

# Perceptions of Support Among Australian Lesbian and Gay Foster Carers

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## **Abstract**

While a growing number of Australian foster care agencies are actively recruiting lesbians and gay men as potential foster carers, few agencies or states have guidelines, policies or legislation explicitly aimed at working with this population. Where guidelines do exist, they carry with them no legislative force, just as much of the legislation relating to registration of foster carers across Australian states provides no legal protection for lesbians or gay men. Where policies do exist, they tend to enshrine a liberal account of sexuality, where individuals are treated as equal before the law, an approach that can function to ignore the discrimination that lesbians and gay men face. The research presented in this chapter begins the work of mapping out some of the potential relationships between guidelines, policy and legislation and the experiences of support from foster care agencies reported by lesbian and gay carers across four Australian states. Findings suggest differences between states in relation to perceived levels of support from both agency workers and the broader community, in addition to differences in the key sources of support reported by participants and their perception of the utility of guidelines for agency workers whose role it is to support lesbian or gay foster carers. Suggestions are tentatively made from these findings in relation to the limitations of adopting a liberal approach to working with

lesbian and gay foster carers, and the need to further investigate the effects of policies, guidelines and legislation upon this population.

Key works: lesbian and gay foster carers, liberalism, support needs, policy, legislation

## **Introduction**

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. 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. 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 and retain sufficient numbers of foster carers to meet the placement needs of children removed from their birth families.

One 'solution' to the lack of available foster carers explored recently by a range of foster care agencies across Australia has been the consideration of a more diverse range of applicants. Moving beyond the heterosexual nuclear family, some agencies

now accept applications from lesbians and gay men interested in becoming foster carers. Yet, and as has been suggested in the context of the UK,

Despite the liberalization of legislation and professional practice in the field of social work, the reality is that gay and lesbian parents parent in a homophobic world and risk rejection by family, friends and wider society.

(Family Futures Consortium 2004, cited in Mallon 2006, 93)

This risk of rejection is compounded for Australian lesbian and gay foster carers by the relative lack of specific guidelines, policies or legislation for supporting or protecting lesbian or gay foster carers (as will be outlined in the following section). Furthermore, where guidelines, policies or legislation does exist, it tends to presume a model of participation based upon liberal individualism, where the assumption is of a 'level playing field' upon which all individuals can enact the rights that are nominally accorded to them. Such an assumption runs dangerously close to functioning as homophobia (taken here as referring to explicit violence or intentional discrimination against non-heterosexual people), as it holds the potential to ignore or discount discrimination experienced by lesbian and gay foster carers, or indeed to suggest that, in the context of a supposed 'level playing field', that lesbians and gay men somehow bring social marginalisation upon themselves (see Hicks & Watson, 2003, for a critique of the liberal model in social work).

With this point about the failure of a liberal approach to working with lesbian and gay foster carers in mind, the present research sought to examine perceptions of support among Australian lesbian and gay foster carers, and to place these perceptions in a relationship to the existence (or otherwise) of mechanisms in each state for

supporting lesbian and gay foster carers. While the intention was not to claim a causal link between actual support and perceptions of support, the purpose of the research was nonetheless to provide some indication of possible differences in the latter across states, and thus to provide an overall picture of experiences of care among a sample of Australian lesbian or gay foster carers. In the sections that follow, previous Australian research on lesbian and gay foster carers is summarised, in addition to information being presented on the current status of foster care legislation across the four states involved in this research and the differing approaches to recruitment of carers across the states. Quantitative findings are then reported from an online survey involving 60 Australian lesbian or gay foster carers. The chapter concludes with the suggestion that social workers need to move beyond a liberal approach to social work practice with lesbians and gay men, and that further attention must be paid to the relationship between the role of policies and legislation and perceptions or experiences of support amongst lesbian and gay foster carers.

