

**Institutional Stressors and Individual Strengths: Policy and
Practice Directions for Working with Australian Lesbian and Gay
Foster Carers**

Dr. Damien W. Riggs and Professor Martha Augoustinos

School of Psychology, The University of Adelaide

Abstract

In response to the current shortfall in the number of registered foster carers in Australia, many agencies are now actively recruiting lesbians and gay men as foster carers. Importantly, however, this move towards recognising the role that lesbians and gay men may play as foster carers has on the whole not been supported by laws or policies specifically aimed at protecting such carers. Additionally, findings from a national research project on foster care in Australia presented in this paper highlight the ongoing heterosexism and homophobia faced by lesbian and gay foster carers when working with social workers and birth parents. Importantly, however, these findings highlight not only the negative aspects of foster care provision experienced by lesbians and gay men, but also the positive ways in which they continue to create families and resist or rework social norms. Implications for practice are made with specific reference to challenging such norms amongst social workers and advocating for legal change to support lesbian and gay foster carers.

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Introduction

Foster care systems in 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 contexts, 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. Whilst in some Australian states foster parents may be granted limited guardianship of children, instances of this are few and guardianship is always shared with 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, the primary outcome of this broadly negative context in which foster carers operate 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 heterosexually-married model of families, some agencies have actively advertised for

lesbians and gay men willing to become 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)

In Australia this is compounded by 1) inadequate legislative change to support lesbians and gay men in Australia more broadly, and 2) a lack of policy guidelines developed by foster care agencies to support lesbian or gay foster carers, or to engage with the media when issues relating to lesbian or gay carers appear. Thus whilst it may be suggested that social workers in Australia on the whole similarly adopt a more liberal approach towards lesbian or gay carers, such carers continue to experience the impact of negative social beliefs about lesbian and gay parents more broadly.

Much of the existing research on lesbian and gay foster parents is framed by a desire to refute negative stereotypes about lesbians and gay men as parents, and to demonstrate how such stereotypes impact upon the lives of lesbian and gay foster parents (e.g., Mallon 2006; Ricketts 1991; Skeats and Jabri 1988). Whilst this approach has been vital for challenging

existing stereotypes about lesbian and gay foster parents, it is limited by 1) a reliance upon existing research that has primarily focused on lesbian and gay biological parents (see Short, Riggs, Perlesz, Brown and Kane 2007 for a summary of this literature); 2) an emphasis in this biological parenting literature upon comparisons with heterosexual parents, rather than attention also being given to the unique aspects of lesbian and gay parenting (e.g., Tasker and Golombok, 1997); 3) a tendency away from emphasising the *positive* aspects of lesbian and gay foster parenting (especially those that demonstrate the *benefits* of having a lesbian or gay parent); and 4) the lack of Australian-specific research on lesbian and gay foster carers (Riggs 2007 being an exception).

Taking these four limitations as they potentially impact upon the lives of Australian lesbian and gay foster carers (in addition to those who work with them) as our starting place, we provide in the remainder of this paper an outline of international research focusing on both positive and negative experiences of care provision by lesbians and gay men, and we then go on to focus on our Australian findings. We preface this by outlining the legislative context in Australia in relation to foster care and lesbians and gay men, and we conclude the paper by outlining practical applications of our findings for social workers.

Our overarching questions are thus 1) how are lesbian and gay foster carers and their sexualities represented in research and by practitioners,

and 2) how do lesbian and gay foster carers understand and potentially resist these representations? Focusing on both the negative (heterosexist) contexts in which lesbian and gay foster carers operate and the positive experiences that such carers have is, we believe, an important tool for highlighting how the discipline of social work and its practitioners may understand the unique experiences of lesbian and gay carers, without constructing non-heterosexual sexualities as either irrelevant or central to the parenting practices of lesbians and gay men. Rather, following Hicks (2005a), our suggestion is that lesbian and gay parents both adapt their parenting to manage heterosexism, whilst nonetheless engaging in acts of resistance and in developing uniquely supportive family forms.

Australian Laws and Policy

It is important to note from the onset that laws pertaining to foster care in any of 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. Three other jurisdictions include explanatory terms in regards to familial relations and individual rights that would appear at the very least to sanction non-heterosexual people and their relationships, but which do not explicitly protect lesbian or gay

foster parents. The remainder of the jurisdictions do not in any way appear to provide explicit sanction for lesbian or gay foster parents.

