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EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF SAME-SEX FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

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EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF SAME-SEX
FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

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

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

by
Cynthia Anna Lopez
Richard Christopher Meza

June 2016

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ABSTRACT

Foster and adoptive parents are crucial in the child welfare system, with the large number of foster children in the system at any time. Same-sex foster and adoptive homes are underrepresented in the child welfare system, despite the shortage and need for more certified foster and adoptive homes. There are limited studies documenting the experiences of gay and lesbian foster and adoptive parents. Some research has demonstrated that "non-traditional," or same-sex couples are met with more obstacles to become certified foster and adoptive parents, in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts. This qualitative study explores the experiences of same-sex foster and adoptive parents during the certification process. The findings suggest that social workers need to gain more knowledge regarding the values and practices of same-sex families, provide resources specific to same-sex family challenges, be sensitive to the unique circumstances of same-sex families, and most importantly, treat same-sex couples equally during the foster and adoptive certification process. Further research is needed looking at the areas of Family Court and judges' rulings, as well as social workers' perceptions in working with same-sex foster and adoptive parents.

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DEDICATION

The researchers dedicate this project to our friends and family who loved, supported and reassured us during the all-nighters, the finals and the stress of grad school.

We also dedicate this research project to our participants. For without them, this could not have been possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	
Problem Statement	1
Purpose of the Study	4
Significance of the the Study for Social Work Practice	6
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	
Introduction.....	8
Same-Sex Couple Experiences	8
Perceptions and Experiences of Social Workers	10
Barriers to Same-Sex Couples Fostering/Adopting Youth	12
Family Functioning and Child Adjusment in Same-Sex Households	15
Other Research on Same-Sex Foster and Adoptive Parents.....	16
Theories Guiding Conceptualization of Same-Sex Couples as Foster and Adoptive Parents.....	17
Conflict Theory.....	18
Attachment Theory.....	18
Summary	20
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	
Introduction	22
Study Design	22
Sampling.....	24
Data Collection and Instruments.....	24

Procedures	25
Protection of Human Subjects	26
Data Analysis.....	27
Summary	27
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	
Introduction.....	28
Demographics.....	28
Results of the Study.....	29
Summary	41
CHAPTER FIVE: DISSCUSSION	
Introduction.....	42
Discussion	42
Same-Sex Couple Experiences	43
Perceptions and Experiences of Social Workers.....	44
Barriers to Same-Sex Couples Fostering/Adopting Youth	45
Family Functioning and Child Adjustment in Same-Sex Households	46
Other Research on Same-Sex Foster and Adoptive Parents	46
Limitations.....	47
Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research	49
Social Work Practice	49
Policy	51
Research.....	51
Conclusion	53

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE	55
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT	57
APPENDIX C: AUDIO CONSENT	59
REFERENCES	62
ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES	64

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Foster and adoptive parents are crucial in the field of child welfare, with more than 415,000 children in the foster care system at any time (Trends in Foster Care, 2015). Although there are numerous studies on adoption, studies regarding the adoption practices of gay and lesbian individuals, and same-sex couples are extremely limited. Moreover, there is little research documenting the experiences of this unique population of parents, and the perceived barriers they may face in the path to becoming foster and adoptive parents. This chapter will discuss the problem area of focus, purpose of the study, and the significance of the knowledge to be gained from this study in order to better social work practice with regards to gay and lesbian, and same-sex foster and adoptive practices.

Problem Statement

According to AdoptUSKids.org, more than 250,000 individuals enter the nation's foster care system annually. Though many children reunify with their parents, half of the minors in the foster care system remain in foster care waiting to be adopted (AdoptUSKids.org). There is an estimate of 102,000 youth, ranging from less than a year old to twenty-one years old, awaiting permanent placement (AdoptUSKids.org). Unfortunately, there are not enough certified adoptive parents to adopt the youth in foster care (Bradley, 2007; Ryan, Pearlmutter &

Groza, 2004). One concern is that Foster Family Agencies (FFAs) and adoptive agencies prefer to place children with nuclear families (heterosexual couples) (Brown et. al, 2009; Mallon, 2011; Riggs, 2007; Ryan, Pearlmutter & Groza, 2004) causing non-traditional families i.e. same-sex couples, to be over-looked as potential placements for youth in the foster care system.

The lack of certified foster and adoptive homes affects many individuals. The first to be affected are the youth in the foster care system. The youth in foster care who are unable to find permanent placement are left to age out of the system (adoptuskids.org). FFAs are affected as well. Jackie Jacobs, MSW (Supervising Director for Trinity Youth Services), stated her offices, at times, have had to decline the admittance of new clients due to the lack of certified homes (J. Jacobs, personal communication, June 2, 2015). Same-sex couples are affected because they are deemed as not "traditional" families. Gay and lesbian couples who are interested in becoming foster and adoptive parents are met with more obstacles to become certified, than their heterosexual counterparts (Patrick, 2006). With such a high number of foster children without homes, all potential homes should be considered for the certification process regardless of their sexual orientation.

Nationally, there is a shortage of foster and adoptive homes, accounting for the large number of foster children in the system at any time. Additionally, many Foster Family Agencies (FFAs) have a narrow definition of family, recognizing only heterosexual couples as a valid family (Ryan, Pearlmutter &

Groza, 2004). Moreover, some agencies may discriminate against same-sex couples, making it very difficult for them to maneuver through the certification process. Historically, gay individuals and couples have been faced with much discrimination. Indeed, there are several myths about same-sex couples that may cause many individuals, including social workers, to oppose allowing same-sex couples and gay and lesbian individuals the opportunity to become foster and adoptive parents. As a result, there are some social workers who may harbor homophobic attitudes, and are reluctant to support same-sex couples in their quest to adopt. In a study by Hall (2010), some negative bias was found by adoption social workers toward same-sex prospective adoptive parents. However, due to their direct experience with the couples, allowing the opportunity to dispel myths about same-sex couples, the majority of the social work respondents viewed the couples positively at the end of the adoption process. Brown and her colleagues studied the experiences of gays and lesbians becoming adoptive parents and found that the majority of the couples identified perceived discrimination as a barrier from the agencies (Brown, Smalling, Groza & Ryan, 2009). Thus, discrimination against same-sex potential foster and adoptive parents is very real, and although some agencies may not flat out deny same-sex couples the opportunity to adopt, they are still conveying to these couples that their unions are inferior to their heterosexual counterparts by making the certification process more challenging and even denying same-sex couples the ability to foster/adopt children in need.

There is a lack of literature involving same-sex parents with foster and adopted children, especially research which explores the experience, challenges/obstacles and any perceived discrimination from FFAs and adoption agencies/ social workers. It is the intent of this research project to explore this population and their experiences.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of same-sex foster and adoptive parents during the certification process, in order to gain a better understanding why this population of foster and adoptive parents may be underrepresented in the child welfare system. Members of the LGBT community have long faced discrimination. And FFA's preference for traditional/nuclear families is yet another prejudice against same-sex couples. The literature discussed later in this study will state barriers faced by same-sex couples, note the misbeliefs about same-sex couples and express the experiences of same-sex couples as they became foster and adoptive parents. This study builds knowledge for social workers working with this particular population. Knowing specific experiences, obstacles and perceived discrimination will allow social workers to better work and be culturally sensitive to same-sex couples.

Although research has shown that FFAs and adoptive agencies prefer traditional families, the reasons are unclear. Also, it is unclear if these agencies harbor any biases against same-sex families and/or homosexual individuals.

Perhaps the answer lies in the preferences of the foster youths' biological parents, who may favor traditional families. It could also be that the social workers at the FFAs may have their own biases, or misbeliefs, surrounding the outcome of children raised by same-sex couples. Or perhaps it is due to the FFAs' lack of outreach to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) community. There are many unanswered questions in regards to same-sex individuals and couples as potential foster and adoptive parents. This research study clarifies some of these uncertainties. This study interviews same-sex adoptive and or adoptive parents living in southern California. The researchers interviewed the couples together to aid in the depiction of a clearer picture on their experiences during the certification process. As mentioned earlier, the body of knowledge surrounding these clients is very limited and it was the purpose of this study to not only add to the existing body of knowledge but to also inform social workers about working with same-sex couples who wish to adopt/foster children.

