

Words matter

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The power of language was brought home to me half a century ago when in a vacation job for a large research project, I and fellow students interviewed disabled people and completed a schedule that included a pen picture. One of these contained the phrase ‘confined to a wheelchair’ which led to a severe and unexpected reprimand from our professor. He fumed, ‘How would you feel if I described you like that?’ and explained that it portrayed the individual as inactive, lacking emotions and beliefs, bereft of rights and expected to be gratefully dependent on the benevolence of others. The phrase was duly altered to ‘uses a wheelchair’, a revision that implied someone doing and feeling normal things but using an aid when necessary.

The debate about whether language shapes our perceptions or vice versa has long dominated anthropology and linguistics. The 1930s research by Sapir and Whorf led to the formulation of the famous hypothesis of linguistic relativity, suggesting that the structure of a language affects its speakers’ worldview or cognition, and that people’s perceptions are relative to their spoken language. Needless to say, this has been criticised as too deterministic and the opposite seems more fitting when we feel ‘lost for words’ as we grapple to understand a new situation.

It is not the place here to pursue this debate but in a review article, Hussein (2012: 645) writes, ‘Whorf may not have been right on all counts, but he was not wrong either. The fact that language plays a role in shaping our thoughts, in modifying our perception and in creating reality is irrefutable.’ So we learn that the Inuit people have over 50 words for snow, desert nomads use more than a thousand camel-related phrases and British football fans could probably top this with a plethora of adjectives for drunk. It seems that as the theory is impossible to test scientifically, examples can be selected to support any view.

But language is more than descriptive. It often seeks to incorporate a disparate set of characteristics in a single concept, as in the term learning difficulties, or struggles to capture a multiplicity of situations as in the phrase dysfunctional family. New words often help disaggregate broader concepts or introduce sensitive distinctions that refine practice. But language also has a power dimension, for instance when a label affixed at the right moment allows one individual to condemn another. When troublesome adolescents eschew our help, we replace social graces with pejorative and dismissive nouns, such as ‘yobbo’ or ‘tart’, or

make pointed references to their immutable characteristics of race, gender or sexual orientation.

Social work has always been in the frontline of language issues as it deals with sensitive matters, disadvantaged and difficult people and seeks to avoid stigmatising labels and stereotypes. So, there are numerous examples where words that were used with the best intentions now appear totally inappropriate. The Children's Society once rescued 'waifs and strays' and Victorian bobbies regularly corralled 'feral street urchins'. Even official government reports have fallen into this trap. As recently as 1957, a Royal Commission on the law relating to 'mental illness and mental deficiency' employed a hierarchy of cases intended to improve practice and provision which included terms like 'idiot, moron and imbecile' in its attempt to better match needs and services.

In this respect, the Children Act 1989 was especially radical in establishing a language that avoided damaging labels, but which was legally and professionally viable. It introduced a single criterion for professional involvement, the concept of 'a child in need', and established new thresholds, namely harm and significant harm, for taking action, all overridden by the principle that the child's needs should be paramount. For children in care, a new vocabulary was introduced to symbolise this thinking: children 'in care' became 'looked after' and debate about the relative merits of long-term foster care versus adoption was replaced by 'ways of achieving permanency'. Especially significant was the attempt to integrate 'family support' with 'child protection' (research had shown that protection is mostly achieved via family support) by replacing the label 'child protection case' with 'a child in need where there is a protection issue'.

Two articles in this edition and one in the last have sought to illustrate these changes and explore the links between language, perceptions, policy and practice. Elena Canzi and colleagues (2021) used T-Lab computer software to analyse the wording in narratives where intercountry adopters recalled how they made sense of their experiences and coped in the first year. They found that it highlighted specific problems that might otherwise have been missed, such as those faced by mothers as opposed to fathers, first-time parents and those adopting boys and older children, especially if from Asia and Eastern Europe, and so helped sharpen the focus of support services.

In this edition, Eva Sprecher and colleagues note the importance of language in discussions about developing fostering relationships. The carers and children in their study often describe not being able to 'stand' the use of certain words frequently used in care contexts, such as 'foster carer', 'looked after child' and 'supervised'. They explain how these terms distance fostering relationships from those of a normal family, although they also can protect children from unpredictable and painful changes in fostering relationships.

But more salient still is the life story of Jack Legge, also in this journal. His biography reads as a comprehensive history of developments in thinking, policy and practice regarding severely disabled children, all mirrored by changes in the language used throughout his short life. Just old enough to benefit from the deinstitutionalisation policies of the 1980s, he was able to live mostly at home with intensive support from health and respite services. But despite the new approach and softer language, huge demands still fell on his family and the assets they could provide.

To illustrate the implications of this discussion for looked after children, let us look more closely at one major language change that has affected childcare: the increasing use of the term foster carer as opposed to foster parent. Why has this happened and what does it signify?

