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## CURRENT AND PROSPECTIVE FOSTER PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER FOSTER YOUTH

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CURRENT AND PROSPECTIVE FOSTER PARENTS'  
PERCEPTIONS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND  
TRANSGENDER FOSTER YOUTH

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

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

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by  
Shay Brittany Alvarez  
Stephanie Kristeen Funston

June 2016

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Approved by:

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into foster parents' perceptions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) foster youth through a self-administered survey in an attempt to provide better care for these children. The pool of participants were varied in most areas including age, gender, ethnicity, education levels, and religiosity. However, the majority was heterosexual and had less than 2 years of experience fostering. The results showed no particular demographics, trainings, or level of experience that contribute to more or less acceptance or preparedness. This may be due to response bias, however, it is more likely due to a flawed instrument. The results show that overall attitudes followed a normal bell curve, slightly skewed in favor of more positive attitudes. This is the most important finding of the study, which shows an improvement in foster parents' overall attitudes compared to prior research. It also showed that more parents feel comfortable fostering LGBT youth, than do not.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my parents for all their support throughout my college education. Without you two I would not have been able to complete my MSW. I would also like to thank Watson, who has helped grow for the past 4 years. You have taught me so much more than just theories. Thank you and STAY STRONG! I would also like to thank my research project partner, Stephanie, for providing me with mental and emotional support when times were getting tough. Thank you for putting up with me through this whole process and sticking by my side. I am grateful I met you and got the opportunity to work on this project together. #W4L

-Shay Brittany Alvarez

Firstly, I would like to thank my parents and family for their continual support throughout my education. Nothing I have accomplished would be possible without you. I would also like to thank my friends for tolerating me being unavailable for weeks at a time while in school, but never failing to offer a shoulder to lean on when it was needed. A large thank you for the help and support I've received from my professors and cohort. I have learned so much from each and every one of you. I am so grateful for the family we've all become. Lastly, I'd like to thank my research partner, Shay, for keeping me motivated and for her friendship throughout this process.

-Stephanie Kristeen Funston

## DEDICATION

We would like to dedicate this research project to all the foster family agencies (FFA) and foster parents who participated in our research. Also, to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) foster youth. Stay strong and be true to yourself!

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of foster parents and social workers is ensuring that foster children obtain a sense of safety, permanency, and well-being. However, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) foster youth are being discriminated against while they are in foster care. It is important for social workers to gain an understanding of the perceptions of current and prospective foster parents of LGBT foster youth to determine the types of policies, education, and trainings that have to be implemented to reduce negative experiences they face in out-of-home care.

#### Problem Statement

According to Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG, 2015), there are approximately 400,000 children in foster care in the United States. Of these 400,000 children in foster care, it is assumed that 5 to 10% of the foster youth identify as LGBT (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Furthermore, a recent study found that 19% of foster youth in Los Angeles County identified as LGBT, and similar to racial and age demographics of heterosexual foster youth, the majority of foster youth who identified as LGBT were of color (Wilson, Copper, Kastanis, & Nezhad, 2014). This population is at a higher risk for neglect, abuse, and discrimination, than

their heterosexual counterparts (Lambda Legal, n.d.). Thus, the perceptions of foster parents need to be considered when placing LGBT foster youth in order to decrease the likelihood of these harmful experiences. In a recent study on the perceptions of twenty-five foster parents on LGBT youth in foster care, it was found that the participants held homophobic beliefs about the LGBT youth (Clements & Rosenwald, 2008). These types of beliefs can negatively effect LGBT foster youth by putting them at an increased risk of neglect, abuse, and discrimination (Clements & Rosenwald, 2008; Freundlich & Avery, 2005; Lambda Legal, n.d.).

To decrease the likelihood of LGBT foster youth experiencing negative outcomes while in out-of-home care, social workers and national organizations have advocated for policies to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of these youth. Although every youth in state care has federal and state rights, LGBT foster youth often have these right violated. For example, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 ensures the safety, permanency, and well-being for foster care youth. However, LGBT foster youth have not benefited from ASFA due to the lack of permanency and services available to them (Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006). On the other hand, states such as California have adopted their own policies to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of LGBT foster youth. The Foster Care Nondiscrimination Act prohibits discrimination of foster youth on a number of bases, including sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status (National Center for Lesbian Rights,

n.d.). In addition, on September 3, 2015, California's Senate Bill 731— Respecting Gender Identity in Foster Placements (2015), was amended to ensure LGBT foster youth are placed “in out-of-home care according to their gender identity, regardless of the gender or sex listed in their court or child welfare records” (C.A. Legis. §. 731, 2015). Although there are some policies in place attempting to protect LGBT foster youth from discrimination, LGBT foster youth are still struggling for equality in their foster homes.

Furthermore, national organizations such as Lambda Legal (n.d.), have advocated for education and trainings for foster parents on the topic of LGBT youth. Lambda Legal (n.d.), has advocated for education and training about the LGBT population to be mandated. Although trainings are not mandated, national organizations such as Gender Spectrum (2014), PFLAG (2015), and Matthew's Place (2015), are educating and training professionals about sexual orientation, gender identity, and the resources necessary for this population.

According to Clements and Rosenwald (2008), it will greatly benefit social workers to participate in diversity trainings that will help them better educate and train foster parents on sexual orientation and gender identity. Policies, as well as proper education and training of social workers, can help foster parents understand sexual orientation and gender identity, and thus decrease the risk of neglect, abuse, and discrimination LGBT foster youth experience in out-of-home care.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to gain knowledge and insight into current and prospective foster parents' perceptions of LGBT foster youth. This study analyzed foster parents' perceptions of LGBT foster youth and examined if educating and training the foster parents can help them provide better out-of-home care for LGBT foster youth. The common misunderstandings about LGBT foster youth frequently puts the youth at an increased risk of discrimination; thus increasing the number of LGBT foster youth running away and becoming homeless, developing mental health issues, and attempting suicide (Berger, 2005; Dunlap, 2014; Mitchell, Panzarello, Gryniewicz & Paz Galupo, 2015).

