

**Australian lesbian and gay foster carers negotiating the child protection system:  
Strengths and challenges**

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**Abstract**

Whilst a growing number of Australian foster care agencies are actively recruiting lesbians and gay men as potential foster carers, few agencies have policies for working with this population. Drawing on interviews and focus groups conducted with lesbian and gay foster carers from across four Australian states, the thematic analysis of narratives presented in this paper provides clear directions for developing policy. Carers reported considerable skill in negotiating placements and an awareness of the relatively tenuous position that they held within foster care systems. Many spoke of an overarching narrative of ‘justified suspicion’ when it came to engaging with agency workers and were often dependent upon the goodwill of individual social workers. Yet despite these challenges, lesbian and gay carers spoke in general of the unique and important skills they bring to care provision. The findings suggest that policy changes are required so as to 1) challenge heteronormativity and develop policies that clearly outline the implications of homophobic behavior, 2) encourage reflexivity about best practice amongst workers, and 3) provide clear guidelines about the inclusion of lesbian and gay foster carers.

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## Introduction

As with much narrative research, this paper starts off with a story. For over six years now I have been conducting research on the lives of Australian lesbian and gay foster carers. For a few years longer than this, I myself, as a white middle-class Australian gay man, have been a foster carer. The intersections of these two sets of experiences are worthy of elaboration, as they sit at the heart of the findings presented in this paper. As a foster carer, my role as both an academic with a considerable publication history in foster care, along with my practice as a family and relationships counselor, have often afforded me a relatively privileged position as a foster carer, one that many of my research participants do not share: I know Australian foster care systems well, I know the rhetoric they are reliant upon, and perhaps most importantly, I can make recourse to my professional identity to challenge the practices of other professionals. All of this knowledge accrues to me considerable advantages when it comes to negotiating a care system that is drastically under resourced, and which, despite the best of intentions of many, is still shaped by its location within a broader heteronormative social context.

When the above situation is reversed, however, and if I take my identity as a gay foster carer into my writing and research on Australian foster care, the benefits of my identity (i.e., ‘insider’ knowledge) largely tend to disappear, and sometimes even functions in counterproductive ways. For example; my early attempts at publishing research on lesbian and gay foster carers, in which I clearly situated myself as a gay foster carer, were met with what appeared at the time as either an implicit expectation to ‘prove’ that my research was not biased, or the explicit statement that my research was a ‘conspiracy theory’ (see Riggs, 2006a). As a result, and despite a long-

standing engagement with critical psychology and considerable suspicion of any claim to being an ‘objective social scientist’, I gradually modified the presentation of my findings so that I disappeared. And lo and behold, no one attributed bias to my findings anymore, and the papers were accepted for publication (Riggs, 2006b; 2007; 2008; 2010a; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2009).

Whilst the acceptance of my research was a positive outcome in that it allowed the findings to be available to the academic community (and thus hopefully to inform practice and policy), it was unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, it required me to buy into a logic that would suggest that marginal groups members are invested in our research whilst dominant group members are not (hence we must explain away our potential partiality, whilst they are not required to). Thus in rendering myself invisible (as a gay foster carer), all I potentially did was reinforce this logic. The second problem stems from the first, namely that in rendering myself invisible, I in effect depoliticized my research. This was in some ways more problematic than the first problem, as it is just as easy for marginal group members as it is for anyone else to contribute to the objectification of other marginal group members when we accept the guise of objectivity. In other words, by rendering my own investment in the research invisible, my research itself was potentially rendered suspect: what heterosexual, non-foster carer would conduct research on lesbian and gay foster carers? And why would they do it? Together, the two problems I have presented here led me to ask myself at what cost my lack of disclosure had come (both personally, but more importantly, to my participants and the broader group they represent).

This opening story brings me to the present research, which developed in many ways as a counter to the problems and concerns outlined above. How could I, as a white middle-class gay

Australian foster carer who works as an academic, engage in research where both I was visible, but where the research was not just the story of my life? The response I have developed to this challenge is twofold: First, it has become increasingly important to me to acknowledge that the research questions I develop are often informed by my own experiences or observations, and that as a competent member of certain social groups it is legitimate for me to take those as a starting place for research, and perhaps more importantly, that speaking about my own location is one way of being honest about the relatively privileged position I hold in relation to the groups that I conduct research with. In other words, rather than making my observations, doing something with them, and sitting back quietly reaping the benefits, it appears important to me to try and do something with the knowledge that I gather and to speak from the position of a situated knower. Which brings me to the second response, namely that just as it is important to refuse the depoliticization of my research, it is equally as important to recognize the politics of academic research, and its relationship to policy and practice. To this end, it has become increasingly important to me that the findings from my research are presented in ways that both convey the nuance of each person's story, whilst also telling something about the bigger picture in ways that will stand up to scientific scrutiny and thus hold the potential to effect change in the world.

