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## **Social worker perceptions of services directed toward sexual minority youth and their families in child welfare agencies**

Travis James Webb

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SOCIAL WORKER PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICES DIRECTED  
TOWARD SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH AND THEIR  
FAMILIES IN CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Travis James Webb

June 2004

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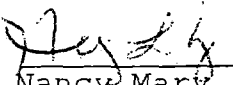
  
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## ABSTRACT

Sexual minority youth are coming out about their same-sex attractions earlier in recent years. With this reality is the assumption that such youth and their families may experience a range of potential problems and concerns, suggesting that the child welfare system may need to do more to respond to the unique needs of this population. By employing a qualitative research design, this study examined child welfare agencies' ability to adequately render services to sexual minority youth and their families using face-to-face interviews with ten child welfare workers. This study is important for social work as it explores how services can best be provided to this population in the context of child welfare.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Statement

In recent years, much research has been conducted pertaining to the attitudes, beliefs and risk behaviors associated with the "Coming out" process for sexual minority youth (Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual adolescents) with "coming out" is referred to as a person's decision to reveal their same-sex, sexual orientation to their family, friends and surrounding community. However, there aren't sufficient studies which seek to examine the role of social work, and more specifically, the capacity of the child welfare system to effectively service this population. For any practitioner or professional working with this population, the niche for social work and child welfare becomes apparent when we consider the psychosocial adjustments sexual minority youth must face during childhood.

Indeed, sexual minority youth (SMY) are coming out earlier in recent years, and this carries with it a range of potential problems and concerns. Negative experiences associated with stigmatization and discrimination are almost inevitable consequences for youth who come out to friends, family and the greater community. In reality, SMY



are not unlike other children who require counseling, therapy, out-of-home placement or other services. However, it is no surprise that the needs of SMY may be unique when the worker is developing adoption, foster care, family reunification services or other interventions for the client and certain considerations should be made in light of the child's identity and sexual orientation. Thus the relationship between SMY and their families should be of particular interest to social workers and other professionals under the child welfare umbrella who are entrusted with improving the adaptive functioning of children regardless of their sexual orientation.

As a rule, child welfare and other social service agencies typically have formal policies which affirm the respect and dignity of the diverse populations they serve. However, relevant literature suggests that the child welfare system is unequipped to work effectively with SMY and their families, as formal policy has straddled the issue of alternative sexual orientation and social workers aren't adequately trained to deal with the diverse needs of this population. The result is an emerging service gap where otherwise child welfare agencies and other planes of social work could be more proactive in effectively helping SMY to live better lives. This study explored the

condition of the child welfare system to adequately service SMY and ultimately determine if a gap in service exists.

#### Purpose of the Study

The intent of this study was to examine the perceptions of social workers in child welfare agencies as to their preparedness in meeting the needs of sexual minority youth and their families. In drawing on the perceptions of child welfare workers, it is believed that further clarity has been attained as to the ability of the child welfare system to adequately intervene in the lives of sexual minority youth, and determine whether a gap in service truly exists. The study explored the worker's perception of his/her own capacity, and the capacity of the agency, to effectively mobilize resources and render services.

Indeed, the range of services available to children are typically varied. Youth-serving agencies come into contact with SMY for reasons that fall into three interrelated areas: health of the youth, family conflict, or a need for out-of-home placement. The extent of these problems emphasizes the need for all youth-serving agencies, regardless of function, to become knowledgeable about and sensitive to the needs of their young, sexual

minority clients (Philips, 1997). These agencies, "Often initiate good-faith efforts to increase sensitivity, but are unable to sustain their efforts against competing demand and resistance from staff members, clients, administrators, and the community" (p. 2):

Likewise, efforts to increase sensitivity to gay and lesbian youth cannot likely be sustained in an environment that doesn't explicitly encourage such undertakings. A philosophical groundwork must first be laid that demonstrates the agency's commitment to diversity and to establishing a safe and welcoming climate for all clients (Philips, 1997). Once this philosophical foundation for the agency is set it becomes easier for staff members to learn about, advocate for, and provide services to sexual minority youth (Philips, 1997). Ultimately, clients and staff are set to benefit from philosophies indicating that the agency and its staff do not shy away from controversial issues as anyone seeking assistance will find accommodation there.

Moreover, if the philosophy of an agency is to be assessed as effective, then either the input of agency staff or the clientele they service must be solicited. Indeed, to obtain the perceptions of SMY in the child welfare system could prove to be a challenging task

considering children's tendencies of keeping a low profile and preferring confidentiality in matters regarding their same-sex attractions. This study hopes to have gained an accurate assessment of child welfare agencies' responsiveness to SMY by gathering the perceptions of the workers themselves, realizing that agency staff may be a more practical and accessible source of information for conducting face-to-face interviews. For this purpose, this study employed a qualitative design to effectively reach the objectives proposed in this study and for guiding the analysis of the data.

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work

The proposed study has direct implications for social work as its objectives are concerned with assessing the current condition of the child welfare system to provide social services to SMY and their families effectively.

The contributions of this study for the discipline of social work can potentially manifest in many ways. First, this study was designed with the purposes of bringing about awareness as to the issues SMY face when entering the child welfare system. Participants in this study may not have given much thought to these issues prior to their respective interviews for this study. It may be that upon

reflecting on these issues, social workers will be compelled to consider SMY more carefully, develop new strategies for effectively working with SMY, and empower them to make informed decisions on their behalf.

Moreover, this study may also contribute to social work by impacting child welfare policies effecting this population. It is hoped that this study will influence social workers in the arena of child welfare, and in related areas, to propose new policies which will give greater consideration to the needs of SMY and ultimately lead to greater responsiveness in service delivery.

Lastly, this study has contributed to the research knowledge base associated with this topic in that it may reiterate findings that were made as much as ten years ago, or validate the need for new studies on or related to this topic. Moreover, this study may serve to remind interested parties that the recommendations of past research has not yet been heeded and that opportunities may still exist to enhance service should this problem become more pronounced.

CHAPTER TWO  
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This section will serve as a review of the literature pertaining to sexual minority youth in the context of social work, with specific attention when available, given to child welfare. As there is a noticeable absence of credible studies pertaining to sexual minority youth and child welfare, other relevant literature will be included in an attempt to create a stronger context as for the need for further study. This chapter begins with a discussion of the literature pertaining to sexual minority youth development, followed by a discussion of theoretical frameworks, the risk factors effecting this population, and finally the role of social work.

An Overview of Sexual Minority Youth  
Development

Historically, many researchers argued that gay youth didn't exist- that youth were sexually neutral and that their sexual orientation did not form until late adolescence. It wasn't until the 1980's did researchers even begin to publish empirical articles on gay youth (Tharinger, 2000). However, with the emergence of verbal, sexually minority youth, the necessity for research cannot

be ignored. Tharinger (2000) writes, "While no exact figures are available on the number of SMY, [other studies suggest] that the increasing social acceptance of lesbians and gays has allowed more sexual minority youth to become aware of their orientation at an earlier age and unlike their counterparts from previous decades, these youth have the language to articulate their identities and to develop in a context of gay pride" (p. 160). Unfortunately, increased pride and assertiveness often puts SMY in direct conflict with many of the institutions they traditionally turn to for support, such as family, peers, organized religion, and schools.