Research has found that between twenty-five and forty percent of homeless and runaway youth identify as LGBT (Berger, 2005). The youth who are homeless, or have decided to runaway from home, have experienced some type of homophobia and lacked support in their homes (Berger, 2005). In addition, research has found that while in foster care, approximately 95% of LGBT youth experience sexual abuse (Mitchell et al., 2015). Being sexually abused can lead to mental health issues. Mitchell and colleagues (2015) found that youth who identify as LGBT are at a greater risk of experiencing depression, anger, and posttraumatic stress than their heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, research has found that suicidal ideation is more common in LGBT youth than heterosexual youth. For example, Dunlap, found

that young males who identify as LGBT are four times more likely than heterosexual males to attempt suicide (2014). In addition, young females who identify as LGBT were six times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts (Dunlap, 2014).

Therefore, in order to decrease discrimination against LGBT foster youth, it is important to study the perceptions of foster parents. Gaining knowledge and insight into their perceptions can help get a better understanding of the proper education and training that can be implemented before LGBT youth are placed in a home. This preliminary study aimed to find how foster parents perceived LGBT foster youth through a quantitative method. Through a questionnaire distributed through Foster Family Agencies (FFAs) in the Inland Empire, perceptions of foster parents were analyzed to explore whether they would benefit from education and trainings about the population, in order to decrease homelessness and runaways, mental health issues, and suicide attempts within the population.

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work

When working with foster youth who identify as LGBT, the importance of understanding their daily struggles is crucial to ensure their safety, permanency, and well-being. The findings of this study will contribute to social work practice by providing an outlook on the importance of educating and training foster parents about sexual orientation and gender identity. According to Freundlich and Avery (2005), it is important that when placing LGBT foster

youth, appropriateness, safety, and permanency are considered, as well as their access to services.

In addition, this study hopes to contribute to social work research, since there is limited research on foster parents' perceptions of LGBT foster youth and how those perceptions can affect the LGBT foster youth population. This study aims to examine the importance of educating and training foster parents about the LGBT population and obtain relevant information about foster parents' perceptions of this population to expand on social work research data that is available. Furthermore, this study hopes to contribute to the practice of child welfare by exploring the importance of foster parents attending education and trainings about sexual orientation and gender identity.

It is hopeful that through the evaluating phase of the generalist intervention process, social work agencies will recognize the importance of adopting programs that provide education and trainings about sexual orientation and gender identity to foster parents. Understanding foster parents' perceptions of LGBT foster youth can help social work policy makers develop the necessary policies and resources to increase foster parents awareness of the risks these youth face. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of foster parents on LGBT foster youth and determine whether they can benefit from education and trainings about sexual orientation and gender identity.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The chapter provides a brief literature review of caregivers and professional's perceptions of LGBT foster youth and the challenges LGBT foster youth face. More research is needed on the perceptions of foster parents, however, because many youth have not openly identified as LGBT and because foster parents may not be comfortable openly voicing their opinion on the topic, there is limited research available.

#### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Erikson's stages of development can be used to understand the unique stressors that LGBT foster youth experience. In addition, understanding foster parents' perceptions of LGBT foster youth and how these perceptions are developed and perpetuated can be explained by social learning theory. By examining foster parents perceptions and LGBT foster youth's development from these two frameworks, it can be better understood how positive or negative perceptions can influence a child's development. In addition, it is important to understand how gender conformity can affect an individual's self-esteem.

Bazoff (2011) asserts that Erikson's developmental model is unique in that it includes the entire lifespan and considers both natural human traits and

the demands of the societal world (as cited in Bennett & Douglass, 2013). This model includes eight stages, and each stage involves a “psychosocial crisis” which represents “not only reactions to stress but are catalysts of growth” (Bennett & Douglas, 2013, p. 278). Originally, these stages were tied to age ranges, but the theory was revised to show these crises can occur more than once and throughout the lifespan (Bennett & Douglass, 2013). Erikson’s model stresses growth, experiences, and the ability to adapt to the demands of the societal world throughout the lifespan (Bennett & Douglass, 2013). The incorporation of the social world, which includes foster parent perceptions, allows for this model to be flexible enough to be applied to the specific issues facing LGBT youth in foster care. From Erikson’s perspective, it can be seen how transphobia and homophobia in foster parents and in their surrounding environments can negatively impact an LGBT child’s development.

In a child’s early years, birth to 3 years, they form an attachment to their caregivers, develop trust, and increase their interactions with people and their environment (Bennett & Douglass, 2013). These stages are titled “trust versus mistrust” and “autonomy versus shame and doubt” (Bennett & Douglass, 2013, p. 279). Children in foster care are more than likely already struggling to resolve these crises due to removal from caregivers and family and the neglect or abuse that lead to removal. In addition, LGBT foster children may begin to internalize any negative perceptions of LGBT individuals and this may lead a sense of shame (Bennett & Douglass, 2013).

From the age of 3 to 6 and throughout primary school ages, children are in the “initiation versus guilt” and “industry versus inferiority” stages, which involves developing courage and the ability to execute tasks and experience potential failure (Bennett & Douglass, 2013, p.279). In this stage, LGBT foster youth may be exposed to discrimination or a lack of acknowledgement from peers and authority which can lead to low self-esteem, guilt, and problems in assessing social, emotional, and professional situations (Bennett & Douglass, 2013). These problems with low self-esteem and problems with social and emotional situations further set the youth up for negative outcomes.