The findings presented in this paper are thus one evocation of the approach elaborated above. My aim in conducting this research was to speak with Australian lesbian and gay foster carers about their experiences of engaging with support workers, and their own perceptions of their role as foster carers. These broad questions were informed by my experiences as a gay foster carer, and in particular my perception that, on the whole, whilst agency workers (whose role it is to provide support to foster carers) are in general willing to engage with lesbian and gay foster carers, in the

specific this at times plays out in ways that tend towards a liberal inclusivity that actually fails to recognize both its own potential for contributing to our marginalization, as well as failing to recognize the unique contributions that lesbian and gay carers make to child protection agendas in Australia. What I wanted to explore, in other words, were potential examples of what Elizabeth Peel (2001) has termed ‘mundane heterosexism’: the routine everyday ways in which marginalization occurs, but also the specific resistances that occur in the face of this. From a policy perspective, I was interested to ask participants how they perceived policy, and whether it was of any use in mitigating against marginalization in any form (i.e., mundane or otherwise).

What I found was a consistent narrative across almost all of the participants, one in which they were keenly aware of marginalizing practices, but that they often felt unable to talk about this for fear of being labeled ‘paranoid’. Yet despite being cognizant of this context of potential marginalization (and the relative lack of protection afforded by policies or support workers), the lesbian and gay foster carers I spoke with affirmed a myriad of ways in which they make an important contribution to Australian foster care systems. By outlining these findings, and placing them within the broader Australian context, the findings I present in this paper are thus uniquely placed to provide clear guidance for the future development of policies that better meet the support needs of lesbian and gay foster carers, and which do so by respecting and valuing the narratives presented here, rather than trivializing them or yet again expecting their conformity to a heteronormative understanding of what represents the ‘best interests of children’.

### *Previous Research and the Australian Foster Care Context*

Foster care agencies across Australia currently face a drastic shortage of people willing to provide out-of-home care to children who cannot live with their birth parents (AIHW, 2010). As opposed to the US and UK, children removed from their parents in Australia are rarely placed for adoption, and instead are typically placed (where long-term orders are granted) with foster parents who care for them in a family context until they come of age. While in some Australian jurisdictions foster parents may be granted limited guardianship of children, instances of this are few and guardianship is always shared with the State (with individual agency social workers acting as proxy guardians for the State). Yet despite not having legal guardianship of foster children, Australian foster carers are expected to carry the primary responsibility for raising foster children, but with low levels of financial remuneration. Perhaps understandably, then, one of the outcomes of this context in which foster care operates in Australia is that it has become increasingly difficult to recruit sufficient numbers of foster carers to meet the placement needs of children removed from their birth families. Furthermore, and as a result of ongoing shortages in funding and staffing, child protection systems across Australia face challenges in retaining currently registered foster carers, with research suggesting that a lack of support impacts significantly upon both retention of carers and the success of placements (Barber & Delfabbro, 2004).

When it comes to lesbian and gay foster carers specifically, the problems associated with lack of support and difficulties in attracting new carers are potentially compounded by the fact of ongoing discrimination within foster care systems. Both Australian and international research on

lesbian and gay foster carers has to date produced an overwhelmingly negative image of child protection systems. This research highlights at least five areas where discrimination occurs against lesbian and gay foster carers: 1) “considerable scrutiny of their parenting ability and capacity to raise children” (Brooks and Goldberg 2001, 154; Riggs, 2006); 2) “outright rejection... on the basis of their sexuality alone” (Hicks 2005b, 43-44); 3) an implicit expectation to ‘educate social workers’ about issues pertaining to non-heterosexual people in order to be fairly considered as applicants (Hicks 2005b; Riggs 2007); 4) the prevalence of a ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ policy that has until recently been implicit to UK assessment procedures (Hicks 2000), and which US research suggests continues to be implicit to US assessment procedures (Matthews and Cramer 2006); and 5) requests made to lesbian and gay applicants to demonstrate that they will provide appropriate ‘opposite sex role models’ to children in their care (Hicks 2000; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2009).

Yet despite this negative image of child protection systems, and much like lesbian and gay parents in general, lesbian and gay foster parents continue to bring a unique perspective to their parenting. In the context of child protection, research suggests that this can be potentially beneficial for children in care. A key example of this is the suggestion that many lesbians and gay men consider fostering as a first option for starting family, rather than as ‘second best’ to biological reproduction (Hicks 2005b; Mallon 2006). Mallon infers from this that lesbian and gay carers often succeed in caring for children with high needs as a result of this commitment to foster parenting as a first option. Hicks (2005a) also suggests that lesbian and gay foster parents may often successfully create families with foster children because they are willing to consider non-biological relations as not only acceptable, but also an appropriate way of creating families.

Hicks and McDermott (1999) suggest that an openness to non-biological families and a commitment to raising foster children may also result from the higher representation of lesbians and gay men within the caring and voluntary professions, alongside a commitment to social justice and change. Finally, some research has suggested that the placement of foster children within lesbian- or gay-headed households may actually be *better* than placement within heterosexual-headed households. Hicks and McDermott, for example, suggest that “some children, particularly young men who have had difficult experiences with mothers or female carers, [may find it] helpful to have a placement with solely male carers” (151). Similarly, Patrick (2006) suggests that birth parents (particularly mothers) may find it less threatening to their status as parents if (opposite sex) foster parents are not seen as replacing them.

With the above previous research in mind, in the present research I sought to explore Australian foster carers’ experiences of the child protection system, and specifically to examine their possible experiences of both discrimination with the system, but also any support or recognition accorded to them in their role as carers. The key research questions that guided this research were 1) how do lesbian and gay foster carers perceive the support available to them, 2) what do they believe are the ‘unique’ contributions that they make to Australian child protection systems, 3) whether they perceived any utility in current or future policies aimed at supporting lesbian and gay foster carers, and 4) any challenges they experience as lesbian and gay foster carers.