Knowledgeable social workers, especially in the area of child welfare, need to advocate for the permanency of the many foster children left without homes. Thus, all potential qualified foster parents, to include same-sex couples, should be considered. Additionally, FFAs lack of utilization of a great resource in same-sex households is an injustice to the children in the child welfare system who so desperately need a home, and parents with whom they can form a secure attachment. Same-sex families provide an environment in which children

can flourish just as well, and sometimes even better as those raised in heterosexual households (Carroll, 2010; Hyde & DeLamater, 2011; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). Same-sex families also depend heavily on foster and adoption agencies to allow them the opportunity to become parents. There is no logical reason to have same-sex couples continue being underrepresented as foster and adoptive parents.

The purpose of this study was to gain more information on the experiences of these same-sex couples, with the hope that social workers can change the practices on the recruitment, acceptance and utilization of same-sex prospective foster and adoptive parents, remove any barriers noted, and provide equality on the certification process. This study utilized a qualitative design with open ended interviews. Open ended interviews allowed the researchers a clear depiction of the experiences, challenges and perceived discrimination faced by same-sex foster/adoptive parents.

Significance of the Study for Social Work Practice

The findings of this study may create more of a welcoming atmosphere at FFAs and adoption agencies for gay and lesbian individuals, couples, and families interested in becoming foster and adoptive parents. The hope is that these findings may bring some awareness to the social workers and, overall, agencies about barriers that may be present in the recruitment practices and application process that may be hindering same-sex couples from becoming

certified foster and adoptive parents. With this knowledge, the researchers hope that FFAs will modify their recruitment practices and application process, which will lead to the certification of more same-sex foster and adoptive parents, and, consequently, fewer children in the foster care system. More certified families equals more permanency for the youth in foster care who so desperately need a home.

The research findings may also help change the way FFAs and adoption agencies recruit for potential foster and adoptive parents. Agencies may target the LGBT community specifically, and outreach at such events such as at LGBT pride events. The researchers hoped that the findings from this research will change agencies' preferences for traditional families, to include all forms that families come in. This study examined the experiences, obstacles and perceived prejudice of same-sex couples during the adoption and foster certification process from the perspective of same-sex couples. The significance of this study adds to the limited body of knowledge surrounding the individual experiences of same-sex couples as they became foster and adoptive parents.

This study is relevant to the Title IV-E requirement as same-sex couples desire to adopt/foster children within the foster care system.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter Two is a discussion of the literature pertinent to this study. The chapter is divided by various sections, including a section on the experiences of gay and lesbian foster and adoptive parents, studies on the perceptions and experiences of social workers working with same-sex foster and adoptive parents, studies that look at barriers to same-sex adoption, studies on family functioning among same-sex and heterosexual adoptive families and the adjustment of children in these homes, and other research in the area of same-sex foster and adoptive parents. These relevant studies demonstrate the much needed research that is lacking in regards to same-sex, and gay and lesbian foster and adoptive parents, especially in light of the Supreme Court's recent decision to allow gay and lesbian individuals the right to marry under the law.

Same-Sex Couple Experiences

There are limited studies documenting the experiences of gay and lesbian foster and adoptive parents, particularly in regards to the certification process. One narrative was found in the literature that was relevant to this study in describing the experience of a same-sex couple, and described two very different outcomes. In *The Story of a Gay Foster Parent*, Patrick (2006) narrated his

experience with two agencies as he and his partner became certified foster parents. Both Patrick and his partner are educated professionals with a desire to help children in need. The first agency the couple applied to was associated with a religious affiliation; however, a case worker for the agency assured the couple that their sexual orientation would not be a problem or concern (Patrick, 2006). After the couple completed the police background check, the twelve hour trainings, and the home visit, however, Patrick and his partner were denied certification because of their same-sex lifestyle (Patrick, 2006). Patrick then described the second agency as "welcoming" (2006). This agency, which eventually did certify Patrick and his partner, did not ask for the names of the "mother and father" instead they asked the names of "parent 1 and parent 2" (2006). The only hesitation Patrick and his partner faced came from one mother who was furious that her child was placed with a same-sex couple. The agency case worker at the time defended Patrick and his partner to the biological mother as very skilled foster parents, and when the mother reunified with her child, she thanked Patrick and his partner for their dedication to her child (2006). The limitation in this narrative is that it only contains the experience of one same-sex couple. However, it is significant to note the differences between the two agencies discussed, and how they treated this couple.

Brown, Smalling, Groza, and Ryan (2009) described the experiences of gays and lesbians in their quest to become adoptive parents. In their study, Brown and her colleagues used nationwide media sources to recruit participants.

They utilized a cross-sectional survey of 183 same-sex adoptive parents, where participants were asked to include a brief summary of the barriers and challenges they faced during the certification process, as well as afterwards. The authors found that a majority of the participants identified perceived discrimination as a barrier from the agencies (Brown et al., 2009). Many couples reported that the agencies judged them as inferior based upon their sexual orientation (Brown et al., 2009). A limitation to the study was its use of a nonrandomized convenience sample. The use of specific questions rather than open-ended questions was also a limitation of the study (Brown et al., 2009). The authors also proposed a need for further research on both agency workers as well as adoptive same-sex parents.

Perceptions and Experiences of Social Workers

Findings of studies of adoption case workers who have experience working with adoptive parents who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual have demonstrated positive perceptions. Hall (2010) explored adoption workers' personal opinions regarding prospective adoptive parents who were gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB). Hall also explored the relationships between the worker's opinions, training received, and the worker's demographics. The findings of this study demonstrated that although most of the workers had little training regarding agency guidelines when working with GLB adoptive parents, the majority (85.1%) had experience working directly with GLB adoptive parents, and thus, believed

that gay, lesbian, and bisexual couples and families should be allowed to adopt (Hall, 2010). Although there was some negative bias found toward GLB prospective adoptive parents, the majority of respondents viewed GLB adoptive parents positively, due to their direct experience. The author noted some examples provided by respondents when discussing their experiences working with GLB parents: "Some of the best and enjoyable families I have worked with through the adoption process," and "...the lesbian couples have been highly educated and financially comfortable, and really dynamic women. They are comfortable with who they are and model healthy assertiveness and lifestyles" (Hall, 2010, p. 277). The implications of these findings demonstrate that, when adoption case workers have direct experience working with gay, lesbian, and bisexual couples, and thus, the opportunity to dispel any myths about same-sex couples, their perceptions of these non-traditional families are positive.

Ryan (2007) examined the factors that determine social workers' placement recommendations of children, and found that only two factors, highest degree earned and years of adoption experience, were found significant in regards to placement with gay and lesbian adoptive parents. He found that gender had a significant impact on attitudes toward gay and lesbian adoptive parents, with women being less homophobic than men (Ryan, 2007). It was also found that individuals identifying themselves as Christian, as well as those being African-American and White were significant factors in being categorized as homophobic, in comparison to the reference group (Hispanics, Native Americans,

Asians and others)(Ryan, 2007). The implications of this study demonstrate how social workers' individual biases and perceptions may be influential in their judgment as to the placement of foster children. The limitations of this study include the fact that it is based on social constructive theory alone in explaining individuals' environment influences on their attitudes; however, the attitudes acquired through this process do not always translate into certain behaviors, or patterns in which these social workers would place children (Ryan, 2007).