During adolescence and early to middle adulthood, individuals are tasked with “identity versus role confusion” and “intimacy versus isolation,” which involves developing “a sense of identity” and developing the ability to form intimate relationships (Bennett & Douglass, 2013, p. 279). These two crises are especially relevant to LGBT foster youth development. The decision to come out often occurs during adolescence or early adulthood. The rejection they may experience from peers, foster parents, and society as a whole, may force them to remain “in the closet,” and they may view themselves as being unlovable or that an intimate relationship isn’t a possibility for them (Bennett & Douglass, 2013, p. 279). By not successfully completing these developmental tasks, individuals may be at an increased chance of suffering from depression, abusing drugs, attempting suicide, running away, and a number of other negative outcomes. A foster parent may instill transphobic or homophobic

beliefs, even unintentionally, to a child in any number of these stages that can hinder their potential for positive development.

Social learning theory provides a context in which foster parents' perceptions of LGBT foster youth have been formed. This theory asserts that behaviors, morals, attitudes, and perceptions are gradually learned through reinforcements via the social world until these are internalized into ethics, values, and standards (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). Most importantly, this theory states that if reinforcements can be used to teach, then reinforcements can be used to unlearn (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). By understanding the ways in which these perceptions have been shaped, trainings can help to reinforce any positive perceptions, while weakening negative perceptions.

In the previous example of coming out, it can be seen that foster parent's perceptions can influence the activation and resolution of these developmental tasks. It can be expected that a foster parent that accepts the LGBT adolescent is a protective factor and this child will adjust positively to their environment and have positive health outcomes (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). However, without this acceptance and resolution of developmental tasks, which may be hindered by foster parents' negative perceptions, these youth are at an increased risk of discrimination.

Furthermore, individuals, regardless of sexual orientation, are faced with societal pressures toward gender conformity. Good and Sanchez (2010) found that men "and women who were highly invested in being like society's

ideal man or woman were more likely to have lower self-esteem because they had external contingencies of self-worth” (Good & Sanchez, 2010, p. 204).

Those who placed importance on the approval of society’s perception of how they should act, experienced low self-esteem. In addition, gender conformity has shown to negatively effect close relationships (Good & Sanchez, 2010).

Foster parents who put pressure on their foster youth toward gender conformity are putting the youth at risk of experiencing low self-esteem and may have a negative effect on close relationships.

It is critical to understand how LGBT youth develop and how foster parents’ perceptions of them influence this development. These theories suggest that by increasing positive perceptions, youth are more likely to successfully resolve developmental crises. This better ensures the safety, permanency, and well-being of LGBT youth in out-of-home-care.

#### Caregivers and Professionals Perceptions of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Foster Youth

The perceptions of caregivers are crucial when working with LGBT foster youth, however, the limited research that is available on their perceptions are mostly negative. This can lead to negative outcomes for LGBT foster youth including multiple placements and placements that are not appropriate or safe (Clements & Rosenwald, 2008; Freundlick & Avery, 2004). In addition, these perceptions can lead to a lack of suitable services

(Freundlick & Avery, 2004). Conversely, research has found social workers perceptions of LGBT foster youth is mostly positive to neutral.

Clements and Rosenwald (2008) used an exploratory and qualitative research method, to examine the perceptions of twenty-five foster parents on LGBT foster youth. The foster parents participated in focus groups, which found that foster parents were not supportive of their LGBT foster youth. The study found that although focus groups allow participants to discuss common ideas and provide different points of views, different levels of biases can be problematic (Clements & Rosenwald, 2008). Participants seemed to lack an understanding of what it meant to identify as LGBT (Clements & Rosenwald, 2008). For example, some participants wondered why youth who identified as LGBT could not be counseled to help them cope with their confusion. Another misunderstanding that foster parents had was that gay boys will sexually abuse other children in the house, but lesbians are not a threat and bisexuals are just confused because of their history of abuse (Clements & Rosenwald, 2008). Furthermore, participants feared that LGBT foster youth would molest the other children in the home or that they are living a sinful and morally wrong life (Clements & Rosenwald, 2008). These finding suggest that foster parents can gain a more positive attitude LGBT foster youth through education and trainings.

Freundlick and Avery (2004) conducted a qualitative study examining the experiences LGBT foster youth had in three New York based in

congregate care settings. The researchers defined congregate care as group homes, residential treatment center, mother-child facilities, and maternal facilities (Freundlick & Avery, 2004). The participants of the study included members of six stakeholder groups in New York, including family court judges, representatives from child welfare agencies, and social workers. The study focused on three domains, which included placements for youth who enter foster care, services for youth in congregate care, and safety of congregate care (Freundlick & Avery, 2004). Professionals who participated in the study did not have much concern for the quality and services for LGBT youth, however, they believed that there was not enough placement for this population and that there had to be more placements developed exclusively for this population. Further, one former foster youth stated she had a negative experience while in congregate care because the staff there would discriminate against her because of her sexual orientation. Professionals also expressed concern about the quality of services that were provided to youth in congregate care and that being openly LGBT affected access to services (Freundlick & Avery, 2004). Professionals also stated that LGBT foster youth were vulnerable to victimization and former foster youth reported that staff would do little or nothing to protect them from victimization by other residents (Freundlick & Avery, 2004). This study suggests that it is important that professionals focus on appropriate and safe placements for foster youth who identify as LGBT.

Zamora (2011) conducted a non-probability sampling method to examine the perceptions and practice of social workers with gay and lesbian clients. The researcher surveyed 140 social workers of different levels and divisions (Zamora, 2011). The social workers perceptions were measured using two scales, one for attitudes toward lesbians and the other for attitudes toward gay men (Zamora, 2011). The findings of the study suggest social workers have an extremely positive attitude toward lesbians and a slightly less positive attitude toward gay men (Zamora, 2011). In addition, social workers utilize gay affirming practice when working with the gay and lesbian population, specifically those with “advanced levels of experience”, such as social work practitioners and supervisors (Zamora, 2011, p. 10). It is interesting to note that participants with a degree in social work who received their highest degree after 1994, engaged in more gay affirmative practice behaviors than those who graduated before 1994 (Zamora, 2011). Furthermore, participants who were 55 or older held less positive views toward gay men than the younger participants. This study suggests that social workers hold mostly positive to neutral perceptions of the LGBT population.

