

The recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender foster carers

An international literature review

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Executive Summary

Fostering by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people has been a contested area of social work and foster care practice and remains so in some national contexts. In most parts of the world, lesbians and gay men, until relatively recently, have been subject to discriminatory legislation and their suitability to parent questioned. Across the globe, in places where homosexuality is legal, levels of acceptance vary considerably; greater acceptance being associated with higher levels of affluence and secularism (Pew Research Center, 2014).

The increased use of lesbians and gay men as foster carers and adopters has been influenced by the view that for children, it is the quality of the adult-child relationship that matters rather than the structure of their family, or the sexual orientation of their parents (e.g. Golombok, 2000). This opening up of a potential new workforce means that fostering agencies need to know the best ways to recruit, assess, support and supervise LGBT carers. This review brings together the existing evidence on these topics and uses it to make recommendations for policy, practice, and further research.

There are three main areas of research regarding LGBT people and parenting, though as is noted throughout this review, the main focus has been on lesbians and gay men, with almost no research on bisexual or transgender carers. Firstly, research that compares social, educational, psychological and sexual development outcomes of children growing up in lesbian headed households with those growing up in households headed by heterosexual women (e.g. Golombok, and Tasker, 1996). This phase of research in the USA and the UK was in part triggered by what are often referred to as the lesbian custody cases; when lesbians who had been in heterosexual relationships had the custody

of their children challenged by their child's father on the basis of the belief that children would be damaged growing up in lesbian families. Secondly, research considering outcomes for parents and children of lesbian and gay households encompassing adoptive families (e.g. Brodzinsky and Pertman, 2012). Thirdly, research looking at the experiences of lesbian and gay adopters (e.g. Brown, Smalling, Groza, and Ryan, 2009).

Within the existing research evidence about LGBT people parenting, most findings relate to outcomes for children born into those households or adopted by them. Although there are similarities between adoption and fostering, for example in the most part children being placed in families from public care, there are also significant differences. Foster carers, in the main, care for a range of different children over time and share the care of, and responsibility for children with those who have parental responsibility, and public bodies. In addition, foster carers are often involved in regular contact arrangements between their foster children and those children's birth families.

A recurring theme in the literature is the importance to LGBT adopters and foster carers of being in a supported, valued, trusting, effective relationship with their social worker and agency within which they are afforded guidance regarding the care of specific children (e.g. Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Hill, 2013). This is no different for all foster carers who place a high value on the quality of their working relationship with their supervising social worker, when it works well (Brown, Sebba and Luke, 2014). However, what is potentially different for LGBT carers is the perceived, or actual, homophobia or heterosexism of their social worker, or their foster child's social worker, or their foster child's birth family, or the fostering agency, or other foster carers, or other professionals working with them and the child.

This review of the international research addresses the topic of the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers. It was undertaken to consider the following questions:

- What is known about the effective recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers?
- What can fostering services do to improve the quality of the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers?

Electronic databases and websites covering the international literature were used to identify 20 published papers (covering 19 studies). Those identified were from the UK, USA and Australia. Comparisons across countries are subject to limitations of different cultures and services. Most of the research exclusively about LGBT foster care, rather than research that merges fostering and adoption, has developed in Australia where, in contrast to the USA and UK, adoption is rarely the chosen option for permanence for children in public care.

Studies identified for the review were published since 1996 and were all written in English. Most of the studies focused exclusively on the perceptions of established foster carers; less often on perceptions of social workers and one included young people's perceptions. The studies used a range of methodologies from in-depth interviews and focus groups to larger scale surveys using questionnaires. Study samples ranged from 1 to nearly 400. No studies were identified in the review that included interventions subjected to evaluation using comparison or control groups. Most studies adopted a retrospective design, seeking the perspectives of established carers.



Key Findings

LGBT foster carers have a wide range of experiences, as do all foster carers, of their recruitment, assessment, support and supervision.

However prospective and currently approved LGBT foster carers experience two additional dynamics: first, their own perceptions about how fostering agencies, social workers, foster children and young people and their families might respond to their gender and sexuality; second, how fostering agencies, social workers, foster children and young people and their families do respond to their gender and sexuality.

Foster carers' perspectives of the quality of foster care and social work practice is variable and 'good' practice is often associated with individual practitioners. It is therefore important for social workers, foster carers and agencies to be aware of gender and sexuality and the parts they play in LGBT people's lives without over focussing on them, but rather including them within a holistic approach.

The studies included in this review indicated some progress in practice over time and examples of positive experiences and practice were more evident in more recent studies. However, there was not a clear linear progression of practice improving over time, and some examples of heteronormative social work practice were still evident in recent studies.

Areas of particular importance for the effective recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers, evident within the publications, were that:

- Recruitment of LGBT foster carers can be hampered by their own assumptions that their sexuality would be a barrier;
- LGBT applicants are helped by agencies having clear policy statements regarding their recruitment;
- Geographical differences in recruiting LGBT carers partly reflect different legal and policy frameworks. For example, in South Australia LGBT foster care is not overtly endorsed;
- Social workers' beliefs regarding gender roles and sexuality affect their attitudes towards LGBT people becoming adopters and foster carers which may subsequently influence the assessment process;
- No significant differences were found between public and independent fostering agencies in the recruitment, assessment and support of LGBT carers but there is a perception by LGBT carers that they would be more easily accepted in independent agencies;
- The quality of support and supervision of LGBT foster carers by supervising social workers (SSW) and foster child social workers impacts on the ability of carers to meet the needs of children and young people;

- Children and young people being prepared for placement with LGBT foster carers, prior to a child arriving at the foster carers' home, is thought to be helpful;

- LGBT foster carers appreciate and need support and supervision regarding meeting the needs of particular children and managing behaviour, like all foster carers;
- Similar to other foster carers, LGBT carers appreciate and need support to enable children to have helpful contact with their birth families. LGBT foster carers can worry about potential homophobia from children's families.

In sum, effective social work practice with LGBT foster carers closely mirrors effective social work practice more widely. However, agencies, foster carers and social workers have to be mindful of the impact of homophobia, both currently and historically, and make sure that their practice mitigates any current continuing dynamics. The focus of foster care is children and young people, enabling them to have warm, reparative, stimulating, and safe foster care placements; recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers needs to have this as its goal.

Recommendations for policy and practice

Given some of the gaps in the research evidence, recommendations can only be tentative. We recommend that fostering agencies:

- Develop and review their policies and practices regarding the recruitment, assessment (to include panels) and supervision of LGBT foster carers, to ensure that they are as effective as current knowledge allows;
- Consider the consistent use of existing guidance about, and models for, the assessment of LGBT foster carers, to make sure that assessments are not heteronormative, but are rigorous, holistic and analytic, neither ignoring nor over focussing on sexuality and gender. Facilitating applicants' consideration of how their gender and sexuality might be relevant to fostering, and what agency supervision and support would be helpful should be integral aspects of assessments;
- Make sure that matching decisions are free from heteronormative assumptions and are about whether a foster carer can meet the needs of specific children;
- Ensure that fostering panel processes are inclusive and enable thorough consideration of a person's or couple's suitability to become, or remain approved as foster carers irrespective of their gender or sexuality; considering that which is relevant to their future foster caring role;
- Ensure that LGBT foster carers receive support and supervision from their SSW and their foster child's social worker that enables them to care effectively for children and young people;
- Enable LGBT foster carers to benefit from LGBT support groups; information about such groups can be helpful. Agencies' own foster carer support groups should be inclusive and LGBT foster carers as a result feel included;
- Examine the content, processes and structures of foster carer training programmes to ensure all foster carers feel respected, valued and included;
- Ensure that social workers have the confidence, skills, attitudes and knowledge to work effectively with all foster carers irrespective of their sexuality or gender;
- Keep the foster child or young person at the centre of foster care practice and decision making.

