand why nobody can look after her she's lovely'"*

Alan left his job and became the stay-at-home foster-father after his wife was promoted to a better paid job. These new roles, as foster carers, were negotiated with their partners to take account of their personal situations and to some extent the foster-fathers trouble gender norms when they become main carers. Through their narratives we also see signs of internalised identities which contest hegemonic norms, for instance Peter's commitment to fostering and childcare is more than convenience due to his partner's employment and Alan's bonding with the girl fostered by his sister-in-law is emotionally-based. Similarly, Chris was motivated to care for children experiencing difficulty because he felt he shared their experiences having had been fostered as a child. Subjectivity and internalised identities are allowed to challenge masculine norms when foster-fathers negotiate new and non-traditional parental roles.

Men in this study identified with roles which contradict aspects of masculine norms by showing caring traits more often associated with women. These caring traits appear to be deep rooted and highly personal for foster-fathers because they position children at the centre of family life. Thomas, a stay-at-home foster-father whose female partner works full-time, described how he

migrated to Britain from the Caribbean and talked about a highly masculinised childhood but because his adult children have moved away he feels:

> *"[I] cannot live without having kids around, we have to have kids around and … I sit down and have a word with my wife and … we just decide and think the best thing is to go into fostering …because at least you know you might not have your own family around but you can help people that need it and that's what led me to become a foster carer".*

The act of fathering, associated with an apparent need to care for children, provides men with a purpose in family-life. Thomas' identification with fostering and caring for children is so important to him that he states:

> *"I know the prime minister would be jealous of me because I'm getting paid to do something that I love".*

This paternal motivation to foster is more complex than masculinity, and fathering, founded on male breadwinning because men, in this study, identified with child-focused care.

John and Mike describe different narratives but, like the other men, share a passion for fostering. Mike became a foster carer when he became a stay-at-home dad to support his partner's career and agreed to look after one of his children's friends who lived in a residential home because: *"my kids approached me and asked me if he could come and live with us"*. He explained as a foster carer that: *"I am the main carer and I make the decisions"* and as the main carer *"[I]do everything… cooking, ironing, cleaning looking after kids"*. John, in common with Chris, also experienced childhood living in foster care. Since retiring from the armed forces, John married, had a son and explained:

> "*When we got together [with partner] it is one thing we would like to do is foster… I knew that fostering was what I wanted to do so from there on in when we realised that fostering was like our destiny*".

From his narrative John presents himself as the main motivator to foster and he explained that he does "*everything that a housewife would do but in role reversal*". The men recognise their motivation to foster and how they negotiate roles which they see are different to what they perceive as being usual gender roles.

Miles fostered with his male partner. As a couple Miles explained that their motivation to foster was to make a family because: *"it was one of the few opportunities to become a family, being a gay couple"*. This motivation to care for children is shared by all the foster-fathers though Miles is more candid about constructing family with children. In contrast Thomas, for instance, reflects on continuing family with children after his birth children move from his home. As a foster carer, Miles relinquished working full time to become a stay-at-home-dad because he had more childcare experience than his partner. His story involved fatherhood and sharing a life centered on a child. Through their interviews men show they were aware they were performing gender differently from masculine norms and they developed alternative and complementary roles which they negotiated with their partners.

The reproduction of gendered norms by foster fathers

While foster-fathers performed gender differently, in the end power, discourse and language all reaffirm gendered relations in fostering families and traditional parenting norms appear to continue to shape family-life. The possible risk of a child protection allegation conceivably limits their involvement in fostering because men are more likely than women to experience

an allegation of child maltreatment (Minty & Bray, 2001; Wilson et al., 2007). The ongoing threat of an allegation to men is explained by John:

> *"Being a man, you have to take more precautions regarding safe caring, child protection and always making sure that you've got witnesses when you do things or say things to people [and] protecting yourself".*

