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'It's all a bit pantomime': **An exploratory study of gay and lesbian adopters and foster carers in England and Wales.**

Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study identifying the experiences of gay and lesbian adopters and foster carers in England and Wales. Qualitative interviews were conducted with twenty-four lesbians and gay men who had undertaken any part of the adoption or fostering application process since the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act of 2002. The study suggests that whilst increasing numbers of lesbians and gay men are accessing fostering and adoption services, gender and sexuality are still problematic areas of contestation within this context. As a result, participants were required to present themselves to assessing professionals in distinct ways, in order to be recognised as 'legitimate' in their applications. Using the concept of 'displaying family', this paper illustrates the ways in which sexuality can complicate such displays, as they fall outside prevailing cultural and familial scripts. However, taking an intersectional perspective, this paper will also demonstrate that this was dependent upon the complex subjectivities of each participant. Finally, it will analyse what this means for the assessment of gay and lesbian adopters and foster carers, and how social workers can respond to both individual identities and diverse family forms.

Keywords:

Sexuality, Gender, Adoption, Foster-Care, Lesbians, Gay Men

Introduction

The visibility of parenting by lesbians and gay men has increased rapidly within the United Kingdom in recent years. Gay and lesbian parenting is seen as one of many 'alternative' family arrangements to have emerged; including blended families, children born through self- insemination, and co-parenting (Weeks *et al.,* 2001; Nordqvist and Smart, 2014). The ways in which lesbians and gay men can pursue parenthood are diverse and include the use of reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF) or self- insemination via a donor; relative or kinship care; and surrogacy. In relation to adoption and fostering, there have been notable changes in legislation within the last decade that have helped remove some of the structural barriers to this route to parenting for gay men and lesbians. This includes the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act 2002; the Civil Partnership Act 2004; the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007; the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2013, and the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 in particular is significant to adoption and fostering social work, as it decrees that unmarried couples, including those within same-sex relationships, can adopt jointly and receive full parental status. The implications of such laws now mean that individuals cannot be disbarred from accessing adoption and fostering services on the basis of their sexual orientation. Social work agencies must now consider and recruit gay and lesbian applicants, alongside others, and several examples of practice-focussed literature have emerged to respond to this (e.g. Mallon and Betts, 2005; Brown and Cocker, 2008; Cocker and Brown, 2010; De Jong and Donnelly, 2015).

The findings and analysis within this paper are taken from a study conducted in 2012 (Wood, 2013). The exploratory study sought to identify the experiences of gay and

lesbian adopters and foster carers who had undertaken any part of the adoption or fostering process since the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. 'Processes' in this context means any part of the inquiry, assessment, or approval requirements involved in becoming an adopter or foster carer. The aims of the study were to understand both the changing landscapes of adoption and fostering and to identify the ways in which social workers have responded to new legislation. Using findings from this research and drawing upon other qualitative studies, this paper focusses on the ways in which sexual identities and relationships are conceptualised by social workers and explores the extent to which discriminatory practices remain. Using the concept of 'displaying family' by Finch (2007), it will examine the ways in which gay and lesbian applicants are required to present themselves and their capacity for parenthood, in order to be recognised as acceptable by professionals. Furthermore, using an intersectional approach (Lutz *et al.,* 2011), this paper will outline how such displays were dependent upon experiences beyond sexual identity.

Research with gay and lesbian adopters and foster carers

Adoption and fostering are highly complex activities, and social work practices within these fields are diverse, depending on those agencies and professionals involved. Prior to recent social and legal changes, various empirical studies found that lesbians and gay men in the UK often faced overt or tacit discrimination when applying to become adopters or foster carers (Skeates and Jabri, 1988; Hicks, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2011; Hicks and McDermott, 1999). This occurred in numerous ways and at varying stages; from initial inquiries, to the home study assessment and finally as part of the approval panel. It should be noted that there are many ongoing international challenges in this area for gay

and lesbian applicants, as well as those who identify as bisexual, transgender, or queer. Brown *et al.* (2015), for example, provide a systematic review of the literature around foster care within the UK, the United States, and Australia. However, due to the scope of this paper, the following section will focus on those studies conducted in the UK with lesbians and gay men.