### **Previous Research**

While there is a growing body of research on the experiences of Australian lesbian and gay parents (e.g., McNair, Dempsey, Wise & Perlesz, 2002; Short, 2007), none of this research has specifically focused on the experiences of lesbian and gay *foster* parents. Recent research conducted by the author, however, has produced findings in relation to the experiences of Australian lesbian and gay foster carers that echo international research (for summaries of the latter see Hicks, 1996; 2000; Mallon, 2006). For example, findings suggest that assessment and training practices in Australia continue to rely upon heteronormative understandings of parenting and

families (Riggs, 2007). Specifically, participants in this Australian research reported that they were required to account for their capacity to provide opposite-sex role models and to prove that they were ‘just like’ heterosexual applicants. Participants also reported feeling an injunction to ‘teach social workers’ about the lives of lesbians and gay men in order to be assessed as viable applicants. Examples such as these highlight the ongoing existence of heteronormativity within Australian foster care systems.

Other empirical research conducted by the author and colleagues has found that lesbian and gay foster carers report that once they have children placed with them there is an ongoing requirement to accept particular developmental outcomes, such as a willingness to promote gender normative behaviours among foster children (Riggs & Augoustinos, 2009). Participants also reported explicit homophobia from social workers as well as the refusal of some agencies to match adolescents who identify as gay with gay carers.

While the Australian literature on lesbian and gay foster carers is in its relative infancy, and while there are legislative difference between Australia, the US and UK in relation to the purpose of foster care (as outlined in the introduction to this chapter), the Australian literature has produced similar findings to those in the US and UK. This would suggest that issues of heteronormativity and indeed homophobia persist despite (or as suggested earlier, potentially because of) a liberal approach to social work practice in Australia. At least one reason for this persistence of discrimination against lesbian and gay foster carers may be the relative lack of clear legislation, policies and recruitment campaigns, as outlined in the following section.

### **Current Legislative, Policy and Recruitment Contexts**

It is important to note from the onset that laws pertaining to foster care across the eight Australian jurisdictions do not explicitly prohibit lesbians and gay men from applying to become foster parents. This does not mean, however, that all of the relevant laws explicitly *protect* lesbian and gay foster parents. To explain further: Of the eight jurisdictions that govern foster care provision across Australia, only one explicitly legislates against discrimination on the basis of sexuality. The New South Wales *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act, 1998* states that “Children's services must also have regard to the provisions of the *Anti-Discrimination Act, 1977*”. The Act referred to here (one that is New South Wales-specific) explicitly legislates (in Part 4C) against ‘discrimination on the grounds of homosexuality’. As such, foster care legislation in New South Wales would appear to offer protection to lesbian and gay foster parents or applicants.

In relation to the other three states included in the present research, the South Australian *Family and Community Services Act, 1972* prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and marital status (among other things), though it does not explicitly name sexuality in this list. Discrimination on the basis of marital status, however, in the context of a country that prohibits marriage between non-heterosexual individuals, would at least in part appear to provide some form of protection for non-heterosexual people (i.e., that non-heterosexual couples cannot be excluded from consideration as applicants on the basis of their marital status). Section 3 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act, 2005* of Victoria clarifies the term ‘domestic partner’ as referring to unmarried people living in “a genuine domestic basis (irrespective of gender)”, thus providing at least nominal recognition of relationships between non-heterosexual people. The Queensland *Child Protection Act, 1999*, however, provides no such

clarification that would offer at least some recognition of non-heterosexual relationships or individuals.

It is also important to note that the portions of the Acts cited above governing the registration of foster carers in *all* jurisdictions other than New South Wales (due to its evocation of the *Anti-Discrimination Act*) in some way implicitly allow for discrimination against lesbian and gay applicants. The Queensland *Child Protection Act 1999* is a good example of this, in its criteria for approval of an individual as a carer, which includes the catch all requirement that both “the applicant is a suitable person to be an approved foster carer” and “all members of the applicant’s household are suitable persons to associate on a daily basis with children”. As it would be fair to state that social and individual opinions on ‘suitability’ often shift, it must be recognised that the *lack* of explicit protection for lesbian and gay foster carers in all but one jurisdiction, along with the provision of catch-all criteria in regards to the approval of applicants, translates into a legal context wherein the position of lesbian and gay applicants is tenuous. This is exemplified by the fact that some (religious-oriented) foster care agencies across Australia do not accept applications by lesbians or gay men, as many of the participants in Riggs and Augoustinos (2009) reported.

