Rold Ambiguity among Foster Parents: Semi-Professionals in Professionalizing Organizations

Kenneth J. Mietus
Western Illinois University

Michael D. Fimmen
Western Illinois University

ROLD AMBIGUITY AMONG FOSTER PARENTS: SEMI-PROFESSIONALS IN PROFESSIONALIZING ORGANIZATIONS

KENNETH J. MIETUS, PH.D.

Western Illinois University

MICHAEL D. FIMMEN, PH.D.

Western Illinois University

Because foster parent role ambiguity has been viewed primarily as a micro-level phenomenon, efforts to reduce its negative consequences have emphasized ameliorist solutions which attempt to alter the behavior of individuals. We suggest that consideration of role ambiguity as a macro-level phenomenon provides a sounder basis for developing long-range solutions which can alter the structure of foster care organizations in ways which will complement existing ameliorist strategies. As semi-professionals, the work-role expectations of foster parents are seen as being contradictory to the goals of a professionalizing organizational structure. The transitional nature of this professionalizing process, and the contradictions which it generates, are discussed. Some consequences are evidenced by empirical data obtained from a state-wide study of a public foster care organization.

Are foster parents professionals or are they paraprofessionals? Are they employees or are they clients? The ambiguity surrounding the role of foster parents has been a persistent theme in the foster care literature for almost two decades (see, for example, duFresne, 1967; Gottesfeld, 1970; Maluccio, 1973; Cutley and Aldridge, 1973; Eastman, 1982). The literature suggests that role ambiguity has been reflected by a variety of factors including professional attitudes, placement agreements, board rates, financial benefits, legal standing and legal rights under federal and state statutes.

In reality, the expectations for the foster parent role have never been formally defined with any degree of consistency

and have instead been identified as the role that the foster parent carried out in practice (Carbino, 1980:5). Depending upon the circumstances, the foster parent is at one time client, while at another time colleague; a contracted service provider and a member of the child treatment team. Consequently, contradictory expectations exist among caseworkers, foster parents and foster care staff which, in turn, produce varying consequences for a variety of program operations. In an effort to ameliorate these contradictory expectations, diverse and often highly particularistic solutions to the problem of role ambiguity have been suggested. These include contracting (Galaway, 1976), staff stabilization (Eastman, 1982), and training (Galaway, 1972). While each of these strategies are valuable in their own right, we suggest that they reflect the image of role ambiguity as a micro-level phenomena and thereby lead to solutions which are both too short-term and particularistic to substantially reduce foster parent role ambiguity.

ROLE AMBIGUITY AS A RESPONSE TO TRANSITION

Foster parent role ambiguity is not a condition which is totally rooted in the social or psychological characteristics of individual foster parents, caseworkers and agency staff. Rather, it can be partially explained as a response to the transitional character of American society and culture in general and of child welfare agencies in particular. Indeed, numerous studies have indicated that role ambiguity is a source of stress for many persons in the American labor force.

In addition, role ambiguity may be viewed as a symptom of certain contradictions that are typical of any large and complex organization. As such, some degree of role ambiguity is always going to be present in large and complex organizations such as our nation's foster care systems. The fact that role ambiguity is as pronounced as it is in some systems may suggest that certain features of those systems are experiencing more dramatic change and contain more dramatic contradictions. In any case, role ambiguity is not to be viewed so much as the primary problem but rather as an in-

dicator of insufficiently articulated system components.

Some foster parent role ambiguity can be explained by the fact that many foster care agencies have experienced significant transition during recent years. One aspect of this transition has been exhibited by agency responses to external forces which are beyond their capacity to control or predict, e.g., the political/economic climate, migratory shifts in the population, increasing numbers of adolescents and neglected children, heightened public awareness of child care/child abuse issues. These kinds of external forces have placed considerable strain upon the system of foster care, requiring it to distribute resources in ways which will respond effectively and efficiently to increased demands for diverse types of child care services.

A second part of the transition has been internal, involving organizational growth, technological development, frequent personnel change and professionalization at nearly every level of our nation's child welfare agencies. Such professionalization is considered necessary and desirable, but it has not fully occurred in all systems and is occurring at different rates within many systems.

It is our contention that the professionalization process itself, while viewed as a desirable and necessary element for the improvement of foster care (see, for example, Appelberg, 1967; Reistroffer, 1968; Stone, 1969; Dorgan, 1974) is a process which has inadvertently exacerbated the condition of foster parent role ambiguity.

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF FOSTER CARE

All complex organizations which employ large numbers of professionally trained personnel reveal structural strain and contradictory role expectations. One common contradiction is that which results from the organization's need to exercise administrative authority, and its need to rely upon professional authority.

