The 'Last Resort'?: lesbian and gay experiences of the social work assessment process in fostering and adoption

Stephen Hicks

This article presents the results of a piece of research which considered the experiences of a number of lesbians and gay men who had been assessed as potential foster or adoptive carers by social workers. The findings suggest discriminatory responses in relation to lesbian and gay applicants which, it is argued, disadvantage their chances of being approved and having children placed within their care. The article attempts to locate such responses, and to suggest ways in which a more anti-discriminatory assessment practice can be developed.

Introduction:

"...After 13 years of trying to adopt as a gay couple we were turned down again. People say that we would make good parents but we are not given the chance to try. How come?... (Smart, 1991:17).

Should lesbians and gay men be considered the suitable carers of children in fostering and adoption, and if so, why should this be only at a point of 'last resort'? These are the questions which are to be addressed in this article, which presents the findings of my research interviews (Hicks, 1993) with a number of lesbians and gay men, all of whom have been through the process of social work assessment to be considered as potential foster or adoptive carers. The research focuses in particular on how lesbians and gay men experience such assessments, and all of those interviewed provided me with detailed critical accounts of this process. Current public, political and also social work wisdom continues to suggest that lesbian and gay carers, if they are to be considered at all, should be used only as a 'last resort' (Community Care, 1993), but this seems to me to be both a dishonest approach and one which denies children's, lesbians' and gay men's rights.

The issue of the fostering and adoption of children by lesbians and gay men has received increasing attention of late. There has recently been an important review of adoption law, culminating in the publication of the White Paper 'Adoption: The Future' (DoH et al., 1993). Alongside such policy developments, the decisions by certain local authorities to approve gay or lesbian applicants (for example, in Birmingham, Hampshire or Manchester) have also received press and media scrutiny. For these reasons, I became very interested in how lesbians and gay men experience the process of social work assessment. Where a social work agency has a positive public policy regarding applications by lesbians and gay men, then one might expect that they would be treated fairly, but I have found this to be untrue (Hicks, 1993). Even in the most forward thinking of local authorities, discriminatory practice in relation to lesbians and gay men is alive and well, and this research attempts to grapple with how such discrimination manifests itself.

My suggestion is that social work maintains both institutional heterosexism and heterosexist practice (Logan & Kershaw, 1994), which, in relation to the needs of children and young people in particular, revolves around a number of 'lay beliefs' about the
unsuitability of lesbians and gay men to care for them. Discussion of such beliefs can be found elsewhere (Hicks, 1993; Ricketts, 1991; Skeates and Jabri, 1988), but to summarize, they include notions that children living with gay men or lesbians will automatically become gay themselves, that lesbians and gay men, in particular, represent a sexual threat to children, that such children will grow up with distorted role models and concepts of what is a 'man' and what is a 'woman', and that they will suffer undue stigma amongst their peers because they have lesbian or gay parents.

None of these beliefs is supported by studies of children living with lesbians or gay men, a summary of which is provided in Green & Bozett (1991), and yet such research is frequently ignored, or its existence denied. This is part of the heterosexist practice of social work, which frequently uses such discriminatory beliefs in assessment processes (Hicks, 1993). As this article will demonstrate, this works to disadvantage the potential approval of lesbian and gay carers, and also the placement of children in their care.

For this research, I considered the situations of eleven people; six lesbians and five gay men. I was interested to interview those who had both been through the social work assessment process and had been approved. I also wanted to speak with lesbians and gay men who came out during the assessment process. For these reasons, I made my contacts largely through friends, my own position within the lesbian and gay community, and through organizations such as the Lesbian and Gay Foster and Adoptive Parents Network.

'They treated us as second-class citizens': sexuality in assessment

Social work decisions, made at all points of the fostering and adoption process from initial contact through to the placement of a child, can be seen to be part of the overall 'assessment'. Nevertheless, there does exist a discrete piece of work, usually referred to as 'the assessment' proper, consisting of visits made to the applicant(s) by a social worker to consider their suitability to be a foster or adoptive carer.

For applicants who had already come out as lesbian or gay to social work agencies, however, assessment decisions about their suitability, based solely on the fact that their sexuality was known, had often already been made before the home visits (Hicks, 1993). The lesbians and gay men that I spoke with reported comments from social workers that, for example, gay men were not strong enough to cope with the demands of 'difficult' foster children, or that the local authority did not want the 'fuss' that having a lesbian foster carer would cause.