It is important to clarify here that in outlining the lack of legal sanction provided to lesbian and gay foster carers, an argument is not here being made that registration as a carer in regard to lesbians and gay men is an ‘equal rights’ issue *per se*. As Hicks (2005) outlines in the UK context, accusations that lesbian and gay parents have made access to fostering or adoption a ‘gay rights issue’ have often been effective in obscuring the fact that it is children’s rights that are at stake in the instance of discrimination against lesbian and gay parents (see Riggs, King, Delfabbro & Augoustinos, 2009; Riggs, 2009, for a discussion of these accusations in the

Australian context). In other words, when lesbians or gay men are refused consideration as foster or adoptive parents, then children removed from their birth parents effectively lose the right to the broadest possible range of placement options. For example, a young girl who has been sexually abused by a male may well benefit from living in a female-only household (Hicks & McDonald, 1999). Preventing registration of lesbian carers (or single female carers for that matter) would thus prevent young girls in this situation (and those in charge of their placement) from being matched with the best possible carers.

If we *are* to consider rights, however, what occurs when lesbians or gay men are not provided with fair assessments, or when they are not adequately supported once they are approved, is that they are denied the right to freedom from discrimination. This does not mean that lesbians or gay men should be automatically approved, but that they must have the right to fair assessment. And an important aspect of a fair assessment is that the assessment is not heteronormative (i.e., premised upon the norms of heterosexual families or applicants). Once approval is granted, lesbian and gay foster carers should have the right to not be harassed or made victim to homophobia or heteronormativity, and should have their unique needs (as lesbians and gay men) recognised, rather than forced into complicity with heterosexual norms. Discrimination or harassment of lesbian or gay foster carers, once approval is granted for care provision, will likely serve as a significant source of stress that holds the potential to undermine the placement and thus fail to meet the needs both of the carers and of the children.

With the above points noted, it is of course important to recognise the potential constraints that foster care agencies face in supporting lesbian and gay carers, such as a lack of funding; the outsourcing of services via competitive tender; and the resulting

fragmentation of services. Nonetheless, it would appear important for agencies who *do* accept lesbian and gay applicants to implement policy and media strategies that support lesbian and gay foster carers. Accompanying this is the need to advocate for greater legal protection for lesbian and gay foster carers so as to protect the relationships and families that such carers form with children in their care.

The current lack of explicit endorsement of lesbian or gay foster carers is also highlighted by a brief examination of the websites of key government foster care agencies in each of the four Australian states involved in the present research. Of the four, only two explicitly state that non-heterosexual people are eligible to apply to become foster carers. The key Victorian foster care recruitment website explicitly states that ‘heterosexual and homosexual couples’ can apply, and the New South Wales government website providing information for potential applicants states that ‘you can be single, married or in a de facto or same-sex relationship’. The remaining two states (South Australia and Queensland) only include broad (though not necessarily inclusive) statements about eligibility, such as that included on the South Australian government information website for potential carers, which states ‘you can be single, married couples or partners’. However, and similar to the ‘out clause’ suggested above in relation to legislation in states other than New South Wales, the South Australian website includes an out clause which, in some political climates, could give rise to the potential to exclude lesbian or gay applicants from consideration. This appears in the statement that ‘your maturity, health and lifestyle will also be considered’. While this is a broad statement, the liberal conceptualisation of homosexuality as a ‘lifestyle choice’ could easily lend itself to the exclusion of lesbian or gay applicants in some instances (and certainly this use of ‘lifestyle choice’

was found by Hicks, 2000, to be a rhetorical tool used to refuse registration to lesbian and gay applicants in the UK).

Finally, only one state or territory in Australia currently has a set of practice guidelines specifically about working with lesbian and gay foster carers. The Victorian Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare *Guidelines for Recruiting and Supporting Lesbian and Gay Carers* (2009) provide information to workers about the unique needs of lesbian and gay carers, appropriate ways of undertaking recruitment, and the need to understand the effects of homophobia and heteronormativity. While this is an important development in Australian foster care, it is necessary to note both that these were only released in 2009, and also that they are pitched as best practice guidelines: they are neither policy nor ethical guidelines, and thus carry with them no legislative weight.