The limitations of Hall's study can be shown in that the study was done with a sample of adoption case workers solely in the Northern California area. Also, the overall response rate was low, at 31.3%. The author concluded that this could also explain the high rate of positive perceptions from the adoption workers toward the GLB couples, as the majority of those who responded showed support of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals as adoptive parents (Hall, 2010). The author speculated that those who did not respond correlated with a lack of interest regarding GLB issues.

Barriers to Same-Sex Couples Fostering/Adopting Youth

Ryan, Pearlmutter, and Groza (2004) discussed many barriers to same-sex couples to becoming adoptive parents. One barrier many adoptive families face is the narrow definition of family (Ryan, Pearlmutter, & Groza, 2004). Many agencies define family as a heterosexual couple (Ryan, Pearlmutter, & Groza, 2004). The authors stated that more flexibility in the definition of family would

lead to more foster youth in permanent placement (Ryan, Pearlmuter, & Groza, 2004). Another barrier is the agencies' homophobia and heterosexism (Ryan, Pearlmuter, & Groza, 2004). Agencies' misbeliefs and prejudices keep homosexual individuals and couples from even being considered as adoptive parents (Ryan, Pearlmuter, & Groza, 2004). Another barrier is the organizational influences, such as the agencies' attitudes toward the LGBT community (Ryan, Pearlmuter, & Groza, 2004). The agency's beliefs can hinder the recruitment and consideration of same-sex couples (Ryan, Pearlmuter, & Groza, 2004). The authors also give recommendations to increase accessibility for same-sex couples interested in fostering and adopting children: social workers need to be familiar with their agency's regulations, their own biases and the need for social workers to challenge issues which have been socially created and sanctioned (homophobia/heterosexism) (Ryan, Pearlmuter, & Groza, 2004).

Riggs (2007) examined the impact of heterosexism on same-sex couples as it relates to foster parent applicants. Riggs described assumptions made about nuclear families in regards to being in the best interest of the child, and how these assumptions would leave families not defined as nuclear to be considered deviant (Riggs, 2007). FFAs and adoption agencies also give same-sex couples the burden of proof they are qualified and adequate foster parents (Riggs, 2007). This is not the case for heterosexual couples, as the burden of proof falls on the agency (Riggs, 2007). During the assessment reports, case workers tend to focus heavily on same-sex couple sexuality, for example, public

displays of affection. (Riggs, 2007). Riggs described one couple's experience during assessment where the case worker constantly asked about the couple's "coming out" and their struggles with their sexuality (Riggs, 2007). Riggs described this particular case worker as ignorant to the obstacles that the LGBT community faces (Riggs, 2007). Riggs stated that there was a lack of research on same-sex foster parents, and more research must be done as it pertains to FFAs and adoption agencies' attitudes towards same-sex couples (Riggs, 2007).

Mallon (2011) wrote about the assessment process of LGBT prospective foster/adoptive families. The author stated that LGBT individuals did not pursue adoption/foster care because of their perceptions of being rejected (Mallon, 2011). Mallon (2011) suggests better recruitment tactics from the agency to LGBT communities. Many LGBT individuals make a judgment about the agency at first contact whether they will be supported or judged negatively (Mallon, 2011). Mallon also found that many social workers were not properly educated about what it meant to "come out" (2011). Mallon stated that same-sex couples were more sensitive to the impact of discrimination foster youth feel because they too have faced prejudice and discrimination (Mallon, 2011). Mallon also noted that child welfare agencies have a responsibility to help children find a safe home, whether it is time-limited or permanent, and doing so means the agency has to explore all possible resources including same-sex couples (Mallon, 2011).

Family Functioning and Child Adjustment in Same-Sex Households

Leung, Erich, and Kanenberg (2005) conducted a study comparing family functioning in gay/lesbian, heterosexual and special needs adoptions, with the purpose of using the findings in adoption practice. In regards to gay/lesbian headed families, they found no negative effects regarding the parenting of adopted children (Leung et al., 2005). In fact, higher levels of family functioning were found to be associated with adoptions of older children, non-sibling group adoptions, and children with more foster placements among gay/lesbian headed households (Leung et al., 2005). It is notable to mention that the authors also found the need to place a child in an adoptive family as early as possible, regardless of the parent's sexual orientation, as a factor that contributes to higher levels of family functioning in adoptive families (Leung et al., 2005). The authors note that the limitations of this study is demonstrated in that a random sample was not available, and thus, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results of this study to a larger population (Leung et al., 2005).

In a study on parenting and child development in adoptive families, Farr, Forssell, and Patterson (2010) found that parental sexual orientation did not affect children's adjustment, parenting approaches, parenting stress, or couple relationship adjustment after the adoption of an infant. Additionally, the authors obtained reports from the children's outside caregivers, including teachers, and found that the caregivers' perceptions of the children were consistent with those of parents (Farr et al., 2010). It is also important to note that gay fathers in

particular, and their children, were faring as well as were lesbian and heterosexual parents and their children (Farr et al., 2010). Most of the adoptive parents, heterosexual and homosexual alike, reported low levels of parenting stress, and high levels of relationship satisfaction (Farr et al., 2010). The authors note that the implications of their findings suggest no justification for denying lesbian and gay adults from adopting children (Farr et al., 2010; Wald, 2006). The limitations of this study include that it is a cross-sectional design, with children still being very young (average of 3 years old), while a longitudinal study may give more accurate results of the long-term outcomes.

Other Research on Same-Sex Foster and Adoptive Parents

Gato and Fontaine's (2013) study was aimed at disproving beliefs surrounding sexual and gender development of youth adopted by same-sex couples. Gato and Fontaine used questionnaires distributed to 768 Portuguese university students who were randomly assigned to one of six vignettes (1. Lesbian couple adopting a female child 2. Lesbian couple adopting a male child 3. Gay couple adopting a female child 4. Gay couple adopting a male child 5. Heterosexual couple adopting a female child and 6. Heterosexual couple adopting a male child) (2013). After reading the vignettes, participants were asked to evaluate the likelihood that this child would have good self-concept, show stereotypic gender behaviors and interests, have behavior problems, and be a victim of discrimination (Gato & Fontaine, 2013). The study found that

participants were more apprehensive of gender/sexual development of children adopted by same-sex couples (Gato & Fontaine, 2013). The study found that men anticipated a negative effect on the child's development more than women did (Gato & Fontaine, 2013). The study also found more apprehension of participants in regards to boy's gender development than the gender development of girls (Gato & Fontaine, 2013). The authors found that a majority of their participants believed the sexual orientation of the parents impacts a child's gender development, and they speculated that this belief can lead to the negative views of same-sex parents (Gato & Fontaine, 2013). The limitations of this study include the fact that the sexual orientation of the participants was unknown (Gato & Fontaine, 2013). Members of the LGBT community may show less negative attitudes towards same-sex couples parenting children and may reduce the differences found (Gato & Fontaine, 2013). Another limitation was that a non-representative population was used (Gato & Fontaine, 2013).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization of Same-Sex Couples as Foster and Adoptive Parents

There are no identified theories specific to same-sex couples in relation to their roles as foster and adoptive parents. However, other theories can be utilized to provide a basis for conceptualization of these roles. Additionally, theory can be used to validate the roles of same-sex couples as parents, and also provide an understanding for why they may be underrepresented in the child welfare system as certified foster and adoptive parents.

Conflict Theory

Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2010) define conflict theory as the disparity of power and control between various social groups. Conflict theory expects the inequality of power and control to lead to oppression and discrimination of groups within society by the more dominant groups who hold legal power (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010). As it pertains to conflict theory, homosexual individuals are oppressed and discriminated by those with legal authority. Same-sex couples' legal right to adopt and foster children varies from state to state (AdoptUSKids.org). Legally, same-sex couple's marriages are seen as less than the marriage of heterosexual counterparts; this is discrimination and prejudice against the LGBT community. This is where the conflict arises.