In regards to the single jurisdiction that provides explicit legislation, 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, this Act (as it pertains to foster care) would appear to offer protection to lesbian and gay foster parents.

In regards to the three jurisdictions that include explanatory terms, the South Australian *Family and Community Services Act, 1972* prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and marital status (amongst other things), though 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 some recognition of relationships between non-heterosexual people. Finally, the Australian Capital Territory's *Children and Young People Act, 1999* makes reference to the recent *Legislation (Gay, Lesbian and Transgender) Amendment Act, 2003* which provides clarification on terms relevant to families and individual rights in relation to sexual and gender identity, though which has little relevance to the sanctioning of lesbian and gay foster carers within the 1999 Act *per se*.

The Acts covering the remaining four jurisdictions do not make reference in any form to issues of discrimination as they pertain to non-heterosexual people. Moreover, the portions of the Acts 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 Northern Territory *Community Welfare Act, 1983* is a good example of this. Part 8, Section 3, outlines the registration of foster carers, including the statement that the Minister must be satisfied, amongst other things, that the applicant is “qualified to be registered according to such other criteria for registration as the Minister thinks fit”. As it would be fair to state that social and individual opinion on ‘parental fitness’ often shifts, it is fair to suggest 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

(particularly religious-orientated) foster care agencies across Australia do not accept applications by lesbians or gay men, as many of the participants in our research reported to us.

It is important to clarify here that in outlining the lack of legal sanction provided to lesbian and gay foster carers, our argument is *not* that being considered for registration as a carer is an ‘equal rights’ issue *per se*. As Hicks (2005b) 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 marginalising the fact that it is children’s rights that are at stake in the instance of discrimination against lesbian and gay parents. Similarly, Australian media reports concerning lesbian and gay foster carers and adopters have negatively constructed the involvement of lesbians and gay men in care provision as one of the rights of adults, rather than the needs of care systems and the competencies of a diverse range of adults to provide care (Riggs, King, Delfabbro & Augoustinos in press; Riggs in press).

In contrast to an understanding of registration as a ‘right’ of all adults, our suggestion in this paper is that if foster care agencies across Australia are in dire need of more registered carers, then *not* protecting successful lesbian and gay applicants will result in the ongoing inability of such agencies to meet the needs of children requiring out-of-home care by restricting placement options. If we *are* to consider rights, however, what

is at stake when lesbians and gay men are not provided with fair assessments, or when they are not adequately supported once they are approved, is that foster care systems only serve to reify one particular family form (Riggs 2006), or prioritise particular groups of people (i.e., heterosexual people) over others (Cosis Brown 1992).

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 that agencies who *do* accept lesbian and gay applicants both implement policy and media strategies that support lesbian and gay foster carers, and 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 need of care.

Data and Method

The data analysed here are drawn from a broad corpus of individual interviews and focus groups conducted as part of a national Australian research project examining why people choose to become foster carers and how to best attract new foster carers. Ethical approval was sought and granted from both the university through which the research was conducted and the foster care organizations with whom the foster carers

were registered. Ten interviews with couples and fifteen focus groups were conducted with men (n=31) and women (n=49) from a range of cultural backgrounds and with a broad range of care experiences across four Australian states using a semi-structured interview schedule focusing on experiences of foster care provision, motivations to provide care, and suggestions for change within Australian foster care systems. Out of a total of 80 participants, 6 self-identified as lesbian and 4 as gay men. Interviews and focus groups were audio taped and transcribed orthographically, and all participants were allocated a pseudonym following transcription to ensure anonymity.

Following a thematic analytic approach (Braun and Clarke 2006), dominant themes were identified within the data set, and these themes were then examined to identify salient sub-themes. The process of thematic analysis involved several research phases. The first phase requires that the researcher became 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” (Braun and Clarke, 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 reviewed the potential themes, and assessed whether or not they worked 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 and Clarke, 87).

Across more than 500 pages of transcribed data, issues pertaining to gender and/or sexuality were raised a total of 25 times. A focus on these topics was typically introduced by lesbian and/or gay participants in focus groups, when questions were asked by the interviewer to elaborate any barriers they had experienced in relation to care provision. Importantly, the 10 participants who self-identified as lesbian or gay consistently raised issues in regard to discrimination from social workers, yet they also provided examples of the positive experiences they have had of creating family with children, and the ways they have made the system work for them. As such, a theme that focused specifically on the experiences of lesbian and gay participants was deemed an important feature of the data set.

