Abstract

This paper discusses some key findings taken from a qualitative study conducted with gay and lesbian adopters and foster carers in England and Wales. The study examined the experiences of twenty-four self-identified lesbians and gay men, who had been involved in adoption or fostering processes since the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act, 2002. This article will explore why participants chose to adopt or foster, and their approach to relationships generated through these routes. Findings indicate that gay and lesbian applicants troubled dominant conceptualisations of family and kinship, and revealed both heteronormative and nuclear constructions of parenting within adoption and fostering social work. In contrast, participants often demonstrated a reflexive and creative approach to caring for looked after children. This paper will therefore consider how professionals can recognise nuanced or complex relationships, situated beyond traditional frameworks, through drawing upon wider concepts within sociological literature.

Key Words:

Sociology of the Family, Sexuality, Adoption, Fostering, Lesbian, Gay

Introduction

The findings within this paper are taken from a small-scale exploratory study conducted with lesbians and gay men in England and Wales, who had adopted or fostered since the implementation of key legislation, including the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Wood, 2013). The study explored the reasons why gay and lesbian applicants choose to adopt or foster and their experiences of the application, assessment, and approval processes. This paper will examine the extent to which participants' sexual identities shaped their approach to these routes, as well as the conditions by which kinship is conceived of and negotiated within

the parameters of adoption or fostering. Findings indicate that complex relationships often exist between the multiple parties involved in a looked after child's life and participants within this study responded to these in certain ways. Furthermore, participants' narratives reveal some of the structural and conceptual barriers to how such relationships are understood within adoption and fostering social work. This paper questions the extent to which the meanings of relationships are recognised within adoption and fostering and how these can be accounted for by those working with looked after children. Finally, this work will contribute to those calls for us to re-examine the ways in which practitioners theorise familial relationships and kinship practices within adoption and fostering, and beyond (Logan, 2013; Saltiel, 2013; Morris, 2013; Hicks, 2014; Tarrant *et al.*, 2015).

Background

Parenting by lesbians and gay men is one of many examples of family diversity in the United Kingdom within recent years. The very idea of 'family' remains an area of ongoing debate and has been subject to various social, cultural, and economic transformations (Jagger and Wright, 1999). Relationships and intimacies which do not follow traditional nuclear templates have, to some extent, become less stigmatised and may include co-parenting arrangements, children born through reproductive technologies, blended families, single-parent families, and many more. Whilst lesbians and gay men have always been involved in parenting in some form, there have been growing numbers choosing to care for children by their own definitions, outside of heterosexual relationships (Weeks *et al.*, 2001). This has also coincided with a number of studies which demonstrate that parental sexual identity does not have a detrimental impact on social, developmental, or emotional outcomes for children (e.g. Golombok, 2000).

In the contexts of adoption and fostering, there have been significant changes in legislation and policy in the UK within the last fifteen years, including the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act of 2002. The Act decreed that unmarried couples, including same-sex applicants, could apply to adopt jointly for the first time and statistics indicate that the numbers of gay and lesbian adopters in England and Wales have risen steadily since its implementation (New Family Social, 2016; Gov.uk, 2017; Statswales.gov.wales, 2017). Access to adoption and fostering for lesbians and gay men has been further supported by legislation such as the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007, and the Equality Act 2010. The Equality Act 2010 encompasses previous equality legislation and prohibits discrimination on the basis of an individual's sexual orientation. Such legislation illustrates a fundamental shift in focus onto the attributes of the applicant, rather than their sexual identity or familial composition, thus challenging the privileging of certain types of relationships within these areas (Brown and Cocker, 2008).

Whilst the aforementioned legislation has helped to eliminate some of the structural impediments for lesbians and gay men accessing such routes, it has also elicited broader questions and criticisms around the meanings of both kinship and parenting. During the Parliamentary debates around the Adoption and Children bill for example, the notion of family - its purpose and construction - was contested extensively, with some opponents citing potential changes as undermining traditional 'family values' (Hicks, 2005a). Yet, social work is often at the forefront of changing family forms, and adoption and fostering are examples of familial arrangements situated beyond a biogenetic basis (Saltiel, 2013; Hicks, 2014). It may be asked therefore how social work is governed by, or resists, wider discourses pertaining to the 'right' kinds of family format, and how lesbians and gay men navigate this. Furthermore, as each stage of the adoption or fostering process requires critical decision making by social workers, it is important to understand how kinship is conceptualised by professionals.