## Method

### *Participants*

Ethics approval for this project was granted by the Social and Behavioural Research ethics committee of Flinders University, South Australia. The project involved two stages: an online survey exploring the support experiences of lesbian and gay foster carers, which was completed by 60 people (findings reported in Riggs, 2010a), and a series of interviews and focus groups conducted across the four states included in the research (Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales) that involved a representative subsample of 30 participants selected from the larger sample. Of the subsample who were interviewed, all but one self-identified as white Australians. Four of the participants came from South Australia, 5 from Queensland, 5 from New South Wales and 16 from Victoria. Participants ranged in age from 29 to 59, with the average age being 41.25 years. The majority of the sample self-identified as lesbian (65%), with the remainder of the sample identifying as gay men. In regard to relationship status, 5 were single and 25 were partnered. Participants on average had been registered as foster carers for 5.65 years, though length of registration ranged from six months to over ten years. The majority of the sample provided long-term care (60%), with equal numbers of the remainder providing either respite or emergency care. Finally, the majority of participants (70%) had only one child in their care at the time of completing the survey, with 10% of the sample having two children in their care and 20% having three children in their care.

### *Epistemological Framework*

There are of course many approaches to narrative inquiry, ranging from the practice-based work arising from the Dulwich Centre with its focus on re-narrating stories in order to effect both

personal and social change (e.g., Reid, 2008), to structuralist analyses of the construction of sequences within participant narratives (e.g., Zetterqvist-Nelson, 2006). Across these two points on a continuum of narrative research sit a varied array of narrative-informed approaches that share the common theme of examining the stories of participants, including sometimes examining the role of the researcher as a participant or co-constructor of the narratives told (Bolivar, 2002; Reissman, 2002). Yet despite this common theme, and as exemplified by the two relative ends of the continuum indicated above, narrative research encompasses a range of epistemological positions, including those that take language as approximating the ‘truth’ of the participant and their lived experience, and those that seek to problematize that truth status of any narrative and instead examine how it is constructed in ways that lend it facticity or cohesiveness (Mishler, 1995).

Drawing together the strands of narrative research identified above, the epistemological framework that I adopt within the analysis that follows may be understood as one informed by a pragmatic constructionist approach to narrative: It certainly does not presume that these are the only representations available of Australian lesbian and gay foster carers, nor does it claim that these narratives represent all there is to tell about the participants themselves. Instead, these are narratives produced in response to a particular set of questions, and told to a specific researcher who was known to participants as a gay foster carer highly critical of normative and marginalizing practices within foster care systems. The epistemological framework is nonetheless constructionist, in that it seeks to question what precisely counts as knowledge (as I discussed in the introduction), and to recognize the thorough imbrication of the individual and the social (where the latter is always already productive of the experiences of the former).

However, the constructionist framework is tempered by the pragmatic drive (both by myself as a researcher but often it appeared on the part of the participants, too) to address shortcomings in current practice with Australian lesbian and gay foster carers. As a result, I present the findings that focus primarily upon the broader themes that arose from the data and which were relatively robust across participants.

In order to create a space in which I could both be considered a competent group member by participants, but also fulfill my role as a competent researcher, I made a distinction throughout the data collection phase between 'private' and 'public' narratives. The former were constituted by stories or personal experiences that participants shared with me (and I with them) that constituted practices of rapport building, or establishing trust, and of participants in some instances using me as a sounding board for their experiences of marginalization. These narratives were often intensely personal and emotional, and were omitted from analysis for two reasons: whilst strictly speaking participants gave informed consent to all that they said being audio recorded, transcribed and subjected to analysis, in practice this seemed ethically suspect. As a member of the group with whom I was conducting the research, I knew that at times the narratives I was witness to were ones that would likely not have been told to another researcher considered to be an 'outsider'. As such, it seemed important for these private narratives to be kept as such, although where relevant for providing context, a précis of aspects of the private narratives is included in the analysis presented below.

The second reason is that in many instances the private stories, whilst touching on broader topics germane to the research, were very individual experiences, and thus were not especially useful in

generating broad themes from the dataset. As such, it seemed important to me, as a researcher mindful of the injunction to produce robust findings, not to rely primarily upon individualized one-off stories to substantiate my claims. And importantly, in almost all instances the ‘private’ stories were mirrored in the ‘public’ stories that participants told in response to the standardized research questions. Indeed, it often appeared that telling what amounted to ‘private’ stories gave participants the opportunity to collect their thoughts and then go on to answer the research questions in ways that both allowed them to determine the amount they wanted to reveal about their lives, whilst also allowing for reflection upon how their own stories might tell us something about broader social structures as well as commonalities with the stories of other participants.

My claim here, then, is that the ‘public’ narratives included in the analysis below are potentially ‘naturally’ succinct reflections upon the research questions and pragmatic focus of the research upon policy and experiences of support. Importantly, focusing on these ‘public’ narratives was not intended as a slight to the ‘private’ narratives, but rather to acknowledge the fact that whilst the latter certainly facilitated the collection of the former, the research focus (right from the initial stage of applying for ethics through to the conducting of the interviews and focus groups) was clearly focused upon perceptions of support and the role of lesbian and gay foster carers within the foster care system, not on the life stories of the participants *per se*.