Same-sex couples do not hold as much control as their heterosexual counterparts, at least, in regards to their marriages. Conflict theory indicates that conflicts, such as inequality between same-sex marriage and heterosexual marriage, can lead to social change for the better and diminish disparities of power and control between social groups (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010). It is the conflict between the control that same-sex couples have and the control same-sex couples seek, which will later lead to equality between homosexual and heterosexual couples as it pertains to the adoption and fostering of children.

Attachment Theory

Regarding the literature found, the majority of studies demonstrate the many hurdles and challenges same-sex and adoptive couples must face in order

to become parents. However, in regards to the many foster children and adolescents awaiting placement, the purpose of some of the research studies on same-sex foster and adoptive parents can be linked to the wellbeing of the children and adolescents in the child welfare system. Attachment theory provides a strong theoretical basis for why the best interest of these children is to get them permanent placement in a home, regardless if the parents are homosexual or heterosexual.

According to John Bowlby, the original developer of attachment theory, children who form an attachment to an adult, that is, an enduring socio-emotional relationship, are more likely to survive (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010). Additionally, the adult *does not* need to be a biological parent; the key is a strong emotional relationship with a responsive, caring person (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010). The effects of long-term attachment in children can be seen in lower levels of anxiety and distress, and higher levels of self-esteem and more positive interactions with peers and adults (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010).

In accordance with attachment theory, and the findings of previous research studies, children raised by same-sex couples do as well developmentally as those raised by their heterosexual counterparts. Thus, FFAs' lack of utilization of a great resource for these children in same-sex households is an injustice to the children in the child welfare system who so desperately need a home, and parents in which they can form a secure attachment. A mutual need

exists between these parentless children and childless couples. Attachment theory states that children need a stable, enduring emotional relationship in order to thrive, and same-sex families want to provide this enduring socio-emotional relationship. They depend heavily, and primarily, on the foster and adoption agencies to allow them the opportunity to become parents. Our study aims to learn about what barriers and challenges same-sex couples are facing, from their perspective, that may be causing them to be underrepresented in the child welfare system as foster and adoptive parents, with the hope that these findings will bring awareness to this issue, to better social work practice when working with same-sex couples, and bring about social change for equality for the LGBT community.

Summary

This chapter discussed of the literature relevant to this study: experiences of gay and lesbian foster and adoptive parents, perceptions and experiences of social workers working with same-sex foster and adoptive parents, the barriers faced by same-sex adoption, the adjustment of children in heterosexual and same-sex parent's homes, and other research in the area of same-sex foster and adoptive parents. The current literature involving same-sex foster and adoptive parents is limited and there is much need for further research regarding these specific clients This chapter also discussed the theories guiding the conceptualization of this research: attachment and conflict. It was the aim of the

researchers to give voice to same-sex couples about their specific experiences as well as create more competent social workers working with same-sex couples who wish to become foster/ adoptive parents.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the methods used for this qualitative study. Specifically, the emphasis of discussion will be placed on the study's design, sampling, data collection and instrument, procedures, protection of human subjects, and qualitative data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of same-sex foster and adoptive parents. By exploring the perceptions and experiences of these minority families, the researchers learned about perceived challenges, and perceptions of the recruitment processes, as well as perceived discrimination, biases, and stereotypes. Additionally, the researchers looked for recurring themes, or unexplored areas of their perceptions and experiences. Overall, the researchers learned about same-sex couples' perceptions regarding how they feel their experiences may have differed from heterosexual couples' experiences through the foster and adoptive certification process.

This study utilized a qualitative study design in collecting data. Information was gathered by conducting face-to-face interviews with 10 same-sex foster and/or adoptive couples. The couples were recruited all over Southern California,

specifically in the counties of San Bernardino, Riverside, Orange, and Los Angeles. A qualitative study design was the most appropriate for this study, as the researchers sought subjective information from the participants themselves regarding their experiences, and perceptions of these experiences. This design allowed the participants to share their thoughts, views, and feelings on the recruitment practices for same-sex couples as foster and adoptive parents, as well as on their perceived notions on the issues of discrimination, bias, and challenges faced during the foster and adoptive certification process. From their unique perspective of having gone through the experience, and reflecting on this experience, same-sex couples can best share what barriers FFAs and social workers were placing on them (with or without intention), and also offer suggestions on how FFAs can modify their recruitment practices to offer a more welcoming environment to same-sex couples seeking to foster and adopt, and remove those barriers.

Due to the nature of the type of information the researchers sought, a quantitative study design was not the most appropriate, as it would limit the participants' responses to predetermined categories, and would not allow the researchers to fully capture the unique experiences of same-sex foster and adoptive parents. However, due to the number of participants being interviewed within a relatively limited geographical location, this study is not necessarily representative of the experiences of all same-sex couples through the foster and adoption certification process.

Sampling

Non-probability sampling was used in this study. The sample size of this study was limited to 10 couples (20 participants), residing in Southern California. Participants were recruited the public, social media including Facebook and Instagram, as well as through snowball sampling, with recruitment of other participants through the referral of current participants. The sampling criteria for the purposes of this study included same-sex lesbian and gay couples who had undergone certification to become foster parents and/or adoptive parents within the past 15 years. The researchers interviewed five lesbian couples (10 women) and five gay couples (10 men). Although it is not a significant focus of the study, the researchers attempted to recruit participants from various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

Data Collection and Instruments

The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews using an interview guide of approximately 10 questions (Appendix A). Demographic information, including age, ages of children, gender, ethnicity, marital status, education, and sexual orientation was collected in addition to key questions regarding the area of study. Questions regarding the children were asked to demonstrate if they are biological, in foster care, or adopted. The reasons for fostering and/or adopting the children were also asked, as well as any challenges experienced during this process. Experiences with the FFAs and social workers were also explored. Key

questions were open-ended, and participants were encouraged to elaborate on their experiences to solicit the most comprehensive information. Additionally, the sequence of the questions was constructed in a way as to build on participants' personal experiences. Furthermore, additional probing questions were developed and utilized by the researchers in order to encourage further elaboration of responses.

Procedures

Participants were recruited the public, social media including Facebook and Instagram, as well as through snowball sampling, with recruitment of other participants through the referral of current participants. The agencies contacted the potential participants and informed them of the research project. The participants who were interested in participating were given the researcher's contact information. Participants were recruited beginning January 2016 through March 2016. On establishing that participants had gone through the foster certification process and/or adoption certification process within the past 15 years, they were invited to participate in the study. Those participants who chose to participate, were provided an informed consent form (Appendix B). Data collection via interviews took place January 2016 through March 2016. Most of the interviews were conducted at couple's home however, one couple wished to be interviewed in the public setting of a coffee shop. Interviews took approximately 20 to 45 minutes to complete, and were administered by the

researchers. On completion, participants were thanked and provided with the knowledge that their participation contributed to the literature regarding same-sex foster and adoptive parents.

Protection of Human Subjects

The researchers took appropriate measures to ensure the protection and confidentiality of participants in this study. All participants were interviewed on a voluntary basis. Participants were presented with an informed consent as well as an audio consent (Appendix C) form that gave permission for their responses to be audio taped. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, confidentiality, that participation is voluntary, and that they may stop participation in this study at any time, or refuse to answer any questions they may feel uncomfortable with. Participants were also informed about who the study is being conducted by, who is supervising the study, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. At no time were participants identified by name, but rather a number between one and 20 was assigned to each participant that corresponded with demographics collected from each participant. This precaution served to protect the confidentiality of the participants. All data collected were stored on tape and computer hard drive, and only the researchers had sole access to it. Furthermore, on completion of the study, all data was destroyed. All participants, as outlined in the informed consent, were able to discontinue the interview at any time without penalty.

Data Analysis

This study utilized qualitative data analysis techniques. The data gathered via the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for significant categories, trends, or patterns of responses. Also, key interview questions were analyzed and compared. A coding method was developed to categorize meaningful units of data. Similarities and differences were identified by the researchers to formulate themes between categories. Furthermore, this study utilized descriptive statistics, frequency distribution, and measures of variability to describe the characteristics of the sample.