Family in late modernity

When considering gay and lesbian parenting it is necessary to acknowledge changing definitions of family and kinship in late modernity. Authors such as Giddens (1992) note that the structural frameworks which have historically defined familial and intimate relationships, have become less central to the ways in which individuals live their lives. Relationships are more likely to be reflexively negotiated through personal meanings and based on shared mutual interests or needs. Gay and lesbian intimacies have often been explored in relation to these changes and the work of Weston (1991) and Weeks *et al.* (2001), for instance, examines the ways in which lesbians and gay men have sought to create kinship networks outside of legal or statutory recognition. Weeks *et al.* (1999) comment that through an absence of precedent, lesbians and gay men have been responsible for carrying out 'everyday experiments in living', as relationships must be reflexively defined.

However, whilst increasing numbers of lesbians and gay men have chosen to expand their families through various means, there are often challenges in doing so. Authors have contended that wider structural inequalities, including class or gender disparities, continue to have an impact on individual choices and the extent to which democratised relationships truly operate (Jamieson, 1999). Despite changing definitions of family, non-heterosexual relationships have frequently been associated with a high degree of stigma or marginalisation (Weeks *et al.*, 2001). The emergence of new kinship formations and the rejection of 'traditional' gender roles for instance have been accused by some critics as a potential threat to the "social order", which leads to an increase in 'broken' families (Jagger and Wright, 1999: 4). Competing claims about what kinship is or is not work to establish some modes of relating as 'legitimate', at the expense of others (Hicks, 2006a). In addition, legislation and social policy shapes dominant ideologies of kinship, through its recognition of certain familial structures (Logan, 2013). This has been further underlined by historical,

exclusionary policies such as Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which prohibited public services from "promoting the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship". The impact of this on families has been outlined within wider studies (e.g. Saffron, 1996), and illustrate that such policies reproduce an ideological chasm between lesbians and gay men, and the care of children.

Constructions of family within social work practice

There are several studies which call for rethinking how social work responds to kinship structures in a range of settings (e.g. Jones and Hackett, 2011, 2012; Morris, 2012, 2013; Logan, 2013; Saltiel, 2013; Hicks, 2014; Tarrant *et al.*, 2015). This work suggests that practitioners must engage with sociological perspectives of family in order to acknowledge diversity within late modernity and understand how social work makes certain knowledge claims about such configurations (Jones and Hackett, 2012; Saltiel, 2013; Hicks, 2014). Saltiel (2013) suggests that a level of criticality is often absent from much social work literature, including practice-based texts. Furthermore, due to the time-limited nature of decision making within children and family social work, professionals may rely upon recognisable conceptual templates, including fixed ideas around biological relatedness, in order to make sense of complex cases. In light of this, a number of authors (Jones and Hackett, 2011, 2012; Hicks, 2011; Morris, 2013; Saltiel, 2013) suggest that conceptualising 'the family' as a distinct entity is limited. Instead the work of Morgan (1996) is critical, in order to view the family as a set of 'practices'; which are dynamic social relationships that are both practical and shaped through mutual consent. This concept of "doing" family infers that it is performative and therefore "an active process rather than a thing-like object of detached social investigation" (Morgan, 1999: 16). Through focusing on what families 'do', rather than their composition, we can be attuned to the meanings of such relationships, as

well as how individuals seek to live and relate. In the context of gay and lesbian families this is imperative, in order to counteract gendered or heteronormative interpretations. The work of Finch (2007) develops this further through the concept of 'display' and, as highlighted within wider literature (Jones and Hackett, 2011; Saltiel, 2013; Wood, 2016), it offers a critical lens for deconstructing why certain relationships are seen as familial, and others are not. Finch (2007: 67) contends that family practices need to be distinctly conveyed, as the extent to which they are recognised is dependent upon 'wider systems of meaning'.

