

Reassessing the Foster-Care System: Examining the Impact of Heterosexism on Lesbian and Gay Applicants

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*In this essay, Riggs demonstrates how heterosexism shapes foster-care assessment practices in Australia. Through an examination of lesbian and gay foster-care applicants' assessment reports and with a focus on the heteronormative assumptions contained within them, Riggs demonstrates that foster-care public policy and research on lesbian and gay parenting both promote the idea that lesbian and gay parents are always already "just like" heterosexual parents. To counter this idea of "sameness," Riggs proposes an approach to both assessing and researching lesbian and gay parents that privileges the specific experiences of lesbians and gay men and resists the heterosexualization of lesbian and gay families by focusing on some potentially radical differences shaping lesbian and gay lives.*

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Hypatia*, 22, 192-212,  
Copyright Project Muse, DOI: 10.1353/hyp.2006.0073

## Introduction

As this special issue of *Hypatia* highlights, the normative status of heterosexuality in Western societies continues to shape the experiences of all people living under the hegemony of heteropatriarchy. Whether this be through the oppression of certain groups (such as lesbians and gay men) or through the unearned privilege experienced by other groups (such as heterosexual men and women), the assumption of heterosexuality as the norm may thus be understood as thoroughly endemic to both social institutions and individual relations. As a result, those of us who inhabit non-heterosexual subject positions are often expected to account for our sexual identifications by either proving our normality (that is, we are inside the sphere of heteronormativity), or by accepting that our difference from the heterosexual norm constitutes some form of essence. Yet, while these may appear to be the only two choices available, I would suggest that this is only the case if we are to accept sexuality as an a priori fact—as something that exists prior to social inscription.

As I will elaborate throughout this essay, it is therefore necessary to recognize the important distinction between how lesbians and gay men (among others) may find our lives forced into difference (and how this difference is managed or disavowed by the heterosexual majority), and the notion of *radical difference* (one that potentially takes nonnormative experiences and identities as its starting point, rather than as always already being the opposite of a norm). Taking this approach to difference as my starting place, then, I suggest that it is important to develop interpretive frameworks that challenge both heterosexism and heteronormativity, and which seek to validate the broad range of experiences of those of us who identify as lesbian or gay, rather than considering us solely as sexual beings constituted within a heterosexual logic of sameness or difference. In other words, the reduction of lesbian or gay

identities solely to sexuality fails to acknowledge the potentially radical differences in identification between heterosexual and non-heterosexual individuals. These possibly radical differences may hold significant potential in relation to foster-care provision, as I elaborate throughout the essay.

In order to elaborate such an approach to understanding identities, and the ways in which those of us involved in foster-care provision may resist heterosexism, I focus in this essay on the foster-care system in Australia; in particular, the assessment process used to evaluate potential foster carers. My primary reason for doing so is that I myself am a foster carer, and as a white middle-class gay male I have experienced heterosexism within the Australian foster-care system, both within the assessment process and beyond. The writing of this essay thus provides me with a space in which to theorize my own experiences, and also to connect them to both the broader context of heterosexism and to the experiences of other (white) lesbian and gay foster carers with whom I have spoken and who have shared their assessment experiences. It is important, however, to draw attention here to our status as white people, who benefit from the privileges that accrue to us as a result of living in a colonial nation. Our experiences of heterosexism thus occur *simultaneously* with our experiences of race privilege, and our differential experiences of gender (Riggs 2006a).

By taking as my focus the ways in which heterosexism underpins the assessment procedure (and foster-care public policy more broadly), I seek to demonstrate how lesbians and gay men who wish to become foster carers are expected to conform to a particular model of parenting that is primarily based upon the norm of the heterosexual nuclear family. In conjunction with this, I look at research on lesbian and gay parenting, and ask the question, ‘Whose agendas and values are being privileged in this research?’ From this vantage point I go

on to elaborate what Ruthann Robson (1992) has termed the “domestication” of lesbians in the sphere of public policy. Through an examination of the assessment reports of lesbians and gay applicants, I suggest that such domestication is evident in the ways that lesbian and gay men who wish to become foster carers are forced to (a) prove that they are just like potential heterosexual foster carers, (b) teach social workers about heterosexism and lesbian and gay identities, and (c) justify their difference from the heterosexual norm by demonstrating that sexuality is private and doesn’t matter. Together, I suggest that these three factors engender an assessment environment within which lesbians and gay men are implicitly positioned as deviant.