Recommendations for further research

The review identified a number of gaps in the existing research evidence. We recommend that further research is undertaken that:

- Examines bisexual and transgender foster care; drawing on fostering agencies', bisexual and transgender foster carers', and social workers' perceptions and experiences of recruitment, assessment, support and supervision to identify effective practice;
- Maps nationally, or by state, where LGBT foster carers are currently located, and how they are utilised for children and young people's placements and the types of placements (e.g. siblings, older children, children with special needs etc.). This information to be considered alongside related fostering agencies' policies regarding the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers. Such research findings would identify whether or not LGBT foster carers cluster in particular geographical locations, and with particular fostering agencies (this is anecdotally believed to be the case);
- Examines, within a number of geographically spread fostering agencies, policies and practices about the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers. Such research to gather the perceptions, and experiences of LGBT foster carers, their assessors (including panels), their SSWs, Independent Reviewing Officers, other professionals in the team such as clinicians and their foster children's social workers regarding recruitment, assessment, support and supervision. Such a research study could consider particular areas to further inform effective practice with LGBT foster carers;
- Foregrounds the perceptions and experiences of children and young people, and their families, placed with LGBT foster carers.

Main Report

Background to review



The political and social context

Historically there can be few such contested areas of social work and foster care practice as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people fostering children in public care. Debates about LGBT people fostering are particular to this area of social work and foster care practice because in most parts of the world lesbians and gay men, until relatively recently, have been subject to discriminatory legislation and their suitability to parent questioned. Indeed in October 2014 it was estimated that homosexuality was still illegal in 79 countries (Erasing 76 Crimes, 2014). Across the globe, where homosexuality is legal, the levels of acceptance vary considerably; greater acceptance being associated with higher levels of affluence and secularism (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Within relatively affluent countries, equality for LGBT people has only been achieved in the last decade. For example, it was not fully realised in the UK until 2013, with the passing of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. In countries where there is equality for LGBT people, the rate of repeal of discriminatory legislation and the enactment of protective legislation has, since the 1960s, occurred at a relatively steady pace, but rapidly since 2000. The speed of legal change does not necessarily go hand in hand with rates of change in public attitudes and social work practice. Indeed social work practice has had to keep up with the radically altered legal position of LGBT people.

Changing the law is one thing, changing social workers' attitudes is another. It appears that whilst there generally seems to be more tolerance and acceptance of lesbian and gay lifestyles there is no room for complacency, because it seems clear from the evidence ... that despite positive legislative changes, homophobic attitudes, prejudice and discrimination still exist. Legislation does not force people who think homosexuality is immoral and wrong to change their views, however it does require them to be more tolerant and treat people alike.

(Brown and Kershaw, 2008, p.129)

This transforming legal, social and political context for LGBT people has significant relevance for the consideration of research findings regarding the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers. Changes to the legal, policy and practice landscape have meant that some research findings become quickly outdated, and research activity itself responds to the changing nature of the interface between LGBT people and parenting.

Research on LGBT parenting and adoption

Research regarding LGBT people and parenting has developed since the early 1980s and can be broadly grouped as follows:

- First, research comparing social, educational, psychological and sexual development outcomes of children growing up in lesbian headed households with those growing up in households headed by heterosexual women (Golombok, Spencer and Rutter, 1983; Golombok and Tasker, 1996; Golombok, Perry, Burston, Murray, Mooney-Somers, Stevens, and Golding, 2003; Patterson, 1992; Tasker and Golombok, 1991, 1995, 1997). This phase of research in the USA and the UK was in part triggered by what are often referred to as the lesbian custody cases;
- Second, research considering outcomes for parents and children of lesbian and gay households, encompassing adoptive families (American Psychological Association, 2005; Averett, Nalavany and Ryan, 2009; Brodzinsky, Green, and Katuzny, 2012; Brodzinsky and Pertman, 2012; Crouch, Watters, McNair, Power and Davis, 2014; Farr, Forsell, Patterson, 2010; Farr and Patterson, 2013a; Goldberg, 2010; Goldberg and Allen, 2013; Goldberg and Gianino, 2012; Goldberg, Gartrell and Gates, 2014; Jennings, Mellish, Tasker, Lamb, and Golombok, 2014; Mellish, Jennings, Tasker, Lamb, and Golombok, 2013; Patterson, 2005, 2006, 2009; Patterson and Riskind, 2010; Patterson and Wainright, 2012; Ryan and Brown, 2012; Ryan and Whitlock, 2008; Tasker, 2005; Tasker and Bellamy, 2007; Tasker and Patterson, 2007);

- Third, research looking at the experiences of lesbian and gay adopters (Brown, Smalling, Groza, and Ryan, 2009; Farr, Forssell and Patterson, 2010; Farr and Patterson, 2013b; Goldberg, 2012; Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Hill, 2013; Kinkler and Goldberg, 2011; Mathews and Cramer, 2006; Laverne, Waterman and Peplau, 2014; Mellish, Jennings, Tasker, Lamb and Golombok, 2013; Ross, Epstein, Anderson and Eady, 2009; Ryan and Brown, 2012; Ryan and Whitlock, 2008).

The foci of these three areas of research activity were predominately the consideration of specifically lesbians and gay men parenting, rather than LGBT people more broadly, although Ross et al (2009) do refer to transgender and bisexual adopters in their study.

At first research findings focussed only on lesbian households but increasingly this was addressed by research studies looking at gay male families and outcomes for both children and parents (Goldberg, 2012; Golombok, Mellish, Jennings, Casey, Lamb and Tasker, 2014; Mallon, 2004; Patterson, 2004, 2005; Tasker, 2005). Research looking at the experiences of bisexual and transgender parents and children is still underdeveloped (Downing, 2013; Patterson, and D'Augelli, 1998; Pyne, 2012; Ross and Dobinson, 2013; Tye, 2003).

A causal relationship between positive research findings about outcomes for children growing up in lesbian and gay families, and the growth in the numbers of LGBT people adopting and fostering children, would be difficult to evidence. There were many factors influencing the increased placement of children with lesbian and gay adopters and foster carers from the 1980s; research findings being just one variable (Brown and Cocker, 2008; Hicks, 2005a, 2007; Logan and Sellick, 2007, 2011; Ricketts and Achtenberg, 1989; Ross, Epstein, Anderson, Eady, 2009).

However, because research about lesbian and gay parenting evidenced that children fared as well in those families as did children growing up in heterosexual homes, it is likely that research did have an influence on policy and practice, and indeed fed in to for example, parliamentary debates in the UK before the passing of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the review of adoption law in New South Wales in 2009. The research findings established that what mattered for children was the quality of the effective relationships children had within their families, not the sexual orientation of their parents, or the structure of their family. Golombok, considering research findings about outcomes for children growing up in lesbian and gay families, noted: '*Family structure, in itself, is not a major determinant of children's psychological adjustment... It is what happens within families, not the way*

families are composed, that seems to matter most' (Golombok, 2000, p101). Looking specifically at adoption by lesbian and gay men, Farr and Patterson make the same point thirteen years later when they comment:

In sum, research on lesbian and gay adoptive parents and their children has grown markedly in the last several years... as in other types of families, it is family processes, rather than family structure, that matters more to child outcomes and to overall family functioning among adoptive families.

(2013b, p.49)

Undoubtedly this repeated finding that the quality of adult-child relationships was what mattered for children rather than the structure of their family, or the sexual orientation of their parents (e.g. Golombok, 2000), did influence the increased use of lesbians and gay men as foster carers and adopters.

This opening up of a potential new workforce means that fostering agencies need to know the best ways to recruit, assess, support and supervise LGBT carers. This review brings together the existing evidence on these topics and uses it to make recommendations for policy, practice, and further research.

Within the existing research evidence about LGBT people parenting, most findings relate to outcomes for children born into those households or adopted by them. Although there are similarities between adoption and fostering, for example in the most part children being placed in families from public care, there are also significant differences. Foster carers in the main care for a range of different children over time and share the care of, and responsibility for, children with those who have parental responsibility, and public bodies. In addition, foster carers are often involved in regular contact arrangements between their foster children and those children's birth families, in both short term and permanent foster placements.