Gay and lesbian adoption and fostering

Lesbians and gay men must consciously decide when and how they can pursue parenthood and there are a number of studies which examine how individuals approach such routes (e.g. Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Mallon, 2004; Lewin, 2009; Goldberg, 2012). These studies focus on the transition to parenthood for lesbians and gay men, and outline some of the political, social, and cultural barriers experienced. Whilst there are several international studies which examine the experiences of lesbians and gay men who adopt or foster, due to the scope of this paper the following section will focus on those conducted within the UK (Skeates and Jabri, 1988; Hicks, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2011; Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Brown, 2011; Cocker, 2011; Mellish *et al.*, 2013; Wood, 2013). A number of these studies found that gay and lesbian applicants have encountered various forms of discrimination throughout the application, approval, and matching processes. Hicks (1996) and Hicks and McDermott (1999) found the existence of a hierarchy between applicants, in which heterosexual adopters were more likely to be matched and placed with children first. Gay and lesbian applicants were often viewed as a 'last resort' for placements, with hetero-nuclear configurations upheld as the most desirable setting for children (Hicks, 1996). Similarly, gay and lesbian applicants were more likely to be matched with children perceived as difficult to place, including older children, sibling groups, or those with additional needs (Skeates and

Jabri, 1988; Hicks, 1996). These findings have been further supported within the recent studies of Cocker (2011) and Wood (2013), which identify that hierarchies were still perceived to exist and that these were sometimes verbally confirmed by social workers.

Gay and lesbian candidates were also required to work hard to advance their applications, including challenging perceptions of risk (Skeates and Jabri, 1988; Hicks, 1996, 1998). As part of the assessment, applicants were often compelled to present their suitability in distinct ways (Hicks, 2000, 2006b), such as outlining how they could provide 'gender role models' to children in their care. The concept of gender role modelling has been challenged by several authors (e.g. Hicks, 2008); however what this requirement infers is the privileging of hetero-nuclear constructions when it comes to family and parenting. Hicks (1998, 2014) suggests that adoption and fostering social work is therefore not a neutral activity, but one which produces certain knowledge claims about a range of subjects, including sexuality, gender, and family. More recently, Wood (2016) identifies that gay and lesbian applicants are required to negotiate their presentations to services in relation to a range of 'normative' constructs, including relationship status, age, class, and many more. This forms part of a broader, complex task of displaying family to wider assessing agencies, in order to be recognised as 'legitimate' (Finch, 2007).

The research study

Findings within this paper are taken from a qualitative study conducted with twenty-four gay and lesbian adopters and foster carers from England and Wales, who had undertaken any part of the application, assessment, or approval process since the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act. This Act served as a representative marker, as the study considered participants' experiences of the application and assessment processes since its

implementation. A purposive sample was sought and both adopters and foster carers were considered as they undertake a similar assessment process by social workers. Participants were recruited through various channels, including organisations related to parenting; adoption and fostering; and gay and lesbian support. The use of social media, such as Twitter, was also used as it was anticipated that this would be a difficult to reach participant group. In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, who were aged between twenty-eight and fifty-nine and ethical approval was granted by the University of Hull. Transcripts were coded thematically, and data was gathered and analysed contemporaneously. Memos were made during the collection of data and throughout the analysis of the research. Saturation of data was felt to have been achieved when no new codes emerged (Birks and Mills, 2011).

The majority of participants identified as White British; two identified as White Irish and one as White British-American. Two men and fourteen women were interviewed as couples (three adopters, four foster carers, and one couple who had both adopted and fostered); four men and one woman were interviewed without their partners (three adopters and two foster carers); and two men and one woman were single applicants (two adopters and one foster carer). The children placed with participants were aged from birth to eighteen years old. Adopters were informed that they could only be placed with children who matched their ethnic or racial heritage; however foster carers had experience of looking after children with a range of backgrounds. Unlike previous findings (e.g. Hicks and McDermott, 1999), this study did not find that participants were explicitly matched with certain children on the basis of their sexual identities, such as those who are harder to place. In order to maintain confidentiality, all participants within this work have been given pseudonyms.

Findings

The following section will identify some of the key themes to emerge regarding the ways in which participants approached and conceptualised adoption or fostering. It will illustrate participants' journeys to parenthood or care, and the reasons why they chose to adopt and/or foster. Finally, it will explore some of the ways in which participants made sense of family within these contexts and how social work responded to this.

Personal narratives and routes to parenthood

Participants discussed both psychological and practical adjustments taken prior to becoming parents or carers. This related to a sense of financial, social, or emotional 'readiness' and several underlined the conscious planning involved in choosing to expand their families; including legal implications. As noted within previous studies (Weeks *et al.,* 2001; Mallon, 2004; Goldberg, 2012), when examining the choice to pursue parenthood, participants often reflected upon their own histories and experiences of 'coming out'. Individuals appeared to draw upon these experiences to highlight a new sense of possibility and to underline previous historical barriers. This was particularly compounded for older or male applicants, who noted that routes to parenthood felt more limited for them:

> Ethan - …one of the things was that, you know, through me they were never gonna be grandparents. And that was a major loss to them. I have to say it was to me, I assumed when I came out I mean one of my regrets was I wouldn't become a father.