Crisp (2005), sampled 3,000 members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and American Psychological Association (APA) to examine the difference between social workers and psychologists use of gay affirmative practice. The survey consisted of the Heterosexuals’ Attitudes Toward Homosexual Scale (HATH), Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men



Scale (ATLG), and Gay Affirming Practice (GAP) scales (Crisp, 2005). The research found that both professions demonstrate “a commitment to gay and lesbian issues” (Crisp, 2005, p. 63). In addition, psychologists, as well as social workers, scores on the GAP suggests both professions engage in beliefs and behaviors “consistent with gay affirmative practice” (Crisp, 2005, p 65). As a result of social workers and psychologists practicing gay affirmative behaviors, gay and lesbian clients are confident in services provided to them and are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to seek therapeutic service. This study suggests social workers, as well as other professions, have a positive perception of the LGBT population and as a result, the LGBT population is more likely to engage in services.

#### Challenges Facing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Foster Youth

Research has identified the negative experiences LGBT foster youth encounter in out-of-home care, many of which are due to the perceptions of their caregivers. Those experiences include discrimination based on sexual orientation and physical and sexual abuse (Clements & Rosenwald, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2015). These experiences put the youth at an increased risk for a number of negative outcomes, including running away and become homeless, experiencing mental health issues, and attempting suicide (Dunlap, 2014; Freundlick & Avery, 2004; Mallon, Aledort, & Ferrera, 2002; Mitchell et al., 2015).

Mallon, Aledort, and Ferrera (2002) conducted a study with forty-five self-identified LGBT youth and staff at agencies located in New York and another in California. This study is an exploratory study using a mixed design approach, where interviews were used as qualitative data and survey responses were used as quantitative data (Mallon et al., 2002). These findings suggested that LGBT foster youth are at an increased risk of abuse and maltreatment than their heterosexual counterparts. Mallon and colleagues (2002) found that approximately 88% of professionals who participated in the study reported that it was not safe for foster youth to identify as LGBT. In addition, 80% of the youth who participated experienced multiple placements due to a living environment being a “poor fit” (Mallon et al., 2002, p. 421). The lack of appropriate placements for LGBT youth encouraged them to leave, either indirectly through neglect or directly through discriminatory behavior. Being homeless contributes to many LGBT foster youth developing mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. Mallon and colleagues (2002) found that homelessness among LGBT youth caused severe mental health problems. The researchers suggested that LGBT foster youth remain with their families of origin and if that is not possible, they be placed in gay-affirming practices where staff is more educated and trained and can provide the youth with a safer place than foster homes (Mallon et al., 2002). Although the findings suggest useful ways to ensure safety, permanency, and well-

being for LGBT foster youth, the sample population was taken from only two agencies, thus limiting generalizability of the findings.

Mitchell and colleagues (2015) conducted a quantitative study that provided a direct comparison of abuse experiences of 108 LGBT and heterosexual former foster youth. Through an online survey, participants answered question regarding their history of physical and sexual abuse (Mitchell et al., 2015). Although the study found that there was no major difference in physical abuse rates between LGBT and heterosexual participants, LGBT participants experienced a significantly higher rate of sexual abuse than their heterosexual counterparts (Mitchell et al., 2015). Furthermore, LGBT former foster youth reported higher self-blame than heterosexual participants (Mitchell et al., 2015). As a result, many of the youth preferred to be homeless than live in foster care. Although this study provided a direct comparison of abuse experiences of LGBT and heterosexual former foster youth, there was an insufficient amount of sexual minority men for a complete analysis.

Wilson and colleagues (2014) conducted a study in Los Angeles County, using computer-assisted telephone interviewing techniques to examine the experiences foster youth had in the foster care system. Of those who participated in the study, 80% of the youth identified as Latino or African American. Furthermore, the researchers estimated that approximately 13% of youth self-identified as LGBT and the majority of those who identified as LGBT

were of color (Wilson et al., 2014). In addition, approximately 10% of the participants stated they were born outside of the United States. This population is at an increased risk of discrimination, with 7.5% of the participants reporting discrimination due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Wilson et al., 2014). In addition, LGBT youth ages 17-21 stated they have been kicked out or ran away due to their gender expression (Wilson et al., 2014). The intersection of oppression indicates that most LGBT foster youth of color experience both racism and heterosexism.

#### Gaps in Literature

Most research that has been conducted related to LGBT foster youth is on the negative perceptions of this population and how those negative beliefs affect the youth, but there has been little research done on how positive perspectives can affect LGBT foster youth. It is uncertain if LGBT foster youth would be more prepared to transition out of the child welfare system if, in fact, their foster parents had a more positive outlook on their sexual orientation and gender identity. In a recent study, it was found that foster youth are more resilient in their transition to adulthood when they felt supported by their foster parents (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). However, there has not been research conducted to explore if this is also true for LGBT foster youth. This study is intended to examine whether foster parents have a negative or positive perception of LGBT foster youth.