More contemporary research suggests a wealth of study addressing the risk behaviors of SMY, the development and psychological milestones reached while coming out, and the effects that stigmatizing and discrimination have on the youth and inter-related systems (i.e., family, peers, school, community). Other studies suggest ways that workers in the helping professions can work effectively with the gay and lesbian population, at times with specific attention to SMY. However, as it will be established later in this section, there are so few studies which focus on the preparedness and efficiency of services offered by child welfare agencies to sexual

minority youth and their families. These few however, are not necessarily empirically based.

Some of the empirically based studies pertaining to SMY focus on the aftermath of a youth's disclosure of his same-sex sexual preference- that is the studies focus on the initial reactions of parents, rather than the long-term effects of disclosure on the family. According to Tharinger (2000) SMY often experience a lack of parental, sibling and extended family support that can exacerbate many of the problems they experience. Most parents respond negatively to their child's disclosure of same-sex attraction, with some parents rejecting their children all together. Armesto (2001) examined factors that contribute to parental rejection of gay and lesbian youth, by surveying 356 college students (239 females and 116 males) who attended the University of Massachusetts. Each participant reported how they would react in a hypothetical vignette, where as parents they would be inclined to react to a son coming out to them. The study concluded that parents who felt their child had more control over their sexuality were associated with more unfavorable feelings about their child's sexuality.

Feelings of shame and guilt also play an important function in the reactions of parents to a child's



disclosure. Parents may experience feelings of shame believing that their child's homosexuality is a reflection of their own parenting and in turn are distressed by how others perceive them. Guilt (2001) may ensue as parents reflect back on their own parenting styles and consider, "Where did I go wrong" (p. 148)? Results from this study also suggest that gender is associated with parental reactions to homosexuality in a child. Armesto (2001) found that females reported greater affection toward their imagined homosexual child and were more likely to report a willingness to offer him support. Men on the other hand, were more likely than women to report that homosexuality was within their imagined child's personal control. Likewise, men were found to have more negative emotional reactions to their child's disclosure and hence the potential for abuse to ensue.

The bulk of related literature seems to elucidate the negative consequences with disclosure. A recent study conducted by Munoz-Plaza (2002) which sampled 12 young adults, 18-21 years old (seven female, five male) in South Carolina, found that most participants did not disclose their same-sex attraction during high school and perceived their parents and family members offered limited emotional, appraisal and informational support. Confronted

with their own sense of alienation and confusion, as well as the overwhelmingly negative messages about homosexuality in their home and school environments, respondents described their sexual identity formation as a process characterized by varying degrees of denial and acceptance.

Furthermore, it was found that non-family members and peers tended to be more supportive than family members (i.e., providing emotional, instrumental support) upon disclosure (Munoz-Plaza, 2002). The study, however, is not without limitations. Considering the sensitivity of the subject matter and concerns regarding potential risks to SMY in obtaining parental consent to participate in the study, minors under the age of 18 were excluded. In addition, the sample consisted entirely of college students who may have had a unique experience in this setting. Moreover, this study is retrospective, meaning the sample consisted of young adults who are potentially less likely able to recount experiences that took place several years ago. Munoz-Plaza admits the study is in no way intended for generalization of the larger population of SMY youth.

Newman (1993) examines the effects of traditional family values on the coming out process of male, gay

youth. Newman studied 27 gay, male youth between the ages of 17 and 20, asking them about various stages of the coming out process. Coming out was analyzed according to levels of sensitization, awareness with confusion, denial, shame, guilt and acceptance of one's own sexuality (1993). Families were categorized as having low or high traditional values based upon; importance of religion, having children, getting married and other domains. Newman posits that families with a strong emphasis on traditional values were perceived as less accepting of homosexuality than were the low traditional families.

Similar to the study by Armesto (2001), Newman also analyzed the effects of shame and guilt on the coming out process. However, Newman (1993) emphasized guilt and shame as a reaction of the youth, rather than the parents. Newman (1993) found that strong, traditional values were not directly correlated to feelings of shame or guilt. He suggested further studies should investigate what distinguishes adolescents who do not internalize negative societal views from those who do. Indeed, such studies would certainly bring light to factors promoting healthy coping skills for "outed" sexual minority youth.

In another study, Grimes (2000) examined multicultural factors and coming out to families. This was

a qualitative study of a non-random sample of 57 gay males, 18 to 24 years old. Grimes concluded that coming out to families is a process that is shaped not only by the parent-child relationship, but also by the conservative or liberal nature of the family system. Contrary to his initial assumption, race did not have a significant effect on how the participant experienced coming out. Consistent with the findings of Newman (1993), participants who came from high traditional families were more likely to experience feelings of rejection and disapproval than those of low traditional families. It was also found that male youths tend to disclose their sexual orientations to their mothers more often than to their fathers and that they did so directly. Few participants were outed by way discovery (i.e., a magazine left out, a diary read), or disclosure made involuntarily by another (Grimes, 2000).

Furthermore, Dube (1998) suggests that greater research could be conducted to assess the real-life reactions of parents with respect to mourning/loss stages associated with a child's coming out. Dube admits there is a need for more longitudinal studies to track the progression of responses from both parents and child following the disclosure. Such studies are scarce. One

such study, conducted by Dube concluded that youths are less likely than parents to perceive a positive change in parent-child relationships following disclosure. The study found that 56% of the lesbian and gay young adults felt that their relationship within the family improved. This was more true for their relationship with mother (66%) than with father (44%). Parents were strikingly more likely to report improvement, with 84% of mothers and 63% of fathers (1998). Another weakness among the related literature is that studies which include the reactions of both youths and parents seldom sample the actual parents of the youths being studied. These are valid limitations when generalizing about the population in question.

#### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Having reviewed various facets of parent-child reactions to disclosure in the relevant literature, the more theoretical frameworks will now be presented. The following paradigms have been selected as the guiding principles by which child welfare and other social service practitioners should consider when working with sexual minority clients. With the developmental foundation established earlier, the challenges facing child welfare workers are more apparent in helping SMY remain unified with their families or locating alternative placements.

For example, Attribution Theory (Armesto, 2001) can be applied to the context of a person and his alleged homosexual preference. It affirms that a person's perception that one has the ability to control the causes of an event will mediate the effective responses associated with that event. For purposes of application, consider for instance that parents who perceives their child has control over their own sexual preference is more likely to react negatively than a parent who believes that their child's sexuality is beyond their control. Thus, parents who believe their child has control over his sexual preference might be more inclined to reject him/her believing that it is a matter of personal choice.

Dube (1998) has established his own developmental model for parental reaction to their child's disclosure. He begins by asserting that although parents often react in a less than ideal manner after learning of their child's same-sex attractions, limited research indicates that most eventually arrive at tolerance or acceptance of their sexual orientation. Dube's model consists of various stages of reaction that span an indefinite length of time. According to Dube, the parent upon learning their child's orientation will typically react initially with shock, then denial and isolation, anger, then bargaining,

followed by depression, and ultimately acceptance (not to be equated with approval).