Perhaps the most substantial research conducted in the UK around gay and lesbian adoption and fostering, is that carried out by Hicks (1996, 1998, 2000, 2006a b, 2008a b, 2011, 2013), and Hicks and McDermott (1999). Building on the initial findings of Skeates and Jabri (1988), their work identified that gay and lesbian applicants were often associated with a degree of 'risk' and were closely scrutinised during assessment. Many agencies were reluctant to consider gay and lesbian candidates as it was unlikely that they would be approved by the adoption or fostering panel. In response to this, applicants sometimes chose not to disclose their sexual orientation to services, or social workers avoided asking questions in this area (Hicks and McDermott, 1999). Similarly, it was established that some practitioners focussed excessively on an applicant's sexuality, therefore potentially distorting the outcomes of the assessment. Skeates and Jabri (1988), Hicks (1998) and Hicks and McDermott (1999) also found that gay and lesbian applicants were more likely to encounter delays when waiting for placements or were used for short-term care only. Furthermore, many were matched with children who were considered more difficult to place, such as sibling groups, older children, or those with additional needs.

Hicks (2008b) identified that gay and lesbian applicants were often coerced into emphasising their suitability in distinct ways, such as outlining how they could provide 'gender role models'. Gender role modelling as a concept has since been critiqued by

many authors (e.g. Golombok, 2000; Hicks, 2008b, 2013), who suggest that it is unnecessary as children are socialised through multiple channels. What is more, over-simplifying or policing distinct masculine and feminine behaviours demonstrates a desire to maintain strict gender boundaries and excludes non-traditional gender displays (Butler, 1990). In order to be approved within a childcare context, Hicks (1998, 2000, 2006b) identified that gay and lesbian applicants were constructed in particular ways. Individuals were often obliged to downplay certain aspects of their gender or sexual identities in order to emphasise 'safer' versions for the final approval panel. These were usually characterised as gender normative, integrated, monogamous, non-political and middle-class.

Recent research includes the small-scale studies of Brown (2011) and Cocker (2011), who found that participants' encounters of being assessed had improved but such processes remained normative in key ways. Cocker (2011) in her exploratory research with lesbian adopters, ascertained that hierarchies amongst potential parents on the basis of their sexuality were still perceived to exist and were in some cases verbally confirmed by social workers. For example, three participants were informed that they would not be matched with babies because of their sexuality. Both studies also found that the requirement for gay and lesbian applicants to demonstrate gender role models was still a prominent demand.

There have also been a number of studies that address the outcomes for children raised by same-sex parents. In the UK, research with lesbian parents spanning over two decades by Tasker and Golombok (e.g. Golombok *et al.,*1983; Golombok and Tasker, 1996; Tasker and Golombok, 1997) found that the psychological, academic, or emotional wellbeing of children was largely unaffected by their parent's sexual orientation.

Furthermore, parental sexual orientation had no bearing on children's gender identity or sexual development. Most recently the work of Mellish *et al*. (2013) examines the experiences of gay and lesbian adopters and their children, in comparison with their heterosexual peers. This work identified that all three types of adopters shared more similarities than differences; however there were slightly higher levels of parental wellbeing in those gay and lesbian parents interviewed. Mellish *et al.* (2013) suggest that this was because they were less likely to experience the same level of stress associated with infertility and that adoption was usually their first choice.

Methods

This article draws on data from a qualitative study conducted in 2012 which received ethical approval from the University of Hull. A purposive sample was sought, with individuals being selected on the basis of their experience as a gay or lesbian adopter or foster carer. Participants were recruited through organisations whose remit related to parenting and childcare, adoption and fostering, or gay and lesbian support. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-four self-identified lesbians and gay men, who had been involved in various stages of the adoption or fostering process since 2002. The Adoption and Children Act of 2002 served as a symbolic indicator of statutory recognition within the adoption and fostering contexts and also defined the geographical parameters of the study. The decision to examine both adopters and foster carers was made because both require assessment by professionals; therefore similar issues could be examined.

Transcripts were coded and analysed thematically. Data was gathered and analysed concurrently, aided by the use of memos which highlighted emerging themes,

relevant theoretical ideas, or anomalies (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Five participants were interviewed without their partner (four men and one woman), three were single participants (two men and one woman) and sixteen were interviewed as couples (one male and seven female couples). One couple were foster carers but later adopted the children in their care. One single participant had been rejected, but not explicitly on the basis of her sexual identity, and the assessment of another couple was terminated due to a family bereavement. One couple had chosen to pursue alternative routes to parenthood after being told by their social worker that they were likely to wait longer because of their sexuality. Finally, one couple had chosen not to pursue fostering after a short-term placement.