## Summary

Findings suggest that the perceptions of foster parents on LGBT foster youth's sexual orientation and gender identity greatly affects the experiences LGBT foster youth encounter in out-of-home care. Therefore, it is especially important to identify the perceptions of foster parents on LGBT foster youth. In addition, future research needs to be conducted on how to better educate and train foster parents on the topics of sexual orientation and gender identity, in order to provide safety, permanency, and well-being for LGBT foster youth.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This chapter will discuss the methods and procedures used to conduct this study. The components of this chapter include study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of current and prospective foster parents' of LGBT foster youth to examine if educating and training the foster parents can help them provide better out-of-home care for LGBT foster youth. Data was collected using self-administered questionnaires in order to survey a large number of people. However, considering data was only collected at FFAs in Southern California, the results are only generalizable in Southern California and those foster parents who are receiving training from FFAs. In addition, the fear of being judged based on their answers can lead foster parents to be dishonest. The primary purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of foster parents on LGBT foster youth and examine whether the foster parents can benefit from education and trainings about sexual orientation and gender identity, and thus decrease negative experiences for LGBT foster youth.

## Sampling

Approximately 70-90 current and prospective foster parents were surveyed using availability sampling, during monthly trainings at Foster Family Agencies (FFA) located in Southern California. The FFAs that have been selected for this study were found through CA.gov Department of Social Services (2013-2014) and were willing to allow research to be conducted on foster parents during monthly trainings. The foster parents participating in the study were those available during the monthly trainings, voluntarily agreed to participate, and were either current or prospective foster parents. They were given a questionnaire to examine their perceptions of LGBT foster youth. In addition, demographic data was obtained. This larger sample size helped increase generalizability, since past research has been lacking in larger sample sizes. The information gathered is critical in examining whether the foster parents' perceptions affects the large amount of LGBT youth who runaway, become homeless, attempt or commit suicide, and develop mental health issues. In addition, the data helped examine if trainings on sexual orientation and gender identity change foster parents' perspective positively, thus decreasing the discrimination, neglect, and abuse LGBT foster youth experience in out-of-home care settings.

## Data Collection and Instruments

The data was obtained through a self-administered questionnaire distributed to current and prospective foster parents during monthly trainings at FFA's located in Southern California. This decreased costs, made it more convenient for participants to complete, and increased the speed of data attainment. The survey identified whether diversity trainings provided to foster parents influence their perceptions of LGBT foster youth. Independent variables included demographics as well as the types and number of trainings attended. Demographics helped to understand factors influencing perceptions and how to tailor trainings to be the most efficient in changing attitudes. In addition, the questions assisted in examining if their perceptions influenced the way LGBT youth are treated in out-of-home care. The dependent variables were the foster parents' perceptions of LGBT foster youth and whether they were more positive or negative overall. Additionally, another dependent variable was the foster parents' perceived preparedness for successfully fostering LGBT foster youth in their homes.

An existing instrument (Appendix A) that measured the attitudes toward LGBT foster youth was utilized for this study. Bell and Salcedo's (2014) instrument is an ordinal measurement and consists of twenty questions determining social workers' perceptions on LGBT youth. Participants were to answer using a Likert Scale to either strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, or strongly agree. In addition, they included a



questionnaire on demographics, which included questions about their gender, age, ethnic background, sexual orientation, religious involvement, number of children, level of education, job title and years in that position, and if they have received any training on the LGBT population, and if so where (Bell & Salcedo, 2014). Terminology was changed in order to properly analyze foster parents' perceptions of LGBT foster youth, rather than social workers' perceptions (Bell & Salcedo, 2014). In addition, some demographic questions were changed to be more relevant to foster parents. Two questions that were deemed ambiguous were removed from the survey while one question was added to assess foster parents' perceived preparedness to foster LGBT youth in their home. This helped examine whether or not foster parents' feel they benefit from trainings on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Bell and Salcedo (2014) found significant relationships between their variables, and that correlation between the items were reliable and specific. When analyzing social workers attitudes toward LGBT foster youth, they found that for positive attitudes Chronbach's alpha was .777, and for negative attitudes, it was .628 (Bell & Salcedo, 2014). Since the ideal alpha is .7, some modifications should be considered in order to enhance the value of the negative attitudes (Bell & Salcedo, 2014). Although the instrument was found to be reliable, there was also a limitation identified by the researchers. They identified the wording and meaning on two of the questions to be ambiguous

(Bell & Salcedo, 2014). However, this was changed in this study by rewording those particular questions.

### Procedures

An existing questionnaire was obtained that tested the attitudes of social workers' toward LGBT foster youth. Since the researchers were collecting data on foster parents' perception of LGBT foster youth, some of the questions were altered in order to properly analyze foster parents, rather than social workers, perceptions. The administrations of licensed Foster Family Agencies throughout Southern California were contacted by telephone to obtain permission to collect data through their agencies. The agencies that agreed to participate provided monthly training dates to attend. Participants were recruited during these trainings between November 2015 through January 2016, by verbally asking for participation and explaining how participation can help contribute to social work practice. All training attendees were provided with surveys and those that choose to participate completed them and returned them to the researchers. In addition, informed consent and a debriefing statement was provided to participants during the trainings.

### Protection of Human Subjects

Before the distribution of the questionnaires, confidentiality was explained to the participants of each training session. In addition, each participant gave informed consent and was provided with a debriefing

statement that contained an explanation of the purpose of the study, how they can obtain a copy of the results, and contact information if they had any questions or concerns regarding the project after the completion of filling out the questionnaire. The questionnaire did not request any personal information from the participants that could risk their confidentiality or anonymity. Additionally, confidentiality and anonymity was ensured when signing the informed consent by a marked 'X' on the signature line, rather than the participant's signature. The participants were informed that data is stored on a password-protected computer and once the research project is completed, all data and information will be destroyed.

### Data Analysis

The research project utilized the quantitative procedure to collect data that analyzed the perceptions of foster parents on LGBT foster youth. Data was entered into IBM SPSS statistical analysis software. The analysis was designed to examine relationships between the independent variables, such as gender, age, ethnic background, sexual orientation, religiosity, number of children, education level, foster parent experience, and LGBT trainings and overall attitudes and readiness to foster these youth. This data may be used in future research to determine how to better tailor trainings to be more effective.