Discursive papers and practice guidance

Since the 1980s, alongside the publication of research findings focussing on outcomes for children and their lesbian and gay families, two further strands of publication have developed that, although similar in purpose (i.e. the exploration of LGBT parenting), are different in that they are predominately discursive.

These two areas include: first, theoretical exploration of what LGBT parenting represents sociologically and politically. Such publications tend to be located within a postmodern framework and draw on the ideas of such theorists as Foucault and Judith Butler (Hicks, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2013; Riggs, 2006, 2007, 2010). This work uses LGBT foster care and adoption as vehicles for the deconstruction and the creative reconsideration of ideas regarding kinship, family, gender and sexuality. Both Hicks and Riggs are unusual in being producers of discursive papers, practice guidance and findings from empirical research studies.

The second strand is practice-focussed material that can broadly be described as practice guidance for social work with prospective, and current, LGBT adopters and foster carers. This latter body of work has focussed predominantly on the assessment of lesbians and gay men as adopters and foster carers, rather than the support and supervision of those carers once approved (Ariyakulnan and Mallon, 2012; Brown, 1991; Brown and Cocker, 2008; Cocker and Brown, 2010; de Jong and Donnelly, 2015; Hicks, 2007; Skeats and Jabri, 1988; Mallon, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2012; Mallon and Betts, 2005; 2012; Riggs, 2011).

Recruitment of carers

In recent years in Australia, Canada, the USA and UK, shortage of foster carers has meant that public bodies have considered the recruitment of LGBT foster carers and adopters more proactively. Indeed some academic papers have directly addressed LGBT people as an untapped resource for the creation of placements for children in public care (Brodinsky, 2012; Brooks and Goldberg, 2001; Gates, Badgett, Macomber, and Chambers, 2007; Mallon, 2006, Riggs, 2006; Ryan, 2000; Sudol, 2010). In addition others argue that there is a need for LGBT placements because some LGBT fostered young people might be well placed with such carers (Logan and Sellick, 2007; Polikoff, 1997), helping them develop a positive self-esteem. Polikoff suggested that:

The most obvious connection between lesbian and gay youth and foster parents is the importance of the availability of gay and lesbian foster parents to provide homes for gay teenagers who need acceptance and support for their journey into adulthood.

(1997, p.1184)

There is considerable variation between different nations, states and locations regarding fostering and adoption agencies recruiting LGBT prospective foster carers and adopters (Gates, Badgett, Macombe and Chambers, 2007; Riggs, 2013; Sudol, 2010). Each State context is different because foster care and social work is practised within the specific legal and policy framework of a particular State.

LGBT community organisations and some State organisations have developed their own materials for LGBT parents, prospective adopters and foster carers to help them consider if adoption and fostering is right for them, and what to expect when they contact agencies and undergo assessments (Stonewall, 2010; New Family Social, 2014; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

Assessment of prospective carers

A key debate within practice guidance on the assessment of lesbians and gay men as prospective foster carers and adopters has been whether or not they should undergo an identical assessment to their heterosexual counterparts or whether, in addition to the assessment content that all prospective carers are subject to, particular areas should be considered with them during their assessment (Brown, 1991; Brown and Cocker, 2008; Cocker and Brown, 2010; de Jong and Donnelly, 2015; Hicks, 2007; Mallon, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2012; Mallon and Betts, 2005). Through the work of such people as Hicks (1996, 2000, 2006b) and Hill (2009) in the UK, Mallon (2006, 2007), Goldberg (2010) and others in the USA, and Riggs (2006, 2007) and Riggs and Augoustinos (2009) in Australia, it is apparent that some social work practice with prospective LGBT adopters and foster carers had been steeped in heteronormative, heterosexist and in some cases homophobic practice. This has led to either an over-focus on gender, sexuality and sexual orientation, or the ignoring of it altogether during the assessment period which was then evident in related assessment reports. The argument put forward in many of these publications was that LGBT applicants should be rigorously assessed, as should all prospective foster carers, and that LGBT prospective foster carers in addition be helped to consider pertinent areas regarding being LGBT that may impact on them as foster carers.

Within the discursive practice guidance literature, models for the assessment of lesbian and gay prospective foster carers and adopters were developed (Brown, 1991; Cocker and Brown, 2010; de Jong and Donnelly, 2015; Hicks, 2007; Mallon, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2012; Mallon and Betts, 2005). Some of these models have been absorbed into more general texts about the assessment of prospective adopters and foster carers (Beesley, 2010).

Cocker and Brown's model for assessing the suitability of individual LGBT prospective foster carers and adopters was incorporated within later practice guidance (de Jong and Donnelly, 2015). Their model's SPRIINT acronym stands for:

- S Sexual orientation*
- P Previous sexual relationship histories*
- R Relationships (current)*
- I Intimacy (the expression of this with each other)*
- I Integration into the community*
- N Not so nice bits: digging below the surface; exploring the long-term nature of relationships; coping with difficulties, stress, disagreements, etc*
- T Think: about the patterns and the gaps within the stories...*

SPRIINT is applicable to all applicants, irrespective of their sexual orientation, as well as containing within it aspects that specifically deal with sexual orientation. The model requires assessors to analyse the content of what applicants discuss with them to enable a synthesis of the material, thereby reaching an informed, reflexive assessment with related recommendations.

(Cocker and Brown, 2010, p.26)

They argue that SPRIINT should be located within the generic model for prospective carer assessment that a particular agency adopts, therefore complementing rather than replacing the assessment that is done with all potential carers irrespective of their gender or sexuality.

Support and supervision of carers

The focus of much of the discursive practice guidance literature, as noted above, is about the assessment of prospective carers. Less is written about the support to carers once they are approved, and indeed next to nothing written specifically about the supervision of LGBT foster carers. The exception to this is the Wakefield Inquiry, the report of a public inquiry examining the circumstances of the sexual abuse of boys by two gay male foster carers, in the UK (Parrott, McIver and Thoburn, 2007). This inquiry report is in effect a detailed case study of a gay male fostering couple; their assessment, placements, support,

supervision and foster carer reviews. As such, although it is an example of where the foster care of children went seriously wrong, which is a rarity, when considered alongside other research findings, it is useful in informing social work, foster care practice and research because it gives such detail of foster care and social work practice. However, inevitably the Wakefield Inquiry was exploited by some elements of the media as evidence that gay men were potential abusers of foster children and therefore should not be approved as foster carers. This was rigorously addressed and disputed by the Inquiry team and the Judge in the related criminal trial. The added feature of public, political and media interest during the trial of CF and IW was the fact that they were gay and that they had been approved by Wakefield Council as same-sex carers. Much of the media attention focused on these facts with little or no reference to the fact that nationally high-quality care is offered by gay (and lesbian) foster carers and adopters to children in England which prepares some vulnerable children for better lives as adults than might have been anticipated at the time they started to be looked after. Indeed, Judge Cahill, in sentencing CF and IW said 'I stress that this case is not, of course, about homosexuality, what it is, is about a breach of trust'. In summing up, she said that 'the fact that they are homosexual does not of course make them either more likely or less likely to have committed these offences' (Parrott, et al, 2007, p.7).

A recurring theme in the literature is the importance to LGBT adopters and foster carers of being in a supported, valued, trusting, effective relationship with their social worker and agency within which they are afforded guidance regarding the care of specific children (Brooks, Kim and McDermott, 2012; Goldberg, 2010; Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Mellish, Jennings, Tasker, Lamb and Golombok, 2013; Laverne, Waterman and Peplau, 2014; Mallon, 2006, Riggs, 2011). This is no different of course than is the case for all foster carers who place a high value on the quality of their working relationship with their supervising social worker, when it works well (Brown, Sebba and Luke, 2014). However, what is potentially different for LGBT carers is the perceived, or actual, homophobia or heterosexism of their social worker, or their foster child's social worker, or their foster child's birth family, or the agency, or other professionals working with them and their child, or indeed other foster carers they might encounter in agency support and training contexts.