Also for consideration, Tharinger (2000) has identified the contextual relevance of Bowlby's Attachment Theory with regard to a child's need for support following the disclosure of his/her orientation disclosure. Attachment theory recognizes that attachment behaviors are innate and survival-directed to promote adaptation to various environmental conditions. The behavior is often associated with a child maintaining certain physical and emotional proximity to another person whereas the child can explore their environment from a safe base. The preferential tendency for a child to relate to certain caregivers is recognized as the child's propensity to ensure his/her own safety. In the context of SMY, adolescents who come out to their parents and experience rejection, withdrawal of love and support or banishment from the home, are at risk of developmental difficulties. This concept is applicable to youth with adoptive or foster parents as well. Tharinger (2000) affirms, "It is possible that rejection by the parents so upsets the internal working model of attachment that it adversely affects the adolescent's development" (p. 164). Tharinger suggests that in such circumstances the worker has the

critical role in working with the youth so that such negative experiences do not hinder existing and future attachment relationships.

Considering the wide range of responses that youth and families might react with upon a youth's coming out, it seems appropriate that Attachment Theory be applied in this context. Perhaps too often, the strain upon youth and their parents following disclosure is undermined by society's tendency to label such events taboo. The gravity and frequency of such events should not be ignored. The potential consequences of which will be addressed in the following section.

#### Risk Factors

Indeed, there are ample studies which have looked at the risk factors associated with sexual minority youth. As children become aware of their same-sex attractions coming out is a critical next step as has already been established earlier. However, what are the consequences for SMY who choose to come out and are rejected by their family, friends and the greater community? Or what of those youth, who under pressure to remain silent are compelled to keep their identities confidential? Under such circumstances the stress can be deemed significant and the ability to cope at times unbearable.



One study which examined the risk of suicide between sexual minority youth and heterosexual youth found that gay and lesbian youth are 2 to 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth and that gay and lesbian youth account for about 30% of the total adolescent suicide rate (Heights, 2002). In another study, between 48.3% and 76.4% of gays and lesbian youths have contemplated suicide, while between 29.3% and 42.5% have actually attempted suicide (Russell, 2001). This to be compared with suicide figures for heterosexual youth which suggest between 19.6% and 29.7% have suicidal ideations and between 7.6% and 13.7% have attempted suicide. The understanding is that the literature is reflecting a wide range of percentages to account for multiple studies on the subject. Therefore these are a range of averages being reported. The findings suggest some inconsistencies, but nevertheless a define relationship between sexual orientation of youth and suicide. Russell admits a valid criticism in that the samples are seldom random and rarely include heterosexual youth as a control group.

Heights (2002) also looked at suicide rates among sexual minority youth. Using a convenience sample of 50 males and 50 females ages ranging from 17-19, with 26% identifying as homosexual, 24% as bisexual/questioning and

50% as heterosexual, the study revealed that the suicide risk of sexual minorities was no greater than that of their heterosexual peers. Heights concluded that the discrepancy from previous research may be found in the fact that often older studies utilized subjects seeking assistance from community mental health centers, shelters and other services. These populations may have exhibited greater pathology and therefore weren't representative of the mainstream, homosexual youth population. Strikingly however, Height's conclusions differ starkly from most other studies on this subject.

Still another study (Elze, 2002) looked specifically at risk factors associated with internalizing and externalizing problems among sexual minority youth between the ages of 13 and 18. In a study of 169 qualifying adolescents in New England, recruited incidentally by way of community support groups and other methods, it was found that youths reporting more family mental health problems, poorer family functioning, and a lower socioeconomic status were more inclined to have internalizing and externalizing problems. Some of the risks accounted for were; discomfort with sexual orientation, family attitudes about sexual orientation, victimization, perceived stigmatization and perceived

negative community environment. An unfortunate drawback of the study was the vague indications as to what the researcher considered to be internal and external problems for the youth. However, it was suggested that the study was important for social work when we consider the unique needs that a stigmatized group may incur. It stressed the importance for social workers to assess the psychosocial functioning of SMY so that effective interventions might be developed to increase the comfort level of the youth with their families, schools, in the workplace and communities.

#### Suggested Community Response and Social Work

Much of the literature pertaining to sexual minority youth has made some marginal reference as to how the study should guide the worker or other professional in effectively helping the client. However, literature devoted exclusively to the role of social work with SMY is scarce, and even fewer studies have focused on the role of child welfare in this capacity. Even more striking is the fact that most of these studies were published ten years ago, and there have been negligible efforts to update past research or conduct new studies which would confirm or

negate whether or not past studies have led to any progress.

Research suggests several ways social service agencies can become more diversity-friendly toward sexual minority youth (Phillips, 1997). First, an agency should be staffed and administered by people who demonstrate a genuine commitment to providing services that foster self-esteem and acceptance for gay, lesbian and bisexual people. This means the agency should strive to hire open-minded, supportive employees willing to work with this population. Staff representing the agency should receive communication regarding antidiscrimination policies, recruitment of gay and lesbian staff members and administration should assess attitudes of potential employees during interviews. Ultimately, agencies when possible, should hire staff reflecting the client population. This includes various ethnic groups, religious affiliations and sexual orientations. Hiring openly gay, lesbian and bisexual staff is a concrete way agencies can demonstrate their commitment to diversity.

Moreover, agencies must affirm their commitment to the safety of SMY (Mallon, 1997). This includes not merely the physical safety of the client but also in areas of confidentiality and affirmation of self-worth. Providing a

safe place for youths to be themselves and promoting an organizational culture that supports and recognizes cultural strength and differences in client populations are essential. Organizations that wish to convey to clients that they are open and accepting of [SMY] should consciously create environments that signal safety and acceptance. Often times the social worker-client relationship is the only safe haven for a client to discuss their sexuality and they are depending on that regular, consistent support every time they come into the agency.

Furthermore, agencies can go a long way in enhancing the welcoming message toward SMY which will strengthen the client's sense of protection and freedom to be open with staff members. Agency waiting rooms can display literature, decorations or other symbols depicting gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. For example, some agencies display posters about AIDS depicting same-sex couples, sending a message that this population has been acknowledged and can receive services there (Mallon, 1997). At the same time, creating a welcoming environment may also include removing materials which overemphasize traditional gender roles.

Finally, agencies can increase the quality of service provided to SMY directly through inservice training. For instance, diversity training for staff is integral to providing services which reflect an understanding and sensitivity to issues relating to alternative lifestyles (Phillips, 1997). Efforts to increase sensitivity toward gay and lesbian youth can manifest in programs designed to increase employees' understanding of the social realities of varying client groups. This commitment to better understand clients' lives provides a natural avenue for the introduction of gay and lesbian content and decreases potential internal resistance. However, such efforts are not put into practice without resistance from agency staff. Some administrators, staff members, or board members may object to an independent sexual orientation sensitivity program. Indeed, many social service agencies and their staff are uncomfortable with and unprepared for dealing with gay and lesbian issues. Many believe that if their agency offers services to SMY it will be perceived as promoting homosexuality. Perhaps agency policies have not explicitly addressed this issue. According to Sullivan:

Invariably, there is a lag between the emergence of current research findings and incorporation of those

findings into policy and practice. In the case of research on gay and lesbian youths, the incorporation may be further impeded by practitioners' and policymakers' discomfort with the subject matter (1994, p. 16).