Summary

In summary, this chapter presented the methodology and procedures that were used to conduct this study. This study utilized a qualitative study design, as well as non-probability and snowball sampling in order to best gather the information regarding the area of study. Face-to-face interviews were conducted using an interview guide. Procedures used were discussed, as well as the appropriate measures being taken by the researchers in order to protect the participants being interviewed. Qualitative data analysis was also discussed.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The findings of the study demonstrate that, across the board, all participants became foster parents with the intention of adopting the children. The majority of participants stated the reasons for becoming foster and adoptive parents were because they wanted to become parents and grow their families to include children. There were mixed reviews regarding the support provided by the agencies during the foster and adoption process; however, all viewed their experiences during the foster and adoption processes positively if they were able to keep the children, and finalize the adoptions.

Demographics

The participants consisted of 10 same-sex couples. Fifty percent of the participants were women in a lesbian relationship and fifty percent of the participants were male involved in a gay relationship. Fifty percent of the participants identified as White or Caucasian. Twenty-five percent identified as Hispanic, Latino/Latina or Mexican. Fifteen percent identified as African-American. Five percent of the participants identified as Asian. Five percent of the participants identified as Native American. Half of the participants were married. Thirty percent of the participants were in a domestic partnership or civil union.

Twenty percent of the participants were unmarried. The ages of the participants ranged from thirty-two years of age to sixty-three. In total the participants have adopted and or fostered thirty-six youth ranging in ages of 0 months to 24 years old. The ethnicities' of the fostered/adopted youth included White/Caucasian, African American, Hispanic/Latino/Mexican, Asian, Native American with a majority of youth being described as bi- or multi-racial.

Results of the Study

Twenty participants were interviewed for the study, and were initially asked the question, "What were your reasons for adopting/fostering children?" The majority of the participants, 90% (18 participants), stated they sought the assistance of an agency, either a Foster Family Agency (FFA) or the local county Social Services Agency (SSA), because they wanted children. The remaining 10% (two participants) stated they did not seek out having children, but instead "inadvertently" became foster parents due to the opportunity arising. For example, participant 19 shared that her brother had informed that his grandchild, an infant, was going to be going into the foster care system as the parents could not care for the child, and she and her wife stated, "We'll take her" (Personal Correspondence, April 2016). Participant 15 stated he was not even aware that same-sex couples could become foster parents, saying, "I'm from Arkansas. There were laws in the books against gays having children" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). This participant also stated that he and his

partner were not seeking to become foster parents, but inadvertently became foster parents when his partner's sister left two of her children in their care with them one day, "She just left them" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 15 also stated that they took in the rest of her children, including a newborn infant, when the children were "officially" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016) removed from her care, for a total of seven children.

When participants were asked about their experiences during the adoption/foster process, their responses were mixed. More than half of the participants (60%) stated they felt "100%" supported by the agency". All of these participants went through their local county Social Services agency, i.e., Department of Children and Family Service (DCFS). Two of these participants, however, are still going through the adoption process. Six participants, or 30% of the participants, felt supported by the agencies "for the most part," or "50% of the time". Of these, two (a married couple) went through a Foster Family Agency (FFA). The rest of these participants (4) went through their local county Social Services Agency (SSA). Two participants (10%), a couple, felt they were not supported by the agency. They also went through their local SSA.

The reasons given by the participants who felt completely supported by the agency varied, although good communication was given as a reason across the board. Participant 3 and Participant 4 went through an FFA stated that, although the FFA was not specific to same-sex couples, it was very "open to gay families" and was "very good" (Personal Correspondence, February 2016) in the

support that was provided to this couple. Both participants felt the same way about the FFA. Participant 11 felt the agency was very supportive stated that this was due to the fact that the couple's relationship was not the focus (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 11 and Participant 12 went through their local county SSA. Participant 11 stated, "The focus was on the best interest of the children and not our relationship" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). She added, "I felt very comfortable" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

For the six participants who stated they felt supported by the agency about half of the time, different reasons were given to demonstrate this. However, communication issues with the social workers was uniform among all these participants. Miscommunication and lack of communication were the two primary issues related to communication between participants and social workers. Participant 3 and Participant 4, a couple that had gone through an FFA, stated they were not informed that the FFA had not placed a child with a same-sex couple in over two years, "until after we had paid" (Personal Correspondence, February 2016). Participant 3 remarked, "The communication could have been better" (Personal Correspondence, February 2016). Participant 9 stated that, although the couple had been certified to become foster parents in four counties among different states, when the couple came to California "It was very different" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 10, partner to Participant 9, stated "It took two years to get a placement" (Personal Correspondence, March

2016). When asked to explain the lengthy wait he said, "County workers died, went on medical leave and not having the people to come to inspect our home" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). The participant further stated, " There was only one individual who is qualified or ordained to do the home inspection and she was gone for six months on medical leave with no one taking her place" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

Participants 17 and 18, a couple, who stated the agency was not helpful, gave different reasons for this. This couple went through their local county SSA, and adopted a total of five children. One of the participants from this union stated, "We had a variety of social workers" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016), and added, "We've had one social worker that was wonderful, and we've had the opposite experience" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

Participant 17 described having a "good social worker" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016), the participant noted good communication, knowledgeable about the court process, and caring. When describing "the three" other social workers, he stated, "It was the opposite" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). "No communication, last minute meetings" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 17 stated that the social workers misinformed the couple, stating "It's gonna happen, and then no, no, no. And then it didn't happen" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 17 also added, "They didn't understand the (court) process themselves" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). However, when the Participant 17 was asked

about how he would describe his overall experience with the agency, he stated, "Overall positive, because in the end we got the kids. So of course we're happy. I would've gone through hell to get them" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

All participants who eventually adopted, or are still in the adoption process (95%), stated their overall experience with the agency was positive, despite the level of support that was provided to them by the agency. Participant 15 (5%) did not state whether he had a positive or negative experience, but responded, "I would say I would do it over again in a second because what I got out of it, with kids, was something I never expected in my entire life" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). For this participant, who was hoping to adopt the children, the judge returned the children to the biological father, despite being told by the social workers, "Don't worry" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 15 stated the overall effect of this decision on his and his partner's relationship was negative, stating, "The effect on our lives has been very negative, the aftermath of it was life-crippling" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016), adding, "We had two such polar opposite experiences with something so connected" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

All the participants stated they had no prior attempts at adoption. Four participants (two couples) stated they had one prior instance at being foster parents. Participants 15 and 16, a couple, stated the children in their care were both 18 years old, and it was "temporary" (Personal Correspondence, March

2016). Participants 1 and 2, a couple, stated they had the child for only two days before the child's grandmother "changed her mind" (Personal Correspondence, February 2016), and took the child. Participant 1 remarked, "That was hard for us" (Personal Correspondence, February 2016). Still, two couples (20%) had attempted to adopt again after completing their first adoption. Both couples were unable to adopt these children. Participant 11 stated they "lost" the child to the biological father, after having fostered "for about a year and a half" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 13 stated that the temporary foster parents that the children had been currently living with: "those children's foster parents had told them it would be bad to be adopted by gay people (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). And so the little six year old boy wrote a letter to his attorney saying, 'I don't' want to be adopted by those two ladies and if you let that happen I will run away' (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

Participants were then asked about the challenges they faced during the foster and adoption process ("What was the most challenging aspect of the foster/adoption process?"). The responses varied; however, 20% (4 participants) stated the challenges were related to uncertainty of whether they would be able to keep the children. Participant 2 stated, "We went to every court date to show the judge we were serious" (Personal Correspondence, February 2016). Still another participant (Participant 5) stated the couple did not know if they would be able to keep the children as, "They were foster first, and the parents still had rights" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