### *Procedure*

Following ethics approval, foster carer support agencies that I had a relationship with already from previous research on foster care conducted in four states (Victoria, South Australia, New

South Wales and Queensland) were approached again for involvement. (The individual agencies are not listed here in order to protect the anonymity of participants due to the relatively small population of lesbian or gay carers registered with each agency). All four agencies agreed to participate, and circulated flyers to potential participants including information on the project and the requirements for involvement. Flyers were also circulated among lesbian and gay parenting networks via online communities of which I am a member. Flyers included basic information about the study and the time commitment it would involve, and invited interested carers to visit the website where the online survey was hosted for more information, or to contact myself directly. Whilst there is no way of determining response rates, within a very short matter of time the full sample of 60 participants had both completed the online survey and indicated their interest in being interviewed.

Interviews (10) and focus groups (5, each with 4 participants) were conducted at a venue convenient to participants, including meeting rooms, public venues and in some instances in the homes of participants. Participants were offered the choice of being involved in either an individual interview or a focus group, the intention being to allow for maximum inclusion of participants who may not otherwise be willing to share their story (i.e., some participants may only feel comfortable talking in a group, whilst others may not wish to speak in front of other carers). The interviews and focus groups followed a semi-structured format, though as outlined above, allowed also for conversation outside of the interview questions. Sample questions include: “What kind of relationship do you have with your support agency?”, “What role do you think current policies or research on lesbian and gay carers play in the support you receive?” and “What are some of the specific challenges or unique benefits to being a lesbian or gay foster

carer?”. Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis and participants were allocated a pseudonym to ensure anonymity as well as any clearly identifying aspects of their narratives being removed (such as names or locations).

### *Analytic Approach*

Whilst it could be suggested that the themes identified would be pre-determined by the research questions, this was in fact not the case. Whilst there were indeed key research questions as outlined above (i.e., perceptions of support and challenges, perceptions of the ‘unique’ contribution of lesbian and gay foster carers, and perceived utility of current or future policy), participants typically spoke at length in response to each question, and this provided considerable scope for themes or topics to arise within each question that highlighted specific sets of concerns amongst participants. To this end, each key focus of the study was examined in relation to the interview or focus group question that pertained to it by following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach to identifying themes. The first phase of such an approach requires that the researcher become familiar with the data. This is best achieved by reading and re-reading the data, while making note of any initial ideas. The second phase involves generating initial codes from the data by “coding the interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set” (p. 87). The third phase entails collating the initial codes into potential themes and gathering all the data relevant to each potential theme. The fourth phase requires that the researcher review the potential themes, and assess whether or not they work in relation to both the coded extracts and the entire data set. Finally, the fifth phase entails refining the specifics of each theme and the “overall story that the analysis tells” (Braun & Clarke, p. 87).

Within the research question of support, one theme predominated across participants, namely the reliance upon the goodwill of individual supportive agency workers. Within the research question of challenges faced by lesbian and gay foster carers, a key concern raised by most participants related to being treated as though they were paranoid when they raised concern about potential instances of marginalization on the basis of sexuality. In regard to the utility of policy, whilst few participants were aware of existing policies for working with lesbian and gay foster carers (largely because only Victoria has such a policy – see CECFW, 2009 – but not even all Victorian participants were aware of this), many participants had something to say about the role of policy. Overall in this regard, participants indicated the need for policy to provide a clear mandate for agency workers to understand the impact of heteronormativity (including its role in producing feelings of ‘paranoia’). Finally, participants were most forthcoming about what they perceived to be the unique role of lesbians and gay men in Australian child protection systems. Importantly, these were benefits that accrued to children, to birth parents, and to the system itself.

## Results

### *Reliance upon the Goodwill of Workers*

From the very beginning of the interviews and focus groups, I was privy to a range of ‘private’ stories that emphasized the heavy reliance of participants upon the goodwill of individual social workers. These stories typically related to instances where there were two possible outcomes available, and the only reason why the positive outcome was achieved was due to the role of a

supportive agency worker. Importantly, foster carers emphasized the fact that they had no way of predicting if they would continue to be supported in this way, and they appeared very cognizant of the fact that the situation could just as easily have turned out for the worse (because there are no policies or laws that protect them from this outcome: see Riggs, 2010b). In response to the formal interview questions, half (15) of the participants presented a public version of this private narrative when asked about the support they receive. The first extract below from Tamsin represents one example of this:

#### Extract 1

Tamsin: So the birth mother had a problem with us being lesbians, but because we had an agency worker at the time who said ‘no’ to this and advocated for the placement to happen and to work that it actually did, and if she hadn’t been there – and she was a team leader – I doubt it would have happened.