Findings

Participants were aged between twenty-eight and fifty-nine and all identified as White British, except for two who identified as White Irish and one who identified as white British-American. Eleven participants were foster carers (four couples, one single foster carer and two interviewed alone) and eleven had adopted or applied to adopt (three couples, two single applicants and three interviewed alone). One couple had both fostered and adopted children. Most participants and their partners were employed in the public sector and, in particular, health and social care. For further information, supplementary material is available online.

In comparison to previous studies, participants' experiences of being assessed as an adopter or foster carer had changed in several ways. None encountered an immediate refusal of services on the basis of sexual orientation and neither was there a need to

conceal their sexuality. Similarly, participants did not feel as though their sexuality was necessarily over or under-focused upon when they were being assessed and all felt that professionals recognised that they were entitled to be considered for an assessment. Whilst it has been found previously (Hicks, 1996, 1998, and 2000; Hicks and McDermott, 1999) that gay and lesbian applicants were more likely to be matched with those children perceived as difficult to place, this issue did not arise in this study. The children placed with foster carers ranged from birth to eighteen years, and were diverse in their nationalities and racial or ethnic heritage. Adopters were only permitted to be placed with children who matched their ethnic or racial background. Participants were sometimes asked to consider those children outside of their initial specifications outlined during their application, but this was often related to their skills set; usually as a result of professional experiences. However, as supported by Mellish *et al*. (2013), it may be noted that the changing landscape of adoption and fostering means that looked after children invariably require additional support.

Despite these differences, the study found that fixed ideas around identity and parenting may be entrenched within the adoption and fostering processes. Many participants recognised that their sexual identities or the gendered nature of their relationships challenged the ways in which the adoption or fostering processes were conducted. The following section explores some of these key tensions in relation to the concept of 'displaying family' (Finch, 2007). It will demonstrate how participants sought to navigate their interactions with social workers, and using an intersectional approach (Lutz *et al.*, 2011), will identify how this depended upon the subjective experiences of each applicant. All participants have been given pseudonyms in order to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

Displaying families/ displaying lives

Participants acknowledged that the adoption and fostering processes require applicants to disclose intimate information about themselves and their families. Several articulated that they felt subjected to a 'professional gaze', which made them consider the ways in which their lives may be viewed or interpreted by social workers. Though it is beyond the scope of this article, the normalising and regulatory activities of social workers that this professional gaze relates to, has been widely written about; see for example, Parton (1999) who draws on the work of Foucault to examine structural power within social work institutions and practices. The concept of 'display' as developed by Finch and Mason (1993) and Finch (2007), amongst others (Almack, 2011; Doucet, 2011; Gabb, 2011; Heaphy, 2011) provides a useful conceptual lens for exploring this further. Finch (2007) contends that family is not only performed in everyday interactions and meaning making, but that it also needs to be 'displayed'. Finch (2007: 66) describes display as an active, relational social process and one where:

> …the meaning of one's actions has to be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others if those actions are to be effective as constituting 'family' practices.

The concept of 'displaying family' illustrates those performances that are enacted in order to show others that '…this is my family and it works' (Finch, 2007: 70). Many participants reported that they were subject to close scrutiny during the assessment process and as part of wider training days. During these days, participants suggested that they were inadvertently coerced into modifying their behaviours to fit with what they believed social workers wanted to see. Many critiqued the performance that this elicited:

> Lauren –I think everyone knows how to put on a show. It's just hilarious, the number of people staying behind at the end to put the chairs away and just everyone trying to grab the social workers in the break time and ask pertinent questions and just creeping to them…

This necessity for performance was also identified through the ways in which panel was organised and conducted. Amy discusses this in relation to her social worker's advice for panel:

> Amy – Well she did explain that it's like lots of people there that make the decision that we have to be there. We go in and then we have to come out and then we have to go in and they say whether it's okay or not, whether you've been approved or not. At the time we were so nervous, really nervous like "oh my God, oh God", but looking back, I'm like… it's all a bit pantomime.