In summary, while liberal inclusivity makes it appear as though lesbians and gay men are welcomed as foster carers, the legislative, policy and recruitment contexts within Australia would suggest otherwise. As indicated above in reference to the findings of Riggs and Augoustinos (2009), the very fact that certain foster care agencies clearly state to interested parties that they will not consider lesbian or gay applicants highlights the tenuous position of potential lesbian or gay foster carers, and the limited options they may have (in comparison to heterosexual applicants) for becoming foster carers (i.e., only certain agencies will consider their application). This capacity to regulate who will and who will not be considered as a foster carer is, albeit in subtle ways, made possible by the legislative frameworks in three of the four states involved in this project. Also, given the fact that only one state has a specific set of guidelines (and that these carry with them very little weight), it is important to recognise that notions of liberal inclusivity (where everyone is presumed to have

equal access) fail to truly grasp the ongoing effects of homophobia and heteronormativity and their impact upon lesbian or gay foster carers.

## **Method**

### *Procedure*

Ethics approval for this project was granted by the Social and Behavioural Research ethics committee of Flinders University, South Australia. Following ethics approval, agencies in four states (Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland) were approached 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). These were agencies known to the author from previous national research on foster care conducted in 2006-2009 as being open to applications from lesbians or gay men. 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.

Participants were invited both to complete a brief online survey and be involved in either an individual interview or a focus group with up to four other foster carers. Participants could opt to only complete the online survey. The survey was administered through the website surveymonkey, and was comprised of ten demographic questions, two forced response questions, six Likert scale questions, and four short-answer questions. Overall the survey focused on perceptions of the utility of guidelines, levels of support received, and perceptions of attitudes toward lesbian

and gay carers in the community. Interviews and focus groups utilised a set of structured questions, including experiences of care provision and perceptions of support. The final sample involved 60 participants, all of whom completed the online survey, and 30 of whom were involved in either an interview or a focus group. The findings presented in this chapter, however, focus solely on the survey data.

### *Participants*

Of the overall sample who completed the online survey, all bar one self-identified as white Australian. Nine (15%) of the participants came from South Australia, 15 (25%) from Queensland, 12 (20%) from New South Wales and 24 (40%) from Victoria. Participants ranged in age from 29 to 59, with the average age being 41.25 years. Three age groups predominated, with 41-45 year olds and 51-55 year olds each constituting 20% of the overall sample, and 31-35 year olds constituting 25% of the sample. 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, 12 (20%) were single and 48 (80%) 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 people had been registered for either between 3-4 years (40% of the sample) or 5-10 years (35%). 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.

Due to the small pool from which the participants were recruited, and due to limits arising from the ethics process (i.e., that the researcher could not directly contact potential participants but rather could only provide flyers and await responses), it was relatively difficult to target specific groups of carers. Nonetheless, the demographic information presented above, while obviously only including a specific selection of lesbian or gay foster parents (i.e., primarily white, coupled, lesbian carers), is broadly indicative of the lesbian and gay parenting population across Australia (e.g., see Power et al., 2009). This is not to deny the fact that a more diverse sample would have been beneficial, but rather to suggest that the sample collected within the present research would appear to be at least broadly indicative of the groups of Australian lesbians and gay men who care for children (i.e., that more women than men at present are parents, and that primarily these are white couples).

### ***Analytic Approach***

Survey data were scored such that higher values on the Likert scales represented more positive responses. Perhaps due to the fact that short answer responses on the survey were optional secondary responses to the Likert scales, there was a minimal response rate (on average only 15% of people answered each of the four short answer responses). As such, a decision was made to exclude these from analysis as they could not reliably be considered representative of the sample. Likert responses and the single demographic variable of state of residence were entered into SPSS 17. State of residence was selected as the only independent variable primarily because of the differing legislative, policy and recruitment contexts across the four states involved in this project, which, it was hypothesised, would produce differing accounts of support

and perceptions of community acceptance of lesbian and gay carers. Three of the Likert response questions and one of the forced response questions were treated as dependent variables for the purpose of this chapter. These were: “To what degree do you believe that guidelines would be likely to improve the support you receive as a lesbian or gay foster carer?”, “To what degree are you satisfied with the level of support you receive from your agency worker?”, “In relation to your perception of community attitudes towards lesbian and gay foster carers, would you say they are predominantly...” and the forced response question: “From where do you receive your greatest amount of support as a carer?” (choices being partner, family, agency worker, friends, or other carers). The remaining survey questions were not utilised in this chapter as they did not pertain specifically to the focus on support and its potential connection to differences between states in relation to legislation and policy.