## Summary

This study was a preliminary study to gather information regarding foster parents' perceptions of LGBT foster youth to help determine their preparedness for fostering these youth and the efficacy of LGBT training for these parents. This study aimed to address future research needs to better ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of LGBT foster youth.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

In this chapter the researchers will outline the demographics of the study participants, key variables, statistics, and finally, summarize the findings.

#### Presentation of the Findings

##### Demographics

This study drew data from survey responses from 91 participants, two of which were not included because one did not complete the demographics section, while another did not complete any of the Likert Scale questions. Of the 89 remaining surveys, 85 reported their age, which varied from 24 years old to 67 years old (range: 43). The average age was approximately 43 years old.

Every participant identified their gender. Fifty-eight of which were female (65.2%) and thirty were male (33.7%). One participant identified as Male-to-Female Transgender (1.1%).

The majority of participants identified as European/White American, with 34 total (38.2%). Thirty-one participants identified as Hispanic or Latin American (34.8%). Thirteen participants identified as African American (14.6%). The remaining ethnicity options included Asian American, Middle Eastern American, Native American, Mixed Race, and Other. Only 11

participants identified as one of these ethnic backgrounds, making up only 12.2% of respondents total. Every participant answered this question.

The bulk of participants identified as heterosexual. Seventy-seven foster parents (86.5%) identified as heterosexual, while 10 (11.2%) identify as gay or lesbian. There were two participants that did not answer.

A large majority of participants identified as religious in some way. Twenty-nine participants (32.6%) identified as “very religious” and 37 participants (41.6%) identified as fairly religious. This means that almost 75% of participants are “fairly” or “very” religious. There were 14 participants (15.7%) that stated they were “not that religious.” Only eight participants (9.0%) identified as “not at all” religious. There was one participant that did not answer.

The researchers removed a question regarding the number of children the foster parent had because it did not specify if these children were biological, adopted, currently fostered, or fostered at some point.

Participants reported a wide range of educational levels. Eleven respondents reported receiving a high school degree (12.4%). The majority of foster parents, 31 of 89 respondents, reported having taken some college courses (34.8%), while 25 respondents have completed a college degree (28.1%). Nine respondents (10.1%) received a Master’s degree, while only four have received their Ph.D. (4.5%). Three respondents did not answer or their responses were not applicable. An additional six respondents stated they

had professional licenses. This answer was removed from the data, because it does not fit within a scale.

The majority of those surveyed were prospective or new foster parents. Thirty-three parents had none or less than one year of experience (37.1%). Twenty parents had one year of experience (22.5%). Only eight respondents had 2 years of experience (9%), while nine had 3 years of experience (10.1%). Eight respondents had 4 years of experience (9%). Only seven respondents had between 6 and 8 years of experience (4.4%). Three respondents had 15 years of foster parent experience or more (3.3%). Four participants chose not to answer.

A question asking respondents to state whether they were current or prospective foster parents was removed because it was repetitive and a number of responses did not correlate with their years of experience. For example, some stated they were prospective foster parents, but they had a number of years of experience. This question did not specify if they were current or prospective with the specific agency they were surveyed at or if they had experience with past agencies, so this may have caused some confusion.

The majority of foster parents, 61 of 89, had not attended a training on the LGBT population (68.5%), while only 22 had (24.7%). The question regarding where the training occurred was removed, because the researchers found it to not be as relevant as previously thought.

Key Variables

The 19 Likert Scale questions were divided in two to make two scales. One scale used 17 questions to examine attitudes, while the other used two questions, in an attempt to examine how prepared foster parents felt to care for LGBT foster youth.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the perceived preparedness scale follows a normal bell curve, slightly skewed in favor of preparedness over not. However, it is important to note that 23 surveys had missing information and could not be used in the scale.

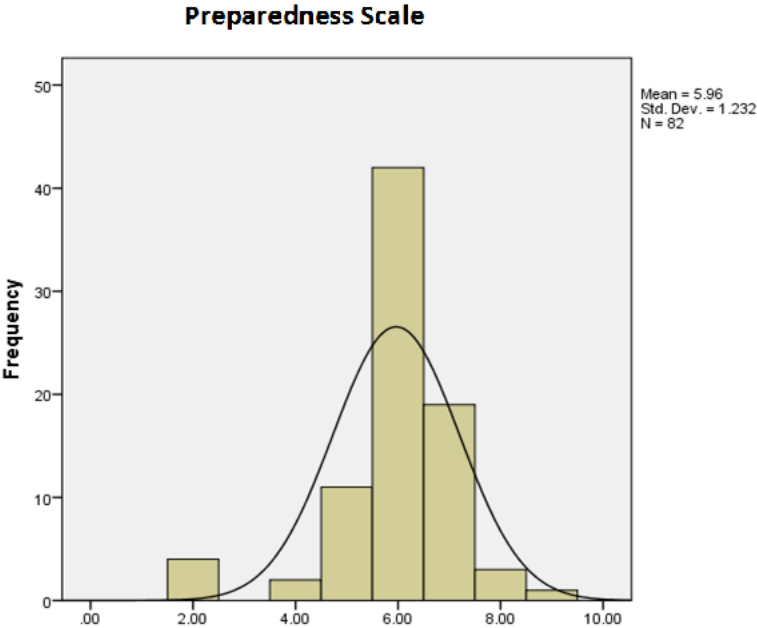


Figure 1: Preparedness Scale



As can be seen in Figure 2, the questions regarding overall attitudes toward LGBT foster youth also follow a normal bell curve. Again, it is important to note that 23 surveys had missing information and could not be used in the scale.