To counter this limiting (and indeed dangerous) approach to assessment, I suggest that we need to reassess the foster-care system, and to challenge the heterosexism that inheres to it. Drawing on Murray Ryburn’s (1991) work on the “myth of assessment,” I propose that foster-care assessment needs both to prioritize the experiential knowledges that all potential foster carers may have and to engage in a critical examination of the assumptions that inform the foster-care system more broadly. In regard to lesbian and gay foster carers, I suggest that we must continue to develop lesbian- and gay-specific theories that privilege our experiences as lesbians and gay men, and which are not designed as add-ons to existing epistemological frameworks, but rather exist in their own right (Clarke 2002). Such an approach, however, would not set out to simply switch positions of power, so that lesbians and gay men were in control (as if that were possible), but instead would examine how power operates within the foster-care system and how it may inform assessment procedures.

One of our goals as lesbian and gay foster carers may thus be to refuse domestication and to seek alternate ways of relating to one another both as lesbians and gay men, and with the children we care for. This may entail recognizing the potentially *radical* differences that exist

between and within lesbian and gay relationships, rather than perpetuating the notion that we are “all the same” (Pollack and Vaughn 1987).<sup><1></sup> While solidarity may be useful for challenging heterosexism en masse, we should not slip into a reliance upon sameness that elides the important differences that structure our lives through practices of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and ability (to name but a few).<sup><2></sup> Thus I suggest that rather than developing (yet another) generic model for assessing or understanding our lives as lesbians and gay men, we need to examine critically the specificities of our experiences. In this way, the foster-care system may be better placed to challenge heterosexism and to examine its complicity in social practices that are oppressive to lesbian and gay foster carers.

### **Heterosexism in the Foster-Care System and Lesbian and Gay Parenting Research**

The foster-care system in Australia is informed by a range of state-specific laws that govern the application and administration of foster-care placements. Here, I focus upon the laws that pertain to South Australia, as the data I analyze come from lesbian and gay carers who live in this state. These state-specific laws make explicit reference to what constitutes a family and a parent, implicitly positioning lesbians and gay men as being outside of these two categories. As a result, while the laws governing foster care in South Australia (primarily the Children’s Protection Act 1993 [CPA] and the Family and Community Services Act 1972 [FACSA]) purport to maintain a nondiscriminatory stance in relation to family and community services, they may more transparently be understood as maintaining the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable parents by privileging the heterosexual nuclear family as the most appropriate site within which to place children (see Riggs 2004a, 2006b, for a further elaboration of heterosexism in foster-care policy). Some examples of this conflation of the categories of ‘family’ and ‘parent’ with

heterosexuality include the CPA statement that defines family as: “the child’s immediate family (including all guardians) and the child’s extended family (that is to say, all other persons to whom the child is related by blood or marriage)” (part 1, section 6). Here, the term family is reserved for a child’s guardians (which lesbians and gay men are not eligible to become through adoption according to state law), and for a child’s relations “by blood or marriage.” These definitions exclude lesbians and gay men in the majority from the category ‘family,’ as laws governing access to in vitro fertilization technologies and same-sex marriage prohibit many lesbians and gay men from having “blood or marriage” relations to the children they care for. Obviously this is not the case for all lesbians and gay men (some of who may have children from previous heterosexual relationships or may have had children through surrogacy or donor insemination), yet the implication is that the CPA does not value families located outside the boundaries of heterosexual marriage or procreation. As a result, the term ‘family’ as the CPA defines it refers predominantly to the heterosexual, biological relations of a child.

Similarly, the terms used in the FACSAs to define parent work to marginalize lesbians and gay men: “‘Parent’ includes a person who has . . . adopted a child in accordance with the law of this State, or the law of another State or Territory of the Commonwealth. . . . ‘Step-parent’ in relation to a child means a person (not being a parent of the child) who is married to a parent of the child” (part 1). Again, as lesbians and gay men are ineligible for adoption within Australia and do not have access to state-sanctioned marriage, we are thus not defined as parents under FACSAs. The implication is that while heterosexual foster carers may have some claim to the category of ‘family’ through their ability to locate themselves within the definition of parent provided by the FACSAs, lesbian and gay carers do not.