Findings of Heterosexism in Practice

As we mentioned in the introduction, research on lesbian and gay foster parents has primarily focused on the experiences that such parents have of foster care systems and social workers. These findings are overwhelmingly negative, and highlight at least five areas where discrimination occurs against lesbian and gay foster carers internationally:

1) “considerable scrutiny of their parenting ability and capacity to raise

children” (Brooks and Goldberg 2001, 154); 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).

Our findings suggest that Australian lesbian and gay foster carers also experience similarly explicit forms of homophobia, where lesbian and gay carers are discriminated against by social workers, and more subtle (but no less negative) experiences of heterosexism, where social workers make suggestions or comments that demonstrate a belief that lesbian and gay families are ‘second best’ to heterosexual families (see Cosis Brown, 1991, for a summary of this in relation to the UK). In the first extract a participant shares her experience of having to work with a group of ‘horrendously homophobic’ social workers:

Extract 1

Bette: When our foster daughter was 2 and a half she was having access with her birth mum and we had a very homophobic, *horrendously* homophobic group of social workers, they were awful, so awful. It was so obvious to us that the issue wasn't about [the child] being safe, but that we were lesbians. The guy who was the supervisor at the time, he ordered overnight access for [the child] and it was horrendous. She would say 'I don't want to go to there anymore', it was terrible. Then one day she didn't come home because mum had decided to keep her.

Here the participant makes very clear her perception that the problems experienced by herself, her partner, and the child they were caring for, were primarily the product of a group of social workers' beliefs about their identity as lesbian carers, rather than being focused on the needs of the child in their care. Not only does the participant report her own disagreement with the decision in regards to an overnight access, but also the child's resistance to going to stay with her birth mother overnight.

In the second extract a gay male carer and a lesbian carer discuss experiences that are somewhat more subtle than that experienced by the participant in Extract 1, but which nonetheless clearly demonstrate the ways in which normative assumptions about families, children and parenting impact upon lesbian and gay parents:

Extract 2

Mary: Once our social worker said she had a difficult subject to bring up, and then she said 'maybe you better start thinking about how you would react if [your foster daughter] is heterosexual'. And I said 'the chances of her being heterosexual are 99%'. Do they ask heterosexual foster carers how they will cope if their foster child decides if they are gay or lesbian, no?

Dan: We got told something similar, we were thinking about activities for [our male foster child] like dancing, and the social worker said 'are you sure it wouldn't be better if he did something like football'.

Mary: Oh what?

Dan: And I am like 'but he doesn't like football'. And she said 'well it might be easier like that, it might be better' and I am like oh my god, whatever. She didn't say anything explicit but it was obvious – you can't have a boy who does dancing.

Mary: It is those sorts of comments where you know it is well and truly alive and entrenched in culture.

In this extract the two participants speak of experiencing what Peel (2001) defines as 'mundane heterosexism'. Whilst the social workers in the case of both participants did not say anything that was explicitly homophobic, nor did they explicitly say anything that would clearly be read as heterosexist (i.e., assuming that lesbians can't have children or that all parents are heterosexual), they nonetheless demonstrate a heterosexist interpretation of what lesbian or gay parents should do. For the first participant in this extract, not only does the social worker appear to presume that the lesbian carer would desire her foster child to grow up to identify as lesbian, but the social worker also appears to signal that this would presumably be an improbable thing for the carer to desire. As the participant asks rhetorically, 'do they ask heterosexual foster carers' that type of question? The likely answer, she would appear to suggest, is no, thus suggesting that asking this question of a lesbian carer is indeed heterosexist.

The second participant in Extract 2 relates an experience of a social worker second-guessing his consideration of dance as an appropriate sport for a boy. Even though the carer relates that the child 'doesn't like football', the social worker seems intent upon highlighting the gender inappropriateness of this in the statement 'it might be better'. As the interaction between the carers indicates, this type of statement is

considered not only nonsensical, but also a product of heterosexism that is 'well and truly alive and entrenched in culture'.

In the final extract in this section a gay male carer outlines his own interest in caring for gay or lesbian children, but reports that this was constructed as 'inappropriate' by his agency:

Extract 3

Robert: Once I had done the training I actually wanted to take on gay teenagers, gays and lesbians. The ones that had come out early. In all my time I have only ever had one, and that went well, but only happened because the social worker didn't realise the young man was gay before the placement. But I would still like to go down that path.

I: Have you talked to [your agency] about that?

Robert: Yes they just won't place them with me. I found out that there was a young person living locally, the placement had completely broken down, they were really struggling to find a place because he was a cross dresser and I put my hand up and they said 'no'.