Another four participants (two couples) stated the most challenging aspect faced was related to "timing". Participants 3 and 4, who went through an FFA, stated the "waiting" (Personal Correspondence, February 2016) was the most challenging aspect of the process. Being required to meet the mother of the children before beginning the adoption process, Participant 3 stated, "It was waiting if somebody, that we didn't know, felt like we were good enough people to raise their child" (Personal Correspondence, February 2016). Another couple, Participant 7 and Participant 8, adopted five children. Participant 8 stated: "It took a bit longer for some (parents) to sign over their rights" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

The remainder of the participants stated the most challenging aspect of the foster and adoption process was something specific to their situation. For example, Participants 11 and 12, a couple, who utilized artificial insemination, stated the adoption "process" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016) itself was the most challenging. Participant 11 stated, "We had to prove there was no father" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 12 added, "We just had to get a letter from the donor. Not from the donor, from the Cyrobank" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Another couple noted understanding the court process as the most challenging aspect. Still another couple stated the most challenging aspect was the "crippled system" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 9 stated: "And yes there are well-meaning employees in the county and state system but it is a crippled system and they are apparently

unable to meet the needs of getting kids placed quickly and fast timely manner” (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 13 stated: "Well the things that were challenging happened much later because you adopt people when they're little kids and then they turn into teenagers and all hell breaks loose” (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 15 stated "being shuffled from department to department" was the most challenging aspect of the process, while Participant 9 noted the home study as the most challenging aspect (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

When participants were asked directly if they felt they had been discriminated against ("Did you perceive discrimination from any of the agency(ies) or its social workers?"), 100% responded "No" (Personal Correspondence, 2016). However, some participants added to their responses. Participant 9 stated he felt there was discrimination towards a transgendered child the couple fostered while in Mississippi (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). He stated: "The system there is extremely biased and designed to control a transgender child to not be a transgender child" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 12 stated she did not feel discriminated against, but felt "uncomfortable" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016) during pre-adoption classes, stating, "We were like the only same-sex couple there" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Another participant, Participant 13, stated she did not feel discrimination from the local Social Services Agency she was working with, but from the mental health professionals (Personal Correspondence, March

2016). She stated: "The one thing I would say that was a form of discrimination, as since our son had these issues, we dealt with a lot of mental health professionals (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Some of these mental health professionals were not what I would consider adoption competent" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

When participants were asked, "Were there any challenges after the foster/adoptive youth was placed in your home?" 20% of participants responded, "Not really". Thirty percent of participants responded that these challenges were "not specific to gay people". Five participants (25%) stated challenges were related to the adjustment of being new parents. Participant 17 stated, "We weren't expecting to have 5 (children) so that was a challenge to get into a routine" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Twenty percent of participants (4) stated the challenges with the children came "later" with the need for increased services for the children. Three participants (15%) noted "logistical" challenges. For example, Participant 11 stated the challenge was regarding the child's birth certificate: "The new law had just come out where you could put on the birth certificate 'Parent and Parent' instead of 'Father and Mother,' so the nurse was a little confused and wasn't sure how that was gonna pan out" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Participant 15 noted a number of challenges with their local Social Services Agency after losing the children to the biological father, but then later becoming the children's temporary foster parents when the biological father went to jail (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

Participant 15 stated he and his partner wanted to work on "getting the kids back" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016), however, "They (SSA) wouldn't assist with that" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). He also noted, "Communication got less, except to do their 'monthlies' where they legally had to" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

Responses were mixed regarding the follow-up question "How helpful was the social worker/agency in working through these challenges?" Twenty percent of participants stated they received no help. Thirty percent stated they did not seek any help from the agency and/or social workers. Forty percent of participants stated the agency and/or social workers were helpful, and one participant (10%) was not specific in his response. When asked, Participant 9 stated: "I know they're doing a job and I think they are doing a caring and loving job but I know they are operating in a crippled system" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

The final question participants were asked was, "How could social workers better work with same-sex couples during the adoption/foster process?" Although responses varied, there were common themes that emerged. The major themes identified were related to being knowledgeable, equality, more support, open-mindedness, and support for children.

Being knowledgeable was the biggest theme that emerged in participants' responses. Thirty-five percent of participants stated they felt social workers could better work with same-sex couples during the foster and adoption process by

being knowledgeable. Participant 2's response was specific to knowledge about the gay community. She remarked: "If they are educated about the community, and how the community is more driven towards family, like you know, gay and lesbian couples are talking and have it on family. They are creating, you know family centers" (Personal Correspondence, February 2016). Participant 3 also stated he felt being knowledgeable about the same-sex couples was important. He stated, "Maybe they don't have experience, but get experience with same-sex couples, you know. The couple becomes the process. They like to know that you know what they want" (Personal Correspondence, February 2016). Participant 9 and 10, a couple, discussed that it was important to be knowledgeable about the gay community in order to dispel myths and remove stigmas about gay men. They specifically spoke about the "stigma of pedophilia" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016), and how it may affect gay men from wanting to adopt boys. Participant 9 stated: "Removing the stigma of pedophilia would do a huge benefit to the gay community of men who are afraid to have young boys in their home because of that" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). He added, "With no evidence that gay men are prone to pedophilia" (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

Twenty percent of participants' responses were related to equality. Two participants stated they felt social workers could better work with same-sex couples by treating them equally. Participant 19 stated, "Well you know, the social workers, what I appreciated about it, was they actually did not make a big

deal about us being a same-sex couple” (Personal Correspondence, April 2016). She added, "They really treated us like we were any other couple, and I really appreciated that because it made the process so much more normal, I think, and comfortable" (Personal Correspondence, April 2016). Two participants' responses were related to equality, however not just towards same-sex couples, but to the deaf community as well. Participant 18 is deaf. Participant 17, Participant 18's partner, stated: "They would go straight to me and I would constantly say you need to connect with him too. They'd even send me all the emails, so because of the disability, they just bypassed him” (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). He added, "Even the deaf group, which you would think would go to him, always went straight to me all the time, and wouldn't, didn't think to include him in the conversation, so it was a very interesting dynamic” (Personal Correspondence, March 2016).

Being open-minded was voiced as another way in which social workers could better work with same-sex couples by another 15% of participants. Participant 8 stated, "Some (social workers) can open their mind. I'm not speaking of mine personally, however others should be able to be more open to same-sex home for children in need” (Personal Correspondence, March 2016). Still another 15% of participants stated they felt more support from social workers was needed. This also related to more support groups, and classes for only same-sex couples. Two participants (10%) stated they felt assistance should be done related to the needs of the children, whether right after the adoption

process had been completed, or "years later", when issues occurred. Another 10% of participants stated they felt their issues were not related to being "same-sex".

Summary

Over all, the responses to the questions varied however, most participants had a positive experience throughout the foster/adoptive certification process. The data collected by the participants did shed light on a few experiences of same-sex foster and adoptive parents. Some trends that became surfaced was the social workers needing to be more knowledgeable of agency practices regarding same-sex couples and the LGBT community, tailored support for same-sex couples during the certification process as well as for the foster/adoptive youth and cultural humility on the part of the social worker.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this section the researchers will compare the findings of the current study to the information provided in the literature review. The researchers will discuss the similarities or dissimilarities to prior research involving same-sex foster and adoptive parents. The limitations of the current research will be discussed. The researchers will make recommendations on how to utilize the information collected to the improvement to social work practice, policy and future research.

Discussion

The data collected by the participants gave a glimpse into the experiences faced by same-sex couples during the foster and adoptive process. The researchers found some similarities and inconsistencies from the information provided in the Literature Review section. The researchers will list the following sections: Same-Sex Couple Experiences, Perceptions and Experiences of Social Workers, Barriers to Same-Sex Couples Fostering/Adopting Youth, Family Functioning and Child Adjustment in Same-Sex Households and Other Research on Same-Sex Foster and Adoptive Parents.