The process of investigating allegations of child maltreatment and the subsequent practice of safer caring (Slade, 2006), can prohibit emotional warmth between adults and children. The dilemmas caused by possible child protection concerns were expressed by Chris when he said:

> "*A lot of these kids need a hug - they need a shoulder to cry on and I'm not allowed to [hug]".*

Though Chris acknowledged he has allowed children to hug him he is very aware of the possibility for the hug to be misunderstood as a safeguarding concern. Foster-fathers understand children require emotional support but recognise the predicament caused by the perceived threat of an allegation. Through discursive practices reflecting risk-based discourses their performances reproduce hegemonic norms when foster-fathers feel they are expected to conform to non-caring stereotypes of men rather than provide emotional support to children. In this way the very support established to help foster carers through social work may well have the opposite effect on foster-fathers, Mike commented "*some social workers hate men*" while Chris explained that he thinks:

> *"A lot of social workers don't bend, they have been taught this is the procedure ...this is the way that we [social workers] do it, we [social workers] have got to do this, I [the social worker] am under orders".*

This perceived risk of falling foul of social work procedures appears to restrict men as foster-fathers because they do not want to be seen as risk to children.

While each man was motivated to foster, Miles alone explained he became the main carer due to having more childcare experience than his partner. The other men all explained they were somehow reversing roles with their women partners. The foster-fathers, in this study, routinely described a process whereby traditional parenting is resumed once a woman returns to the home-space. Throughout his interview Mike recounted how important it was for him to care for children and, as the main carer, he performed gender differently to trouble masculine norms. However following his partner's retirement, this all changed when he felt "*really pushed out*" and he withdrew, albeit reluctantly, from the feminised domain of the home-space. The way Mike shifts his home-based roles seem to highlight how these performances, that challenge normative parenting, are only temporary and not permanent. Alan similarly experienced a change of role when his partner also left work stated:

> *"It's just like the same as the mum really; like [partner's name] taking over cooking again and she takes over them roles, whereas that was always my job because I was a bloke at home whereas now she has taken over."*

Men may perform gender differently as stay-at-home carers but they enact *fathering* roles rather than transform traditional parenting because *mothering* remains distant and out of bounds from men. Peter and Chris also reflect on how their partners resume control over parenting and the home-space when they return home. This is more than conveniently taking time and having a break, rather the men seem to expect women to resume main caring because they are better equipped as carers than men. Foster-fathers performed gender differently by taking on roles they mostly associated with women, such as main caring. Gender relations, however, remained intact, sometimes despite agency, because performativity in the end enacted the repetitive citation of traditional mothering and fathering roles in foster families. Gender relations are challenged by child-focused foster-fathers who perform gender differently as main carers but when women return home performativity moves to performance to *do* gender

because dominant social forces and power relations re-affirm hegemonic norms as the acceptable way of proceeding.

By taking on the main caring role foster-fathers identified with non-traditional masculinity; however, through their narratives they continued to perform gender and affirm parental norms. Data from these interviews demonstrate main caring foster-fathers perform gendered roles when they take on the disciplinarian or boundary setter role in the home, Chris explained he imposes the boundaries within the home rather than his partner. Similarly male role modelling is presented as typically masculine. John explained he was consciously trying to be a good male role model for the foster children. The main caring foster-fathers, though appearing to challenge parenting norms by becoming main carers, continued to *do* gender when they performed many traditional parenting roles.

Discussion

There are limitations to this study due to the relatively small sample from within a single fostering agency and because no single male carers or foster-mothers were included in the sample. Another limitation to this study is the conceptualization of gender as fluid to just two categories (male and female). Data were only analysed from men who identified themselves as main carers and limits the generalisability of the study to this group. Despite these limitations, which prohibit generalised conclusions, the individual stories present a picture which is both surprising and complex. The data from this study confirm men play a wide range of traditional roles and tasks in fostering, such as role modelling, entertainer and disciplinarian, as well as caring, non-traditional roles. While these roles have been reported on elsewhere (Newstone, 2000; Riggs et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2007), the process by which foster-fathers negotiate new non-traditional roles and enact normative parenting has not been theorised. This