As I have noted, all of those lesbians and gay men with whom I spoke had been formally assessed, however, and were able to give me critical accounts of their experiences. Assessment visits use a 'standard' structure provided by 'Form F' (BAAF, 1991), revised following the implementation of the Children Act 1989, which details the areas that should be covered by the social worker with prospective carers. Form F does actually discuss lesbian and gay foster and adoptive carers, and has the following suggestion to make: "...Agencies should be open in their approach to potential applicants, to reflect the wide variety of children needing families. Applicants come in many guises: single people, married or unmarried
couples, people with disabilities, lesbian and gay people. Stereotyped notions of the ideal family should be examined critically... " (BAAF, 1991; p. 2).

Nevertheless, the form itself does include several areas in which discrimination against lesbian and gay applicants is possible, examples being sections on 'marital status' or family networks. It is also my belief that many heterosexual social workers, far from critically examining their attitudes towards stereotyped notions of the ideal family, instead actively work within practice parameters which promote heterosexuality as an a priori quality for a 'natural' and 'loving' home. This attitude has been written into policy recently, with the Adoption White Paper's emphasis upon married couples as the best of 'family structures' (DoH., 1993).

Examples of ways in which Form F may discriminate against lesbian and gay applicants includes the section on individual profiles, which places more importance upon kin relationships, rather than the wider social networks often adopted by lesbians and gay men. The questions regarding gender roles suggest that a rigid "stress on femininity for girls/ toughness for boy S (BAAF, 1991:p. 11) should be checked out, but I found that lesbians and gay men are frequently asked to prove the opposite here; that is, that they will be able to provide 'traditional' male/female role modelling for children. Evidence of this is also to be found in Golombok et al. (1983), Ricketts (1991), and Skeates & Jabri (1988). This is another example of the promotion of heterosexuality and its active 'construction' by social work assessments.

Attitudes of Social Workers:

All of the people interviewed felt that they had been in the position of having to 'educate' their social worker about lesbian and gay issues, and lesbian and gay lives. This in itself is discriminatory, since social workers who know little about gay men and lesbians may express such ignorance in their assessment conclusions. An example of this was reported to me by Peter, a single gay man assessed for adoptive care by a social worker from an inner London authority with explicitly anti-discriminatory policies. He told me that he thought that his social worker viewed all gay men as "Oscar Wilde types", just one of any number of stereotypical ideas about gay men, and that such ideas were expressed in the final assessment report, which stated: "...Peter admitted to me that he was a homosexual ... Despite being homosexual, Peter does not wear theatrical clothes ... His flat and way of life is perfectly normal...

Some of those interviewed told me that their social worker had ignored or avoided the issue of their sexuality, even where this was already known to the local authority, in order to 'protect' the placement. Michael, a single gay man, was known to be gay, but the assessing social worker avoided any mention of this. Often this is because the local authority have specific, often 'difficult/hard to place', children in mind for these potential carers, and want to use this particular placement. Nevertheless, this avoidance of sexuality remains damaging to lesbian and gay carers in the longer term, who still face the issues involved in telling children placed that they are living with a gay man or lesbian. This would be far better discussed at the outset, and should be raised by professionals involved in making placements.
One of the most frequently cited objections to lesbian and gay parenting is that children will experience distorted gender role models, something which is refuted in all existing research with such children (see Green and Bozett, 1991, for a summary of this work). As I have noted earlier, lesbian and gay applicants are frequently asked to prove that they are able to provide ‘traditional’/stereotypical role modelling to children. Questions about available male and female role models were reported by many of my interviewees. For example, lesbians were asked whether they knew any men or had male visitors to the house. Jo and Louise, a lesbian couple, told me that they felt such issues should be considered in all social work assessments, rather than just because they were lesbians, and they felt that the social worker represented them as ‘non-political/non-radical’ lesbians in order to avoid concerns around role models arising at the fostering panel. Michael, a single gay man, was advised by his local authority to be assessed with his sister, who lived in his house, and he felt that this was also due to stereotypical notions of gender roles on their part. He felt that the local authority were suggesting that: “...If you want to get through this system quicker this is the best way to do it...”

Again, I believe this to be evidence of a social work system with the promotion of heterosexuality at its core.