Here Tamsin is clear that without the help of a worker (who was a team leader) it was likely that the child (who at the time of the interview had been with Tamsin and her partner for five years) would not have been placed with them. Whilst this was a positive outcome, there is no guarantee for Tamsin that if she and her partner decide to care for a second child, that this would automatically be supported at the agency level if a birth parent were to contest the placement. Many participants noted to me that in some cases birth parents were consulted but their views were ignored, in other cases birth parents almost appeared to be given the right of veto over lesbian or gay carers, whilst in yet other instances they were not consulted at all. Such inconsistencies again reinforce the perception that positive outcomes (i.e., children being placed

with lesbian or gay carers) are highly contingent upon the goodwill of individual workers. The following extract further highlights how lesbian and gay foster carers are keenly aware of the potential for placements to be refused not simply because of the beliefs of birth parents, but also because of the beliefs of social workers:

#### Extract 2

Tara: At the time we complained [about an unsupportive assessment team] we knew a senior person and he went into head office above the people that my partner complained to and got it sorted. So we have been very fortunate that his career path has sort of moved in our favour. Otherwise we would have been stuck at the level of the people who made the decision who were calling us ‘those lesbians’ and who felt very angry at us.

Damien: So that is an interesting thing – if it wasn’t for you having that contact you would have lost her

Tara: Yes, we would have.

Here Tara relates the story of seeking a permanent placement order for a child that had been in her care for over a year. Tara knew the system well, already had one child on a permanent order placed with her, and was very clear that her family would provide the best possible outcome for the child. Yet despite this, Tara was very aware that some social workers had a highly negative view of her and her partner (‘those lesbians’), and that this was preventing the permanent order

going through. Fortunately for both Tara, her family, and the child, Tara knew someone in a position of authority who could 'get it sorted'. What is perhaps unfortunate about this outcome, however, is that were it not for the goodwill of this individual senior person, the order for permanency would likely not have been granted (and thus the child would have eventually been removed from Tara and placed in an alternate permanent placement). Furthermore, it is problematic that Tara was forced to be reliant upon the goodwill of the senior worker. Not only does this provide no reassurance for Tara and her family that the same issue would not occur again if they decided to care for another child, but also it leaves Tara and the senior worker open to allegations of favouritism. Whilst this was clearly not the case (as Tara and her partner had been assessed and recognized as competent carers well suited for the care of the particular child), the need to resort to the help of someone known to the family could just as easily have been used as evidence against Tara. Tara's case was also echoed in the following story from Amanda, who related her experience of being reliant upon specific interpretations of policies within some agencies that do not explicitly endorse lesbians or gay men as foster carers:

#### Extract 3

Amanda: When I spoke to a worker from [a religiously-affiliated foster care agency] she said 'look my personal opinion is I have no issue with [you being a lesbian], however given our policy is that applications have to go to these community panels, if you didn't already have those children it wouldn't happen'. So clearly that is not a policy or anything, that is her sense of if you had just rung us out of the blue and didn't already have children you wouldn't be approved

In this extract Amanda relates the experience of wishing to take on the care of another child in addition to the children she is already caring for, and that the response from a particular religiously-affiliated agency was that the only reason they *might* consider it was because she already has children placed with her from another agency. It is important to note that the worker Amanda spoke with clearly noted that they had no issue with Amanda being a lesbian, which whilst positive, nonetheless suggests the possibility that another person may well have an issue (which is evident in the statement that ‘applications have to go to these [religious] community panels’ who would likely not approve the application, see Riggs 2010b for a discussion of this). Thus as Amanda states, none of this is policy, but rather it comes down to the beliefs or opinions of individual workers or panel members. Again, lesbian and gay foster carers are forced to be reliant upon the goodwill of individual workers who may or may not endorse or support lesbian and gay foster carers. This problem was exacerbated for many people like Amanda who had moved house since their previous placement, and were required to approach the agency who serviced their new housing area (which in some instances meant moving from a very supportive and affirming agency to a religiously-affiliated agency who were known to be unsupportive of lesbian and gay carers).

The extracts presented within this theme highlight the issues that arise for lesbian and gay foster carers as a result of being forced to engage with a system that most often does not provide clear endorsement for their role as carers, and which thus requires carers to be reliant upon the goodwill of individual workers. This reliance (and the lack of clarity or security that it produces) often resulted in considerable anxiety amongst carers as to their ongoing recognition as carers, as is outlined in the following theme.

### *The Production of Paranoia*

Perhaps an understandable product of the lack of clarity experienced by carers as outlined in the previous section is a degree of anxiety about likely placement outcomes or possible levels of support from agency workers. This is further exacerbated by the perception that in some instances lack of support may arise from homophobia on the part of social workers. This anxiety about possible homophobia was reported by almost all of the participants (25 people mentioned some form of anxiety, often prefaced by the statement ‘I don’t want to sound paranoid, but...’). Such anxiety has been documented in the lesbian and gay parenting literature (e.g., Lev, 2004), which rightly points out that being ‘paranoid’ about potential discrimination has likely little to do with the ‘faulty thinking’ of lesbian or gay parents, and much more to do with the insidious effects of homophobia and heteronormativity. In other words, due to the intermittent, unpredictable and potentially damaging effects of discrimination, it is entirely logical that lesbian and gay parents (amongst others) should be perpetually on guard for potential instances of discrimination, and thus it is reasonable that this would result in a generalized sense of distrust or suspicion toward those in positions of authority in particular. Elizabeth summarizes this well in the following extract where she refers to the ‘lengthy silence’ that served to reinforce her suspicions that homophobia was playing a role in the lack of placements she and her partner Amy were receiving:

#### Extract 4

Amy: Well just it was taking so long and we knew the numbers of children coming in to the system here and wondering why we weren't getting a placement after having been approved for six months, and just didn't know what was happening, we couldn't get any answers though had our suspicions.