Consequently, it is this very dilemma guiding closer examination as to be addressed by this study. If past research has suggested ways in which social service agencies can be more responsive to the needs of their clientele then why are these indicators not being heeded? Such questions need to be posed to the social workers who actually work with these clients.

Likewise, Mallon (1992) observes the stagnation of child welfare in incorporating new policies into its practice which would enable it to be more proficient in the lives of sexual minority youth. He indicates the child welfare system is reluctant to modify its current practice out of fear that it will be perceived as promoting homosexuality and this is reflected in its demeanor as an organization down to administration and with its staff. Moreover, Mallon identifies several obstacles currently effecting child welfare in adequately reaching this population and suggests numerous interventions which would likely impact SMY more effectively. Many of the provisions

that Mallon suggests are rooted in staff education and training about homosexuality, and to provide staff with a philosophy which affirms the rights of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth, while genuinely conveying sensitivity to clients who are homosexual. In a field of scarce resources on the subject, Mallon's work continues to be one of the most profound studies available in the last ten years.

In other work, Mallon (1997) provides a model exemplified in an organization of his design called *The Triangle Tribe*, based in New York. This non-profit organization intervenes on behalf of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth and their families in providing them with appropriate out-of-home placement before their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. The organization recognizes the isolation experienced by such youth when alternative placement is warranted and seeks to bridge the gap between inadequate community services and the families. The model presented by Mallon is a crowning example of community response to an ever-growing need that hasn't been adequately addressed.

Likewise, Sullivan (1994) appears to have taken up much of what Mallon proposed in his work with regard to his understanding of SMY development and many of his suggestions for revision mirror those of Mallon. However,



Sullivan is primarily concerned with the obstacles that child welfare agencies face in attempting to modify their program to better meet the needs of sexual minorities. This study is specific to the child welfare roles of providing out of home placements to all children, including SMY. The study identifies four specific obstacles for consideration; (1) child welfare agencies fail to incorporate current research in their policies and practices with SMY, (2) intrinsic inequities exist in the interpretation of child welfare which put such youths at a disadvantage, (3) there is a lack of appropriately trained staff equipped to work with this population (including foster parents and other staff in the home where the child is placed), and (4) there is a lack of flexibility with specific arrangements made to SMY in adoptions, foster home and group home placement. Sullivan presents several valid criticisms of the welfare system in dealing with population and offers specific, concrete recommendations as to how child welfare agencies should reconceptualize their practices.

In another study published several years later, similar conclusions and suggestions were put in the context of a model presented by Travers (1999). He presented several points which echo the sentiments of

Mallon and Sullivan where social service agencies should conduct and incorporate "action research," and increase the accessibility of services to the gay and lesbian population. He also pointed to a community action network in Toronto, Canada which seeks to consolidate services from a variety of service providers and enhance their responsiveness to the needs of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. The purpose was to make youth-serving agencies more marketable to sexual minority youth (1999).

Furthermore, the theme of advocating for underrepresented minorities is the theme of Morrow's work (1993). Morrow recognizes that a child's family, educational setting, and the surrounding social culture are significant factors in the development of SMY. She posits that professional social workers will be most adept to working with this population when they recognize their own personal biases, educate themselves about gay and lesbian issues and commit themselves to promoting equal rights and services for sexual minorities, including children. Morrow took a heavy tone in favor of advocating for sexual minorities and called on social workers to "dispel negative stereotypes, myths and discrimination aimed at lesbian and gay individuals" (p. 662). Morrow succinctly captured the earnestness for members of the

helping profession to work on behalf of the underrepresented.

Finally, the community response to SMY might be better informed by soliciting input from the youths themselves. Another deficit in relevant literature is the absence of studies which attempt to gather the perceptions of sexual minority youth in their own experiences with the social service community. One rare study (Ginsburg, 2002) recruited 58 self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual or questioning youth in the Philadelphia area. The youths were asked to complete a questionnaire, submit to an interview and participate in a focus group to discuss their experiences, desires and observations with the health care community.

The results of the study were insightful. Many youth described feeling isolated and not particularly welcome in their dealings with relevant agencies (Ginsburg, 2002). They suggested that agencies could do more to make their practices more engaging of SMY and suggested that agency staff should be more sensitive and knowledgeable about gay and lesbian issues. Staff should also be more representative of the population- that is many youth expressed a desire to work with clinicians who were openly gay (2002). Hence, child welfare agencies should consider

hiring openly gay and lesbian workers. Participating youth also listed specific actions which were offensive, such as assumptions about gender roles and sexual behaviors. Strong sentiment in favor of strict confidentiality between clinician and client was also an important matter for participants. This was a decisive study considering the lack of feedback used in determining how policy should be shaped with regard to this specific population.

Having reviewed the relevant literature, it is hoped that the case for further studies pertaining to effective child welfare service with sexual minority youth has been made. The bulk of the literature presented suggests that administrators and practitioners in social service agencies could do more to make their practices more responsive to the needs of this population. Clearly, however there has been a lack of studies on this subject in the last ten years (even less pertaining to child welfare), consequently at a time when we're learning much more about the challenges sexual minority face.

#### Summary

In retrospect, this review began with a discussion of the developmental challenges facing SMY, which in turn led to the numerous risk factors that manifest as a result of those challenges, and finally coverage was given to

studies which have suggested how social work might become better involved in the lives of these youth. If we follow this logic, perhaps a warranted direction in which to proceed is to pursue other studies which investigate the progress child welfare agencies have made (if any) and to seek out staff members within child welfare agencies to solicit their perceptions as to how effectively they're meeting this challenge.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This section will present the methods used in conducting this study. Attention will be given to the study's design; sampling, the interview instrument, data collection, procedures, and protection of human subjects during the course of the study. This chapter will conclude with an overview of issues pertaining to qualitative data analysis.

#### Study Design

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the preparedness of child welfare workers to provide quality services to sexual minority youth and their families. Related literature has suggested a perceived service gap in child welfare agencies' ability to respond effectively to needs uniquely effecting SMY. This study has explored as to whether such a service gap truly exists, and identify to what extent child welfare agencies are attempting to meet those needs.

The study employed a qualitative design, consisting of face-to-face interviews with ten social workers in child welfare agencies in Riverside and San Bernardino

County. It is believed that conducting face-to-face interviews was the most practical means to effectively gain the perceptions of social workers in this context. For such a study as this, face-to-face interviews allowed the interviewer to tailor the questions in such a way as to solicit the highest candor of responses, as well as to achieve greater clarity from participants. However, due to time restraints and the extensiveness of the interview objectives, approximately only ten participants were recruited for interviews, thus this study was not intended to be representative of the national welfare system in general.