Same-Sex Couple Experiences

Patrick (2006) experienced a lack of agency specific knowledge as it pertained to same-sex couples fostering and adopting children. Many of the participants within this research study voiced similar experiences. One couple stated that their social worker told them that their sexual orientation was not going to be a factor. As the couple completed the certification process, the same social worker informed them that they had not placed a child with a same-sex couple in several years. This couple went to a private agency and felt that their social worker was not competent in the agency's regulations. However, there were also other couples that stated that their social worker was not competent in same-sex foster and adoptions and expressed the uncertainty regarding the wait time before a child would be placed with them.

Patrick (2006) also found a difference in the application between the two agencies he and his partner used to foster children as the first asked for the names of the "mother and father" and the second asked for the names of "parent 1 and parent 2". About 40 percent of the participants stated that the agency inquired about the names of the "parents." About 50 percent stated that the agency's application asked for the names of the "mother and the father," while, the remaining 10 percent stated they did not remember. The data collected seem to coincide with the experience presented by Patrick (2006).

Brown, Smalling, Groza and Ryan (2009) found that many of their participants did not feel discriminated against or harshly judged based on their

sexual orientation. A majority of the participants related similar experiences. All of the participants stated that they did not experience any perceived discrimination from the agency or their social workers, when asked directly. However, it must be noted that one participant stated that he did not experience direct discrimination although, he felt that the time between certification and placement was extremely length due to the need of foster families.

Perceptions and Experiences of Social Workers

Hall (2010) found that social workers had little training to the culture of the LGBT community. However, Hall (2010) found that many social workers found same-sex homes to be a viable resource to utilize for the placement of foster youth. Some participants noted that they felt it was important for social workers to be aware of the culture and “(gay) community.” It was apparent that all of the participants’ social workers had a similar view of the potential for foster and adoptive homes with same-sex families, due to the fact that children were placed in participants’ homes.

Ryan (2007) found that some social workers had misconceptions and negative perceptions of placing children and youth in a same-sex home. Ryan (2007) found that female social workers were less likely to homophobic. Most participants verbalized they had a female social worker and some would use a non-gendered pronoun such as “they” when speaking about their social worker. As social work is a predominantly female field, it is safe to note that a majority of the participants, if not all of them, had a female social worker who predominantly

worked with the family. One participant shared that a male social worker briefly worked with the family, but it was a “terrible” experience. The data collected by this research project coincides with the research of Ryan (2007).

Barriers to Same-Sex Couples Fostering/Adopting Youth

Barriers presented by Ryan, Pearlmutter & Groza (2007) were the narrow definition of family as well as agency homophobia and heterosexism. Fortunately, the participants stated they did not experience these barriers. A majority of the participants stated that the agency welcomed the couples and their sexuality was never an issue.

Another barrier was the social workers’ lack of competence of the LGBT community (Riggs, 2007). The participants did note this barrier, however it did not hinder the placement of a child or youth with the couple. Several couples stated that social workers need to educate themselves about the LGBT community.

A final barrier mentioned was the couples’ perceptions of being rejected by an agency (Mallon, 2011). One participant stated that he was unaware of his ability to foster children. The participant stated that he had moved from another state where fostering child was unattainable for men who identified as gay, though, this participant did not have the perception of being rejected. The barrier became the not knowing the individual state’s foster and adoption laws regarding same-sex couples.

Family Functioning and Child Adjustment in Same-Sex Households

Research has found that children did not show any signs of negative affects to the adjustment of being placed in a same-sex home (Farr, Forssell & Patterson, 2010; Leung, Enrich & Kanenberg, 2005). As the participants stated, there were no concerns, issues or problems after the child was placed with them. This information coincides with the information provided in the Literature Review as the youth placed with the participants adjusted as well as can be expected of any youth being recently adopted. The majority of participants stated that issues were not “outside the norm,” and not “specific to same-sex” as it pertained to the youths’ adjustment to a same-sex home.

Other Research on Same-Sex Foster and Adoptive Parents

Gato & Fontaines (2013) aimed their research to disproving beliefs surrounding children’s gender development due to being raised by same-sex parents. Though the participants did not mention gender as a concern of the social workers, one couple brought up pedophilia as a concern of social workers. The couple, who foster a youth from Mississippi, were confronted by the concerns of a child being placed with a same-sex (gay) couple because “they are more likely pedophiles”. The comment came from support staff working with the youth while she was placed in Mississippi to the youth’s current social worker. The couple were angered by the accusation of “being pedophiles because that has been a misconception surround the community historically. Though pedophilia among gay men is a misconception it unfortunately still exists.

Limitations

The data collected from the study were informative to the experiences of same-sex foster and adoptive parents. There were a few common themes and trends to emerge from the data. However, there are five specific limitations to this study.

The first limitation is due to the sample size. The researchers reached the goal of five lesbian couples and five gay couples resulting in a collective sample of 10 couples. However, the sample size is not large enough to make the experiences of same-sex foster and adoptive parents generalizable to the population. A greater sample size might also find alternative trends and themes contrary to these research data.

The next limitation was the geography of the study. This researchers recruited participants from Southern California, specifically from the Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino and Riverside Counties. The state of California is known nationally to be “on the front” of LGBT equality acceptance. If participants were collected from less progressive regions of the Nation, the data collected may be significantly different resulting in dissimilar data than the data collected from this research study. If the researchers expanded the geography to a national level, the data may have resulted in a more diverse range of experiences for same-sex couples, with a greater understanding of same-sex foster and adoptive parents’ experiences during the certification process.

Another limitation to the research was the lack of data collected from same-sex adoptive and foster parents who went through a private agency as a means to foster/adopt children. Since the majority of the participants fostered and/or adopted children via their local County SSA, the research resulted in a lack of experiences from couples who went through a private agency to become certified as foster/adoptive parents. It is possible that if the research had more participants from private agencies that the data may have resembled more of the negative or discriminatory trends displayed in the literature review section, specifically “Same-Sex Couple Experiences.”

Age was another limitation to the study. Participants’ ages ranged from thirty-two to sixty-three. Because the study captured the experiences of older same-sex couples’ experiences during the certification process, there is a possibility that the data may not capture the experiences of younger couples, who have adopted recently. Historically, the LGBT community has faced more discrimination and persecution in the past when compared to more recent achieved equality, thus different trends may have emerged. However, there are two couples who are still going through the adoption process, whose experiences may more closely reflect the adoption practices of today.

Similarly to the limitation regarding the ages of the participants, was the criteria for participants to have gone through the certification process within the last 15 years. If the researchers expanded the criteria of foster and adoptive parents being certified within the past 30 or even 20 years, there is a possibility

for similar data to found in the “Barriers to Same-Sex Couples Fostering/Adopting Youth” section of the literature review.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

Though the data collected by this study was informative, and a few trends were identified, there is still room for improvement. The researchers will make recommendations for the betterment of social work practice, policy and the future as it pertains to the responses collected from the participants of this research study.

Social Work Practice

As mentioned in the findings section, the participants had many suggestions as it pertained to how social workers can better work with same-sex foster and adoptive parents. A common theme that emerged was the social worker’s knowledge about agency specific rules and guidelines to the certification process, as well as the court process as it pertains to the adoption process. A majority of the participants stated that social workers did not have answers to many of their questions off hand, and would take time for the social worker to respond with the answers. Social workers who work with children involved in the foster care and adoption system need to know their agencies’ rules and regulations during the certification process, particularly as it pertains to same-sex couples, who are a minority in this area. Resources available to first-time and continuing foster and adoptive parents, such as organizations supporting same-

sex families, and support groups, should be utilized and shared with the families, whose unique experiences and concerns may differ from those of their heterosexual counterparts.

There is also a need to update the foster and adoption application forms, in light of recent policy and legislative changes allowing same-sex couples the right to marry. A few participants noted that the forms inquired about the “Mother’s and Father’s” information, similar to Patrick’s experience (2006). An application that instead denotes “Parent 1 and Parent 2” is more appropriate and is inclusive to all prospective adoptive parents, thus promoting an atmosphere of acceptance for same-sex couples.