Aims and scope

Support to adopters and foster carers comes in many forms; not just from the fostering or adoption agency. Community support from such organisations as The LGBTQ Parenting Network in Canada and New Family Social in UK have a particular role, because as well as offering support to carers, they afford the opportunity for LGBT carers to meet other LGBT carers. This is important because they are often in a minority within their own agencies.

Austerberry, Stanley, Larkins, Ridley, Farrelly, Manthorpe and Hussein (2013) note the importance of foster carers receiving effective support to enable them to work with their foster child and the child's birth family. Foster carers can find contact with birth families stressful. For some LGBT foster carers they have additional concerns regarding either the perceived, or actual, homophobia of a child's family (Patrick and Palladino, 2009; Hicks and Mcdermott, 1999; Hill, 2013).

The research and literature covered within this background section encompassed LGBT parenting generally, and LGBT fostering and adoption specifically to set the context for our review questions. This literature review is concerned with LGBT foster care and in particular the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers, that being the focus of the findings section.

This review of the international research addresses the topic of the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers. It was undertaken to consider the following questions:

- What is known about the effective recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers?
- What can fostering services do to improve the quality of the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers?

Methodology

This review synthesises the findings from the international literature on the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers. A number of electronic databases were searched, including ASSIA, Australian Education Index, British Education Index, Campbell and Cochrane Libraries, Conference Proceedings Citation Index, ERIC, International Bibliography of Social Sciences, Medline, PsycInfo, SCOPUS, Social Care Online, Social Policy and Practice, and Social Services Abstracts.

The following websites were searched: Albert Kennedy Trust, British Association of Adoption and Fostering, Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services, Campbell, Casey Family Programs, Chapin Hall, Community Care Inform, Department for Education, Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre, Joanna Briggs Institute, LGBTQ Parenting Network, National Children's Bureau, New Family Social, National Foundation for Educational Research, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in Administration for Children and Families (USA), Social Care Institute for Excellence, Stonewall, The Fostering Network, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, What Works Clearinghouse.

Our search terms included:

"foster care*" OR "foster parent*" OR "foster famil*" OR "substitute famil*" OR "family foster home" OR "out-of-home care" OR "out of home care" OR "looked after" OR "looked-after" OR "alternative care" OR "adopt*"

AND

LGB* OR lesbian* OR gay* OR bisexual* OR transgender* OR homosexual* OR sexuality OR "same sex" OR "same-sex" OR "same gender" OR "same-gender" OR "queer"



Key Findings

Titles and abstracts of the publications identified from the electronic searching were then screened for relevance. Finally, international experts on foster care were contacted to suggest any references that were not uncovered by the electronic search. The review was restricted to empirical studies, though discursive papers informed the background, context and discussion. We did not restrict the review on the basis of particular kinds of methodology, but rather applied a quality threshold to ensure that only studies reaching a minimum standard of quality (as judged for the chosen methodology by journal reviewing standards) were included in the review.

Status of the studies

The 20 research publications (19 related research studies) identified in this review were all written in English, and published since 1996. The studies were undertaken in the following countries; different contextual systems should be acknowledged which may limit transferability of some of the findings:

Australia	4
USA	8
UK	8

The studies included both qualitative and quantitative methods. Details of the studies can be found in Table 1 Appendix A.

Introduction

We have organised our findings under the three areas identified in our research questions, namely recruitment, assessment, and support and supervision. As noted earlier, research about LGBT parenting has been predominately concerned with outcomes for birth and adopted children and their parents, as well as adopters' experiences, and focused on lesbians and gay men rather than LGBT people more broadly. There is less research specifically related to LGBT foster care. We selected publications for this review focused on foster care, but in some cases they included adoption. The inclusion of publications covering both fostering and adoption was because many research studies and publications include adoption, rather than focussing on fostering alone. We included one paper that just addresses adoption because of the nature of the research study, looking as it does at the attitudes of social workers (Hall, 2010). The publications mainly draw on research study findings, other than two which are individual case studies (Patrick, 2006, Parrott et al, 2007). Hill (2013), and Hicks and McDermott (1999), both UK books, are in effect collections of case studies, and provide a useful contrast between carers' experiences and perceptions in 1999 and 2013; a gap of 14 years, a period in the UK that witnessed significant legal, policy and practice changes relating to LGBT fostering and adoption.

The selected publications reflect the time and place of their production, in this fast changing landscape of social work and foster care practice with LGBT foster carers. For example, some of the findings in Hicks' (1996) paper are different to some degree from those of later publications. One significant difference, in terms of the physical location of the research studies, relates to the differences in policy and

practice between the USA, the UK, and Australia in regard to permanence for children. Much of the research undertaken in the UK and the USA about LGBT parenting focussed on children as permanent members of LGBT families, either through birth or adoption (Riggs, Delfabbro and Augoustinos, 2010). This is not the case so much in Australia where foster care is usually the chosen option for permanence for children in public care. Riggs writes:

As opposed to the US and UK, children removed from their parents in Australia are rarely placed for adoption and instead are typically placed (where long-term orders are granted) with foster parents who care for them in a family context until they come of age. (Riggs, 2011, p.217)

To some extent this contextualises the fact that most research exclusively about LGBT foster care, rather than research that merges fostering and adoption, has developed in Australia. Exceptions to this are Patrick (2006) and Patrick and Palladino (2009) concerning LGBT foster care in the USA.

Although many of the publications concentrate on the perceptions and experiences of LGBT foster carers, and the views of social workers (adults), it is evident in most that the central concern is fostered (and adopted) children and young people. The recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of foster carers have to be child-focussed activities. Foster care exists to meet the needs of, and enhance the life chances for, foster children and young people. It is therefore important that we start with the voices of children and young people to foreground their presence in this literature review.

Children and young people's voices

There are currently no studies that focus exclusively on the voices of children and young people placed with LGBT foster carers; although there are texts specifically addressing the voices of young people growing up in lesbian and gay families more generally (Saffron, 1996), and the Mellish, et al, 2013 study included some voices of children placed for adoption with heterosexual, lesbian and gay families. Because of the absence of the voices of fostered children and young people, we drew on more general research findings related to the views of children and young people growing up in LGBT families, as well as selecting material from the other studies where the voices of foster children are evident. Guasp's (2010) study noted both positive and negative comments from children and young people, but overall the children and young people thought that: 'Most people, including friends at school, are fine about children having gay parents. They think it is a good thing or don't really care' (2010, p.3).

When asked how children and young people felt about their lesbian and gay families Guasp summarised what they said as:

- *Many children of gay parents see their families as special and different because all families are special and different though some feel that their families are a lot closer than other people's families.*
- *Some children feel that their family is a bit different if they have lesbian or gay parents but this is something to celebrate, not worry about.*

- *Other children do recognise that children with gay parents are less common than other sorts of families, but don't feel this means that their families are any different to other people's families because of it.*
- *Very young children don't think their families are different from other people's families at all.*

(2010, p.3)

Jamie, a six-year-old, commenting on his envisioned relationship with his gay dads reminds us that there are other more pressing matters to think about beside the sexuality or gender of your carers when looking to the future. He said: 'They can come to my house, paint my house and look after my children' (Hill, 2013, p.135).

Recruitment

Motivation

The motivation of individuals and couples to foster is one of a range of variables impacting upon recruitment (McDermid, Holmes, Kirton, Signoretta, 2012; Peake and Townsend, 2012; Sebba, 2012). This is no different in the main for LGBT adopters and foster carers (Jennings et al, 2014; Mallon, 2004; Shernoff, 1996). However, the studies in this review highlight some differences for LGBT people regarding their motivation to foster and the characteristics of those wanting to foster and adopt.