The assumption that gay men, in particular, are likely to sexually abuse children in their care, was also present in the attitudes expressed by social workers, particularly when gay men asked to care for boys. Richard and Paul, a gay couple, felt that it would be inappropriate for them to parent a young woman, in terms of gender issues, but social workers often expressed concerns around gay men and boys. Again, this is despite research contradicting such beliefs (Green & Bozett, 1991), and evidence that most sexual abuse is perpetrated by heterosexual men against children within their own families.

Coming out as lesbian or gay to social workers:

The work of Ricketts & Achtenberg (1990) has concluded that, during the process of social work assessment, gay and lesbian applicants “...are scrutinised more carefully and are held to a higher standard than are their heterosexual counterparts.” (Ricketts & Achtenberg, 1990:p. 104). Thus, when applicants declare themselves to be lesbian or gay, they will often find that a heterosexual social worker begins to focus upon their sexuality above, and to the exclusion of, all else. This is in marked contrast to the experiences of heterosexual applicants, who rarely find themselves having to discuss their sexuality in any depth, if at all.

All of those interviewed had made a conscious decision to come out as lesbian or gay at some point during the assessment, and I was interested to find out why they took this ‘risk’. Many said that they regarded being ‘in the closet’ as detrimental, both to the children involved and to themselves. Judith, who with her partner Pat has fostered over 50 children over a number of years, remarked:

“...As fostering is so difficult anyway, it is important not to hide things from the children ... We need to be open with them...”

Indeed, it was noted that not coming out would be deceitful in some way by four of my respondents. Coming out was viewed as part of the
need to be honest in any assessment, and this had even been noted in an assessment experienced by Peter, a single gay man. His social worker had noted that he was "at ease with his sexuality" in her assessment report.

Nevertheless, this puts the onus on individual lesbians and gay men to bring up the issue of their sexuality themselves, as part of an assessment, rather than it being an issue which social work itself has taken on board. Judith noted that the kind of media reporting of lesbian and gay foster carers which has been seen of late is likely to push many lesbian and gay carers back 'into the closet', as they fear press attention. This she would regard as entirely bad for foster or adoptive children, who require honest and open carers. Judith told me that recent debates in the media, which continue to represent gay men and lesbians as risks to children and to deny existing research in this area, leave her feeling angry, weary and distressed. She feels that such debates misrepresent what the parenting of children involves, suggesting that married, straight couples are somehow 'naturally' able to care for children, which is "...a misconception of what parenting is all about .... The idea that 'If you're married then you will be a good parent'... is not borne out by the facts... ".

Richard and Paul, a gay couple, were able to provide me with detailed information regarding their experiences of being out to many local authorities, since they had kept their own records of the responses of 24 separate agencies to whom they applied. These agencies were mainly in London, and the couple made it clear that they were gay. One authority was suspicious of the fact that Richard and Paul asked to foster a young boy, despite the fact that they believed it inappropriate for them to parent a young girl due to issues of gender. Another authority responded to their request for an assessment by saying that they found it hard enough to approve single parents, let alone gay people. Two authorities in the Home Counties refused to work with them, one giving them a "frosty response", and the other explaining that they "wouldn't approve gays".

Other people had experiences of coming out either during the assessment itself (Jo and Louise), or afterwards (Judith and Pat). Jo and Louise told me that they came out to their social worker during the assessment, as they believe that unless they had done so, she might have ignored the fact that they were a lesbian couple:

"...The response of the social worker was to say that she had to go back and check this with her team. The social worker returned later explaining that while the team supported our application, she needed to ask us some supplementary questions. These revolved around the issue of our attitudes towards men, and the availability of male role models to any child placed with us. We felt that we were being asked such questions simply because we are lesbians, and we feel that such gender issues should have been covered in any assessment."

Most of my respondents felt that it had been up to them to raise sexuality issues, and that even when they had done so, heterosexual social workers rarely had the sophisticated understanding of lesbian and gay issues necessary to discuss these with applicants. There are, for example, quite specific questions which need to be addressed with lesbian and gay carers. Contrary to the liberal view that lesbians and gay men should be asked exactly the same questions as heterosexual applicants, there is a need to discuss how lesbian and
gay carers will deal with telling the child about their sexuality, how this will be handled with the child's school, friends etc., how the carers' sexuality will be explained to the child's birth parents (particularly in shared-care schemes), how they handle anti-gay and lesbian prejudice, how the carers would handle any teasing experienced by the child and even how they would handle the possibility of a child accusing them of abuse.