Taking these definitions of family and parenting as a starting point, we may thus better understand how the state sanctions the heterosexual family. The objectives of the FACSIA are clearly stated as: “Promot[ing] the welfare of the community generally and of individuals, families and groups within the community; and promot[ing] the dignity of the individual and the welfare of the family as the basis of the welfare of the community” (division 2, 10). Here, “the family” is taken a priori to represent the “basis of the welfare of the community.” In light of the definitions of family examined above, the basis of the welfare of the community is thus taken to be the heterosexual nuclear family—all other forms of family are thus supplemental, and therefore not intrinsic to the community’s welfare.

This construction of what constitutes the welfare of the community raises the question, as one reviewer of this essay suggested, of why lesbians and gay men are increasingly deemed to be acceptable foster carers, but not acceptable adopters. I would suggest that this is partly because the foster-care system in Australia is currently in crisis, and in desperate need of carers, which results in lesbians and gay men being deemed an acceptable (albeit second-best) source of potential carers (Riggs 2004a). Hicks (1996, 2000) has suggested in the context of the United Kingdom that lesbian and gay carers often have children placed with them who have disabilities, or who are especially hard to place. While this was not reported by the carers that I spoke to, it certainly supports a second-best logic in relation to lesbian and gay parenting, and one that I would suggest informs the prohibition of lesbian and gay adoptions in Australia. In other words, as adoption is currently quite limited in Australia (as opposed to the United States, where it is far more commonplace), any children available for adoption will be reserved for heterosexual parents.

These points about access to adoption versus foster care for lesbians and gay men thus demonstrate how the above constructions of ‘parents’ and ‘families’ within the FACS and CPA position lesbians and gay men as at best second-rate parents and at worst unacceptable, deviant parents. These assumptions inform foster-care assessment practices, and thus encourage lesbian and gay applicants to prove their normality by demonstrating their approximation to the heterosexual norm (Riggs 2005). Potential lesbian and gay foster carers are thus implicitly encouraged to accept the normative status of heterosexuality, which entails recognizing our outsider status as lesbians and gay men. As I elaborate in the next section, foster-care assessment procedures entail a range of heterosexist assumptions that in effect deny the experiences of lesbians and gay men.

The assumptions informing foster-care assessment that I have just outlined similarly inform much of the existing research on lesbian and gay parents. In particular, such research often seeks to demonstrate that lesbian and gay parents are just like heterosexual parents, and that children raised in lesbian- and gay-headed households are not at risk of poor developmental outcomes or of being abused (for example, American Psychological Association 1995; Tasker and Golombok 1997). Such “just like” accounts

reinforce the notion that difference (from the norm) is dangerous and indicative of deficiency and that sameness is safe and desirable. Although this account does not explicitly portray lesbians as deviant ‘others,’ it places them on the margins of our understanding of the family, to be compared normatively with heterosexual families. This account positions lesbians as equal to heterosexuals. That is, heterosexuality is constructed as the norm for equality. (Clarke 2002, 212)



Thus, as Victoria Clarke suggests, research on lesbian and gay parenting that takes a “just like” approach often adopts a defensive or apologetic posture, and in so doing implicitly accepts the designation of lesbian and gay parents as intrinsically deviant.

Ruthann Robson has termed this “just like” approach “domestication.” She suggests that “domestication . . . describes a process of substituting one way of thinking for another” so that one appears as if it were normal or common sense (1992, 172). Lesbian and gay parents are domesticated when we are accepted as legitimate parents on the terms set under heteropatriarchy—for example, we are permitted to be foster carers if we accept the definitions of parenting and families as defined in foster-care public policy (Riggs 2006b). We are rendered acceptable, then, by taking on board a system of rules that effectively excludes our experiences. Thus as Robson suggests, advocates for lesbian and gay parenting rights typically focus on the “manipulation of law to achieve desired results and not on challenges to the underlying premises of law” (174). The outcome of this is that the norms of the heterosexual nuclear family (as enshrined in the law) become the norms for all types of parents. Lesbians and gay men are expected either to accept this or to be positioned as deviant. As I elaborate in the next section, the assessment process effectively locates lesbian and gay applicants within a heteronormative framework, thus discouraging us from challenging heterosexism or voicing any of our experiences that do not conform to the norms for parenting that circulate under heteropatriarchy.