Participants suggested they were sometimes required to present themselves and their families in ways that may be clearly recognised or 'read' by assessing professionals. This occurred so that they could assert both their suitability as applicants and the legitimacy of their families and relationships. Participants reflected on the ways in which their circumstances, histories and experiences may be viewed:

> Seamus - I think you think what if they look at your house and think "oh no", you know, "it's not suburban enough". Or what if they say "you had three weeks off with stress five years ago, that's not gonna make a good parent".

Complicated displays

Finch (2007) situates the notion of display within the increasing diversity of families in late modernity and the ambiguity that this may elicit. For those families which deviate from the traditional hetero-nuclear form, the impetus to display the positive nature or meanings of such relationships will be greater. This indicates that acts of display are both impacted by wider power relations and can be open to differing interpretations (Almack, 2011; Heaphy, 2011; Gabb, 2011). Those groups who do not fit within dominant or

culturally recognised forms of family may inadvertently fall outside of "wider systems of meaning" (Finch, 2007: 67).

Findings within this study similarly indicate that familial displays to services were sometimes complicated by a participant's sexuality or the gendered nature of their relationships, as their situated experiences were either rendered invisible due to a "heterosexual assumption" (Weeks *et al.*2001: 11), or viewed as potentially problematic. Whilst a type of display was felt to be needed from applicants when moving through the assessment process, this was often exacerbated by the implicit notion that participants could be disadvantaged by their sexuality. All participants disclosed their sexuality early on in the process and although they did not necessarily anticipate overt hostility, they were aware of the likelihood of encountering everyday instances of heterosexism. Their family and relationship displays were configured by the need for participants to demonstrate excellence in their capacity for parenthood and prove their validity as potential carers. This was ratified by some professionals, who warned applicants that their sexuality was likely to be addressed during the panel and approval stages.

Several participants suspected the existence of an unspoken hierarchy for placements (Hicks, 1996). This was perceived as a result of delays in placement or 'matching' difficulties, but was also sometimes confirmed verbally by social workers. Peter, Lara and Caitlyn, and Josie and Lauren were informed by professionals that they may be less likely to be matched with children or would have to wait longer than their heterosexual peers. Many felt that they needed to exceed professional expectations, in order to countermand any negative connotations associated with their sexuality:

> Andrea – ...a lot of the people that we were on the training with would question things, because they didn't feel the need to project themselves in a positive way,

like to prove themselves. It's a bit like when you're female and you're in a male work environment. You've gotta constantly be proving that we're better than the men; we're better than the heterosexuals, we can do this, we're gonna say yes.

Participants frequently anticipated that social workers would view them through a heteronormative frame of reference and that certain aspects of their lives and histories may be misunderstood (Hicks, 1998, 2000; Gabb, 2011). Several participants were asked questions about domestic life or the division of labour. A number of couples were asked to clarify their roles within the home, as this could not be imposed onto an obvious gendered framework:

> Astrid - It always comes up: "so who does this in the house and who's the best cook?" When our link worker speaks to the children: "so who's the best cook?" and one of them would say I was and one would say she was and like "who does the most cooking?" Well we do the same… we share everything 50/50.

Participants also observed that the adoption process in particular is configured to respond to heterosexual couples and their likelihood of infertility. Both training materials and the social work assessment emphasised the need for individuals to acknowledge any consequential grief they may have experienced. Yet, participants who had already considered alternative ways of becoming parents from an early stage contested this:

> Ethan – A lot of their stuff was around being challenged on these prep courses, that [adoption] is not the replacement for your unborn child. You know these are separate issues and I guess we were a little bit smug about that because this was our first choice not our second choice…

Nearly all participants articulated that adoption was neither a second choice nor a means of 'imitating' biological reproduction. Instead, it was an opportunity for family-building that had not always been accessible to them before the introduction of supportive legislation. Participants' relationships and families therefore appeared to be rendered unintelligible within the heteronormative context of the adoption and fostering

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assessment. This supports the work of Almack, (2011), Gabb, (2011) and Heaphy (2011), who suggest that those who do not fit within traditional scripts for kinship may find displaying family difficult, as they do not sit within dominant realms of meaning or recognition. Furthermore, it illustrates that the nuclear family, and its corresponding roles and responsibilities, remains a powerful ideology and one which inevitably permeates adoption and fostering social work.