#### Sampling

The sample for this study, as previously stated consisted of approximately ten social workers currently employed in child welfare agencies who consented to be interviewed. For purposes of selecting study participants, convenience sampling was employed, whereas the interviewer visited two child welfare agencies; one in Riverside County and the other in San Bernardino County. Efforts were made to contact agency supervisors who could identify potential staff members deemed suitable and willing to be interviewed. For example, supervisors were asked to suggest workers from social welfare units whose operations

would be more likely to interact with SMY and their families (i.e. Adoptions, Foster Care, Family Maintenance, Family Reunification). One challenge with respect to obtaining a reliable sample was that not all social workers within a child welfare setting have ever knowingly worked with sexual minority youth. In cases where such participants have not knowingly worked with SMY, it was determined that they could still provide insight as to their overall preparedness in working with this population, and the overall capacity of the agency to do so.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

Specifically, this study collected data by way of interviews with social workers in child welfare agencies. Participants were asked if they consented for the interview to be taped recorded. The interviewer used an interview schedule comprised of approximately eighteen questions. The questions themselves were posed in an open-ended fashion, thereby soliciting the most comprehensive responses from participants. Additionally, the format for the questions were constructed in such a way so as to compel participants to reflect on past experiences before answering, rather than a random sequencing of questions, which without logical order might



suppress the most accurate of responses from those interviewed. For example, the instrument began with questions pertaining to an agency's policies about cultural diversity and related training before asking the participant about specific experiences, hence the interviewee, in tune with their respective agency's position on SMY, was inclined to answer more thoughtfully about their perceptions given the context. Ultimately, the instrument was designed with the task of acquiring the highest quality of responses. (Please see Appendix A, for a list of questions to appear on the interview schedule).

#### Procedures

Upon establishing a sample eligibility list, the interviewer invited those individuals to participate and offer them a Starbuck's gift card as compensation for their time. Approximately ten such individuals were interviewed for the purposes of this study. Interviews with participants occurred at a rate of approximately two a week over a five week period. The interviews consisted of approximately eighteen questions lasting approximately 30 minutes and were held at the agency of employment, or at another satisfactory location agreeable to study participants. Following the interviews, participants were asked if they may be contacted at a later time, should

additional information become necessary. Once the interviews were completed, data analysis and synthesis of the material took approximately two weeks.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

As the objectives of this study were dependent upon the direct questioning of currently employed social workers, every conceivable effort was taken to protect anonymity and confidentiality of participants. At no time during the course of the interview or any other time will a participant's name be connected with the data provided. A random number between one and ten was assigned to each participant to match the interviewer's notes to the respective interview. Thereby no association could be made as to the interviewee's identity and the data recorded from that interview. This precaution served to secure the anonymity of study participants. In addition, the data was stored in such a manner so as not to become accessible to others not involved in conducting the study.

#### Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was conducted using qualitative analysis techniques. First, data from audio-taped and/or hand-written recorded face-to-face interviews was transcribed verbatim and a coding method

was developed for organizing the data by specific themes. As part of the analysis a preliminary phase of coding was used to identify categories and assign codes to the categories. A journal was used to record the definition of each code and to document the designation of codes in the data. Next, a second phase of coding was developed to identify possible relationships, as well as similarities and differences that may exist within the data set. These procedures facilitated synthesis of the data into a form more easily read for purposes of this study. In addition, the researcher took careful aim to avoid allowing his own biases to interfere with the analysis of the data. Lastly, frequency distribution and measures of central tendency (mean) used to describe the characteristics of the sample, as appropriate.

#### Summary

This chapter served to present the methodology employed in the study. Issues pertaining to the composition of this study were discussed, including; study design, sampling, data collection procedures, and a detailed explanation of the interview guide. This chapter also discussed issues pertaining to human rights, including confidentiality, and concluded with a

description of the qualitative analysis procedures  
employed in this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This section will serve to present the results of the data collected according to the questions listed on the interview schedule (See Appendix A). The data will be presented according to the range of responses as to each question. There were a total of fifteen questions asked. Coverage of each question will occur in the order each question appeared on the interview schedule.

#### Presentation of the Findings

The interviewer conducted ten interviews, with four participants representing social workers from San Bernardino County, Child Protective Services, and six workers representing Riverside County, Child Protective Services. There were a total of three male (n=3) participants, and seven female (n=7) participants in this study. The mean age for all respondents in this study was 44.7 years. In addition, three (n=3) of the respondents identified themselves as Hispanic, and seven (n=7) of the respondents identified themselves as Caucasian. Moreover, participants were asked how long they have been working in a child welfare agency. The range of employment was two

years to seventeen years. The average length of employment for all participants was 7.1 years.

The following are the responses provided by participants to the questions, as indicated on the interview schedule:

With regards to the question that asked participants to identify what the formal policy of their agency was toward the provision of services to SMY and their families, interestingly enough, most participants interpreted this question as how their agency's formal policy addressed SMY, and did not attribute service provision as an inherent component of the policies they identified. For instance, half of all respondents (n=5) indicated that their agency's specific policy toward SMY was non-discriminatory in nature, which included all children, regardless of their sexual orientations. These responses did not specifically identify service provision as a component of those policies. The other half of all respondents (n=5) reported that they were not aware of any formal policy in their respective agencies which specifically addressed SMY.

As to the question that asked participants what training they had received, if any, to prepare them for working with SMY, the range of responses was varied. Four

participants (n=4) claimed to have the equivalent of one eight-hour training exclusively on issues effecting SMY, three (n=3) indicated they had received training not exclusively concerning SMY, but in conjunction with related topics (i.e. diversity issues, cultural competence, etc.) and three (n=3) reported having no training on issues affecting SMY at all.

With regards to the question that asked respondents if this training was adequate considering their current job duties, of those seven participants who had received some training, five respondents (n=5) reported that the training they had received was adequate, while two respondents (n=2) reported that it was not adequate considering their current job functions.

As to the question that asked participants as to what experiences they had, if any, in working with SMY while working in child welfare, of the respondents, four reported having significant experience working with SMY, three indicated limited experience, and two respondents reported having no experience working specifically with SMY.

With regards to the question that asked respondents if they were comfortable working with SMY, and to elaborate on why, or why not, again, the range of

responses was varied. Although, all of the participants (n=10) reported feeling comfortable in working with SMY, the reasons for feeling comfortable were virtually all unique. One respondent spoke of the positive benefits of being exposed to diverse populations, another indicated that he/she was openly gay/lesbian and therefore, "one of them." Still others spoke about not having any personal bias toward the gay/lesbian population and thus there were no personal issues to be dealt with. Another respondent spoke of growing up in a community where tolerance was observed for all persons regardless of ethnicity, creed, sexual orientation, religion, etc.

As to the question that asked respondents to identify specific needs unique to SMY, considering their same-sex sexual orientations, a majority of respondents identified issues related to placement of SMY (i.e. foster home, group home, adoptive family, etc.). For example, six respondents (n=6) identified foster parents of SMY as specific placements where SMY may be rejected and/or ridiculed for their sexual orientation. Two of those respondents also indicated Adoptive parents as possible placements or caregivers who may reject the child in their care on the basis of their sexual orientation. Three participants (n=3) suggested that SMY may experience



rejection within their own families or in their schools. These responses were all made in a specific context: that considering the high rates of rejection and/or abuse of SMY in placement, that parents and caregivers who have accepted placement, or who may be considered for placement of SMY, should undergo some degree of training. Respondents indicated that such training and screening should address issues effecting SMY, and ultimately their acceptance of those children in their care.