### **Power and Privilege in Foster-Care Assessment**

In his work on foster-care assessment, Murray Ryburn (1991) has suggested that the notions of ‘objectivity’ that inform social work practice engender a power dynamic within foster-care assessment that privileges the worldviews of practitioners over applicants. In addition to this, and

following on from the previous section on foster-care public policy, I would suggest that a reliance upon objectivity works to privilege a heteronormative account of what constitutes good parenting practices,” thus effectively marginalizing lesbian and gay applicants. As a result, the moral assumptions that inform social work are hidden through recourse to the rhetoric of objectivity, whereby social workers are positioned as being able to discover the truth about applicants and to judge their worthiness as potential foster carers against a standard for caring that is promoted as being self-evident. Yet, as I have elaborated elsewhere (Riggs 2004b, 2005), these notions of scientific proof may instead be understood as tools for warranting heterosexual privilege and for enforcing the normative status of heterosexual parenting.

In addition to these moral assumptions about what constitutes a good foster carer are a range of assumptions about appropriate child-adult relations. While it is understandable that any foster-care model needs to take as its starting place a concern for child welfare, this is typically promoted through the normative assumption of the heterosexual nuclear family as the model for adult-child relations: a model that is in many ways premised upon the disavowal of non-heterosexual parents. One of the ways in which this occurs is through the construction of lesbians and gay men as deviant. In his work on lesbian and gay parenting, Eric Rofes (1998) suggests that the binaries of innocent and deviant have long been used in relation to children in order to warrant a construction of lesbians and gay men as inherently pathological, and thus unable to care for children. As I discuss in the next section, these constructions of innocence and deviance are often played out in the assessment of lesbian and gay foster-care applicants, whereby lesbians and gay men are expected to discount our sexuality and thus prove that we can have healthy relationships with the children in our care (Riggs 2004c).

Both claims to objectivity and notions of a normative model for parenting and child-adult relations (premised on the pathologization of nonnormative parents), thus appear to be endemic to foster-care assessment in Australia. This demonstrates the power that inheres to foster-care assessment, and the implications of this for lesbian and gay applicants. In particular, it shows how the foster-care system more broadly brings a range of biases to bear upon lesbian and gay applicants, the result being that we often have the burden of proof to demonstrate our ability to provide adequate foster care, far in excess of that placed upon heterosexual applicants. This power imbalance within foster-care assessment thus produces particular acceptable lesbian and gay identities (Hicks 2000). In other words, lesbian and gay applicants are required to subordinate our own abilities as lesbians and gay men in order to demonstrate that we do not challenge the heteronormativity that structures the foster-care system, and thus that we are not militant or radical in our sexuality, politics, or parenting styles (Hicks 2000; Riggs 2004a).

One important point that I raise here in regard to what I see as the endemic heterosexism within foster-care assessment and the ways in which this is played out in the power relations between carers and workers, is that there is a great need for workers to be accountable for both their own heterosexism, and for the impact it may have upon lesbian and gay applicants. My suggestion here is not that individual workers are to blame per se for heterosexism, but rather--much like the need for those of us who identify as white to be accountable for our race privilege and our involvement in the propping up of racist structures simply because of our location as white people--that there is a need for individual (nominally heterosexual) workers to take up the challenge of identifying the ways in which heterosexism may impact upon their practice (Hicks 2005). Such an approach would not aim to position lesbian and gay applicants as inherently good or oppressed in relation to supposedly bad social workers, but rather to look at how the

assessment procedure may work in the service of heterosexism and how workers may be complicit with this. As I elaborate following the analysis, the potential for challenging heterosexism may take any number of forms, some of which I explore in the context of radical differences in lesbian and gay families.

### **Case Examples of Heterosexism in Foster-Care Assessment**

#### ***“Just like a normal parent.”***

This first example of heterosexism in foster-care assessment demonstrates what Tamsin Wilton (1996) has termed the heterosexualization of lesbians and gay men. Wilton suggests that this occurs when the logic of heterorelationality is applied to lesbian and gay relationships, the result being that lesbians and gay men are read as performing expectations and practices in their relationships that are similar to those found within heterosexual relationships (Pollack 1987). Thus, for example, the assessment report for Donna and Tina<sup>3</sup> suggests that:

Donna is more inclined towards a hands on approach to child raising as she already has a child of her own from a previous heterosexual marriage, while Tina may be more likely to help out in more indirect ways, for example by facilitating discussions with social workers and by supporting Donna. Tina also would be less likely to take a hands on approach as she is currently working full time.