The problem with gender

Gender was found to be a highly problematic area for applicants as adoption and fostering social work frequently rested upon essentialist ideas of what it means to be a man or woman and, in turn, parent or carer. Social workers often referred to heterosexual examples during adoption and fostering training events, and handbooks, letters, and forms usually focussed on male/female centred parenting arrangements. Maria and Polly noted difficulties when completing their Local Authority's adoption application forms as these asked for the names of the prospective 'mother and father':

> Polly – Some of the forms were a bit like "oh just cross out 'man'"
>
> Maria – There were forms like that and also we noticed that on the preparation course there was a lot of talk of finding a "new mummy and daddy" which came up quite frequently because it was starting to grate on me.

All participants were asked how they could provide gender role models to the children in their care and were expected to reiterate these arrangements throughout the assessment and beyond; including as part of annual fostering review panels. The reasons for outlining gender role models were not always explained, although participants felt it to be a mandatory stage of the process. Many participants felt unable to challenge this requirement for fear of appearing disruptive or non-cooperative.

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Male applicants noted that display work was compounded by their own situated experiences. Many were compelled to display their aptitude for care and, more specifically, an ability to 'nurture'. Ethan recounted that social workers frequently stated that they were looking for a 'mummy figure' when searching for placements. In response to this, a number of participants sought to deconstruct a predominantly feminised view of care and domesticity:

> Ethan – [Social workers] assume that we would have a regimented home, we'd be filthy, we'd be taking stuff out of the freezer from Iceland and if they fell we'd say "get up and don't be silly" and that's the sense I got from these people with these responses; that we're men and therefore we can't nurture. You know adults, the assumptions they make about... stereotypical assumptions they make about men parents, you know that we can't really get beyond maybe a half-hearted 1960s with a bit of new man thrown in, but not too far because they're wimps and they don't want them either.

Notions of 'risk' were also identified as challenging for men, and in particular, for male foster carers. This sometimes related to safer caring recommendations posed by agencies to prevent abuse and ensure that foster carers protect themselves from allegations. Male participants discussed the challenges of adhering to these recommendations when they require female carers to take the lead in certain tasks, such as intimate care. These recommendations also posed a problem when male applicants were being matched with children:

> Peter - We said hang on a minute, we wanted girls because it would be more appropriate but they said because you're two men, if the child requires any bathing at all or any intervention which requires intimate care, you won't be able to do that. We were like, but we're two gay men? And working by your strange logic if we were going to do anything horrible to a child it would probably be to a male child. But that was after the fact, and after they were like, oh "doh!"

This created an inherent uncertainty; not only in how gay men should parent children in their care, but also in how they should present their gender preferences when being matched and placed.

Participants suggested that they felt pressure to provide an overstated display of their suitability, but this was particularly necessary for males who were expected to overcome any associations with risk or inexperience (Doucet, 2011). It was suggested by participants that an exaggerated performance was necessary, so that they could clearly assert their caring abilities or prove that members of the opposite gender featured within their lives. Seamus, for example, drew attention to photographs of those within his support network, which he placed within his life story book:

> Seamus - I had to have two of the women that were in my support network, so that the panel could physically, visually see the women, so that would prevent them from saying "who are the women who are gonna help?"

It may be concluded that within the social work context, display work is a difficult task and one which needs to be highly nuanced. As noted by Hicks (2011), it requires gay and lesbian applicants to traverse both gender normative and gender non-conforming expressions and behaviours in their presentations to services.

'You have to act like nothing's ever happened to you'

Whilst the adoption and fostering processes appeared to be largely heteronormative, findings suggested that they were intrinsically normative in general. Although participants did not experience problems in accessing the adoption or fostering process, they were compelled to follow narrowly defined parameters of acceptability when discussing their relationships. It was also acknowledged that this must be presented in an

overly simplistic fashion. The difficulties of claiming a fixed sexual orientation was

implied by Josie and Lauren, who decided not to discuss their relationships with men

prior to becoming a couple:

> Lauren - Cause you're presenting as bisexual effectively then aren't you? So actually you're throwing them yet another twist, do you know what I mean? As a lesbian couple if you, well had had relationships with men and women that were significant and you declared that, well you're not just declaring a past relationship you're declaring that your sexuality isn't what they think, so they're gonna question that even more aren't they?