Also with regards to the question about specific needs of SMY, a single respondent indicated that a child's personal hygiene may be a special need for SMY. This was to include special clothing, accessories, or toiletries that SMY might use. Still two other respondents (n=2) could not identify any specific needs unique to SMY considering their same-sex, sexual orientations.

Another question asked participants to indicate whether or not their agency had the necessary resources to enhance a goodness of fit for SMY going into placements. If, the answer was "Yes," participants were asked to elaborate. Interestingly enough, most of the respondents focused on whether or not their agency was attempting to establish a goodness of fit between the caregiver and the youth, rather than whether the agency actually had

specific "resources" available to do it. Respondents were inclined to make a judgment call about their agency rather than evaluating what resources were available.

Also with regards to the question of placement, four respondents (n=4) indicated that they perceived there was typically not a goodness of fit in the majority of cases within their agencies. Two respondents (n=2) indicated that they didn't know, and four (n=4) respondents indicated that their respective agencies were meeting, or at least attempting to establish SMY in placements with a goodness of fit in mind. These respondents claimed that their agencies were making needed improvements in areas of worker sensitivity, enhancing awareness, training, and screening (referring to the matching process of SMY with appropriate caregivers). One respondent indicated that his/her agency was doing all it could with the resources available.

As to the question that asked if respondents felt that the child welfare system was in general, doing all it could to meet the needs of SMY. If not, participants were asked what more could it do. One respondent said that the system could do more to track community resources available to, or about SMY. It was also expressed that individual agencies should attempt to help clients and

families more if dealing with the specific issues of sexuality as they pertain to youth. Another sentiment was that agencies should attempt to hire more employees who are openly gay themselves, or who are sensitive to the needs of gay, lesbian and bisexual adolescents. Another participant suggested more aggressive recruitment of placements that specifically cater to the needs of SMY. Still other respondents spoke generally of just providing more education to promote awareness (to public, line workers, supervisors, caregivers) about this population.

As to the question inviting participants to identify specific steps that their agency had taken to make themselves more responsive to the needs of SMY and their families. To this question, many of the respondents could not identify specific steps that their agency had taken. However, those respondents who did answer the question did so by citing examples in terms of improvements their respective agencies had made. For example, one respondent indicated that the initial intake process with youth and potential caregivers was more thorough by attempting to take into account issues of sexuality. Another response suggested that overall awareness was up on the part of the agency to educate the public. Moreover, many respondents chose to use this question as an opportunity to expand on

specific steps their agencies should do to become more responsive.

Another question suggested to respondents that some child welfare employees have not been comfortable in offering suggestions as to how their agencies could improve services to SMY in fear of being perceived that they endorsed homosexuality. Respondents were asked if they ever felt this way, and if they were ever reluctant to offer suggestions for this reason. (Note: respondents were not asked if they had ever actually offered suggestions). Out of ten participants, all ten (n=10) indicated that they had never felt constrained to provide suggestions to their respective agencies, concerning SMY. For all the respondents, talking about homosexuality in their agencies has never been an issue, nor have there been any negative consequences associated with doing so. Moreover, two participants (n=2) indicated that they actively advocate on behalf of the gay and lesbian population.

As to the question that asked participants to define the atmosphere of their agency toward SMY, all respondents (n=10) indicated that the general atmosphere was very supportive, sensitive and non-prejudicial to the gay, lesbian and bisexual population in general. However, two

respondents (n=2) reported that the political climate within child welfare was generally still reluctant to address specific issues concerning the gay and lesbian population.

(19) Another question invited participants to identify any policy changes they would personally make with regard to SMY. Of respondents, five (n=5) indicated that they would propose policies which mandated that social workers and/or caregivers receive training as to issues effecting SMY and their families. Other responses included; policies proposals which would attempt to connect SMY with placements that were more sensitive and accommodating of those youth, and policies which ensure a youth's right to a sensitive and knowledgeable worker. Only one respondent (n=1) indicated that he/she would not make a policy proposal.

(17) Another question asked in general if participants felt that there was an overall service gap in effectively working with SMY in the context of child welfare. Of the respondents, six (n=6) reported that they perceived an overall service gap. Two respondents (n=2) indicated that they did not perceive a service gap in their agencies. And two participants (m=2) indicated that they didn't know.

⑬ The final question invited all respondents to make any additional comments, express opinions, or ask any questions that they had with regards to this topic, or the study in general. For purposes of brevity it is suffice to say that some participants inquired as to the purpose of the study and the overall outcome desired in being carried out. Other respondents took the opportunity to elaborate on points that they considered relevant to this discussion, but did not have the opportunity to articulate earlier in the study Still others expressed their satisfaction that a study of this kind was being conducted and hoped that their participation and the outcome of the study would facilitate greater awareness as to the issues effecting SMY.

#### Summary

This section served to present the data provided for each question on the interview schedule. As indicated, there were a total of fifteen questions on the interview schedule. The data was presented in a manner so as to demonstrate the range and frequency of responses for each question. The next section will address analysis of the data for this study.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This section will serve as a discussion of the data described in the previous section. Analysis of the data will include a discussion as to any relationships or themes that were identified by the researcher. This section will also discuss the limitations of the study, as well as the recommendations that the researcher would like to make based on the study findings.

#### Discussion

Findings of this study suggest that there wasn't a consensus (perception) among the ten study participants that a service gap exists as to how child welfare agencies attempt to provide services to sexual minority youth and their families. What can be said is that it was the general sentiment among all the participants that the child welfare system could do more to enhance their overall service provision, specifically to SMY. How these responses differed had to do with the extensiveness of that service gap and what that meant for each respective participant.

For example, as previously reported there were six respondents (n=6) who perceived that overall there was an overall service gap. However, the two respondents (n=6) who indicated that there was not a service gap offered suggestions as to how their child welfare agencies could enhance services. In addition the two respondents (n=2) who indicated that they did not know if there was a service gap also offered suggestions as to how their respective agencies could enhance services to SMY. Thus, it could be concluded that all ten participants are in relative agreement that there is room for the child welfare system to enhance its service provision to this population, even if this isn't a perceived service gap.

Furthermore, there were several themes among the responses of participants. For instance, many respondents identified multiple risk factors, which might be considered unique to SMY and which have been presented thoroughly in related literature (Elze, 2002; Ryan, 2001). More than half of all respondents identified parental/caregiver rejection, withdrawal of love, physical and/or sexual abuse, general neglect, victimization, isolation, stigmatization, chastising, lack of sensitivity, peer harassment, and ridicule, as potential risk factors which can negatively impact youth. Ultimately, youth may



experience a kind of identity crisis when subjected to these effects, as suggested by Munoz-Plaza (2002) who in his study described the sexual identity formation of SMY as a process characterized by varying degrees of denial and acceptance. Youth suicide was also correlated with the aforementioned risk factors, as suicide rates are considerably higher for self-declared SMY, than their heterosexual peers (Heights, 2002).