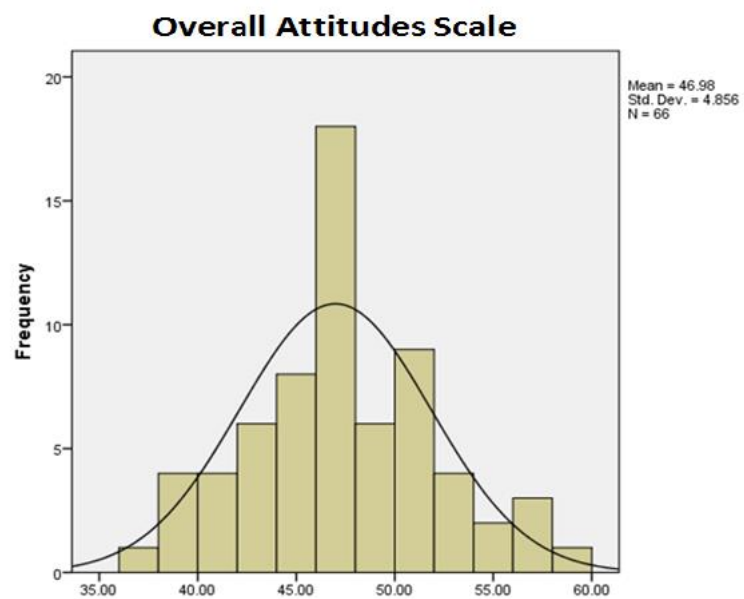


Figure 2: Overall Attitude Scale

Crosstabs were then used to compare these two scales with each of the demographic questions to determine which variables influence preparedness or overall attitudes.

The only significant correlations were between the preparedness question scale and attitude question scale ( $r(\text{sample size})=.321, \alpha=.01$ ).

There was a positive correlation between age and years of foster experience. However, there were no significant correlations between either the preparedness scale and attitudes scale and any of the demographic variables. Independent Samples T-tests also showed no significances between either scale and any of the demographic variables.

Notably, twenty-seven foster parents agreed that they would feel uncomfortable fostering an LGBT youth (30.3%). Eighteen neither agreed nor disagreed (20.2%). Thirty-nine participants stated they disagreed (43.8%). Nine participants did not respond to this question (5.6%). To corroborate this, 39 parents felt they were prepared (43.8%), while 20 stated they did not feel prepared nor did they feel unprepared (22.5%), while 24 stated they did not feel prepared (27%). There were a six total of responses not able to be included in this question (6.7%). This shows that more parents feel prepared and comfortable than do not.

### Summary

This chapter provided the data gathered from the survey participants, including demographic information, key variables, and statistics.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This chapter will outline the findings presented and the conclusion and implications of the data. The limitations of the study are reviewed. In addition, recommendations for future research, social work practice, and policy advancement will be made.

#### Discussion

This study hoped to better understand the factors that contribute to people having an overall positive attitude regarding for LGBT youth and to determine if there are factors that contribute to foster parents feeling prepared to care for these youth.

The pool of participants was decently varied in most areas including age, gender, ethnicity, education levels, and religiosity. However, the majority of participants were heterosexual and had less than 2 years of experience fostering. However, no particular demographics showed to contribute to more or less acceptance or preparedness.

There was a small correlation between feeling prepared and having a positive attitude. This is reasonable given that foster parents with more positive attitudes may feel more prepared, or ones that feel more prepared may have more positive attitudes. There is little research on foster parents'

attitudes toward LGBT foster youth, however, Zamora (2011) found that social workers who had a more positive attitude toward the LGBT population, were more likely to engage in gay affirming practice.

It is interesting that there was absolutely no significant correlations between either the preparedness scale and attitudes scale and any of the demographic variables given how many variables were available. This could suggest that there is no way to determine which factors indicate preparedness or attitudes, however, it is more likely that this points to the measurement instrument being flawed or response bias in participants.

Despite being assured of their confidentiality and anonymity, it is possible that participants still skipped questions they felt they would answer unfavorably. However, because nothing was found to be significant, even favorable answers, the instrument is more than likely flawed. The reliability and validity were not tested after revising the tool to fit this specific population.

Overall, the results did reflect that more parents feel prepared than do not. But perhaps most importantly, the overall attitudes scale showed a normal curve, or “middle of the road” responses, which indicates that most people do not feel particularly strongly either way or feel positively overall. This is an improvement upon past studies, which showed generally overall negative views of LGBT youth. For example, Clements and Rosenwald (2008) suggest foster parents lack an understanding of this population and thus, have negative perceptions of them. In their study, foster parents viewed LGBT

foster youth as being confused and stated LGBT youth will sexually molest other children. This current study suggests an overall improvement.

### Limitations

Although this study does make contributions to social work's understanding of LGBT youth placed in out-of-home care, there are limitations. Since the study only collected surveys from four FFAs in Southern California, and used a non-probability convenience sample, the results lack generalizability to the overall foster parent population. As mentioned earlier, in any study surveying human participants there is the risk of response bias. In this study, the surveyed foster parents may have adjusted their responses to be more desirable to the researchers. Furthermore, some participants may have adjusted their responses to seem more desirable to the agency itself. Also, those that refused to participate in the survey may have done so out of fear of consequences from the agency or researchers. Certain questions were skipped which could reflect participants not feeling comfortable answering those specific questions honestly.

A number of the participants in the study were prospective foster parents. This means they have yet to complete training or actually foster a youth. Their responses are purely hypothetical and their limited experience and training may result in less than accurate answers.

A strength of this study would be the wide geographic area surveyed and sample size. Eighty-nine surveys were collected from foster agencies

located throughout two counties in Southern California from the following cities: Tustin, Hesperia, Redlands, and Upland. However, large geographical regions were not surveyed, such as Riverside County. Also, all participants were from FFAs and none were licensed through the counties themselves.