For the purposes of this study, a professionalized organization will be characterized as having a high proportion of professionals on its staff (at least 50 percent) and one in

which professionals have superior authority over the major goal activities of the organization. It is also useful to distinguish between those organizations employing professionals who have a long training period (five years or more) and those employing professionals whose training is shorter (less than five years). The former may be considered full-fledged professional organizations while the latter, semi-professional organizations (Gross and Etzioni, 1985:135).

In full-fledged professional organizations, tensions are typically reduced by dividing responsibilities. The primary goal activity, delivery of specialized services, is controlled by those trained as service delivery professionals. Administrative activities are controlled by those who come into administration either from the ranks of service delivery specialists or who are professionally trained administrators. While this arrangement does not totally eliminate tension, role ambiguity is often reduced when the ranks of administration contain a large proportion of persons who emerged from the ranks of the primary service delivery professionals. Such administrators are more often sensitive to the working conditions and problems of those who are out in the field. Conversely, the professionals who are out in the field are more likely to communicate openly with their supervisors because they have similar experience and training backgrounds and because the service delivery professionals perceive themselves to be professional equals to their supervisors. Communication in such organizations tends to be greater (Hage, et al., 1971) and role ambiguity less pronounced.

In contrast, most public foster child care organizations are not full-fledged professional organizations, particularly at the level of primary service delivery. Given their training backgrounds, most foster parents, are clearly semiprofessionals.

Semiprofessionals generally have not had formal training prior to entry into their profession. The training that has been acquired is typically non-standardized, of shorter duration less mandatory, and only minimally certifiable than that received by full-fledged professionals. Also important,

"semi-professional" work is usually carried out under condi-
tions that are less autonomous than that of professionals.
Semiprofessionals typically work under conditions of close
supervision, i.e., under narrow span-of-control conditions
with one supervisor (generally a full-fledged professional)
monitoring the activities of no more than 10 - 12 subordi-
nates. While the upper levels of many public foster care sys-
tems have made substantial progress in the transition from
semi-professionalized to professionalized organization, the
process has yet to occur fully at the primary service delivery
level, i.e., at the level of the foster parent. The uneven dis-
tribution of this professionalizing process is a structural con-
dition which, we argue, contributes substantially to the
condition of foster parent role ambiguity.

STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO ROLE AMBIGUITY

An examination of the supervisor-subordinate relation-
ships in the organizational structure of many public foster
care systems reveals that the span-of-control ratios at the
caseworker-foster parent level are generally quite broad.
Under the best conditions, caseworkers typically oversee
about 25–30 families and their foster children (Mietus and
Fimmen, 1984). Given certain preconditions, this type of
structure can be very effective and efficient. It operates most
efficiently when the deliverer of the special service (in this
case, the foster parent) possesses highly specialized knowl-
edge that is not only extensive but fairly standardized among
all service deliverers. Extensive, standardized and specialized
knowledge is typically acquired after five or more years of
formalized training and an apprenticeship period spent
under closely supervised conditions (Wilensky, 1964). These
are characteristics which structurally define the occupational
status of professional.

As a general rule, organizations which utilize a large
number of professionals as primary service deliverers require
less explicit rules and regulations specifying the manner and
method to be used in the performance of work activities

(Zey-Ferrell, 1979:201). The role expectations of professionals have been developed and internalized through the lengthy process of formal training. They do not need to be told how to perform operations as much as they need to be told how to use the organization as a system to access the resources they need to perform their work more effectively.

Professionals thus operate very effectively under broad span-of-control conditions. Having systematically internalized a substantial body of task performance knowledge, they require less closer supervision and fewer operative rules, i.e., rules governing task execution and workflow. Organizations which utilize large numbers of trained professionals (e.g., hospitals, universities, some social service agencies) generally exhibit broad span-of-control structures. Under these structural conditions, delivery of service in a manner consistent with departmental or agency policy is more effectively and efficiently accomplished than under conditions of close supervision.

While semi-professionals are typically more effective under narrow span of control conditions, a broad span-of-control condition between caseworker and foster parent is a far more typical pattern in our public foster care system. Indeed, many caseworkers and caseworker supervisors would likely agree that it is undesirable, perhaps even "unprofessional", to supervise foster parent activities too closely. Consequently, caseworker and foster parent communication is infrequent. When close supervision does occur, it is conducted primarily under conditions of crisis and tension. This is a pattern that is typical of organizations utilizing a broad span-of-control while providing routine delivery of services.

This broad span-of-control, low supervision condition, demands that foster parents exercise considerable latitude and discretion in the performance of their responsibilities. While regulative information is provided, (how to file requests for expense reimbursement, etc.), the information most often requested by foster parents is operative in nature (e.g., "How to Discipline a Foster Child Who has Trashed your Living Room"). The preference for operative over regu-

lative rules is a consistent expectation of semi-professionals (Zey-Ferrell, 1979:201).