In this example, Donna and Tina’s parenting practices are interpreted in the social worker’s report as mimicking a traditional heterosexual nuclear family—one partner stays at home to care for the children, while the other goes out and works. I do not intend to suggest here that Donna and Tina do not do the things suggested in the report (that is, already have a child or work full time), but rather that the report structures these facts so that they can be read as being just like a

heterosexual couple. This is used to emphasize Donna and Tina's sameness in relation to heterosexual modes of parenting.

This focus on no difference is more explicitly presented in the following assessment report for Mark and Andrew: "It is the workers' opinion, based on our observations of Mark and Andrew's interpersonal skills in a group setting with a range of people from diverse backgrounds, that the issue of their being a same-sex couple will not have a negative impact on their ability to foster." Similar to the previous example, while this may seem at first to support Mark and Andrew as applicants, it does so by emphasizing that their experiences of difference bear no relation to their parenting skills. This effectively denies some of the reasons why they may well have "interpersonal skills" that are effective in working with "a range of people from diverse backgrounds," thus disavowing some of the potentially radical differences they may bring to parenting. As I will suggest in the next set of examples, this denial of some of the potentially radical differences that may shape the lives of lesbians and gay men can also result in lesbian and gay applicants having to prove that they are not different; radical or otherwise. Thus social workers may not only locate lesbian and gay applicants within a framework of sameness, but they may also expect lesbian and gay applicants to explain away their sexual identities.

### *Justifying Difference, Accounting for Sexuality*

All of the assessment reports included here give considerable attention to accounting for the applicants' sexuality. Yet, as Hicks (1996, 2000) suggests in his work on lesbian and gay foster-care assessment in the United Kingdom, such is most often not the case for heterosexual applicants—their heterosexuality is assumed. In the following example, Sarah and Susan are asked to account for how their sexuality may impact upon children in their care. "Sarah and

Susan have demonstrated considerable knowledge of how to deal with discrimination, and would actively work to support children in their care if faced with discrimination at school. They believe that they have a supportive network of friends and contacts within their local school, which will prevent such discrimination occurring.” This report suggests that the focus of discrimination should be for lesbians and gay men to justify their difference or to prevent discrimination by having a supportive network of friends and contacts. Such a reading of discrimination does little to challenge heterosexual privilege or to examine how schools (for example) need to address heterosexism within the classroom and with educators, rather than perpetuating the belief that it is solely up to lesbians and gay men to defend or protect ourselves against discrimination (Clarke 2001). This example demonstrates that when assessment reports acknowledge sexual difference (that is, when they don’t focus solely on sameness), lesbian and gay applicants have to justify how their difference (as some form of essence) will be managed in accordance with particular normative views about parenting, sexuality, and identities.

This is also evident in assessment reports that attempt to account for lesbians’ and gay men’s sexualities by denying them. For example: “Anne and Mary present themselves as having a secure, healthy relationship, and were not demonstrably or overly affectionate with one another during the assessment process. They appear to be a very private couple who are comfortable with themselves.” Anne and Mary are ‘desexed’—their sexuality is represented as being unthreatening and as something that is private rather than public, the implication being that their sexuality is invisible. Kareen Malone and Rose Cleary suggest that in this way “lesbians . . . are put into conceptual categories that leave them degendered and without desire—desexed in both senses” (2002, 274).

Degendering and desexing lesbians within foster-care assessment may be distinguished from the rhetoric of “just like,” in that it doesn’t simply seek to normalize or heterosexualize lesbians’ sexuality, but rather it seeks to completely refuse (or at the very least privatize) their sexuality. This effectively re-closets lesbian applicants, and thus implicitly positions their sexual identifications as invalid or inappropriate. Such examples of heterosexism are also evident in the ways in which lesbian and gay applicants are expected to explain their sexual identifications to social workers.