For many prospective foster carers and adopters who are LGBT, adoption or fostering was their first choice for being involved with, and responsible for, the care and upbringing of children. Unlike other foster carers, many were wanting to parent for the first time. Rather than this being viewed as a positive factor regarding the potential recruitment of LGBT people as adopters and foster carers, it was sometimes problematised by assessing agencies and social workers (Hicks, 2000, Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Hill, 2013; Riggs and Augustinos, 2009).

Prospective applicants' enthusiasm to become foster carers or adopters was hampered to some degree by their own assumptions that their sexuality would be a barrier (Riggs, 2011). New Family Social's (2014) survey found that 36% of

their respondents thought that being LGBT would be a barrier to becoming an adoptive parent or foster carer.

Regarding characteristics, the Gates et al (2007) study found that LGBT foster carers in general had higher levels of educational qualifications than their heterosexual counterparts. These findings were also reflected within Hill's (2013) and Hicks and McDermott's (1999) collections of foster carer and adopter case studies, many of whom worked in education/welfare settings.

Geographical and State differences

There were significant differences evident within the publications regarding different degrees of interest by States in recruiting LGBT foster carers and adopters (Gates et al, 2007; Riggs, 2013; Riggs and Augustinos, 2009). This difference of interest reflected different legal and policy frameworks in some cases, but not in all. Within Australia for example, South Australia and Victoria did not have explicit government policies regarding the positive recruitment of LGBT foster carers unlike New South Wales (Riggs, 2013).

Agency attitudes

Fostering and adoption agencies have had to weather the media's sometimes prurient interest in LGBT fostering and adoption. Writing in 1999, Hicks and McDermott note that:

One of the reasons that social work agencies remain cautious about the issue of lesbian and gay carers is the constant threat of media exposure involved, and social workers may be just as likely as carers to 'get it in the neck' from the press for the sake of a good story.

(1999, p.174)

Writing 10 years earlier, Ricketts and Achtenberg (1989) record the impact that the fear of press exposure had on agencies. Although things have moved on in many parts of the world since 1989 and 1999, the ghost of the media is an ever-present concerning presence for fostering and adoption agencies.

Changes to social work organisations' policies and attitudes are evident from the studies. Lesbian and gay prospective foster carers were sometimes not welcome as foster carer applicants with some agencies (Hicks, 1996, Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Patrick, 2006; Ryan, Pearlmutter, and Groza, 2004). More recently Riggs and Augoustinos (2009) found that potential applicants can assume that they will not be welcome because the foster care system in some states in Australia does not openly and overtly endorse LGBT foster care even though the same study found that some foster carers had positive experiences of their fostering service. They found:

... a lack of guidelines developed by foster care agencies to support lesbian and gay foster carers, or to engage with the media when issues relating to lesbian and gay carers appear. Thus whilst it may be suggested that social workers in Australia on the whole ... adopt a more liberal approach towards lesbian and gay carers, such carers continue to experience the impact of negative social beliefs about lesbian and gay parents more broadly

(2009, p.78)

Riggs (2013) recommends that fostering agencies make their position regarding lesbian and gay foster carers explicit and visible to the public. Many fostering agencies in the UK now make their foster care equality policies visible (in line with the Equality Act 2010); in addition some explicitly welcome LGBT applicants.

In general, no differences were reported between public, private and independent agencies' attitudes towards LGBT foster carers (Brown, 2011). However, some LGBT foster carers fostering for public agencies did think that private/independent fostering agencies might be more welcoming and supportive of LGBT foster carers (Downs and James, 2006).

Perceived strengths of lesbian and gay carers

Social workers in two studies noted particular strengths of some LGBT foster carers. Brooks and Goldberg sum these up as including: '*...psychological stability, sensitivity, educational accomplishments, financial security, strong support systems, and resourcefulness*' (2001, p153). In another study social workers thought that LGBT foster carers' experiences of marginalisation and discrimination might add to their capabilities as foster carers both in being able to consider the challenges of being foster carers, as well as building their resilience. One such social worker articulated this point:

So what you're looking for is resilience and the ability to deal with either the specific questions that their history brings to the fore or whatever other problems fostering might throw at them. Because in a way with a gay couple, I think, it makes it easier to find issues that they may have had to deal with in their life that you can talk about and relate to fostering and looked after children. Whereas sometimes Mr and Mrs conventional you struggle to find anything in their life that's been problematic that you can actually help them to get them to talk about and how that might relate to fostering.

(Brown, 2011, p.118)

The link between stigma a child in public care might experience, and stigma experienced by many LGBT people, means that LGBT carers can be in a strong position to build children's self-esteem (Patrick and Palladino, 2009; Ross et al, 2009); by modelling confident and productive ways of being with others and in the world.

Assessment

Social worker attitudes

A central aspect of the assessment of a prospective foster carer and their household is what is often referred to in the USA as 'the home study', and in the UK as 'the assessment'. New Family Social's (2014) survey found that 35% of their LGBT respondents believed that their assessment would have been easier if they had not been LGBT. The assessment/home study is usually undertaken by one person, so the beliefs and attitudes of that person are pertinent to the assessment of LGBT foster carers. There was evidence in the studies of LGBT carers of them experiencing heteronormative and even homophobic social worker assumptions. For example, assessors being preoccupied with the domestic roles lesbian and gay partners undertook within the home, lesbians having to evidence the presence of men in their social network, discussions with lesbians about male role models for foster children. In fact all these matters are pertinent to all foster carer assessments but what was apparent in the studies was that those involved believed that if the prospective foster carers had been heterosexual couples or single applicants, such scrutiny would not have occurred (Hicks, 1996, Hicks and McDermott, 1999, New Family Social 2014; Patrick and Palladino, 2009; Riggs and Augoustinos, 2009). However, in these studies there were also examples of LGBT carers having positive and enabling relationships with their social work assessors.

These findings are in line with the varied views lesbian and gay respondents reported of their experiences of adoption assessments (Mellish et al, 2013). Hicks' conversations with social workers about the assessment of lesbian carers revealed the coming together of ideas regarding gender and sexuality, in some cases resulting in negative and positive stereotyping. He writes: *Lesbian applicants were, at the very least, represented according to heteronormative expectations of the 'good carer' and, at worst, rejected as 'too radical, too political, too challenging of men, indeed too lesbian'* (Hicks, 2000, p 165). The connection between social workers' beliefs regarding gender roles and attitudes towards LGBT people becoming adopters and foster carers was found in a number of studies (Jayaratne, Faller, Ortega and Vandervort, 2008; Spivey, 2006):

The relationship found in the analysis ... bears out the supposition that a direct relationship exists between beliefs and attitudes and that those whose sex-role beliefs were more egalitarian and less traditional would also be more favorable toward adoption by gay and lesbian couples.

(Spivey, 2006, p.48)

Within some agencies attempts were made to mitigate this by 'gay and lesbian friendly' social workers assessing LGBT prospective foster carers (Brooks and Goldberg, 2001). LGBT people's positive experiences of the assessment process were too often associated with 'the goodwill of individual workers' rather than a more systemic agency approach that 'mandates for skills for working with lesbians and gay men but that does not overemphasize sexuality' (Riggs, 2011, p.225). However, another study about LGBT prospective adopter assessments noted that 'adoption caseworkers prioritized factors that could be applicable to most adoptive parents, regardless of sexual orientation' (Hall, 2010, p.277).

It seems then that there was too much variability in the quality of LGBT carer assessments. In addition to encountering problematic beliefs and attitudes regarding gender and sexuality some applicants felt they were placed in a position of having to "educate" their social worker about lesbian and gay issues, and lesbian and gay lives.' (Hicks, 1996, p.18).

Authors of a number of publications linked the variability of the assessment experience of LGBT prospective carers to questions about the quality and content of social work education and training. The argument was that social work education needed to be such that it enabled effective assessment of foster care applicants irrespective of their gender or sexual orientation (Dugmore and Cocker, 2008; Goldberg, Moyer, Kinkler, and Richardson, 2012; Hall, 2010; Parrott et al, 2007).

In addition to social workers' attitudes and beliefs, the perceptions of LGBT applicants themselves were seen as important, because they impact on both the recruitment and assessment processes, and need to be held in mind by fostering agencies and social workers.