## **Results**

### *Satisfaction with support*

Degree of satisfaction with level of support received from agency workers was assessed on a Likert scale where a score of 1 represented ‘not at all satisfied’, 2 represented ‘somewhat’, 3 represented ‘quite’ and 4 represented ‘highly satisfied’. The mean for all four states combined was 2.55 ( $SD = 1.08$ ). Mean scores in Victoria were highest ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ), followed by South Australia ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ) and New South Wales ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ), with Queensland scores being lowest ( $M = 1.80$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). A one-way between groups ANOVA was conducted to determine whether levels of satisfaction differed across states of residence. A

statistically significant difference emerged,  $F(3,56) = 8.59$ ,  $p < .001$ . Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score for participants in Queensland ( $p < .001$ ), South Australia ( $p < .05$ ) and New South Wales ( $p < .05$ ) were each significantly lower than for participants in Victoria. There were, however, no significant differences between Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia on mean scores for satisfaction with support (all  $p > .05$ ). Finally in relation to support, a weak but significant correlation was found between satisfaction with support and perceived utility of guidelines,  $r(58) = .41$ ,  $p < .01$ , suggesting that greater satisfaction with support was related to the perception of guidelines as having greater utility.

#### *Source of support*

Participants indicated the source from which they receive the greatest amount of support as a carer via a forced choice response (options being partner, family, agency worker, friends, or other carers). The greatest number of participants nominated their partner as their key source of support (45%), followed by family (30%), agency worker (15%), friends (5%) and other carers (5%). A log-likelihood ratio test was performed first to identify whether there was an association between state of residence and whether participants were partnered or not, and then to identify any association between state of residence and source of support. Log-likelihoods were used in preference to the more typical chi-square due to the fact that some cells had counts smaller than five (Read & Cressie, 1988). The association between state of residence and relationship status (partnered or not) was not significant, thus suggesting that the distribution of single and partnered participants across states approximated what would be expected in an even distribution. The association between state of residence

and source of support was, however, significant:  $\chi^2(12, 60) = 59.17, p < .01$ . As indicated in Table 1, residing in South Australia was more likely to be associated with nominating family as a key source of support than any other potential source. Residing in New South Wales or Queensland was more likely to be associated with nominating a partner as a key source of support over any other source. Reporting agency workers as a primary source of support was only significantly associated with residing in Victoria.

Table 1. Key source of support by state of residence

			Support Source					
			Partner	Family	Agency Worker	Friends	Other Carers	Total
State	SA*	Count	0	9	0	0	0	9
		Expected Count	4.0	2.7	1.4	0.4	0.4	9.0
	NSW*	Count	9	3	0	0	0	12
		Expected Count	5.4	3.6	1.8	.6	0.6	12.0
	QLD*	Count	12	0	0	3	0	15
		Expected Count	6.8	4.5	2.2	.8	0.8	15.0
	VIC*	Count	6	6	9	0	3	24
		Expected Count	10.8	7.2	3.6	1.2	1.2	24.0
Total		Count	27	18	9	3	3	60
		Expected Count	27.0	18.0	9.0	3.0	3.0	60.0

\*SA=South Australia, NSW=New South Wales, QLD=Queensland, VIC=Victoria

### *Utility of Guidelines*

Perceived utility of guidelines for improving support for lesbian and gay foster carers was assessed via a Likert scale where a score of 1 represented 'not at all', 2 represented 'somewhat', 3 represented 'considerably' and 4 represented 'definitely'. The mean score for all states combined was 2.35 ( $SD = 1.23$ ). Mean scores were

highest in Victoria ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ), followed by South Australia ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) and New South Wales ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ), with mean scores lowest in Queensland ( $M = 1.4$ ,  $SD = .83$ ). A one-way between groups ANOVA was conducted to identify differences in perceived utility of guidelines across states of residence. A statistically significant difference emerged,  $F(3, 56) = 6.75$ ,  $p < .001$ . Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score for participants in Queensland ( $p < .001$ ) was significantly lower than for participants in Victoria. There were no other significant differences between states in relation to perceived utility of guidelines.