### ***Teaching the Social Worker***

In her research on the ways in which textbooks on women pay only token attention to lesbianism, Celia Kitzinger argued that “ignorance is something in which many people have vested interests, and consequently take care to maintain” (1990, 126). Ignorance may thus be understood as an active choice not to know or learn about something that is outside of your own experience. In relation to foster-care assessment, this choice not to know epitomizes the privilege that heterosexual social workers bring to the assessment procedure. Heterosexual social workers may expect lesbians and gay men to “learn” about their specific situation (being gay) in a way that is not expected of heterosexual applicants. For example, “Stuart and Ben have already demonstrated commitment to training specific to their situation by reading literature [on lesbian and gay foster carers] provided by the worker.” The assumption here is that Stuart and Ben should read literature “specific to their situation,” which belies the fact that heterosexual applicants are expected to just “read the literature” (with no reference to “their specific situation”, that is, sexuality), and that social workers themselves often appear not to have read the literature on lesbian and gay foster carers.

Mark and Andrew, for example, are reported to have “spent considerable time during the assessment process relating to the assessment workers their experiences of ‘coming out,’ and their own struggles with sexuality. The workers were thus able to have a better picture of them as people, and to understand how the experiences of lesbian and gay men are different to those of heterosexual people.” While this may appear to be a positive account of learning and sharing information, it demonstrates how the workers had chosen ignorance beforehand and were thus reliant on Mark and Andrew to relate and explain their experiences to the assessment workers. As Kitzinger pointed out, the expectation “that ‘we’ teach ‘them’ about our oppression may constitute one form of that oppression” (1990, 130). This suggests that there is always the danger that lesbians and gay men who do not appropriately educate their assessment workers may be represented less positively in their assessment report by ignorant social workers. Lesbian and gay applicants are thus placed (yet again) in the position whereby they have to actively justify their ability to parent by refuting social workers’ stereotypes, or by educating them on lesbian and gay relationships.

Together, these three examples of heteronormativity and heterosexism within the assessment process demonstrate how the foster-care system marginalizes lesbian and gay applicants. Furthermore, it demonstrates how lesbian and gay applicants are expected to perform the subject position “appropriate carer”—to convince social workers of the benefits of promoting their application appropriately. As I suggested in the introduction, lesbians and gay men are encouraged to prove their sameness (and it would appear here that this is the most common route taken within assessment reports), while the reports examined here do not give voice to a discourse of difference of any kind. In the following section, I explore possible alternatives for



assessment with lesbian and gay applicants that require a shift within the assessment procedure itself.

### **Ways Forward—Alternate Modes of Assessment**

In this final section, I wish to explore two related concepts that may be useful for developing alternate modes of foster-care assessment, and which may assist in challenging heterosexism in assessment procedures. The first draws again upon the work of Murray Ryburn (1991), in his suggestion that assessment practices need to be changed so as to involve applicants as active co-facilitators. Such an approach requires critical examination of the power dynamics that often adhere to the assessment process and involves consideration of the factors that prevent active collaboration. The second point relates to the issue of collaboration and focuses on how lesbian and gay applicants may represent their lives in ways that destabilize, rather than conform to, heteronormative expectations of foster carers. This entails paying attention to the social practices that shape lesbian and gay identifications, in particular, the potentiality for developing alternate ways of relating to one another and the children we care for that do not rely upon notions of either essential sameness or difference.

With respect to reassessing the foster-care system, I follow Ryburn (1991) in proposing that social workers need to examine the utility of employing concepts such as ‘objectivity’ in their work. Feminists have long critiqued the concept of objectivity for the value assumptions that inhere to it and the particular worldviews that it promotes (Cosgrove 2003; Haraway 1988). I thus suggest that it has little place within foster-care assessments, which are intimately enmeshed in a broad range of social, political, and moral frameworks. While there can be no doubt about the reality of abuse that children in care have experienced and the need for guidelines around

how to engage with foster children, this need not translate into a prescription for parenting that normalizes particular familial situations that may often take the heterosexual nuclear family as their starting place.

With regard to incorporating methods for validation into assessment procedures without necessarily reinforcing one type of parenting, workers may find that an approach that takes the experiences of applicants as its starting point (rather than one that starts from a list of predetermined questions) engenders a more collaborative approach to foster-care assessment. Obviously the foster-care system in Australia is currently configured so that applicants need to demonstrate their abilities in certain areas, but this need not necessarily translate into a prescriptive model for foster-care assessment. Indeed, assessment workers may work with applicants to explore the assumptions that underpin certain expectations, the result being that skills such as critical engagement may be usefully mentioned in reports in order to demonstrate an applicant's ability to think creatively, a useful skill for working with children in care.