The change in preferred terminology seems to have occurred in the 1990s although it first appeared in *Adoption & Fostering* in 1988. It had long been a contested area but there is no straightforward explanation of why it happened when it did. It seems to be connected to ongoing debates around the professionalisation of foster care. Gillian Schofield and colleagues (2013) studied how foster carers manage their roles as carers and parents and achieve a work–life balance. They found a distinction between those who identified themselves primarily as carers and those who saw themselves primarily as parents, and that some could move flexibly between these roles while others could not. Importantly, they concluded that for foster carers who could be flexible, the two roles enriched each other rather than created stress and role conflict.

This process of professionalisation has been linked to several factors: the increasingly challenging nature of foster children; the resulting importance of training, standards and qualifications; and the increasing likelihood that foster carers will receive fees in addition to allowances, often reflecting their levels of skill and qualification. It is suggested that these, in combination, make it necessary to think of foster care as a professional task, and indeed this is a central argument when the status of carers is being promoted. In this context, the concept of a ‘professional’ is associated not only with skills and training but also with respect, including the foster carer being perceived as a ‘fellow professional’ alongside social workers, teachers, lawyers and others involved in the ‘network’ around the child.

The growing acceptance of a ‘professional’ foster carer identity has, however, raised serious questions about whether carers can also continue to be loving parents to the children they look after and enable them to experience secure attachments and a ‘normal’ family life. Is their parenting role compromised by their professional role and employment status, leading to children experiencing their carers as ‘just doing their job’? This debate has a particular resonance in long-term placements where permanence plans clearly identify the child’s need to form secure attachments, to experience committed and loving family relationships and to feel part of a family.

Further research has sought to resolve this carer/parent alternative but, it has to be said, with modest success. Some studies looked beyond placement contexts to the differing roles and responsibilities of birth parents and social workers and how they relate to foster care. Others, like Hollin and Larkin (2011), compared the discourses of professionals (social workers in a group discussion about foster placement breakdown) with those of policy-makers (in the English governmental Green Paper *Care Matters*). In both cases, attachment theory was used to explain why placements succeed and fail, but there was a significant difference in the way that the two groups perceived the roles of key players in the child’s life. The social workers viewed the birth parents as the parental figures and saw themselves in a non-parental role. But in *Care Matters* the role of birth parents is largely ignored and social workers are seen as parental figures. Moreover, neither source viewed foster carers as parental and *Care Matters* positions them as strictly professional. Thus, there was a glaring incongruence whereby the success of foster placements is understood through attachment theory while the carers who manage them are perceived as non-parental.

It might have been expected that the regulations and standards governing foster care would offer a clearer view, but this does not seem to be the case. For example, standards 13 and 14 of the *Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards* (Department for Education, 2011) mention ‘foster parents’ in the ‘underpinning legislation’ section but ‘foster carers’ is used through the rest of the document. In contrast, *The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010* and *The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and*

Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 and *The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015* make no mention of ‘foster carer’ and ‘foster parent’ is the wording used throughout.

So, it seems that 30 years after the implementation of the Children Act, the terms carer and parent are still interchangeable with the implications for their respective roles remaining unclear.

In the last two years, however, the ‘parent’ aspect of fostering has undergone something of a revival. A firm statement as such was provided in the 2018 stocktake report *Foster Care in England: A Review for the Department for Education* by Narey and Owers (2018). On p. 11 it states:

Various advice to carers needs to change, but, more than that, a shifting philosophy – which has seen ‘foster parents’ being called ‘foster carers’; children being discouraged from calling their long-term carer Mum or Dad; and sometimes carers being framed as just another professional in a child’s life – needs to be arrested.

An equally trenchant view is offered by the independent provider *By the Bridge* which explains:

... some fostering organisations will call individuals who look after children foster carers whilst other organisations will refer to them as foster parents. As a fostering organisation, we prefer to use the term foster parents because we believe it better represents their role as a professional parent to the children. We believe that the term reflects the moral and social responsibility of looking after another person’s child. In many ways what our foster parents do is ‘super-parenting’ and as such we think that the term parent reflects the complexity and challenges of the work they do.

So, are we any the wiser? The fundamental problem is that the term foster care is very general and if it is to be useful needs qualifying adjectives and a typology pertinent to its function for a particular child at a particular time. It is only then that suitable words to describe the task can be framed. If fostering is perceived as a monolith, it leads to unproductive arguments of ‘for or against’, examples cited to support beliefs and a fixation on labels. For example, the perception that all foster care involves looking after a single child on a long-term basis is far too narrow as a quarter of new placements last less than six weeks and a third involve groups of siblings. Similarly, the term covers a range of obligations from uncomplicated tending to intensive care, with or without emotional involvement. It also has legal, social, psychological and biological dimensions with the roles and responsibilities of state, professionals, carers and birth relatives shared according to the needs of the child. The terms foster ‘parent’ and ‘carer’ certainly carry different implications, but their suitability depends on the situation. As everyone who fosters is a ‘carer’ but not necessarily a ‘parent’, ‘carers’ seems to be the best general term, with ‘parent’ used when some aspect of ‘parenting’ is required.

But that does not resolve the chicken–egg language dilemma. Does the choice of terms determine what we expect of foster carers/parents or do our expectations shape the wording? Whatever the answer, and the previous discussion gives the latter dynamic a slight edge, the important point is that neither question diminishes the significance of language.

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