#### *Perception of community attitudes*

Perception of community attitudes toward lesbian and gay foster carers was measured on a Likert scale where a score of 1 represented 'totally negative', 2 represented 'somewhat negative', 3 represented 'somewhat positive' and 4 represented 'totally positive'. The mean score for all states combined was 2.20 ( $SD = 0.84$ ). Mean scores in South Australia were highest ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ), followed by Victoria ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) and New South Wales ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ), with Queensland mean scores being lowest ( $M = 1.80$ ,  $SD = .86$ ). A one-way between groups ANOVA was conducted to identify differences in perception of community attitudes across state of residence. A statistically significant difference emerged,  $F(3, 56) = 4.94$ ,  $p < .05$ . Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score for participants in Victoria ( $p < .05$ ), Queensland ( $p < .05$ ) and New South Wales ( $p < .05$ ) were all significantly lower than those for participants in South Australia. There were,

however, no significant differences between Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales on mean scores for perceived community attitudes.

## **Discussion**

The results presented in this chapter from a survey of 60 Australian lesbian or gay foster carers suggest overall that Victorian participants experience the highest degree of satisfaction with support from their agency workers, and that Victoria was the only state in which participants nominated agency workers as a key source of support. It is important to note, however, that both South Australian and New South Wales participants were on average not unhappy about the level of support they receive (with the mean rating being 'somewhat satisfied' for these two states). It was only in Queensland that some participants reported being unsatisfied with the level of support they receive.

This trend in regards to satisfaction with support was repeated in regards to the perceived utility of guidelines for better meeting the support needs of lesbian and gay foster carers, with a weak but significant correlation found between these two variables. The fact that there was a significant difference between perceptions of the utility of guidelines between Victoria and Queensland may thus at least in part be explained by the fact that Victorians were in general more satisfied with the level of support provided by their agency worker than were those in Queensland. In other words, perceiving guidelines as having the capacity to increase support may only occur where participants already feel, to at least some degree, satisfied with the support they receive.

It is interesting to note, however, that the trend identified above did not hold out in relation to perceptions of community attitudes toward lesbian and gay foster carers, with South Australian participants reporting the most positive perceptions of community attitudes. Nonetheless, Queensland participants reported much more negative perceptions of community attitudes than did participants in other states, thus reiterating the above findings that lesbian and gay foster carers in Queensland overall have the most negative perceptions of their experiences in relation to support.

These findings would appear to confirm at least in part some of the claims made earlier in this chapter, namely that differences between states in relation to legislation, guidelines and recruitment practices may engender differing perceptions on the part of lesbian and gay foster carers. That Victorian participants most positively viewed agency workers may at least in part be related to the existence of practice guidelines that, while not carrying with them any legislative weight, have nonetheless been widely promoted and indeed were written in collaboration with lesbian and gay foster carers as consultants. The existence of playgroups and support groups for lesbian and gay foster carers in Victoria that were formed in conjunction with foster care agencies may be another reason as to why Victorian carers in general feel more positively disposed both towards agency workers and towards the utility of guidelines.

It is perhaps surprising, however, on the basis of the logic that legislative support may engender a feeling of protection from discrimination, that New South Wales participants were not more positive in their reporting of perceptions of the utility of guidelines or perception of community attitudes. This finding may in part be explained by the fact that in 2008 a case was brought to trial by a gay couple in New South Wales who had been refused approval as foster carers by one agency on the

basis of their sexuality (McDougall, 2008). While the couple were successful in their litigation, awareness of the discriminatory practices of some agencies may lead to a perception among foster carers in New South Wales that policies or laws do not necessarily lead to social inclusion or indeed changes to public attitudes.

And of course it is important to note that the only state involved in this research that offers no form of public support for lesbian and gay foster carers (in legislation, policy or recruitment approaches) – Queensland – was consistently rated most poorly by participants in relation to the utility of guidelines, satisfaction with support, and perception of community attitudes.