An approach that values collaboration, and which sees applicants as co-facilitators of the assessment process (rather than as interviewees or respondents), may thus allow lesbian and gay applicants to work with assessment workers to examine and challenge the heterosexism informing foster-care policy. This may entail workers and applicants exploring heterosexual privilege, questioning the ways in which lesbian and gay applicants (among others) are marginalized within the foster-care system, and developing responses that refuse the expectation that lesbian or gay parents/applicants will be "just like" heterosexual parents/applicants. This focus on lesbian and gay applicants' specific knowledges may work to create a space for such challenges to be responded to by the foster-care system more broadly, such as has occurred in the

United Kingdom over the past decade through the work of the Lesbian and Gay Foster and Adoptive Parents Network (Hicks and McDermott 1999).

An important outcome of challenges to heterosexism in the foster-care system would be the privileging of lesbian and gay accounts of parenting. Intimately related to this is the need to recognize the many (potentially radical) differences that exist within and between lesbian and gay relationships, and which may be of importance for working with children in care (Clarke 2002; Malone and Cleary 2002). Radical difference may include an approach to parenting within some lesbian and gay households whereby particular gender norms and expectations are either explicitly challenged or at the very least not actively reinforced. This may be a particularly useful approach for some foster carers working with children whose experiences of violence have resulted from the behaviors of birth parents who rigidly reinforce particular gender norms. While there is the potential that challenging gender norms may be experienced as threatening to a child's own beliefs around gender, it is nonetheless the case that living in a lesbian- or gay-headed household may help children who have experienced these forms of domestic violence to recognize alternate ways of understanding gender norms. So, for example, a boy who has grown up with a violent father who derided women and punished the child for engaging in behaviors considered feminine may gain a lot by living with a lesbian parent. This is not of course to say that lesbians (for example) are inherently nonviolent or predisposed to challenging gender norms. Rather, my point is that there is the potential for a child living in a lesbian-headed household to experience a radically different set of gender behaviors.

Similarly, a lesbian- or gay-headed household that refuses to identify a pair of masculine and feminine figures, and that privileges the role that one or more parents who are same-sex attracted may play in parenting, may be useful for children who have experienced

abuse within a heterosexual family based on the prioritization of masculine and feminine gender roles. In other words, not having to live with a “mum and dad” may be useful for a child who has experienced mums and dads as being abusive. In contrast to this, there may also be the potential for some lesbian- or gay-headed families to engage in radically different forms of gender behaviors that demonstrate to children the contingent nature of gender norms. For example, a child who grows up with a butch lesbian parent may learn a lot of radically different things in comparison with a child who grows up with a heterosexual parent or a lesbian parent who does not identify as butch. Of course, none of these approaches to parenting are necessarily better than any others, but they can help children who have experienced oppressive gender norms to conceive of other ways of relating to people.

While examples such as these are not inherent to lesbian and gay headed households, and while heterosexual carers may also challenge gender norms, the dismissal of difference within foster-care assessment, or the lack of attention to radical difference, may constitute a form of heterosexism that requires attention. Thus my previous suggestion for reassessing the foster-care system may be one productive way of maintaining our focus on the specificities of experience by valuing the knowledges that each applicant brings to the assessment process.

Such a reassessment also requires lesbian and gay applicants to look at our own relations to the sexual identifications that we make, and the way this positions us in certain ways through heteronormative parenting practices. This may help to create a space for us to engage with Michel Foucault’s suggestion that “to question ourselves on our relation to homosexuality is more than simply having the desire for sexual relations with someone of the same sex, even if it is important; it’s desiring a world where these relations are possible” (1996, 370). Foucault’s suggestion here is not a utopian vision of the world, within which lesbian and gay relationships