There are also high expectations that being LGBT means the assessment process is harder and we will only be offered harder-to-place children. The percentage of actual adopters and foster carers with this experience are lower, but they still reflect that there is real reason for this negative expectation.

(New Family Social, 2014)

Same or different assessment?

The debate about whether or not the assessment of LGBT prospective carers should be the same or different from that undertaken with heterosexual carers has been evident in the literature for a number of decades. The consensus from the publications reviewed was that assessments need to be enabling, rigorous, and analytic, covering all subjects considered with all foster carers; but in addition social work assessors, with the LGBT applicants, should think through areas pertinent to a person's gender and sexuality relevant to them becoming foster carers. The Wakefield Inquiry, in the UK, identified some anxiety on behalf of a number of social workers involved, about potentially being accused of homophobia in their work with one gay couple which contributed to the couple's assessment lacking sufficient rigour or analysis; the carers subsequently went on to abuse boys in their care (Parrott et al, 2007). Assessments need to be holistic, neither over-focussing on gender and sexuality nor ignoring them. In this regard it seems that the quality of LGBT foster carer assessments may have changed over time as articulated by one social worker:

I think the change is that we are more confident about lesbian and gay assessments. What I mean by that is that we are more confident about addressing the issues in the same way we would with any other carer. We're not

worried about being told we're discriminating. We're confident about explaining why we're asking questions.

(Brown, 2011, p.117)

A number of social work assessors in one study made the link between how a LGBT person managed discrimination and their subsequent development of resilience, or not, and the relevance of this to the assessment process as future foster carers. A social worker from the same study who thought that additional areas did need to be covered in assessments argued:

I think the other thing that can be different is about the need to have a discussion about some of the discrimination they're going to meet when they start fostering from within the community and how we're going to help them but also how resilient they are about actually being able to manage that as well, because if they're not resilient, you know, it's not going to work.

(Brown, 2011, p.117)

Gender roles

Studies that garnered LGBT carers' views about their assessments indicated that there were two angles from which social workers explored gender roles with prospective carers. First, some assessors were preoccupied by heteronormative notions of gender roles and focussed on such questions as who, within a couple, did domestic chores; such questions were not routinely put to heterosexual applicants (Hicks, 1996, 2000; Hicks and McDermott, 1999). Understanding the day to day functioning of a prospective fostering family is relevant to all foster carer assessments. As part of an assessment this is indeed a sensible area for exploration; but the evidence in the studies showed LGBT applicants were scrutinised, in this regard, over and above that to which heterosexual applicants were subjected. The second was a seeming belief on the behalf of some social work assessors that children

need to experience both men and women in families to develop their own sense of their maleness or femaleness (Riggs and Augoustinos, 2009), which is not consistent with research findings (Farr et al, 2010; Mellish et al, 2013).

Gender of the child

Social work assessors exploring with foster carers their preference regarding fostering boys or girls is an ordinary part of all foster carer assessments. However, Hicks found that some of his respondents' wishes regarding the preferred gender of a prospective foster child were problematised (1996; 2000) by assessors for example demonstrating the belief that gay men could not support the development of girl children. Voicing an interest in caring for young LGBT people was, in one case, seen as 'inappropriate' (Riggs and Augoustinos, 2009), as if there was potential sinister intent.

Assessment of couple relationships

In the Wakefield Inquiry there was evidence that the gay carers' relationship as a couple was insufficiently explored; the inference being that the social work assessor was anxious about exploring their relationship in depth because they were gay (Parrott et al, 2007).

The sexuality of lesbian and gay couples applying to foster is self-evident to an agency they apply to and to their assessor. This is not the case for transgender or bisexual couples or single applicants. Given that some applicants in the past were rejected as prospective carers because of being LGBT (Hicks and McDermott, 1999, Patrick, 2006), it might be expected that applicants could conceal their sexuality. However, in the Hicks and McDermott (1999) and the Hill (2013) collections of case studies this was not the case. The strain of needing to come out as lesbian or gay 'again and again' to assessors, panels and once approved to a whole range of people was noted in some studies (Hicks, 1996; Hicks and McDermott, 1999). Agencies' assumptions regarding couples being heterosexual can cause difficulties for LGBT applicants (Patrick 2006).

Panels

In the UK, fostering and adoption assessment reports are presented to a panel for consideration. The panel process is commented upon in a number of publications (Brown, 2011, Hicks, 2000; Hicks and McDermott, 1999). Hicks (2000) and Hicks and McDermott (1999) found that applicants' experiences in panel meetings were similar to those noted above in respect to assessments, regarding heteronormative

assumptions, and being asked questions related to gender roles they believed would not have been asked of heterosexual applicants.

Support and supervision

The importance of agencies having policies about their approach to recruiting, assessing, supporting and supervising LGBT foster carers was articulated in a number of studies. Riggs's study suggests a link between 'experiences of support and the existence (or otherwise) of policies or practices aimed at supporting lesbian and gay foster carers' (2013, p.104).

The role of the supervising social worker (SSW)/link worker/the foster carer's social worker

The quality and effectiveness of the relationships LGBT foster carers had with their SSWs, reported in the studies, indicated varied experiences for individual LGBT foster carers internationally and over time. More recently there are examples of LGBT foster carers feeling that the quality of the support they received from their SSW was excellent. One of Hill's lesbian foster carers comments: 'With the social work team it is like being part of a big, extended family. There is a lot of support out there' (2013, p.65). Goldberg et al found similar findings:

Some described specific workers who provided excellent support and advice and whose positive impact helped to offset the strain of dealing with "a system that is not the greatest" ... describing specific social workers in glowing terms, using words like "wonderful" and "awesome."

(2012, p.305)

These positive findings are somewhat tempered by findings in Australia where a significant proportion of a sample of foster carers; 'reported less than positive views about the support they received, and that relatively few considered their agency worker to be their primary source of support' (Riggs, 2013, p.103). These varied views of LGBT foster carers regarding the quality of the support and supervision they receive from their agency is consistent with the varied views on the same subject of foster carers generally (Brown, Sebba and Luke, 2014).

Matching

A number of publications noted a problematic lack of guidance within agencies regarding the placement of children and young people with LGBT carers (Brooks and Goldberg, 2001; Gates, et al, 2007; Goldberg, et al, 2012). In some cases the child's social worker was reluctant to make a placement with an LGBT foster carer (Brooks and Goldberg, 2001; Hicks, 1996; Hicks and McDermott, 1999), similar to findings in a USA adoption placement study (Ryan, 2000).

In the 1980s and 1990s there was evidence that LGBT foster carers and adopters were more likely to have children placed with them who were perceived as difficult to place (Hicks, 1996; Hicks and McDermott, 1999). Despite changes in this regard, New Family Social's (2014) survey evidenced that this is still perceived to be true by LGBT prospective foster carers; indeed 57% of their sample who were considering becoming foster carers thought this to be the case, whereas only 37% of approved LGBT foster carers experienced this as true.

Regarding the matching of children and carers, a study examining the attitudes of the workforce found that: 'Both African American and white conservative leaning workers are more likely to disagree with the placement of children in gay/lesbian households' (Jayaratne et al 2008, p.964).

Preparation of children for placements

A concern voiced by a number of foster carers in different studies was the importance of children and young people being prepared before being placed with LGBT foster carers. Lack of preparation for placement - a child knowing little about the foster carer and the foster carer knowing little about the child - has also been found to be the case in respect to foster carers more generally (Brown, Sebba and Luke, 2014). The experience of the foster carers was that individual children and young people responded differently to being placed within a LGBT household, but even though many children took it in their stride, preparation was still considered important (Goldberg, et al 2012; Hill, 2013; Patrick, 2006). In Patrick and Palladino's study, they found that:

Surprisingly, gay and lesbian foster parents often had no idea if case managers said anything about their relationship to foster children

being placed in their home. While they felt workers were responsible for disclosing the information on their behalf and monitoring the children's responses to the disclosure, their experiences as foster parents suggested this was not routinely done'

(2009, p.338)

Social workers' limited confidence in talking to children about the sexuality of their foster carers was thought to be linked to their poor preparation of children before they were placed with a LGBT carer (Patrick and Palladino, 2009). Conversely, the lack of confidence was not reflected in the New Family Social's (2014) survey: 96% of their LGBT foster carer respondents felt prepared to answer children's questions about their family composition and sexuality.