The political atmosphere of child welfare agencies is another theme that emerged from the data. For example, many respondents commented about their respective agency's willingness or reluctance to hear suggestions, modify policy, or allocate funding for gay or lesbian issues (i.e. training, new resources, services, etc.). The perceptions about the political atmosphere were mixed among those respondents who addressed it. In other words, it appears that there is not a lot of consensus as to the political atmosphere of the agency as to whether or not they are more supportive or reluctant, one way or the other. Some respondents described their respective agencies as very hospitable to suggestions about the gay and lesbian population, while others claimed the issue was being heard, but not addressed. Some participants affirm that many supervisors are uncomfortable with talking about

gay and lesbian issues, but suggestions that such discomfort or reluctance is rooted in an agency's fear of being regarded by the public as endorsing homosexuality was not substantiated by a single respondent in this study. Thus, this study is inconsistent with previous literature by (Mallon 1992; Sullivan 1994; and Phillips 1997).

Also along the lines of prevalent political tones in child welfare, many respondents talked about the apparent lack of training devoted to issues concerning SMY (or gay and lesbian issues in general) and this for some respondents went back to their agency's low priority to designate funding toward that end, and suggestive of a worker's unwillingness to take such training even if it were offered because many trainings were not mandated, but elected by the worker. One respondent referenced a kind of uproar by social worker against a proposed piece of legislation which would have made it mandatory for social workers to attend specific trainings on specific topics. The prospect of social workers having to take mandatory trainings was evidently unpopular. Hence motivating social workers and supervisors to attend certain kinds of training could be an issue.

Indeed, the concept of training itself appeared to be a virtual catch-all solution to enhance agency responsiveness. Virtually every respondent brought up training in some context; as either inadequate, a sign of progress, or as a means to bring about awareness for the public, parents/caregivers and social workers. Training is considered an integral part of staff development in educating the worker about specific issues effecting client development, caregiving, and in projecting the over-all agency's position of being one of tolerance and adaptation. (Phillips, 1997).

Specifically, parents were deemed to require more awareness about gay and lesbian issues to perpetuate more stable home environments between SMY and their families. Training was also deemed essential for potential foster parents and other caregivers of SMY, to secure existing placements, as well as to expand on placement resources where there are so few to begin with. It has been universally accepted by the child welfare system that there are too few foster homes and other placement facilities which specifically cater to the needs of SMY. Ultimately, such training would generate more viable placement options and thus facilitate a goodness of fit for the youth. Furthermore, additional training for social

workers would perpetuate more informed decision-making on the youths' behalf.

Still, respondents suggested many other viable solutions where child welfare agencies could enhance service provision. Many of these pertained to the specific placement needs of SMY. For one, child welfare agencies need to track existing community resources to facilitate service linkage to clients. Several participants cited the lack of eligible foster home facilities and other placement options for SMY. Other placement resources may exist with the under-tapped gay and lesbian community themselves (Sullivan, 1994). The child welfare system should be more receptive to the idea of gay and lesbian partners as legitimate caregivers, and aggressively recruit foster homes and other facilities which are committed to servicing self-declared gay, lesbian and bisexual clients.

Another suggestion overwhelmingly echoed by participants was that social workers make a concerted effort to present themselves as more sensitive and informed about issues effecting SMY. Furthermore, social workers should put the child's comfort and well-being before their own when working with them. Often times a

child's social worker is that child's most accessible link to getting help.

Moreover, a majority of participants felt that it was paramount for social workers to be more thorough in the matching process of placing a SMY in homes where that will be appropriate considering their needs. Respondents identified several components which contribute to an appropriate placement, such as; the child's ability/willingness to express one's own need, the worker's knowledge and sensitivity about gay and lesbian issues, the worker's sensitivity to those needs, as well as the awareness and sensitivity of the caregiver who is agreeing to accept responsibility for that child. A conscientious worker will attempt to ensure that all of these components are taken into consideration to ensure a goodness of fit for the child.

Respondents also reported areas where their respective agencies had made advancements in sensitizing workers to the needs of SMY. Indeed, about one half of respondents identified some degree of progress they perceived their agency to have made. For example, one respondent reported that supervisors and other administrators in child welfare would look unfavorably upon any social worker who came to them and requested to

be dismissed from a case where a client was openly gay, lesbian or bisexual. Another respondent reported that they were required to answer a questionnaire about specific positions and/or feelings that the worker had about working with diverse populations, including the gay and lesbian community. One particularly seasoned worker admitted that while employed in child welfare, they were compelled to come to terms with their own biases in working with sexual minorities, and ultimately had to work through them. These insights suggest that child welfare agencies are trying to be more thorough in their employee screening procedures prior to making hiring decisions.

Finally, it was a recurring reaction by a majority of study participants that this study, and others like it, effectively bring about greater awareness with regards to this population. It was further anticipated that from enhanced awareness that the child welfare system be more proactive in incorporating research studies into current policies and practices with regards to this population. Such was a recommendation of Sullivan (1994) who recognized that minimal change had been implemented after a decade of studies devoted to this issue. Considering the increasing numbers of SMY coming out at earlier ages, and the risks associated with them, there is little doubt but

that the child welfare system will have a more significant role in the lives of these youth.

#### Limitations

There are several limitations realized during the course of this study. First, this study is not meant to be representative of the national child welfare system in general. Although 50 fliers were distributed at a child welfare agency in San Bernardino County, as well as 50 fliers in Riverside County, the response rate was only 10%, (or n=10 respondents). Moreover, considering the number of interviews successfully conducted, this study is not intended as an evaluation of whether one child welfare agency from one county is more responsive in servicing SMY than another. Moreover, it is not intended to be indicative of the state of California or the nation, as this study's sample size is too small.

Secondly, of the ten respondents, 40%, or four (n=4) are self-declared gay or lesbian individuals working as social workers within their respective agencies. Thus, the response rate, and consequently the data provided, may have influenced the findings of this study. It is conceivable that gay and lesbian individuals may have been more inclined to participate in this study considering that the study pertains to issues effecting gay and

lesbian children. Moreover, there may be a self-selection bias issue in that respondents may have agreed to participate, already having an interest in gay and lesbian issues within the field of social work. This bias may also have effected the study findings.

#### Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

The responses provided in this study are indicative of many of the positions and recommendations offered in previous studies with regards to service provision for SMY. Based on the suggestions generated by respondents, this study's recommendations are rooted in four critical areas: diversity training, resource tracking and linkage, and public awareness.

First, child welfare agencies can enhance their responsiveness to the needs of SMY by increasing the amount, and the quality of multi-cultural and diversity training to agency social workers, administrators, client parents, and potential caregivers (i.e. foster homes). Training for staff within child welfare agencies should address the specific needs and risk factors effecting SMY, including potential placement screening tools to determine suitability. Such training should also assist workers and administrators to confront and deal with their own



personal biases. Training for parents and placement caregivers should focus on educating the public about alternative lifestyles, as well as the risks prone to these youth as sexual minorities. Such training may prevent family of origin conflict for SMY and their families, who have not yet entered the system. Training for placement caregivers may enhance a goodness of fit for the youth, and ultimately prevent placement breakdowns.

Second, child welfare agencies could more aggressively pursue community resources that would benefit SMY, as well as to establish agency networks with those resources to facilitate more efficient service linkage. Many SMY and their families are not informed as to what services are available to them outside of the child welfare system. Indeed, many social workers are not informed as to what community resources are available. Service linkage to clients should include resources which specifically cater to the gay, lesbian and bisexual community, as mental health, educational, transitional living, and other resources are already immediately available.