Making the decision to adopt

Several participants commented that their initial interest in adoption was instigated through local and national advertisements, the media, and applicant open days. Seamus however commented that seeing friends who had successfully adopted helped to underline a sense of possibility:

> Seamus - Really it was having gay friends who'd adopted [who showed that] it can be done… It was only when my two gay friends adopted their three boys I realised that you can do this as a gay person.

Participants who had chosen to adopt often did so as their first choice. The reasons for this sometimes reflected a sense of 'altruism', but also indicated their ambivalence towards biological relatedness:

> Josie - Well, because we like children and we wanted to have a family and neither of us were desperate to give birth… It was more about wanting to care for a child so we weren't kind of... we weren't desperate to have a sort of...
>
> Lauren - …biological link to a child

Several participants suggested that their approach to adoption often differed with their heterosexual peers. Several recalled that they were compelled by social workers to address any feelings of grief as a result of infertility; yet as found within wider research (e.g. Hicks, 2006a; Mellish *et al.*, 2013) this did not necessarily reflect their circumstances:

> Seamus - They explained that you have had to have worked through your issues of childlessness and that tends to be people who physically can't have children. I don't know whether I could biologically have children, cause I've never tried.

No participants stated that legislative change was the sole reason for their decision to parent or foster, and a number were unaware of the Adoption and Children Act. Lucy underlined this through emphasising the 'everyday' quality of her family and its distance from wider policy:

> Lucy - ...unless it's something that jumps up and bites us on the backside, we don't really pay that much attention to it. We're just us, we're just another family.

However, legislation was felt by some to be critical when seeking equal recognition as parents. Polly and Maria commented that whilst they felt adoption was the 'right thing' to do,

they could also achieve ‘equality’ in their parental status, as neither one would have a biological link to their child:

> Polly - At the time our answer was that we both wanted to be equal parents, you know if one couldn’t be genetically... and also we wanted to do the right thing.

Several participants felt that adoption could also offer a greater sense of permanency or autonomy which other routes could not necessarily ensure. The desire for further security was emphasised by male applicants in particular and reflected their lack of immediate recourse to parenthood, such as through in vitro fertilisation. It also emerged as a result of pursuing alternative routes prior to adoption or fostering. Adopters Seamus and Jasper, and foster carer Jay, for example, had engaged in unsuccessful co-parenting or donor arrangements with friends:

> Jay - The child wouldn’t have been mine, the child would have been their child but I would have had a lot of relationships with them. They would have known I was the father and I would have seen the child quite often and I found that really hard and I think it was then that made [me] realise how much I really wanted kids.

Participants who were foster carers sometimes discussed adoption in relation to situated or chosen bonds. Foster carers Claudia and Lucy stated that whilst they had not adopted children, they would consider it depending on the relationships developed with the children in their care. Similarly, Liz and Gill commented that their decision to adopt two children in their long term care was ‘child-led’:

> Liz - [The adoption] was child-led… we never had any intention of adopting children, but Billy actually asked us to adopt him.
>
> Gill - Pressurised us didn’t he Liz?
>
> Liz - And we kept saying no, no, you’re here as long as you need to be here. No, no, no, and then eventually...
>
> Gill - ...we caved in.

Making the decision to foster

Participants chose to foster for diverse reasons and this reflected both a desire to look after children, or to embark upon something 'altruistic'. Fostering was not deemed to be an easier route to looking after children, but was viewed as a separate endeavour with specific demands:

> Ian - Yeah we never really thought of surrogacy or adoption, it was… we saw the advert for fostering… we both sort of talked about it and when you foster you're giving children who for whatever reason struggle to be adopted, children with multiple moves or children with special needs, or for whatever situation... or children for who adoption isn't really the route.

Several participants had professional experience of working with children and viewed it as an extension of their expertise or interests. Other participants had personal experiences of fostering, either being part of a 'fostering family', or through being looked after. A number of foster carers however commented that adoption was not possible due to financial or employment responsibilities. Likewise, other participants did not want the permanency associated with adoption:

> Amy – I just felt that [fostering] was something I could be quite good at and also I think it felt a bit safe to go the fostering route because if it was something we really didn't like, it was a big massive lifestyle change for us, we could go "ooh" [puts hands up].