Many of the couples interviewed stated that social workers need to provide more resources for the families. Some of the resources listed by the couples, specifically involved more support, support for the couple during the adoption process, and support for the children, generally, after the process and particularly as they aged, when they became “aware” that their families were different. One couple stated that wished their agency had more information about local support groups with other same-sex couples during the certification process as well as after the children had been placed with them. The couples stated that they were given resources for support groups of predominantly heterosexual couples, leaving the couples to feel alone through the process. Another couple also recommended counseling resources for the children, as their son began to realize in fourth grade that his family was different, and only wanted

one of his parents to take him to school. Some of the couples stated that they would appreciate more resources for their children as they reached adolescence, such as a support group with other adolescents with same-sex parents.

Policy

It is the recommendation of the researchers for federal policy regarding the right for same same-sex couples to adopt and foster children. As it stands currently, each State has the right to govern their own policy on same-sex couples having the right to adopt or foster children. As Participant 15 stated, he was unaware that same-sex couples could even foster children, coming from a state where “there were laws in the books against gays having children.”

Participants 9 and 10 stated that if they had been living in Mississippi, they would not have been allowed to foster and/or adopt children since they identified as being gay. As stated above, there is a great need for certified foster and adoptive families, and without a federal policy to allow same-sex couples the same right to foster and adopt, many children will continue to age out of the foster system without a family to call their own.

Research

The significance of the findings demonstrate a need for additional research. Information not explored by this study gives opportunity for future inquiry in this area of study. The researchers make recommendations for future research to further explore the experiences of same-sex foster and adoptive parents.

The first recommendation is for research in the area of Family Court, and specifically, looking at the rulings that judges make, as well as the deciding factors for judges to rule children be placed with same-sex couples over heterosexual couples, or vice versa. A few participants reported feeling at the mercy of the judge to rule in their favor rather than a “traditional” couple, despite the agency’s support of the family. Though the majority of these participants had judges that ruled in their favor, one couple did not, despite SSA’s recommendation for the children to remain with the couple. Additionally, some participants reported knowing people who “weren’t as lucky as them when it came to judges.” Interviewing Family Court judges directly, as well as looking at the statistics on the rulings of same-sex couples versus heterosexual couples may lead to more specific data involving the experiences of same-sex foster and adoptive parents in the court system.

Future research should also focus on the beliefs of adoption social workers’ as they pertain to the quality of care provided to children from same-sex couples compared to “traditional” or heterosexual couples. This includes the social worker’s willingness to place children with same-sex couples when heterosexual couples are available for the placement of children, and also, the social worker’s knowledge as to the values and trends in same-sex families in regards to adoption. As one participant noted, gay couples are “talking about family,” in light of recent legislation allowing same-sex couples to marry. It is important to learn if social workers are aware of up to date information,

particularly regarding how same-sex couples are looking to expand their families by adopting children, as well as the impact of this on the foster care system in terms of the number of children waiting for placement. Because there is limited research in this area as well, this is an area that warrants further exploration.

Conclusion

There are limited studies documenting the experiences of same-sex foster and adoptive parents, particularly during the certification process. This qualitative study aimed to look at the experiences of 20 same-sex foster and/or adoptive parents. The purpose of this study is to explore the barriers potential same-sex foster and/or adoptive individuals may be facing in their quest to become parents. With so many foster children in need of safe and loving homes, same-sex families should not continue to be underrepresented as potential foster adoptive parents in the child welfare system.

The findings of the study demonstrated that the main challenges participants faced were in not knowing whether they would be able to keep the children (either because of biological parents or the judge's ruling), logistical challenges (i.e., birth certificates for children), timing, support, and in getting placement in the home. Although when asked directly, all participants stated they did not feel discriminated against by the social workers and/or the agencies they were working with, many still voiced feeling "uncomfortable" at some point during the process due to their status in a same-sex relationship. In regards to

challenges after the children were placed in the home, several participants noted challenges with adjustment to life as new parents, or with the adjustment of the children to the new home. Support during this time was noted as something that social workers could better do to work in assisting during this transition for both parents and children. Other ways participants felt social workers could better support same-sex families is in being knowledgeable about the gay community and learning more about their values, being knowledgeable about their agencies' policies and the court process, being open-minded, and treating them equally.

There is a need for future research looking at the areas of Family Court and judges' rulings for same-sex couples in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts, as well as in looking at social workers' perceptions in working with same-sex foster and adoptive parents, and in assessing their knowledge of the gay culture and community. Perhaps if social workers are more knowledgeable about the gay community's values as it pertains to family, they can better see the potential of same-sex households as safe and loving homes for the thousands of children in foster care who so desperately need placement.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

I would like to start the interview with a few back ground questions.

Participant #:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your sexual orientation?
3. What is your Ethnicity?

Participant #:

4. What is your age?
5. What is your sexual orientation?
6. What is your Ethnicity?

Couple:

1. How long have you been together?
2. Marital status?
3. How many children do you have?
 - a. What are the ages of your children?
 - b. What are the Ethnicities of your children?
 - c. How many are adopted?
 - d. How many children are foster?
4. What were your reasons for adopting/fostering children?
 - a. Did/do you feel supported by the agency?
 - i. Please explain?
5. What were your experiences like during the adoption/fostering process?
 - a. Positive?
 - b. Negative?
6. Any prior attempts at adopting/fostering children?
 - a. How many previous attempts?
 - b. Please explain:
7. What was the most challenging aspect of the foster/adoption process?
8. Did you perceive discrimination from any of the agency/ies or it/s social workers?
 - a. Did you believe this was based on your sexual orientation?
 - b. Please explain:
9. Were there any challenges after the foster/adoptive youth was placed in your home?
 - a. What were the challenges?
 - b. How helpful was the social worker/agency in working through these challenges?
10. How could social workers better work with same-sex couples during the adoption/foster process?

Developed by Cynthia Anna Lopez and Richard Christopher Meza (2015)

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

APPENDIX C
AUDIO CONSENT

AUDIO USE INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR NON-MEDICAL HUMAN SUBJECTS

As part of this research project, we will be making an audiotape recording of you during your participation in the experiment. Please indicate what uses of this audiotape you are willing to consent to by initialing below. You are free to initial any number of spaces from zero to all of the spaces, and your response will in no way affect your credit for participating. We will only use the audiotape in ways that you agree to. In any use of this audiotape, your name would *not* be identified. If you do not initial any of the spaces below, the audiotape will be destroyed.

Please indicate the type of informed consent

Audiotape

The audiotape can be studied by the research team for use in the research

(AS APPLICABLE) project.

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be shown/played to subjects in other experiments.**

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be used for scientific publications.**

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be shown/played at meetings of scientists.**

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be shown/played in classrooms to students.**

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be shown/played in public presentations to nonscientific groups.**

Please initial: _____

- **The audiotape can be used on television and radio.**

Please initial: _____

I have read the above description and give my consent for the use of the audiotape as indicated above.

The extra copy of this consent form is for your records.

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

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ASSIGNED REPONSIBILITIES

This was a two person project in which the authors collaborated throughout.

Responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:

Team effort by Cynthia Anna Lopez and Richard Christopher Meza

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

Team effort by Cynthia Anna Lopez and Richard Christopher Meza

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

Team effort by Cynthia Anna Lopez and Richard Christopher Meza

a. Introduction

Team effort by Cynthia Anna Lopez and Richard Christopher Meza

b. Literature Review

Team effort by Cynthia Anna Lopez and Richard Christopher Meza

c. Methods

Team effort by Cynthia Anna Lopez and Richard Christopher Meza

d. Results

Team effort by Cynthia Anna Lopez and Richard Christopher Meza

e. Discussion

Team effort by Cynthia Anna Lopez and Richard Christopher Meza