One foster carer noted that for many children the foster carer's sexuality was not their main concern:

So during the car ride home I usually explain that we have two dads in our family instead of a mom and a dad. Initially the kids seem uninterested or mildly curious. We learned that for many of them it is a non-issue. We have found they are much more concerned about having a bed to sleep in and food to eat - and knowing they are safe, secure, and loved - than they are about our relationship.

(Patrick, 2006, p.127)

Race and ethnicity

Race, ethnicity and religion did not feature particularly in the reviewed studies. Hall's (2010) study found that social workers in their adoption study prioritised same race matching over any other consideration. This was a different finding to Hicks where the social workers in one case believed that it was not appropriate to place a sibling group with a lesbian couple because this would conflict with the assumed religious beliefs of their birth family, even though one woman of the couple was an ethnic match for the children (Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Hicks, 2011).

Supervision and support for children's needs

Some of the studies found that, like many foster carers (Brown, Sebba and Luke, 2014), LGBT carers wanted effective social work supervision and support to enable them to meet the needs of children they were caring for (Goldberg, et al, 2012; Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Hill, 2013; Patrick, 2006; Riggs, 2013; Riggs et al, 2010) and particularly regarding contact with birth families (Patrick and Palladino, 2009).

Contact

Austerberry et al (2013) evidence that contact between foster children and their birth families can be a source of stress and tension for foster carers. They argue the importance of targeted social work support enabling foster carers to facilitate effective contact for foster children. Studies in this review reflect the Austerberry et al (2013) findings documenting carers' differing experiences of contact, ranging from positive experiences to more difficult ones (Downs and James, 2006, Goldberg et al, 2012; Hill, 2013, Patrick and Palladino; Hicks and McDermott, 1999). As with other areas within this review the difference for LGBT foster carers from heterosexual carers was regarding their sexuality, and how birth families would, or did, react (Downs and James, 2006). Their actual experiences were often different from their worries in this regard (Hill, 2013; Patrick, 2006; Patrick and Palladino, 2009). For example, Patrick recounts a message on a card from a birth mother of his foster children:

I could never tell you both how much you have done for me and my children. My heart bursts with gratitude for the love you shared and expressed for them. You helped my kids have a new start in life by opening your arms and home to them... May God bless you and keep you safe throughout your lives and those you touch.

(Patrick, 2006, p.130)

And one of Goldberg et al's respondents commented: *'I think it's good for Joe to continue to have relationships with his birth family... and that's going to be facilitated by my having a relationship with them'* (2012, p.308).

These positive experiences and approaches are tempered to some degree by Downs and James' (2006) findings, where a minority of LGBT foster carers perceived their sexual orientation as being of concern for the birth families (nearly 27% of men and 30% of women in their sample). The authors comment: *'Birth parent concerns over the foster parents' sexual orientation must be better managed for the welfare of the foster child, the foster parents, and the relationship between the child and his or her birth family'* (Downs and James, 2006, p.294).

Team around the child

The experiences of LGBT carers of being a member of the 'team around the child' within the studies varied from working closely with others in the interest of a child to feeling marginalised. This range of experience reflects findings regarding foster carers more generally (Brown, Sebba and Luke, 2014). The difference was that the LGBT foster carers in some cases experienced feeling marginalised or over-scrutinised as being associated with their sexuality (Downs and James, 2006; Goldberg, 2012; Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Patrick and Palladino, 2009; Riggs, 2011; Riggs and Augoustinos, 2009).

One foster carer's positive experience is recorded as follows:

We have had the same link worker since we started fostering, which is very unusual but great for building up a relationship. We have also had amazing support from the two CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) workers. There are two family therapists within the local authority whom we can also call on to discuss issues.
(Hill, 2013, p.57)

An area where some LGBT carers appear to be vocal, and have a different view than others responsible for a foster child, is related to 'safer care'; feeling that agency policies in this regard were not always in children's interests. Two carers from the same collection of case studies put this forthrightly:

'I struggle with safer caring policies. If I was tickling my nephew, how can I not tickle my foster son? Sometimes I think the policies are not realistic and the needs of the children should come first.'

(2013, p64)

I think the safer care policies are a load of rubbish. Of course you should be able to kiss or cuddle a child. It's about where you draw the line. I'm a parent, I do what a child needs' (Hill, 2013, p.153). A balanced approach to safer care would consider the particular needs and experiences of a specific child; for one child tickling might be in their interests but for another it might not be.

The importance of feeling a valued member of the team around the child, to enable foster carers to meet the needs of children and for placement stability is summed up in a discursive text which addresses both the potential perceptions of LGBT carers as well as what agencies facilitate:

LGBT parents might be particularly vulnerable to feeling that they have to prove their worthiness as parents in different ways than do their heterosexual and cis-gender counterparts. Supportive services that acknowledge the particular challenges and strengths of LGBT parents and that can help them understand the context of their children's difficulties can contribute to the maintenance of successful placements.

(Ariyakulkan and Mallon, 2012)

Support networks and groups

Support for LGBT foster carers comes from varied sources, their own friendship and family networks as well as from formal agency support groups (Downs and James, 2006; Goldberg, et al, 2012; Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Riggs, 2013). Agency foster carers' support groups were experienced by a number of LGBT carers as ineffective because they felt marginalised in predominantly heterosexual groups (Hicks and McDermott, 1999). In addition to agency support groups, LGBT carers have created their own support networks that are specific to being a LGBT carer; for example, the LGBTQ Parenting Network in Canada and New Family Social in the UK.

Training

Training is one element of a foster carer's personal development and is potentially a source of support enabling a foster carer to develop their knowledge and skills at the same time as being part of a training experience with other foster carers. However, training was sometimes experienced by LGBT carers as heteronormative and marginalising; for example the trainers assuming that everyone was heterosexual and by the use of normative language (de Jong and Donnelly, 2015; Mallon, 2007; Riggs, 2004). Some LGBT carers in both Goldberg et al's (2012) and Hicks and McDermott's (1999) studies experienced preparation training delivered by their agencies as problematic and marginalising with some training materials being heteronormative.



Gaps in the current research evidence base

Our stated intention was to consider existing research evidence about the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers. What became apparent was the absence of any findings about bisexual and transgender foster carers. This is a gap in current knowledge; foster carers, social workers and fostering agencies are therefore reliant on practice guidance and discursive papers (Downing, 2013; Pyne, 2012; Ross and Dobinson, 2013; Tye, 2003) for information on bisexual or transgender carers.

There is currently limited knowledge about the numbers of LGBT foster carers, where they are located and how they are utilised. Such information could map where LGBT foster carers are, if their agencies are ones with clear policies regarding the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers and how they are utilised by their agencies for placements.

Although there are findings about lesbian and gay foster carers', and social workers' perceptions and experiences of recruitment, assessment, support and supervision, there is little robust triangulated evidence drawing on different perceptions and experiences within the same agency. The studies reviewed include two surveys but no quantitative studies for example involving secondary data analysis.

There was considerable evidence regarding lesbian and gay foster carers' thoughts and feelings when they experienced heteronormative practice, and contrasting evidence of when they thought the practice was 'good'. Currently however there are more detailed findings about poor practice and less regarding components of best practice.

Although we included the voices of children and young people as best we could in this review, there is an absence of research findings about the views and experiences of fostered children and young people placed, or having been placed, with LGBT foster carers. Their voices are essential for consideration and improvement of foster care practice.