Some lesbian or gay couples reported that, although assessed as such, social work agencies often represented them to others as 'the foster parent and her friend'. This was felt to be a denial of their sexuality, in order to protect the placement. Jo and Louise, and Peter, also reported that they felt they were presented as 'non-political' about their sexuality. The assessment report on Jo and Louise noted:

"...Their loving relationship is not made obvious and was brought to my attention in a thoughtful and sensitive manner

Assessment outcomes for lesbian and gay applicants

Despite the discriminatory practice evidenced above, all of those with whom I spoke were approved by the agencies which assessed them. This therefore leads me to hypothesize that there exist significant numbers of lesbians and gay men who are not approved because of similar examples of heterosexist social work practice. My research did not consider those whose assessments were unsuccessful, but it would be interesting to look at such examples in the future.

The present article has considered the assessment process for lesbian and gay applicants, and there is not space here to focus on the outcomes of such social work. Nevertheless, in summary, I did also find that lesbian and gay applicants faced tougher scrutiny of assessment reports than straight applicants, that most were providing forms of shorter-term, less permanent care to children than that for which they had been approved, that many face further problems in actually getting a child placed with them, this being especially true for gay men, and that it is often disabled, 'difficult' or 'hard to place' children who are located with lesbian or gay carers (Hicks, 1993; Skeates & Jabri, 1988).

Lesbians and gay men as a 'last resort'?

This research has discovered that even those lesbians and gay men who do manage to get through the assessment and approval process for fostering or adoption, and these are few, are treated as a 'last resort' in the type of placement for which they are eventually used. This notion of a 'last resort', which translates easily into Judith Weeks' comment about being seen as a second-class citizen, discriminates against lesbians and gay men on a number of levels. Firstly it reinforces the heterosexist practice of social work (Logan & Kershaw, 1994), which allows some social workers to promote heterosexuality and hold that lesbians and gay men 'shouldn't be near children'. Secondly, it allows social work agencies to see little point in resourcing such a lengthy piece of work as an assessment, when the potential carer would only be used when all other options had failed. And thirdly, it allows that those lesbians and gay men who are approved are expected to 'take what they get', if they indeed do have any child placed with them at all.
Public and policy discourses are at work, here, to deny the appropriateness of the placement of children with lesbians and gay men. The notion of the 'last resort' therefore proposes that lesbian and gay fostering and adoption must not be encouraged or publicly acknowledged, but that it should be allowed to continue 'on the quiet'.

This is a dishonest and discriminatory position, which ultimately works against the needs of children and young people for good child care practice. Excluding particular groups from fostering and adoption denies the large numbers of children waiting to leave 'care' possible family placements, and, as Brown (1990) notes, "...we have a statutory responsibility to offer the best possible placements to children in our care, and we cannot afford to discriminate against any individuals who may have excellent potential as foster or adoptive parents." (Brown, 1990; p. 19).

As much as this wider societal prejudice, lesbians and gay men also face discriminatory practice by social work services. My own research has found that individual social workers, as much as their agencies, can prevent lesbian and gay fostering and adoption. For those lesbians and gay men who are assessed, I found that the process was far more vigorous, exhaustive and time-consuming than for heterosexuals. This is backed up by the research of Ricketts (1991) and Skeates & Jabri (1988). I found examples of discriminatory attitudes and practices at all stages of the assessment process, and also in the preparedness of local authorities to place children in the care of approved lesbians and gay men.

Such practices are based upon discriminatory ideas about gay and lesbian caters, continuing to ignore the existing research on them, and on who actually abuses children. Social work needs to develop a good child care practice which acknowledges, as does 'Form F' (BAAF, 1991), that foster and adoptive care should be provided by a range of carers, reflecting the diversity of communities and, most importantly, meeting the needs of children and young people. The research discussed here I hope will have a part to play in informing the development of a social work education and practice which takes the challenging of discrimination against lesbians and gay men seriously.

References:

British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF) (1991) Form F: Information on Prospective Substitute Parent(s) London: BAAF.


Community Care (1993) 'Gay Couples Approved in Hampshire's Foster Policy', Community Care, 951 (28/1); 1


Green, G. Dorsey & Bozett, Frederick W. (1991) 'Lesbian Mothers and