I: What reason did they give?

Robert: They said it is not appropriate to have a gay adolescent staying with a gay male... The thing that got me was because I am out, and all my friends just accept me for whom I am, it would have been the perfect environment for him to actually grow up in an environment where people did accept him.

Despite the participant clearly attempting to engage with his agency about caring for gay or lesbian children, and despite him clearly outlining an argument as to why this would be useful (an ‘accepting’, ‘perfect environment’), he has only had one gay child placed with him. Again we can see how constructions of the ‘inappropriate’ intentions of lesbian or gay carers can be potentially detrimental to children for whom ‘they are really struggling to find a place’. Much like the previous extract, where it seemed axiomatic for the social worker to suggest something other than dancing to the foster carer, in this extract it is presented as axiomatic that ‘it is not appropriate to have a gay adolescent staying with a gay male’. Such a response can only be constructed as appropriate if the corollary suggestion is overlooked – that it might in some instances be *inappropriate* for a gay- or lesbian-identified adolescent to live with a heterosexual male (or heterosexual families in general). As we will summarise in the following section, research suggests that there may well

be times when it is beneficial for foster children to be placed in lesbian- or gay-headed households.

As we have highlighted in this section, lesbian and gay foster carers in Australia, much like their counterparts internationally, report their parenting being inappropriately subjected to scrutiny (see Brooks and Goldberg 2001; Hicks 2000 for international examples of this). The extracts provided here demonstrate both subtle and explicit forms of heterosexism and homophobia against lesbian and gay fosters, and thus provide examples of some of the negative ways in which social workers engage with lesbian and gay foster carers. In this instance, and to return to the question we asked in the introduction, the sexuality of lesbian and gay foster carers is at times inappropriately treated as central to their identity as parents (e.g., when inappropriate decisions are made about children in their care or when heterosexist comments are made about their parenting practice). At other times the sexuality of some lesbian or gay foster carers is *not* treated as relevant (e.g., when the participant in the final extract outlines the potential benefits for a gay child being placed with him, only for this to be ignored).

Lesbian and Gay Foster Parents Living Well

The existing research on lesbian and gay foster parents (as referred to in the previous section) also provides insights as to the positive aspects of

foster parenting for lesbians and gay men and the children in their care. Primary amongst these are 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) 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.

In our research with lesbian and gay foster carers, we too found positive stories of foster care provision by lesbians and gay men. In the following extract, one lesbian carer spoke of her commitment to caring for children she is not biologically related to:

Extract 4

I: Why did you decide to become a foster carer?

Terri: I started in my early 20's, I am now in my early 40's, and I started foster caring for children that I worked with in residential care who required foster care, so that was very child specific and I really enjoyed that experience and always wanted to have a lot of children. Probably around the same time that I realized that I wasn't heterosexual... and that foster care was a way of having a bigger family, because I really enjoy kids and my partner and I were trying to have a second child, and that was just not happening and we had always said 'let's do foster care'. So for us it was about extending our family, having more kids in our life and taking the opportunity to share our life and some of the opportunities that our daughter has with other kids.

This participant spoke of undertaking a range of caring roles, from working with children in residential care, to having a birth child with her

female partner, to extending their biological family by caring for foster children and sharing with them the opportunities that her biological daughter has. This participant thus demonstrates the ethos of the previous research findings summarised above, in her commitment to creating families in ways other than solely through biology, in working professionally in caring roles, and in making a commitment to social change through foster care. In the following extract the carer reported in Extract 3 shares more about caring for the one gay child who lived with him:

Extract 5

I: Do you still have contact with the boy you did have who was gay?

Robert: I do, he is a really good kid. I had some friends over for dinner recently and he loves shocking people and he walked out in this bright red floral frock and a friend of mine was sitting at the table and turned around and said 'the shoes clash' and he continued eating. They showed that there was no shock value there at all. But then another friend helped him coordinate the handbag and shoes, he did want to do it well.

In this extract, the participant highlights the benefits for the child in being placed with him, such as being able to experiment and grow in a

context that was accepting of his identity. Such an experience of being accepted and 'doing it well' may potentially not have occurred for the young man had he chosen to come out or cross dress when living with heterosexual foster parents.