Conclusions

LGBT foster carers have a wide range of experiences, as do all foster carers, of their recruitment, assessment, support and supervision. However, prospective and currently approved LGBT foster carers experience two additional dynamics: first, their own perceptions about how fostering agencies, social workers, foster children and young people and their families *might* respond to their gender and sexuality; second, how fostering agencies, social workers, foster children and young people and their families *do* respond to their gender and sexuality.

Until relatively recently, LGBT people have lacked protective legislation; heteronormative and even homophobic practices in foster care and social work were still evident from the studies that affect carers' perceptions and experiences. This was balanced by evidence of inclusive, effective, recruitment, assessment, support and supervision. However, the quality of foster care and social work practice was variable and 'good' practice was often associated with individual practitioners. It is therefore important for social workers, foster carers and agencies to be aware of gender and sexuality and the parts they play in LGBT people's lives without over-focussing on them, but rather including them within a holistic approach.

The studies in this review indicated some progress in practice over time and examples of positive experiences and practice were more evident in more recent publications. However, there was not a clear linear progression of practice improving over time, and some examples of heteronormative social work practice were still evident in recent studies.

Areas of particular importance for the effective recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers, evident within the publications, were that:

- Recruitment of LGBT foster carers can be hampered by their own assumptions that their sexuality would be a barrier.
- They are more likely to be wanting to parent for the first time, than some other applicants;
- LGBT applicants were helped by agencies having clear policy statements regarding their recruitment;
- Geographical differences in recruiting LGBT carers partly reflect different legal and policy frameworks. For example, in South Australia, LGBT foster care is not overtly endorsed;
- Social workers' beliefs regarding gender roles and sexuality affect their attitudes towards LGBT people becoming adopters and foster carers which may subsequently influence the assessment process;
- No significant differences were found between public and independent fostering agencies in the recruitment, assessment and support of LGBT carers but there was a perception by LGBT carers that they would be more easily accepted in independent agencies;
- The quality of support and supervision of LGBT foster carers by supervising social workers and foster children and young people's social workers impacts on the ability of carers to meet the needs of children and young people;
- Children and young people being prepared for placement with LGBT foster carers, prior to a child arriving at the foster carers' home, is thought to be helpful;

- LGBT foster carers appreciate and need support and supervision regarding meeting the needs of particular children and managing behaviour, like all foster carers;
- Similar to other foster carers, LGBT carers appreciate and need support to enable children to have helpful contact with their birth families. LGBT foster carers can worry about potential homophobia from children's families.

In sum, effective social work practice with LGBT foster carers closely mirrors effective social work practice more widely. However, agencies, foster carers and social workers have to be mindful of the impact of homophobia, both currently and historically, and make sure that their practice mitigates any current continuing dynamics. The focus of foster care is children and young people, enabling them to have warm, reparative, stimulating, and safe foster care placements; recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers needs to have this as its goal.

Recommendations for policy and practice

Given some of the gaps in the research findings, recommendations can only be tentative. We recommend that fostering agencies:

- Develop and review their policies and practices regarding the recruitment, assessment (including panels) and supervision of LGBT foster carers, to ensure that they are as effective as current knowledge allows;
- Consider the consistent use of existing guidance about, and models for, the assessment of LGBT foster carers, to make sure that assessments are not heteronormative, but are rigorous, holistic and analytic, neither ignoring nor over focussing on sexuality and gender. Facilitating applicants' consideration of how their gender and sexuality might be relevant to fostering, and what agency supervision and support would be helpful, should be integral aspects of assessments;
- Make sure that matching decisions are free from heteronormative assumptions and are about whether a foster carer can meet the needs of specific children;
- Ensure that fostering panel processes are inclusive and enable thorough consideration of a person's or couple's suitability to become, or remain approved as foster carers irrespective of their gender or sexuality; considering that which is relevant to their future foster caring role;
- Ensure that LGBT foster carers receive support and supervision from their SSW and their foster child's social worker as well as multi-disciplinary teams that enables them to care effectively for children and young people;
- Enable LGBT foster carers to benefit from LGBT support groups; information about such groups can be helpful. Agencies' own foster carer support groups should be inclusive and LGBT foster carers as a result feel included;
- Examine the content, processes and structures of foster carer training programmes to ensure all foster carers feel respected, valued and included;
- Ensure that social workers have the confidence, skills, attitudes and knowledge to work effectively with all foster carers irrespective of their sexuality or gender;
- Keep the foster child or young person at the centre of foster care practice and decision making.

Recommendations for further research

The review identified a number of gaps in the existing research evidence. We recommend that further research is undertaken that:

- Examines bisexual and transgender foster care; drawing on fostering agencies', bisexual and transgender foster carers', and social workers' perceptions and experiences of recruitment, assessment, support and supervision to identify effective practice;
- Maps nationally, or by state, where LGBT foster carers are currently located, and how they are utilised for children and young people's placements and the types of placements (e.g. siblings, older children, children with special needs etc.). This information to be considered alongside related fostering agencies' policies regarding the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers. Such research findings would identify whether or not LGBT foster carers cluster in particular geographical locations, and with particular fostering agencies (this is anecdotally believed to be the case);
- Examines, within a number of geographically spread fostering agencies, policies and practices about the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT foster carers. Such research should gather the perceptions, and experiences of LGBT foster carers, their assessors (including panels), their SSWs, Independent Reviewing Officers, other professionals in the team such as clinicians, birth families and their foster children's social workers regarding recruitment, assessment, support and supervision. Such a research study could consider particular areas to further inform effective practice with LGBT foster carers;
- Foregrounds the perceptions and experiences of children and young people, and their families, placed with LGBT foster carers.

The Rees Centre is committed to providing robust, useful and timely research and will be consulting a wide range of stakeholders on the findings from this review and considering how to take these recommendations forward. We look forward to your comments.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Details of studies included in the review

Reference	Country	Number of participants	Methodology
Brooks and Goldberg, 2001	USA	10 social workers 11 gay and lesbian foster carers and adopters (5 foster carers and 3 prospective foster carers)	Interviews and focus group
Brown, 2011	UK	13 social workers	Focus groups
Downs, and James, 2006	USA	60 lesbian, gay and bisexual foster carers	Interviews
Gates, Badgett, Macombe and Chambers, 2007	USA	State and Federal statistics	Documentary analysis
Goldberg, Moyer, Kinkler and Richardson, 2012	USA	42 foster to adopt couples, 17 of whom were lesbian and 13 gay	Questionnaires and telephone Interviews
Guasp, 2010	UK	82 children and young people (aged 4-27) of gay and lesbian families	Interviews Focus groups
Hall, 2010	USA	47 social workers	Questionnaires
Hicks, 1996	UK	11 gay and lesbian foster carers and adopters	Interviews
Hicks, 2000	UK	26 social workers, 3 team managers and 1 manager of children's services	Interviews
Hicks and McDermott, 1999	UK	17 gay and lesbian adopter and foster carer case studies	Interviews Self-reporting writing
Hill, 2013	UK	14 gay and lesbian adopter and foster carer case studies	Interviews
Jayaratne, Faller, Ortega and Vandervor, 2008	USA	259 child welfare workers	Questionnaires
New Family Social, 2014	UK	400 LGBT adopters and foster carers, including people being currently assessed and those considering fostering or adopting	Survey
Parrott, MacIver and Thoburn, 2007	UK	Child care Inquiry into two foster carers' abuse of children in their care	Case study
Patrick, 2006	USA	1 gay fostering couple	Case study
Patrick and Palladino, 2009	USA	9 gay and lesbian foster carers	Interviews
Riggs, 2011	Australia	60 gay and lesbian foster carers	Survey Interviews Focus groups
Riggs, 2013	Australia	60 gay and lesbian foster carers	Survey Interviews Focus groups
Riggs and Augoustinos, 2009	Australia	80 foster carers of whom 10 gay and lesbian	Interviews Focus groups
Riggs, Delfabbro and Augoustinos, 2010	Australia	80 foster carers of whom 7 gay	Interviews Focus groups

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