Families beyond boundaries

Participants noted the complex relationships they had cultivated as a result of adopting or fostering. Their kinship systems were often diverse and included friends, families of origin, and support systems built around fostering or parenting. Wider authors suggest that shifts in modern adoption practices means the potential for increased 'openness', including ongoing contact with birth families (Jones and Hackett, 2012; Logan, 2013). These "non-normative"

(Riggs, 2015: 433) connections sometimes transpired as a result of the different individuals involved in a child's life, including social workers, birth family members, children's siblings, and other foster carers. The following section will address some of these networks and how they were understood in relation to kinship practices.

When considering contact with birth family members, a number of participants anticipated potential difficulties that may arise on the basis of their sexuality and a proportion recounted some instances of hostility. Yet, such issues did not always emerge and after meeting with birth family members several participants recounted highly positive experiences. Furthermore, participants often reflectively understood that this hostility was not necessarily a result of homophobia, but was instead due to feelings of subjection on the part of birth parents (additional information on the emotional impact of adoption for birth parents is explored elsewhere: e.g. Smeeton and Boxall, 2011).

However, a number of adopters felt that they had been more open to contact with birth family members than their heterosexual peers. Maria and Polly suggested that this reflected a lack of expectation with regards to biological parenthood:

> Polly - I think it was going into that perspective, having never tried for a child, whereas they were still in that disappointed phase, had to sort of build themselves up… "We're gonna have someone else's kid and they're still gonna have contact, they're gonna have another parent" and we were just like "yep we know that, that's fine".

Seamus similarly outlined that one of his perceived strengths was his desire to develop relationships beyond his own network:

> Seamus - I said I'm happy to meet birth parents initially…. I would consider face to face contact with birth parents. But I was particularly interested in children who had grandparents that had contact because I don't have grandparents.

Rosie suggested that this approach could be because gay and lesbian applicants may have greater experiences of creating both families of choice and of networking:

> Rosie - I think we're more experienced networkers if you know what I mean, because we have to sort of go outside immediate family or work colleagues, and stuff like that and we have to sort of find our own sort of community of friends.

Most participants identified that fostering or adoption inevitably became the primary focus of their relationship and leisure time activities, and that their support networks became more focused around parenting. Furthermore, the relationships generated through adoption or fostering were often defined by participants using familial terminology and were based on continuing care and commitment. Foster carers Astrid and Erica, for instance, considered those contacts cultivated through the process, such as other foster carers, part of their "*extended family*". Lucy also stated that she encouraged her birth children to see those children in their care as "*brothers and sisters*":

> Lucy - …everybody's involved, both everybody who's in the house… Our extended family as well take on board every kid that we have and they're treated just like the rest of them. They're extra grandkids, extra nephews, and extra nieces…

Tom and Ian also chose to draw upon familial language, without referring to themselves as 'fathers':

> Ian - [Children in their care] don't want to have gone and been adopted. They had their family, they still have other relatives, so there's no need to change that, you know? They sort of need the bit in the middle, which we were happy to do, and it is quite nice doing that… Tom and I consider ourselves, with the boys… to be a family unit, and they do, you know?

Participants gave examples of familial terms used by children to define their relationships with their carers:

> Gill - He told everyone, you know, "I've got two Mummies".
>
> Liz - And so we decided to go with it.

However, participants who had fostered commented that their relationships with children frequently extended beyond initial placements. A number described the ways in which care

continued to be enacted, for example through the provision of money and gifts. Astrid and Erica defined these connections as both obligatory and familial in nature:

> Astrid- All of them do it, even though I'm not paid to have them or to look after them or to be that person responsible to get them that stuff for Christmas I still go out and do it, cause they're part of our family.

A number of adopters similarly felt that relationships with previous foster carers were important for their children. Ethan comments on the relationship between his children and their former foster carer:

> Ethan - She's certainly been really supportive of the placement and continues to be so. When she speaks to the boys it's "I'm so happy that you're there". So she gives them permission to move on, cause they miss her terribly.

Yet, such contact was not always sanctioned by social workers:

> Ethan - They said we're not allowed to and we have a review on Friday and we're going to raise it up at the review because we feel we know the boys and they'd be able to manage it.