Elizabeth: It's just the lengthy silence

Here Amy presents both herself and Elizabeth as well informed about the foster care system, and thus as justified in making the statement that there was something suspicious about them having no referrals in the six months following their approval, despite there being high numbers of children needing placements in their area. For Fred, however, in the following extract, he had no access to information that could externally clarify his concerns, and thus he was just left with a 'feeling' of something being wrong:

Extract 5

Fred: If it's just a feeling you can't get in there and challenge this process which is dysfunctional. It is better to have it confirmed. I love things on the table because seriously, you can work a personal safety strategy and you can also work out who your allies are out there, and co-opt them and then go into battle. You can't go in without them though – you need to work out who here is on your side.

As mentioned above, Fred didn't have the ability to check his concerns against something that would indicate the veracity of his feelings (which related to the concern that his agency worker

was homophobic). As a result, Fred reported feeling that he has little opportunity to put structures into place that could address his concerns. This extract from Fred is an excellent example of a narrative that many participants reported, namely that they desired to be proactive in addressing potential discrimination. For Fred, however, the lack of clarity or things being ‘on the table’ meant that he couldn’t know who was on his side, nor could he put in place a ‘personal safety strategy’ that would at the very least protect him from harm (other than, of course, being always wary of agency workers, a position that is an unrealistic expectation of any carer). One of the legacies of this lack of any form of clarity was that carers reported being suspicious even when they had clear evidence that would indicate that discrimination was not occurring, as is suggested by the following extract:

#### Extract 6

June: Well a reason was given for why they weren’t placing a second child with us and it was quite a logical reason and I really believe that our case worker would have been honest with us. So I truly believe that it was to do with the reason given, but I know I did go through that stage of ‘oh I wonder if it was because, the supervisor is a macho bloke who has got to admit that he is desperate for placement options and two lesos come along’. The thought crossed my mind that it was discrimination but you have to let that stuff go just to get along.

Here June discusses the fact that whilst she understood and accepted the reason for being denied a second placement, this didn’t preclude her from wondering if there were other factors at play. Importantly, and as this entire theme has demonstrated, this type of suspicion is not unwarranted:

almost all of the carers had some experience of homophobia or discrimination from a worker at some stage during their time as a carer. But as June suggests, and despite experiences of discrimination, lesbian and gay foster carers are required to ‘let that stuff go’ and accept what they are told at face value, rather than perpetuate concerns that agency staff may be as much driven by their own beliefs as they may be driven by ‘logical reasons’. In other words, lesbian and gay foster carers are required to let go of behaviors that potentially function in protective ways (i.e., being cautious about the beliefs of agency workers) in order to get along with workers. Such a requirement does little to affirm the experiences of lesbian and gay carers, nor does it do anything to address the systemic issues that allow child protection worker’s beliefs to shape practice (rather than practice being informed by clear guidelines and policies). The potentially multiple influences upon agency workers in their engagement with lesbian and gay foster carers are highlighted in the following extract:

#### Extract 7

Edward: Look I’ve suspected some workers have issues with me but they wouldn’t actually say anything but you don’t have to say anything to show disapproval, you can show it, there can be undercurrents, body language – there are a whole range of ways people can communicate disapproval and so even if nothing was said – because I am sure that they are sensible people – I am sure they wouldn’t actually say anything to me.

Here Edward is clear that whilst some workers may speak as though they are supportive, their manner may suggest otherwise. For carers such as Edward, however, mannerisms are unlikely to

hold up as ‘evidence’ of discrimination, and thus lesbian and gay foster carers are faced with having to engage with agency workers despite experiencing ‘disapproval’, which potentially only serves to undermine their faith in the likelihood that they will receive adequate support from agency workers.

### *Unique Contribution of Lesbian and Gay Foster Care Practices*

Despite the considerable concerns about support from agency staff as reported by participants in the extracts presented thus far, participants were also very forthcoming about the unique contribution that they make to Australian foster care systems. In response to a question on this topic, all participants had something to offer about their unique contribution, with many providing what were obviously well thought out commitments to care provision. Many of the participants spoke of the unique environment that they provide to children in care, such as indicated in the following extract:

#### Extract 8

Amanda: Well I always think that we provide the safest environment for a child, male or female who has been sexually abused. For example, with our foster daughter who exhibits sexualized behaviors, I feel totally confident with all of our gay male friends that she would be safe with them. It would be ‘excuse me love – take your hand off my neck what do you think you are doing’, you know; ‘you know that’s not yours – that’s my neck’ that sort of thing and it would be loud and

it would be fun. You know, no secrets, no whispering ‘oh you can’t do that’, there’d be none of that, it would be above board and respectful.