Overall, then, these findings would suggest that a liberal approach (where it is presumed that all individuals are equal before the law and thus have equal capacity to make choices or take up the rights available to them) fails to recognise the fact that access does not necessarily translate into an increased perception of support. While it is of course positive that these 60 foster carers had been assessed and recognised as capable of providing care, it is important to recognise both that a significant proportion of them reported less than positive views about the support they receive, and that relatively few considered their agency worker to be their primary source of support. Whilst it is important to recognise that participants with partners or supportive family members would fairly consider their partners or families a primary source of support, the qualitative data collected from 30 of the 60 survey participants would seem to suggest that not only did few participants consider their agency worker a primary source of support, but that many experienced their agency worker as *unsupportive*. Obviously further comment on this is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to recognise that lesbian or gay foster carers may turn to partners or

families as a primary source of support as they perceive they will receive little (or indeed a negative) response from agency workers.

It is also important to recognise that there is no way of assessing the number of lesbians and gay men who are *not* approved to undertake foster care. While there may be some who are not approved due to unsuitability for a range of reasons, it is also fair to conjecture that some lesbians and gay men may be rejected on the basis of their sexuality, as the case cited above would suggest.

Of course it is impossible to claim from the findings presented here that a lack of satisfaction with support or perceived utility of guidelines is directly related to discrimination experienced by the participants. And it is also important to note that this was a relatively small sample of participants constituted by a relatively homogenous group of individuals. Also in regard to limitations, it is important to recognise the reliance upon single-item measures. Finally, it must be noted that whilst it is possible that social desirability influenced responses, this would appear unlikely as the 30 participants interviewed spoke very clearly and straightforwardly about their opinions and perceptions, and thus it is unlikely that participants would have then reported on the survey what they thought to be 'desirable' responses, as opposed to their actual perceptions.

Despite these limitations, the sample may be considered broadly representative of Australian lesbian and gay parents, and certainly while the sample size is small, it is unlikely that the actual population of lesbian and gay foster carers in Australia (at least in the four states involved in this research) is so large that 60 individuals would not represent a significant proportion of the actual population. What is required in future research (and which will be examined via future qualitative analysis conducted on data from the present study) is attention to potential experiences of discrimination

by agency workers, in addition to potential experiences of support (and what that support looks like). From this, it may be possible to clarify in a qualitative sense the possible relationship between perceived utility of guidelines, satisfaction with support, and the role of discrimination in mediating these variables. Future quantitative research in which the measures are expanded in order to include more items (on the basis of the qualitative findings) will help to increase the validity of findings.

In conclusion, while the findings presented here are tentative and must be interpreted with caution, they nonetheless provide some insight as to differences across four Australian states in relation to the experiences of lesbian and gay foster carers, and potentially indicate something about the relationship between experiences of support and the existence (or otherwise) of policies or practices aimed at supporting lesbian and gay foster carers. While this relationship requires further exploration, the findings presented here certainly indicate that Victorian participants reported the most positive perceptions, which is interesting if we consider the fact that only Victoria has practice guidelines specific to working with lesbian and gay foster carers (and that these guidelines do not adopt a liberal model, but rather both celebrate the unique contributions that lesbians and gay men can make in the context of care provision, whilst recognising the discrimination that lesbians and gay men face). Although we cannot know if the guidelines themselves have produced positive change in relation to satisfaction with support, it is important to acknowledge that there may well be a relationship between satisfaction with support and practices of inclusivity that go beyond the liberal model of access to rights. In other words, while all of the states involved in this project technically in law allow for lesbian or gay applicants to be considered (even if some agencies make recourse to freedom of religion to refuse applications from lesbians and gay men), only Victoria actively promotes a vision of

foster care that moves beyond the liberal model, and instead recognises the unique and important role that lesbian and gay foster carers can play in child protection systems. Such recognition that goes beyond liberal inclusiveness and which actually celebrates lesbians and gay men in terms of their own parenting practices (and which recognises the need for lesbian- and gay-specific guidelines, policy and legislation not as ‘special rights’, but as the enactment of rights that recognise diverse populations according to their own terms) may well serve to foster a stronger sense of support and inclusion than liberal approaches that may be perceived as further marginalising or overwriting the experiences of lesbians and gay men. Further examining the relationship between documents such as those developed in Victoria, experiences of discrimination, and perceptions of support will help to better understand the most appropriate avenues through which to best meet the support needs of lesbian and gay foster carers across Australia.

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