study, by applying Butler's construction of gender performance and performativity, supports the diverse assertions that foster-fathers produce new child-focused care to challenge traditional masculinity (Gilligan, 2012; Newstone, 2000; Riggs et al., 2010) while reproducing masculine norms through role modelling (Gilligan, 2000, 2012). These child-focused roles may challenge gender norms but they are negotiated and not assumed, as demonstrated by Alan who expected his wife to hold onto the intergenerational matriarchal mantle. This emerging identity, as foster-fathers, allows them to perform gender differently and for performative acts to challenge hegemonic norms through the exercise of agency (Butler, 1990). In contrast Miles with his male partner was able to maintain caring roles through the exercise of agency and their choice of roles was not determined by gender. By becoming main carers foster-fathers show an aspect of their subjective self that challenges traditional masculinity and they mimic neither women nor other men and new realities, albeit only temporarily for most, are enacted. However, these new realities, created by main caring foster-fathers, are not fully stable and performativity moves to performances that *do* gender and they continue to reproduce the gap between men and women when women are present in the relationship.

Themes emerging from this study suggest the process of role negotiation in foster families is founded on the reproduction of performances that *do* gender through performativity grounded in dominant discourses and power relations. These themes have implications for social work because they highlight social workers can support fostering families negotiate roles and through assessment better utilize fostering families and the parental roles they negotiate to care for children. Men negotiate new and non-traditional roles which may represent internalised identities that disrupt hegemonic norms. The way foster-fathers produce non-traditional roles and retain parenting norms echo Dermott and Miller (2015) when they suggest modern fatherhood does not by itself alter gendered relations. The limits of agency and choice of family

roles are highlighted when gendered discourses and prevailing knowledge, through language, such as '*role reversal*' repeated by several men, and discursive practices, maintain normative relations even when men take on main caring roles in the home because they see these as temporary role reversals or negotiated roles and tasks. Miles also negotiated main caring duties with his partner rather than assuming this by his gender. In contrast the families with women partners appeared to assume women were carers and men negotiated a caring role when women were unavailable to provide that role.

Social work is concerned with assessment and intervention (authors own, date) and data from this study indicate social workers can help fostering families negotiate new and non-traditional parental roles. The application of Butler's work to foster care offers the opportunity to theorise on the limits of agency in transforming gender relations and the process through which performativity acts to repeat dominant discourses in society whereby foster-fathers perform gender differently to enact and affirm gender norms. The data in this study also support Hick's (2013) assertion that gender practices are performed through everyday activities and whenever gender is enacted differently that this is dependent upon context. This process allows for some considerable flexibility between gender roles, it also allows for multiple and diverse masculinities to be produced by individual men but they ultimately conform to gendered discourses which act to regulate parenting roles in foster families within the heterosexual binary gender matrix. This process of role negotiation could be supported by social workers and help facilitate the improved utilization of foster carers in the care of children.

Conclusion

The findings from this study are surprising because they present foster-fathers as playing more complex roles, which are mostly overlooked in the literature. Foster-fathers are more than

breadwinners; their masculinity is based on caring for children and negotiation within the home. What is new about this study (small as it is) is that it applies Butler's concepts of performance and performativity to foster-fathering to show that men can and do provide children with appropriate caring. More work is needed to see if these findings hold true with more male only fostering households and with a larger sample group in different cultural and national contexts. This study provides evidence that men are highly motivated to care for children; social workers' assessment of men as foster carers should include their potential as carers and not restricted to them as stereotyped non-caring adults. This study supports the assertion by Schofield et al (2012) that social workers should support foster carers manage their different professional and caring roles but extends to argue they could help men and women negotiate new and non-traditional parenting roles in foster care. Furthermore practitioner-based knowledge on how foster carers negotiate their parenting roles can help social workers better understand the family processes when working with families.

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