Most semi-professional knowledge comes from on-the-job training, supplemented with unregularly scheduled and unsystematically developed in-service training. Although this knowledge is less systematically acquired than is professional knowledge, it is no less strongly internalized. As a result, it is knowledge which can be unpredictable and often applied in ways which are inconsistent with agency policies. Narrow span-of-control with closer supervision is best suited under such conditions. When semi-professional knowledge is applied under supervisory conditions that are more appropriate for the application of professional knowledge, i.e., broad spans-of-control, role ambiguity and system tensions are an inevitable outcome.

CONCLUSIONS

Foster parents do not generally perceive of themselves as trained foster care specialists and by most structural standards, they are not. Rather, they are concerned and thoughtful people who care about children and want to help them (Mietus and Fimmen, 1984:109). But while their motivational level is high and their overall skill as natural parents is quite good, their general level of foster parenting skill is quite low. Most do not even view foster parenting as a specialized skill—nearly 65 percent view foster parenting the same as parenting their own children (Mietus and Fimmen, 1984:64). Most enter the foster care system with their role expectations pre-defined, i.e., "I already know how to raise kids, I've raised —— of my own." And while many view themselves as substitute parents rather than specialized care providers, they do expect to be treated as professionals and are often required to act as such.

In spite of their status as semi-professionals, the broad span-of-control situation which exists in most foster care systems provides foster parents with minimal supervision. This condition structurally reinforces the expectation that they should exercise autonomy. This desire for autonomy, a sub-

jective definitional characteristic for most professionals (Pavalko, 1971:23), was so intense in one system that 75 percent of the foster parents felt that caseworker visitation should occur no more often than once per month (Mietus and Fimmen, 1984:93). Yet, in this same system, 70 percent of the foster parents listed various aspects of the foster parent role as being the most difficult part about being a foster parent (Mietus and Fimmen, 1984:111).

Foster parent role ambiguity appears to be a condition that will persist so long as semi-professionals are positioned in structures that are more appropriate for professional primary service providers. Two solutions must be considered; reduce the supervisory ratio by narrowing the span-of-control between caseworkers and supervisors or professionalize the foster parent status through recruitment and training.

REFERENCES

Appelberg, E. (1968). A Foster Familyhood Workshop Report - The Second Year. New York: Yeshiva University.

Carbino, R. (1980). Foster Parenting. New York, New York: Child Welfare League of America Inc.

Cautley, P.W. and M.J. Aldridge (1973). Predictors of Success in Foster Care. Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, August.

Dorgan, M.P. (1974). "Initiating a Program of Foster Parent Education." Child Welfare, Vol. 53, No. 9, November, 588–593.

duFresne, E.J. (1967). "The Rights of Foster children to Financial Benefits of Foster Parents Under Federal Statutes." Journal of Family Law, Vol. 7, No. 4, Winter, 613–635.

Eastman, K.S. (1982). "Sources of Ambiguity in the Foster Care System", Smith College Studies in Social Work, Vol. 52, No. 3, 234–246.

Galaway, B. (1972). "Clarifying the role of foster parents." Children Today, Vol. 1, No. 4, July-August, 32–33.

Galaway, B. (1976). "Contracting: Means of Clarifying Roles in Foster Family Services." Children Today, Vol. 5, No. 4, July-August, 20–23.

Gottesfeld, H. (1970). In loco Parentis: A Study of Perceived Role Values in Foster Home Care. New York: Jewish Child Care Association of New York.

Gross, E. and A. Etzioni (1985). Organizations in Society. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Hage, J., M. Aiken and C.B. Marret (1971). "Organizational Structure and Communication," American Sociological Review 36, Vol. 5, October.

Maluccio, A.N. (1973). "Foster Family Care Revisited: Problems and Prospects." Public Welfare, Vol. 31, No. 2, Spring 1973, 12–17.

Mietus, K.J. and M.D. Fimmen, (1984). Illinois Caseworkers and Foster Parents: A Comparative Analysis of Attitudes and Practices: A Report to the Committee on Foster Home Care: Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, November.

Pavalko, R.M. (1971). Sociology of Occupations and Professions, F.E. Peacock Inc., Itasca, Illinois.

Reistroffer, M. (1968). "A University Extension Course for Foster Parents." Children, Vol. 15, No. 1, January-February, 28–31.

Stone, H.D. (1969). Reflections on Foster Care. A Report of a National Survey of Attitudes and Practices, New York, New York: Child Welfare League of America.

Wilensky, H.L. (1970). "The Professionalization of Everyone?" in Grusky and Miller (eds.) The Sociology of Organizations, Free Press, New York. 483–501.

Zey-Ferrell, M. (1979). Dimensions of Organizations, Goodyear Publishing Company, Santa Monica, California.