and identifications are “just as” acceptable or validated as heterosexual relationships—such an approach would only serve to reinforce assumptions of sameness, and thus discount lesbian- and gay-specific experiences. Rather, I believe that Foucault was calling for a politics of lesbian and gay identifications that refuses to take as its starting point the terms for sexuality set under heteropatriarchy. In other words, a notion of radical difference, which takes lesbian and gay knowledges as its starting point, may critically examine how lesbian and gay identifications are often forced into a relation to heterosexuality (whether it be to refute heterosexuality or to engage with it as its Other). I would suggest that in contrast to this relationship to the heteronorm and in the vein of queer theory, it may be useful to develop modes of relating and parenting that recognize the validity of non-heterosexual identities in their own right—as a form of radical alterity that is not easily subsumed within a heterosexual logic of identification—rather than as simply in juxtaposition to heterosexual identities. This is not to suggest a naïve standpoint that ignores the ongoing histories of oppression and discrimination that lesbians and gay men face: to do so would be to deny our location within specific social locations. What I am suggesting, rather, is that just because our lives have been forced into difference (Raymond 1992), it does not have to be the case that we continue to privilege the modes of difference (and their location within the binaries of inside/outside) promoted under heteropatriarchy. Thus, as Stephen Hicks suggests, we may understand the categories ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ not as fixed identities, but as “ways of knowing or thinking about the social world” (2000, 159).

Throughout this essay I have elaborated some of the complex ways in which both assessment workers and lesbians and gay foster-care applicants may be rendered complicit with practices of heterosexism, and how lesbians and gay men may be encouraged to accept the normative status of the heterosexual nuclear family in order to justify our ability to care for

children. In other words, by expecting lesbian or gay foster-care applicants to justify our differences or prove that we can parent just like heterosexual applicants, the foster-care system in Australia promotes a heterosexual norm. In relation to lesbian and gay foster-care applicants, it is thus important that we continue to examine how acceptable subject positions are produced, and whose particular worldview they privilege. Thus, contrary to assumptions of objectivity within social work practice, I propose that assessment workers and applicants need to work together in order to recognize the very complex ways in which heterosexism is played out within foster-care policy, and how this may be resisted by focusing on the specificities of lesbian and gay experiences.

The three examples of heterosexism and heteronormativity that I have provided are but some of many evident in foster-care policy and assessment (for more, see Hicks 1996, 1997, 2000; Riggs 2004a). The relative recentness and scarcity of research on lesbian and gay foster parenting would thus suggest that this area requires continued focus from academics, policy makers, and practitioners, with particular attention paid to the differences among foster-care systems both within and between locations and the potential for change that examining heterosexist practices presents. Interventions such as those of the Lesbian and Gay Foster and Adoptive Parents Network would suggest that it is possible to challenge heterosexism while at the same time working with children in need of care. Indeed, as I have previously suggested, the foster-care system in Australia is in desperate need of foster carers, and is thus beginning to recognize the importance of working with lesbian and gay communities. While this would currently appear to result in a “second-best” mentality in regard to lesbian and gay carers, it would still appear to be an important time for critiquing and reassessing the foster-care system. As I have suggested, this should entail a focus on the assessment process itself, and on the range

of lesbian and gay identifications that it welcomes. We as lesbians and gay men may thus continue to explore practices of relationality that privilege our experiences, and which resist the framework of heteropatriarchy and its assumptions of sameness or difference.

## Notes

I would first like to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Kaurna people, the First Nations people upon whose land I live in South Australia. In so doing, I recognize the considerable privilege that I experience as a descendant of white colonizers, who continue to benefit from the genocide and dispossession of indigenous nations. I thank the other foster carers who shared their assessment experiences, Helen for her knowledge of the foster-care system, and, as always, thanks to Greg for support and proofreading, and to our foster child Gary, for making this all worthwhile.

1. As I elaborate following on from the analysis, the ways in which difference is managed within foster-care assessments may be countered by some of the radically different ways in which some lesbians and gay men parent. This is not to assume that all lesbian and gay parents will desire to parent in this way or that it is the only (or best) way to challenge heterosexism. Rather, my point is to elaborate how difference need not be understood as an aspect of sameness: that lesbians and gay men (for example) need not be co-opted into a heterosexual framework in order to be effective care givers.

2. Indeed, this pertains to the present essay, wherein I use the terms *lesbian and gay applicants* and *lesbian and gay parents*, when it is important to recognize that the experiences of lesbians and gay men differ greatly in regards to parenting and heterosexism more broadly.

3. All foster-care applicants' names have been changed to protect privacy. Access to assessment reports was gained through informal relations with other lesbian and gay foster carers, who are permitted to share their individual reports as desired.

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