In this extract Amanda goes beyond simply asserting that her friends are ‘safe’ (which of course any carer can claim), and instead states specifically how the child in her care is safe and how this particular form of safety benefits her. For a child who exhibits sexualized behaviors, further secrecy or whispering, as Amanda suggests, may do very little to challenge the culture of secrecy that typically surrounds child abuse. Instead, speaking clearly and forthrightly about respecting the space of others holds the potential to model alternate ways for the child to understand her own body and those of others. Other participants, such as Tara, also spoke of the unique benefits that their family configuration offers to foster children:

#### Extract 9

Tara: What was interesting was that it was found in the assessment that it was more appropriate for her to be with a family like ours than to be with a childless heterosexual family. Of course this was really out there and we were waiting for the department to cut that out before it went to court but they didn’t so that was there in court. The psych said her rationale was that all of the children in this family have a diverse range of biological mothers and fathers and that the fathers’ roles in this family are also diverse, some of them are you know, donors and some of them are dads, and so the child in permanent care would not feel like she was the one who was out of it – she wasn’t the only one who wasn’t biologically

related and that that would serve her well in adolescence when feeling different is such a big deal.

Tara's story was relatively unique in the affirmation that she had received from a psychologist whose role it was to assess her family prior to a new placement. What was affirming was not simply that the family were identified as just providing a 'good enough' care environment, but rather that their family and its complex relationship to notions of biological kinship would potentially provide the ideal placement for a foster child, one that would allow her to 'not feel like she was the one who was out of it'. Of course the unique contributions of lesbian and gay foster carers pertained not solely to the benefits for children, but sometimes also for birth parents, as indicated in the following extract:

#### Extract 10

Sarah: I think that their birth dad has clicked that there is no other dad and that is a benefit to his status in the children's life. I mean he is a really is a bit of a crappy guy, personally, so in some ways he wouldn't come across great compared with many other people, but that this at least always him to not feel in direct competition, which can only benefit the relationship between all of us in the long run.

Whilst Sarah is clear that she considers the birth father of her foster children to be a 'bit of a crappy guy', she is nonetheless willing to acknowledge the importance of the ongoing

relationship that the children will have to him, and for the placement to provide opportunities for this to occur. Whilst ‘not feeling in direct competition’ (because the children are placed in a lesbian-headed household) should certainly not be the goal of child protection services, and whilst encouraging fathers to examine and challenge hegemonic masculinities and their role in perpetuating child abuse may be important (Riggs, 2010c), it is nonetheless important to acknowledge, as Sarah does, that the support of birth parents may at times be vital to the success of a placement and the long-term effects of removal upon children.

The extracts presented in this theme provide but a small selection of the many unique factors identified by participants. Others included the sense of community that lesbians and gay men often provide to children, an understanding of what it means to be an outsider, the space that a lesbian-headed household can provide to a young girl who has experienced sexual abuse from a male, the benefits of being two women in a relationship who are likely to both be afforded leeway to undertake a caring role (leeway that may not be afforded to men), and the role modeling that some lesbians and gay men may provide in regard to alternate enactments of gendered behaviors or a commitment to social justice. Importantly, none of the participants appeared to valorize their contribution over those made by other carers, but rather they appeared simply to focus upon what was unique about their own contribution. This is an important point as previous research on lesbian and gay parents (i.e., Lehr, 1999) has identified problems associated with suggesting that white middle-class coupled lesbian or gay parents are ‘better than’ other parents. Instead, and as the extracts in this section illustrate, it is possible to recognize the unique contribution of lesbian and gay foster carers without this requiring the negative construction of other foster carers.

### *Policy/System Response*

In response to a question about the role of policy, 20 of the participants had something to offer about what they thought needed to be clearly addressed by policy. This was despite the fact that over half of these participants lived in states other than Victoria, and hence had no experience of service provision in a lesbian and gay affirmative policy context. Interestingly, participants presented two somewhat contradictory interpretations of policy. The first is indicated in the following extract:

#### Extract 12

Dan: I guess the system does need to positively discriminate toward us if you like. I mean you have to be able to trust the system to sort of shield you from that stuff. Someone needs to be doing that screening and it has to be managed and it has to be very sensitive. Certainly we shouldn't have to be reliant upon the hope that things will be ok – there should be guidelines that make it clear to workers how they should engage.

Here Dan is clear that there is a need for positive discrimination: that in the face of homophobia or heteronormativity it is essential that agency workers are provided with clear information about the specific needs of lesbian and gay foster carers, and that agency workers to some degree should play a 'shielding' role to protect lesbian and gay foster carers from discrimination. As Dan suggests, this would need 'to be very sensitive' (i.e., not done in a paternalistic or

benevolent way), but it was nonetheless the case that participants like Dan advocated for foster carer systems to explicitly engage with lesbian and gay carers *as lesbians and gay men*.

Contrarily, some participants suggested that there *shouldn't* be a specific focus on sexuality:

#### Extract 13

Todd: I was openly gay and I said that from the minute that I was being assessed.

And I wondered at that stage, I wondered if they would give me kids and I actively did not want boys in my care because of the sexuality issue. I thought 'well I don't want allegations' but I realised after a while that girls could make allegations too, even though you are gay they can still make allegations and I finally took on some boys and it was probably the best thing I ever did. So to me the focus shouldn't just be on who is lesbian or who is gay, the focus should be on kids and I think if they were the guidelines, then any worker in a caring profession that does not have an understanding of gay and lesbian should not be a worker.

Full stop.