Participants observed that professional discourses around family, kinship, or parenting were sometimes implicitly hetero-nuclear in their construction. As illustrated within previous findings (Wood, 2016), this meant that gay and lesbian applicants often disrupted the hetero-gendered underpinnings of adoption or fostering processes. Participants for example were required to answer questions about their family functioning and the distribution of domestic tasks within the household. However, several found that this often followed a gendered template:

> Astrid – ...and they just seem to think that we must have one specific role within the house; she goes out to work so I must be the wife in paisley at the kitchen sink, when that's not how we are.

Participants' experiences of disjunction also extended beyond gender and sexuality; Rosie, for example, felt that professionals were reluctant to consider her as a single applicant:

> Rosie - I think their attitudes just aren't flexible enough, you know, they're looking for a very specific type of person, who I don't consider are actually the best type of people to do the job in my opinion. They seem to have a very fixed... and it's definitely married couples in my experience...

The primacy of biological relatedness was also implicit within the social work encounter; Ethan noted this in a discussion with his social worker around racial matching:

> Ethan - …I was challenging her on this and asking her why and she said, naively in my view: "when you walk out of the door with your children you don't want people to assume straight away that they're adopted". I looked at my partner and looked at her and said "everybody will make that assumption about our kids!" Or that they're from a previous relationship. Neither of us have gestated these children. So that made me think actually she hasn't thought about what it's like to be a child in a, for want of a better word, in a queer family.

Furthermore, participants such as Maria and Polly, and Rosie did not feel that non-biological relationships were always recognised or valued by social workers:

> Rosie - …they seem to expect you to have like sort of lots of members of your immediate family sort of within five minutes driving distance, or within very near to you. That seemed to be one of their key things, it seems like friends don't really count… but has to be immediate, biological family…

These narratives indicate assumptions around how family should be both configured and displayed (Finch, 2007). Such constructions are characterised as nuclear, local, hetero/gender normative, and denote a biological basis for kinship. The following section will explore these examples in relation to practice.

Discussion

This paper outlines some of the experiences of gay and lesbian applicants who choose to adopt or foster children, and highlights similarities with those studies noted previously (Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Mallon, 2004; Lewin, 2009; Goldberg, 2012; Mellish *et al.*, 2013). Participants demonstrated that the decision to become parents or carers was reflectively negotiated and carefully planned; they often drew upon their own histories when discussing routes to parenthood, as well as complex narratives around exclusion and opportunity. No participants cited legislative change as the sole reason for their decision to adopt or foster, although the Adoption and Children Act was felt to be important for some adopters in attaining equal parental status. This is found within wider research examples, such as the work of Mellish *et al.* (2013) or Logan (2010), who underline the importance of legislation in constructing parenthood beyond biological connectedness.

Findings also illustrate that the traditional boundaries of 'family' are seemingly blurred through the tasks of adoption or fostering and that this occurs through on-going formal and informal arrangements with those involved in a child's life. Unexpected intimacies emerged within such spaces and the networks that developed as a result were complex constellations centred on a child or young person. These networks were cultivated beyond the usual parameters of parenthood and often through reflexive discussions between individuals. Participants' stories of where and when kinship practices occur arguably reflect Morgan's (1996) notion of 'doing family', as they denote an ongoing, dynamic process; particularly in relation to language. Likewise, their approach to balancing biological, legal, and constructed ties was often child-led and based on their needs (Jones and Hackett, 2012; Logan, 2013). Participants demonstrated fluidity in their approach, through focusing upon the individual meanings associated with their relationships (Morgan, 1996; Weeks *et al.*, 2001). Foster carers Lucy and Claudia, for example, did not see caring as a substitute for biological

relatedness but viewed it as an extension of kinship practices. For participant Lucy, her family is 'just another family', because what they are doing constitutes 'family' things.

Yet, in drawing upon such claims, Lucy is presenting a view of parenting that is 'everyday', or unremarkable, and it may be noted that participants within this study made claims around both 'sameness' and 'difference' from their heterosexual peers (Hicks, 2005b). As illustrated previously, several stated that they felt they were more open to maintaining relationships around a child than their heterosexual counterparts and discussed their experiences of creating families of choice. This flexibility could reflect a lack of value placed on biological relatedness, as well as openness to the realities of pursing parenthood through alternative means. Those who had adopted frequently stated that it was their first choice and whilst legal security and longevity were characterised as crucial, biological relatedness was viewed as unimportant or even undesirable.

