Professionals' attitudes toward placing adoptive children with same-sex couples: A cross-national study

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Background and rationale

- increasing global trend to legalise same-sex marriage
- accompanied in many cases by recognizing the rights of gay and lesbian couples to adopt children
- research attention is being paid to same-sex adoptive parenting
  - a good body of research supporting the efficacy of same-sex adoptive parenting, which offers robust evidence that lesbian and gay couples parent on par with heterosexual couples
- however, despite legal provisions to adopt, many same-sex couples experience negative attitudes and treatment by adoption professionals.

Relevance for practice

- the case in UK:
  - Local authorities across the UK find themselves under increased demand to deal with applications for adoption from gay or lesbian prospective adopters.
  - Moreover, the recent radical review of adoption services in England was aimed to increase the number of adoptions, widen the pool of adoptive applicants and reduce the costs incurred by keeping children unnecessarily in the looked after system of care.
  - In this context, gay and lesbian prospective adopters might represent an under-utilised resource.
  - The research will provide empirical evidence to inform the practice of social workers and adoption panels and agencies in the UK and worldwide.

Professionals' attitudes toward placing adoptive children with same-sex couples

- some evidence that professionals in the field sometimes still oppose the idea of same-sex couples adopting children.
- Paradox: while the legislation may allow same-sex couples to adopt, this does not ensure that professionals in the field of adoption (e.g. social workers, agency personnel, etc.) will endorse or support gay/lesbian couples wishing to adopt children.

- **institutional discrimination or professional homophobia and heterosexism**
- sometimes manifest as overt forms of discrimination
- **often subtle**
- Challenge for research:
  - how to capture these subtle and often hidden attitudes?

Developing a survey to assess such attitudes

- Combined strategy to assess attitudes:
1. Likert-scale assessment of statements regarding attitudes towards Parenting factors
   - Combined positive and negative statements

- Examples:
  - To place a child with a gay or lesbian couple is not in the best interest of the child.
  - A child should be placed for adoption with gay and lesbian individuals only if the agency cannot find suitable heterosexual individuals to adopt the child.
  - Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to adopt children.
  - Gay men and lesbians make suitable parents.

2. Child factors – scenarios

Example:

- A child needing to be placed with her/his sibling group …
- My level of agreement that the child should be placed with:
  - A single female adoptive parent (sexuality unknown) _____
  - A single male adoptive parent (sexuality unknown) _____
  - A gay adoptive couple _____
  - A lesbian adoptive couple _____
  - A heterosexual couple _____

➢ A thirteen year old child
➢ A healthy 8-year-old girl
➢ A healthy 8-year-old boy
➢ A child with a history of sexual abuse and sexually acting out
➢ A child who has chronic medical needs
➢ A child with emotional and behavioral problems

3. Vignette

Please read the following vignette and then answer the statements below:

▶ Kelly and Chris, both 31 years old, met through mutual friends and have now been in a loving and committed relationship together for twelve years. They recently decided to start a family and have filled out all the paperwork required to adopt a child. Kelly and Chris both went to University and received bachelor degrees. They are successful in their chosen careers and are paid well.

▶ Chris and Kelly have met Lucia, a six-year-old girl from Argentina whose parents died, resulting in her being orphaned. They all get along very well and Lucia has expressed that she would like to live with them. Chris and Kelly carefully considered all of the ramifications in making this decision and feel that they could provide Lucia with a loving home. They have begun seeking formal adoption of Lucia.

- Kelly and Chris are two women wishing to adopt Lucia. Please answer the following questions based on the couple being lesbian.

- Kelly and Chris are two men wishing to adopt Lucia. Please answer the following questions based on the couple being gay.
  - The child adopted by this couple would grow up like any child to have a 'normal' life.
  - I am worried that the child adopted by this couple would grow up to have gender identity problems.

Data Collection

Stage 1:
- 307 respondents from New Zealand so far!

Stage 2:
- To be replicated in the UK – adjust the survey to cultural factors
- TBC!

Data Analysis (n=307) … preliminary descriptive

Profession
- Social Workers =164
- Lawyers = 116
- Clinicians = 6

What is your sexual orientation?
- Heterosexual = 274
- Bisexual = 15
- Transgender = 0
- Gay = 2
- Lesbian = 15

Relationship Status
- Married = 163
- Defacto = 68
- Single & dating = 11
- Single, never married = 23
- Divorced or separated = 29
- Widowed = 9

Data Analysis (n=307) … preliminary descriptive

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Moderately Disagree
3 = Slightly Disagree
4 = Slightly Agree
5 = Moderately Agree
6 = Strongly Agree

Lesbian and gay individuals who are motivated to become parents probably make as good adoptive parents as heterosexual individuals = 5.5

Single gay men who are not in a committed relationship should be allowed to adopt children = 3.8

A child should be placed for adoption with lesbian or gay individuals only if the agency cannot find suitable heterosexual individuals to adopt the child = 1.5

When lesbian or gay individuals apply for adoption, it is important to do a more in-depth evaluation before approving them for adoption than if the individuals were heterosexual = 1.8