This suggests that whilst categories such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' may be permitted within

the context of adoption and fostering, there seems to be little possibility for sexual

fluidity beyond these specific positions.

Managing complex identities

Findings indicated that the complexity of participants' experiences extended beyond

issues around sexuality and gender to include other key aspects of their identities or

histories. It was necessary to view their perspectives through an intersectional lens, as

whilst gender and sexuality were often interlinked, they could not be understood in

isolation. An intersectional analysis identifies the ways in which elements of personal

identity, including social categories, interlink within specific social contexts, to create

particular patterns of experience or oppression (Lutz *et al.,* 2011). This study found that

the focus of each participant's concerns when presenting to services appeared to ebb and

flow, depending upon the context of each interaction and their own subjectivities.

As all aspects of individuals' lives were scrutinised as part of the assessment, this

extended to their wider familial relationships, as well as their health, age, and

relationship status. Single applicants articulated the specific challenges that they

encountered, including managing the financial demands associated with being a lone parent or carer. Seamus felt that this affected the ways in which he was perceived by services:

> Seamus - …social workers are more used to dealing with straight couples, cause that's the norm isn't it? Straight couples adopt more. So I'm aware that I was coming at it from a disadvantage of being male, you know, for being gay, for being single.

Jay, however, suggested that his professional experiences relieved some of these concerns when applying to foster:

> Jay - I think I'm coming from a slightly different position. I've worked with kids for fifteen years. I've been a primary school teacher. I'm an educational child psychologist. I'm financially stable and I can offer a kid a good home. If they were gonna turn me down.... they have to have a bloody good reason!

Participants suggested that they felt as though there was an unspoken '*framework of judgments*' (Caitlyn) by which individuals are ranked on the basis of what may be many potential 'deficits' tallied against them. How this intersected with an individual's sexuality was critical, as it was felt that this already constituted a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963). Peter commented on the ways in which this was made apparent in discussions with his social worker, who advised him that his identification with Paganism could be seen as problematic at panel:

> Peter - …although [partner] was brought up as a Roman Catholic, I'm a Pagan, so he said "right… a gay pagan (!)". He said "no way, that's not gonna happen".

Those aspects of experience that were perceived to be most difficult were a history of mental distress, substance use, minor criminal misdemeanours, and non-monogamous relationships. Consequently, it was suggested that this limited opportunities for the

meaningful exploration of personal histories, through a fear of misinterpretation or

stigmatisation:

> Josie – You might have phases of your life that, you know, are not gonna look
> good for social workers. You may have a phase of taking too many drugs, but that
> was fifteen years ago and that's got nothing to do with you… wanting to be a
> parent now. It's as though although they're telling you to be honest but there's no
> room for things like that.

Participants were therefore conscious of what should be revealed or concealed as part of

the assessment:

> Rosie - The impression I got was that they're looking for people without any kind
> of baggage, in inverted commas, don't talk about it....you have to act like
> nothing's ever happened to you and not speak about it, which again is completely
> the wrong kind of person in my view to be involved in adopting and fostering.

Implications for Practice

Whilst this paper has outlined some of the complexities experienced by participants, the

increasing confidence of professionals working with gay and lesbian applicants should

not be underestimated. Many testimonies noted instances of good practice and receptivity

to learning on the part of social workers. However, it was evident that whilst lesbians and

gay men can more easily access adoption or fostering, such processes remain dominated

by gendered and sexual norms. These accounts also confirm suggestions that the

implementation of new legislation does not necessarily dismantle the wider social

hierarchies in which it is set (Brown and Cocker, 2008; Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield,

2010). Although gay and lesbian identities are now sanctioned within the contexts of

adoption and fostering in England and Wales, such processes are still complicit in

producing distinct versions of acceptability. What is more, these are not only gendered

and sexualised in certain ways, but are profoundly normalising in general (Hicks, 1998; 2000; 2006b; Logan and Sellick, 2007).