In this extract Todd appears to imply that a focus upon sexuality resulted in him in effect vetting himself, something that over time he realized was unnecessary (i.e., that he could care for boys as well as girls). For Todd, then, a focus upon sexuality is potentially a negative thing as it closes down rather than opens up options. Focusing on children's needs, from this perspective, must be the primary concern (rather than focusing on the carer's identity *per se*). Importantly, however, Todd recognizes that *all* workers should be competent to work with lesbians and gay men. In other words, whilst Todd encourages the de-emphasizing of sexuality, he does not claim that

sexuality is irrelevant. Rather, his suggestion is that if competency for working with lesbians and gay men was an *a priori* aspect of child protection practice, then sexuality could be less of a focus, and instead more of the focus could be on children. This is an important point as previous research has indicated the risk of ideological or rights-based claims in regards to lesbians or gay men taking precedence over a wider examination of child care and its role in perpetuating particular normative assumptions about children and their ‘best interests’ (e.g., Riggs, 2009). Todd’s suggestions, then, are useful for directing policy that both mandates for adequate training for workers, whilst not endorsing policy that would require lesbians or gay men to be treated differently. The following and final extract provides further clarification of how policies could mandate for the protection of lesbian and gay carers without making policy all about sexuality:

#### Extract 14

Elouise: I know that all foster carers have lots of eyes on us, lots of scrutiny, but often it feels like that is especially the case for us. We have to check in about every little thing we do as carers, but then some of the questions that workers ask when we do check in seem more about their own agendas or beliefs about what is ‘safe’ that might reflect their own prejudices.

Mark: What gets me is that what you are saying is so true, yet there are no checks and balances against workers. We rarely get minutes of meetings, we don’t get opportunities to reflect back to workers their biases or assumptions, and it certainly doesn’t seem like they reflect upon them. There needs to be things in place that ensure that happens. Recently I had a great meeting where there was

my agency worker there as well as the child's worker and their colleague. So there were lots of notes that could be compared. I felt safer knowing that.

In this extract Elouise and Mark discuss what could be done to challenge workers' assumptions about what constitutes 'safe' practices with children. As they both suggest, determinations of safety may at times be as much determined by individual beliefs as they may be by policies. This would suggest that whilst the existence of policy on child safe practices is important, this must sit alongside policy that encourages workers to examine their own beliefs and their role in influencing practice decisions. Mark extends this by suggesting that having in place 'checks and balances' that place workers under scrutiny equal to that placed upon carers could function to facilitate greater reflexivity on the part of workers. The suggestions made by both Elouise and Mark bring together the two previous extracts by acknowledging that whilst there might well need to be specific policies in place that ensure adequate and fair treatment of lesbian and gay foster carers, this does not mean it is necessary to make policy all about sexuality *per se*.

## Conclusions

The findings presented in this paper highlight the utility of narrative research to policy in at least three distinct ways. First, my role as a researcher within, and member of, lesbian and gay parenting communities is one that can usefully be acknowledged as operating to the benefit of all involved. Not only does my involvement ensure the collection of a diverse range of narratives from participants who may otherwise be cautious about talking to a researcher who does not identify as a community member, but my knowledge of the needs of the community as a

competent member ensures that my research questions are driven by a desire to create positive change on the terms of the community, without them necessarily simply reflecting my personal agenda. Second, the collection of narratives presented here demonstrate that whilst there are similarities between the experiences of lesbian and gay foster carers and those of other lesbian and gay parents, there are also unique aspects of the experiences of lesbian and gay foster parents. Understanding what makes these experiences unique is thus a key aspect of developing policy that attends to the needs of this population. And finally, narrative research holds the potential both to draw out broader themes that hold true across the majority of participants (thus providing robust findings that can legitimately inform policy), whilst also attending to the specifics of each participant and the different perspectives that each participant may have within any given theme.

In relation to the research questions, the findings present clear information about what is currently not working in regards to the support of lesbian and gay foster carers (i.e., the lack of clear policy and the reliance upon the goodwill of individual workers; the role that homophobia and heteronormativity play in the ‘paranoia’ experienced by lesbian and gay foster carers; and the need for policy that both mandates for skills for working with lesbians and gay men but that does not overemphasize sexuality), as well as highlighting the unique contribution that lesbian and gay foster carers make to Australian foster care systems.

Overall, the findings provide clear guidance as to changes to policy that would benefit Australian lesbian and gay foster carers. These include: 1) more adequate training for workers to better understand the effects of heteronormativity, the lives of lesbian and gay parents, and the

operations of ‘mundane’ heterosexism, 2) guidance in regard to reflexivity so that all workers continually reflect upon the impact of their beliefs and assumptions upon their practice, 3) the importance of clearly outlining the consequences of discriminatory behavior to agency workers so that lesbian and gay foster carers can see that homophobia is taken seriously, 4) the need to put in place forms of practice that encourage transparency such as minute taking and having more than one worker in attendance, 5) the need for institutional policies that make it clear as to the acceptability (or otherwise) of lesbian and gay applicants for each individual agency, 6) the provision of information to the public (such as on websites) that is explicit about the previous point so that lesbian and gay applicants are not required to approach (particular religiously-affiliated) organizations only to be knocked back, and 7) clear policy about whether or not birth parents are to be consulted in relation to the sexual orientation of prospective foster carers. In sum, all of these points suggest the importance of recognizing that sexuality *does* impact upon services and the perceptions of certain groups of individuals more than it does upon others, and that whilst this may not necessarily require ‘positive discrimination’, it does require clear attention to the implications of social norms and their impact upon lesbian and gay foster carers.

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