However, as outlined within wider work, (Clarke, 2002; Hicks, 2005b: 303), a strictly assimilationist or transformative view of gay and lesbian parenting is problematic, and can reinforce "essentialist" constructions of families and identities. Hicks (2005b: 204) reminds us that viewing lesbian or gay families or relationships as inherently "radical or conservative" is redundant, as these ideas are "social constructions and not statements of fact". Whilst participants placed less of an emphasis on biological relatedness, this approach is not necessarily exclusive to lesbians and gay men. Calhoun (2000: 158), for instance, argues that heterosexual families also use "...the principle of choice and procreatively secured biological ties to determine kinship". What is more, this study focuses on adopters and foster carers only and does not account for those lesbians and gay men who approach other routes first (Goldberg, 2012).

It is therefore critical to remain open to such complexities when they occur in order to recognise both how and why family claims are made, and in what circumstances they are recognised (Hicks, 2005b; Finch, 2007). Participants may be drawing upon 'sameness' and 'difference' narratives in order to challenge heteronormativity, including those discourses which position hetero-nuclear configurations or biological relatedness as the 'true' basis of kinship (Hicks, 2005b: 302). Through demarcating their strengths, creativity, or commitment, candidates are arguably seeking to assert both their legitimacy and their originality. This also forms part of Finch's (2007: 70) notion of display work, whereby individuals may need to demonstrate that whilst their family may not "resemble those of other people", it is both real and "works".

Finally this paper indicates that whilst gay and lesbian parenting is now legally recognised within the fields of adoption or fostering, certain family forms are inadvertently underlined as the most 'authentic' (Hicks, 2006a, 2014). Adoption was framed as a response to infertility and rather than viewing 'family' as a set of practices, assessing professionals sometimes saw it as a fixed model to be achieved (Logan, 2013). Similarly, participants' kinship networks were often viewed through a bio-genetic lens, sometimes at the expense of families of choice. Narratives demonstrate that the recognition of 'family' remains highly dependent upon wider dominant cultural meanings and that those experiences situated beyond heteronormative models of parenthood may be rendered invisible within such processes (Hicks, 1998; Finch, 2007; Wood, 2016).

Participants equally questioned other procedural aspects of adoption or fostering, including limiting any relationships between foster carers and children. This has similarly been examined within the Care Inquiry (2013) and in findings by the Fostering Network (Swain, 2016), which found that children and young people valued continuing contact with foster carers. Structural impediments to such relationships are also identified by authors such

as Jones and Hackett (2012), who note that policy does not necessarily account for some of the complexities involved in adjusting to the redefinition of kinship boundaries as a result of adoption. Adopters and foster carers within this study however demonstrated ongoing kin work which was often child-led. Furthermore, in doing so they are arguably challenging the assumption that "…children can have only one family" and that children "…cannot recognize their relationships with both biological and adoptive family members" (Goldberg, 2012: 60).

Therefore, it may be argued that by focusing upon how kinship is performed and the individual meanings of relationships, rather than their fit with hetero-normative configurations, it is possible for professionals to consider a range of important contacts within a child's life. Through using those ideas found within sociological discourses, including Morgan's (1996) notion of family practices or Finch's (2007) concept of display work, professionals may be able to recognise the fluidity of family within late modernity and challenge everyday assumptions about what family is, or can be (Morris, 2013; Saltiel, 2013; Hicks, 2014).

Conclusion

This paper offers an insight into some of the ways in which gay and lesbian kinship is conceptualised and enacted within the contexts of adoption and fostering. Findings suggest that participants within this study sometimes challenged the perceived boundaries of 'traditional' kinship and in doing so, disrupted both the binaries of biological/ non-biological relatedness, and the public/ private spheres of family life (Hicks, 2014; Riggs, 2015). In focusing on the creative meanings of relationships and using the language of family to encompass a number of associations beyond a biogenetic basis, participants reveal some of the heteronormative underpinnings of practice within this area. Furthermore, it demonstrates that whilst adoption and fostering are examples of kinship built around the development of

non-biological bonds, hetero-nuclear constructions are still used as a frame of reference by some practitioners.

There are a number of limitations to this study; whilst this work focuses specifically on gay and lesbian participants there may be thematic differences when looking at other sexual or gendered identities. Similarly, this research does not address the experiences of black or minority ethnic participants and further research may be conducted in order to understand how this intersects with kinship practices. This is critical, so that social workers can capture the complexities of human relationships and recognise the part they play in the lives of children.

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