There was also limited representation of the following populations:

transgender parents, gay and lesbian parents, and those that have completed some form of LGBT training.

Lastly, the tool itself is a flawed instrument. By using a tool with a higher reliability and retesting this reliability after the questions are adjusted, the test can yield stronger results.

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

Future research should aim to use a more reliable tool and to have a larger sample. This sample should aim to include both FFAs and county foster parents. In addition, the sample should be reflective of the general population of foster parents in as many demographic areas as possible. Researchers can also compare results in different counties given that some counties are more liberal in their attitudes towards LGBT youth than others.

Although it shows an improvement in attitudes and preparedness, the research still reflects that many LGBT foster youth are at an increased risk for discrimination, abuse, and multiple changes in placement. This places the youth at further risk for mental health problems, drug and alcohol use,

homelessness, and death. Policy needs to incorporate more education on LGBT issues in foster parents trainings and continue to evolve to further protect these youth.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, this study attempted to examine which demographics of foster parents influence overall attitudes and perceived preparedness in fostering LGBT youth. It is evident that this needs to be further researched as there is a great need to provide safer homes for these youth. However, it did show a positive trend of acceptance overall, which gives hope that future foster parents will be able to better care for these vulnerable youth.

APPENDIX A  
QUESTIONNAIRE



Please indicate the level of agreement that most closely fits you:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Being LGBT is inherently bad.					
Parents should inform their children about LGBT issues.					
I believe that a foster youth's identity is more important than their sexuality.					
I believe that people today are more accepting of gay youth.					
I believe that youth are capable of knowing their sexuality.					
The LGBT culture is harmful to many.					
People exaggerate the difficulties LGBT youth experience.					
LGBT foster youth have different needs than straight foster youth.					
Teachers should be allowed to inform children about LGBT issues.					
Being transgendered is easily understood.					
I think LGBT foster youth face challenges that heterosexual foster youth do not.					
I believe that being LGBT is an important part of a person's personality.					
I feel uncomfortable fostering LGBT foster youth.					
I think that discrimination against LGBT youth is still a problem.					
LGBT youth receive a different level of the quality of care and service than non-LGBT youth because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.					
LGBT youth have the same difficulties as other youth of similar age.					
Being transgendered is hard to understand.					
Being LGBT is hard to understand.					
I feel prepared to foster LGBT youth in my home.					

Survey Questionnaire developed by Christi Bell and Raul Salcedo; Revised by Shay Alvarez and Stephanie Funston (2016)

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

**INFORMED CONSENT**

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine foster parents' perceptions of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and/or Transgender foster youth, their training experience, and their perceived preparedness for fostering these youth. The study is being conducted by MSW students Shay Alvarez and Stephanie Funston, under the supervision of Dr. Carolyn McAllister, School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the study is to examine foster parents' perceptions of LGBT foster youth, their training experience for this specific population, and their perceived preparedness for fostering these youth.

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be asked questions regarding their experience with LGBT foster youth and trainings, their comfort levels and attitudes toward this population, and some demographics.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

**CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY:** Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form.

**DURATION:** It will take 10 to 15 minutes to complete the survey.

**RISKS:** There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

**BENEFITS:** There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Carolyn McAllister at 909-537-5559 or at [cmcallis@csusb.edu](mailto:cmcallis@csusb.edu).

**RESULTS:** Please refer to the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino after December 2016.

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Place an X mark here

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Title IV-E Program • 909.537.7226  
5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## Debriefing Statement

This study you have just completed was designed to investigate foster parents attitudes and experiences with LGBT foster youth. We are interested in assessing foster parents' perceptions and if trainings influence these perceptions and/or their preparedness to foster these youth. This is to inform you that no deception is involved in this study.

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. Carolyn McAllister at 909-537-5559 or at [cmcallis@csusb.edu](mailto:cmcallis@csusb.edu). If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please refer to the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino after December 2016.

Developed by Shay Alvarez and Stephanie Funston (2016)

APPENDIX D  
DEMOGRAPHICS

## Demographics

Please choose the most appropriate answer.

1. What is your gender?

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Transgender (Male to Female)
- d. Transgender (Female to Male)
- e. Other (Please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your age? (Please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

3. Please indicate your ethnic background:

- a. African American
- b. Asian American
- c. European/White American
- d. Hispanic or Latino American
- e. Middle Eastern American
- f. Native American
- g. Mixed Race
- h. Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your sexual orientation?

- a. Heterosexual
- b. Gay
- c. Lesbian
- d. Bisexual
- e. Asexual
- f. Other

5. Do you consider yourself religious?

- a. Not at all religious
- b. Not that religious
- c. Fairly religious
- d. Very religious

6. Do you have any children?

- a. Yes – Number: \_\_\_\_\_
- b. No

7. What was the last grade in school you completed?

- a. High School
- b. Some College
- c. College Graduate
- d. Masters Graduate
- e. Ph.D. Graduate
- f. Other professional license

8. How long have you been a foster parent? \_\_\_\_\_ years (Please round to the nearest year)

9. Have you had any training on the LGBT population? a. Yes b. No

10. If yes, where did you take this training?

a. In school

b. Through work

c. Continuing education seminar

d. Seminars for personal enrichment

11. Please circle the correct statement.

I am currently a foster parent

I am a prospective foster parent



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## ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES PAGE

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout.

These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:

Team effort: Shay Alvarez and Stephanie Funston

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

Team Effort: Shay Alvarez and Stephanie Funston

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

a. Introduction and Literature

Team Effort: Shay Alvarez and Stephanie Funston

b. Methods

Team Effort: Shay Alvarez and Stephanie Funston

c. Results

Team Effort: Shay Alvarez and Stephanie Funston

d. Discussion

Team Effort: Shay Alvarez and Stephanie Funston