In the final extract a gay male carer highlights how, despite living in a context of heterosexism and homophobia, there are nonetheless opportunities for challenging discrimination and for creating supporting families with children:

Extract 6

Dan: We have struggled at times with birth parents saying the kids can't be with us partly because we are gay and partly it was well 'if they are not with a mum or a mothering figure then what are these boys going to turn out like. How can you actually parent these kids? How can men parent kids, don't they need a mother somewhere?' I normally respond to that by saying that 'yes, mothering is typically done by women but the act of nurturing is something that anyone can do, regardless of gender'. When we had a second child come to live with us, the first child who had been with us for 4 years asked him 'do you want to share my 2 dads?' even though he doesn't call us that, which we thought was quite cute.

Not only does the participant here clearly articulate a means for challenging calls for 'opposite sex role models' and the normalising of heterosexual mothering, but he also briefly elaborates the experience of his foster child, who appears not only to be comfortable with having two male carers, but also that the child is able to articulate the normality of his family life to a second child. The overall narrative provided here thus does not rely upon the normalising of a gay family by dismissing the important differences that exist within gay-headed households. Rather, it both recognises the challenges, but prioritises the strengths, of the family environment that he is involved in creating.

In many differing ways the participants described in this section share stories of 'living well' despite the broader context of heterosexism (see also Short 2007 for more on this in regard to lesbian biological mothers). To return again to the question we posed in the introduction, the carers reported in this section engage in differing ways with their sexual identities so as to frame the engagement on their own terms. Some of the carers are mindful of the (often discriminatory) contexts in which they operate, but nonetheless assert the validity of their sexual identities and the importance of what they have to offer as foster carers. Others take foster care as an opportunity for meeting both their own needs and those of children in need of care. All together, these carers demonstrate both the positive experiences of care shared by themselves and the children in their

care, and the positive ways in which they engage with and rework normative understandings of parenting and relationships.

Recommendations for Practice

As this paper has demonstrated, understanding the experiences of lesbian and gay foster carers requires a focus on *both* the negative and positive experiences of care provision. In regard to social work practice, it would appear important that efforts at attracting lesbian or gay applicants are not only supported by policy, but that both practice and policy guidelines recognise the unique strengths and challenges of lesbian- and gay-headed families. This will require social workers to work *with* (rather than simply expecting to learn *from*) lesbian and gay foster carers to recognise the moments when sexuality is indeed relevant (i.e., in offering children alternate family forms that allow spaces for healing from previous abuse in heterosexual-headed families), and times when it is not (i.e., in overemphasising stereotyped aspects of lesbian or gay cultures that some social workers may misunderstand or be apprehensive of). This will also require social workers and agencies to do more than simply engage in producing lists of ‘facts’ about lesbian and gay foster parents or attending one-off information sessions. Rather, as Mallon (2006) suggests, what is required is an overall approach to understanding families within social work practice that acknowledges the diversity of *all* families and which

encourages an emphasis upon recognising how social norms shape the ways in which social workers see the world and thus their practice.

In regards to family diversity, the needs of children for out-of-home care may be met not only by heterosexual people and lesbians and gay men in couple relationships, but also by single people, and by bisexual and transgender people living in a range of non-heterosexual or non-gender normative family and relationship forms. Many foster children have experienced abuse as a result of the enforcement of the dominant family model (i.e., two opposite sex parents) and thus may greatly benefit from living with parents and in family units that do more than simply mimic what is deemed to be an 'appropriate family form'. Thus as Hicks (2005a) suggests: "A foster care or adoption practice which does not rely upon traditional ideas about kinship and parenting is a positive step" (54).

Finally, and as we suggested earlier in the paper, social workers need to be willing to advocate for legal and social change to support a wide range of foster carers. This will involve the social work profession recognising how it is complicit with both the positive *and* negative stories that lesbian and gay foster carers share. Acknowledging complicity should not entail the promotion of guilt on the part of social workers, but rather a commitment to change with the aim of equity within social work services. Obviously change is the responsibility of all people (and not solely social workers), but change starts with the actions of individual people

considering how the things they say (and do) can affect the lives of others. Such consideration can then be transferred from the individual to the institutional, where changes in policy can support those people who experience marginalisation to voice their own plans for change. A truly collaborative social work practice will afford opportunities for social workers to recognise how both individual and institutional imbalances in power result in many foster carers (and in particular lesbian and gay foster carers) feeling unsupported, often in very mundane ways. Working with lesbian and gay foster carers thus requires social work professionals to acknowledge the ‘extraordinary yet ordinary’ (Hicks & McDermott, 1999) contribution that lesbians and gay men make to caring for children who cannot live with their birth parents.

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