Finally, child welfare agencies need to be more proactive in bringing overall awareness about gay and lesbian issues to the public. Many of the institutions

that SMY would normally turn to for help are unwilling or unprepared to provide assistance. Schools, families, churches, and public service agencies continue to be ignorant about the issues effecting this population which can have an adverse effect on the developmental functioning of such children. Awareness should come in the form of public service announcements, it should be demonstrated in the offices of public social servants, and built into the policies and practices of social service agencies so that these agencies project an image of tolerance and sensitivity to alternative lifestyles. To do so is ultimately to role model tolerance and sensitivity for the surrounding community, thereby generating awareness and quelling public ignorance.

As to policy, child welfare agencies should act swiftly to establish policies (or reemphasize existing policies) which affirm the dignity and uniqueness of SMY. Policies should recognize SMY (and the gay and lesbian population in general) as a potentially growing diversity group requiring the attention of the child welfare system. Agency policies should reflect an expanding philosophy and atmosphere of those agencies to be open and sensitive to the needs of SMY and their families, and can do so within

the very ranks of its administration down through its line workers through outreach, education and training.

Moreover, child welfare agencies should respond with diligence to enact policies which protect children from potential placements which are not dedicated to providing a goodness of fit for gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. Such agencies should devise policies which will enact screening procedures to effectively match sensitive social workers and sensitive placement caregivers to SMY youth. Child welfare agencies should also consider education measures which will attempt to make parents aware of the issues effecting SMY, to help prevent SMY from entering the child welfare system in the first place.

With regards to research, it is hoped that this study will promote other studies as to the condition of child welfare agencies, and the perceptions of not only social workers, but of parents, caregivers, and ultimately self-identifying SMY as well. As this study was conducted in San Bernardino County and Riverside County, more studies are needed which are more indicative of the child welfare system in state and the nation as a whole. Ultimately, these studies need to stress that child welfare agencies and other public service organizations should be more proactive in incorporating the recommendations of such

studies into action, including policy formation. As SMY continue to grow in numbers, the importance of such studies is evident when we consider the circumstances that make SMY more susceptible to entering the child welfare system in the first place.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, this study attempted to bring about awareness in its own right by examining the perceptions of social workers themselves- to attain their perspective as whether or not the child welfare system is as responsive as it could be in providing services to SMY and their families. Considering the number of respondents who chose to participate in this study, and based on those findings, it cannot be posited to any degree of accuracy as to whether or not a service gap exists in child welfare. Even so, this study suggests there are social workers who are still unaware of the issues effecting SMY, nor have they been adequately prepared to help them. This study has raised questions about what is being done and what more could be done in working with this population. Ultimately, the issue resides not just in social workers or public agencies, but with parents, families, foster homes, schools, the public service sector, and with the community.

It is hoped that this study will continue to promote awareness for anyone working with SMY, and that the child welfare system will look to studies such as this, and others like it- that ultimately, child welfare agencies will be more proactive to implement the recommendations therein, into current agency policy and practice.

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### Interview Schedule

1. What is your Age?
2. What is your Gender? (The interviewer will assume the gender of participants)
3. What is your Ethnicity
4. How long have you been working for Child Protective Services (CPS or other child welfare agency)?
5. What is the formal policy of your agency, if any, toward the provision of services to sexual minority youth (gay, lesbian, bisexual) or (SMY)?
6. What training have you received, if any, to prepare you for working with including sexual minorities (gay, lesbian and bisexual persons) and their families?
7. If you have received some training, have you found this training to be adequate considering your current job duties? If yes, how so?
8. What experience have you had, if any, in working with SMY during your employment with child welfare?

9. Are you comfortable working with this population? If yes, why? If not, why not?
10. In what ways do SMY entering the child welfare system have needs unique to them considering their same-sex sexual orientations? For example: placement needs?
11. Do you feel that your agency has the necessary resources to help place self-declared SMY into placements that enhance a goodness of fit for the youth? If yes, how so?
12. Do you feel that the child welfare system in general is doing all it can to meet the needs of this population? If not, what more could they do?
13. What are some specific steps, if any, your agency has taken to make themselves more responsive to the needs of SMY and their families?
14. Studies have also suggested that some employees of child welfare agencies have not felt comfortable is suggesting ways that their agencies can improve their service to this population because they perceived that they would be endorsing homosexuality and would



consequently be shunned by their respective agencies. Have you ever felt that this was the position of your agency, and have you ever felt reluctant to offer suggestions for this reason?

15. How would you define the atmosphere of the agency you work for toward SMY?
16. If you could make a specific policy change affecting SMY in child welfare today, what would it be?
17. Do you feel that there is a service gap in effectively working with SMY in the context of child welfare?
18. Are there any additional comments, opinions, perceptions you'd like to make with regards to this discussion? Do you have any questions?

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

## Informed Consent

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Travis Webb, from the Department of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino. The purpose of the proposed study is to evaluate the preparedness of child welfare workers to provide quality services to sexual minority youth and their families. The results of the study will contribute to his research project. The study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board at California State University, San Bernardino.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will have a face-to-face interview at a time and place of your preference. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. During the interview you will be asked about your perceptions and experiences (if any) in working with sexual minority youth (Gay, lesbian and bisexual adolescents) while employed at your respective child welfare agency. You will also be asked about your agency's current position, philosophy, and related policy issues concerning sexual minority youth as you understand them.

Throughout the process of conducting this study, every effort will be made to keep your answers strictly confidential. Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and be disclosed only with your permission, or as required by law.

Your participation in this study will be totally **voluntary**. You can refuse to participate in, or withdrawal from the study at any time without penalty. In addition, you do not have to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. Your permission will be asked to allow the interview to be tape recorded. You may refuse to allow the interview to be tape recorded if you choose. When you complete the interview you will be given a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. At that time, you will also receive a Starbucks gift card as compensation for your time in this study.

If you have any further questions or concerns about the study please feel free to contact Professor Janet Chang, at California State University, San Bernardino, Department of Social Work, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, California, 92407 or call (909) 880-5184. If you would like to receive a copy of the results of this

study please contact Travis Webb at (909) 358-7404.

Please check the box below to indicate you have read this informed consent and freely consent to participate in this study.

Please place a check mark here [  ]                          Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I am willing to be tape recorded:            Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## Debriefing Statement

The study you have just completed was designed to assess the preparedness and responsiveness of child welfare agencies and their staff to adequately meet the needs of sexual minority youth and their families. Literature in the last ten years has suggested that child welfare agencies are not adequately prepared to service this population effectively and that ultimately a gap in service exists. This study is meant to clarify those issues and ultimately to bring about awareness as to how child welfare staff can work to enhance their effectiveness in working with such youth. It is hoped that such awareness will promote child welfare workers to make informed decisions when working with this population.

Thank you for participating in this study. If you require additional information about sexual minority youth please contact your local PFLAG Chapter:

Riverside PFLAG Chapter  
(760) 202-4430  
San Bernardino PFLAG Chapter  
Iepflag@iepflag.org

If you wish to obtain the results of this study, please feel free to contact Professor Janet Chang at (909) 880-5184 after July 1,

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