It is paramount that social workers methodically assess candidates; however questions arise as to how meaningful the assessment is when applicants must fit within a tightly defined realm of propriety. Propriety in this sense means that they must enact a display that depicts an acceptable impression of gender and sexual conformity; as well as negotiates those 'difficult' histories noted previously. The findings from this study support suggestions from Logan and Sellick (2007) and Brown and Cocker, (2011) that upholding a simplistic *(hetero)normative = safe* binary is reductive, as it not only potentially overlooks those applicants who may be a risk to children, but also may eliminate valuable applicants. Adoption is a highly risk averse activity for obvious reasons, but such an approach may in fact shut down opportunities for meaningful discussions about personal histories, or limit those with a vast range of experiences that could be drawn upon when caring for children.

Immediate changes can be made to the design of forms and the content of applicant training materials, to ensure that they are more inclusive of different familial configurations; however, this also means rethinking the gendered foundation upon which such processes are positioned. Gender role modelling still needs reconsidering, so that professionals undertake a more nuanced approach to gender (Hicks, 2008b). Similarly, whilst the cultural reverence for the nuclear family and relationships based solely on biological relatedness has been challenged elsewhere (Hicks, 2006a, 2014), this is still implicit in many key stages of the process. Adoption in particular, remains embodied within an assumption of applicant infertility, although lesbian and gay candidates do not necessarily experience this in the same way.

The extent to which practice within this area can move beyond hetero-nuclear ideas around identity, family, and parenthood are of primary concern. These findings do little to challenge popular discourses that depict the adoption and fostering processes as highly restrictive (BAAF, 2010). Whilst there has been a major shift in legislation and policy that can help to remove obstacles for gay and lesbian applicants, it is evident that further work needs to be done to dislodge the social work application process from its hetero-gendered bias. There is an ongoing need to draw upon critical perspectives, such as those located within wider poststructural, queer, and feminist theory as it is these which seek to disturb heterosexual hegemony and essentialist notions of gender (Brown and Cocker, 2011; Hicks, 2008a, 2013, 2015; Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). Furthermore, these approaches should be integrated within all levels of social work degree and leadership programmes, as well as practitioner training opportunities and materials.

Conclusions

Whilst there have been fundamental changes for lesbians and gay men entering the adoption or fostering processes in England and Wales, this study suggests that the field remains configured by dominant familial and sexual scripts related to what normatively constitutes the 'right kind' of family or parent (Heaphy, 2011). For applicants, this means that they must consistently display their family and themselves in ways that are conventional, conservative, or 'ordinary' (Hicks, 2011: 72). This is underscored by a concern that more complex aspects of relationships and identities may be misinterpreted

or ignored by professionals, as these do not fit within a hetero-gendered frame of reference (Finch, 2007; Heaphy, 2011; Gabb, 2011; Almack, 2011).

The analysis of findings was aided by an intersectional lens as participants were often complexly positioned by multiple competing elements of experience (Lutz *et al*., 2011). For many, sexuality was not necessarily their primary concern when moving through the process; instead, other aspects of identity could compound or even displace this. Single and male participants reported having to challenge perceived negativity as a consequence of their relationship status or gender. Experiences of mental distress, substance misuse, or criminal convictions were also found hard to manage in generating displays of acceptability. As a consequence, some participants felt coerced into enacting a hyperbolic performance, which provided little space for the meaningful exploration of personal histories.

There are several limitations to this study; examining both adopters and foster carers may not fully account for the specific instances of display work attributed to each process. There are, for example, distinctive issues around permanence or infertility for adopters which may compound their need to display suitability. Furthermore, this study did not include the experiences of black or minority ethnic applicants. Equally there are potentially similar thematic difficulties for other sexual minority groups. Sexuality remains a marginalised topic within social work discourse and one that is under-researched. Queer and bisexual narratives are largely absent in adoption and fostering literature and there is also a deficit in research that focuses specifically on the experiences of transgendered or gender non-conforming applicants (Hicks, 2013; Brown *et al.,* 2015). Additional research is needed in order to analyse how such factors intersect to create specific patterns of experience or subjection.

In conclusion, the study suggests that social workers must deconstruct the idea of rigid sexual and gender identities and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions around parenting. How social workers recognise this is of acute importance, as whilst the numbers of gay and lesbian applicants in the UK continue to grow, their experiences of disjunction are still apparent. The ability of social workers to respond to the complexities of human identities and relationships requires careful consideration, as it is a need which extends beyond sexuality alone.

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