An international scoping review regarding the recruitment and assessment of LGBT+ communities in the adoption process.

Dr Lucille Kelsall-Knight and Professor Caroline Bradbury-Jones

School of Nursing & Midwifery, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Background

Adoption of children has been a long-standing part of history in most countries across the globe. Since the 1950s in the UK, social care agencies for children and families have been the decision makers determining the viability and social acceptance of family dynamics (Mallon., 2011; Kirton., 2013). People with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) identities are known to become adoptive parents (Hill., 2012; British Association of Adoption and Fostering., 2014; Golombok, Mellish, Jennings, Casey, Tasker, and Lamb., 2014), although the true number is not currently known. LGBT+ people face discrimination when embarking upon their journey to parenthood, and this is exacerbated with identity intersections (for example disability, ethnicity, and relationship status) (Kelsall-Knight., 2021). Discrimination experienced by lesbian, gay and single parents was documented in early work by Hicks (1996), with details relating to social workers not actively seeking to place an adopted child within a gay family. Widespread discrimination can be attributed to legislation and social pressures which support heteronormativity (Mellish, Jennings, Tasker, Lamb and Golombok., 2013). There is an increasing knowledge base regarding lesbian and gay adopters and foster carers (Cosis-Brown, Sebba and Luke., 2015), however there remains a lack of knowledge surrounding gender minority parents (Brown and Rogers, 2021).

Legal rights in parenthood and equality for LGBT+ people is varied internationally. In some countries, such as the United States of America, same-sex relationships were not protected under federal law until 2015. In England and Wales homosexuality was decriminalised in

1967, Scotland followed suit in 1980, and Northern Ireland in 1982. Following on from this the Local Government Act (1988) was amended to include Section 28, which prohibited the local authority from 'intentionally promoting homosexuality or publishing material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promoting the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. Following the repeal of Section 28 in 2003, the Civil Partnership Act (2004) became legislation in England and Wales. The subsequent Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act (2013) allowed same-sex couples in England to marry, with the legal recognition of same-sex marriage following in Scotland in 2014 (Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014) and Northern Ireland in 2019 (Northern Ireland Act 2019). This alteration of marriage law tied in with further progressive law change with regards to same-sex parenting. The swiftness of legal changes has led to both oppressive and progressive opinions co-existing surrounding same-sex relationships and LGBT+ parenting, however this rapid legal change has also been in light of British societal attitudinal shifts. In 1983, 70 percent of the British public believed that sexual relations between two people of the same sex was wrong, however by 2012 35% of the British public held this belief (Park, Bryson, Clery, Curtice and Phillips, 2013). There is no data regarding British attitudes towards LGBT+ communities available post 2012.

All state-run social care organisations, and those in the independent sectors commissioned by the state to provide social care, must actively consider the needs of LGBT+ communities and must not discriminate against anyone on account of the protected characteristic of sexuality or gender (Equality Act, 2010). Homophobia remains present in many UK institutions, with service users and their families reporting prejudiced and discriminatory comments about sexual orientation (Kelsall-Knight and Sudron, 2020).

Changing family constructions has led to a widening of viewpoints surrounding the health and wellbeing of adopted children (Mellish et al., 2013). Controversial views regarding

same-sex parenthood exist (Mellish et al., 2013; Golombok et al., 2014), such as perceptions that children raised by same-sex parents will be adversely affected by experiences such as bullying during childhood on account of their parents' sexuality (Mellish et al., 2013). When voiced by parents and professionals, such oppressive views and comments could have an effect on the emotional health and wellbeing of adopted children. Moreover, pre-placement, discriminatory attitudes towards same-sex parents may serve to further disadvantage already vulnerable children due to a delay in them being placed in adoptive homes. Whilst there is an existing research base regarding LGBT+ people being parents, the focus is predominantly regarding the outcomes for children with same-sex parents. To address this gap, this review explored the experiences of the recruitment and assessment of LGBT+ adopters, internationally.

Methods

We undertook an international scoping review of empirical research regarding LGBT+ communities in relation to adoption.

Research question:

In relation to LGBT+ people in adoption:

1. What are the patterns, advances and gaps in the available literature?

2. What are the lived experiences of the adoption assessment process for adoptive parents?

3. What information can be discerned in relation to the subgroups identified within the LGBT+ acronym?

4. What are the impacts of intersectionality?

5. What are the key recommendations for policy, practice and research?

This review synthesised the findings from the international literature on the recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of LGBT+ adoptive parents. A number of electronic databases were searched and inclusion dates were from 2005-2022. Sixteen studies were identified in this review. They were all written in English and published between 2006 and 2021. All except one were from single-country studies as follows: Ten from USA, two from UK; two from Canada; one from Belgium. The multi-country study was conducted in Belgium, France and Spain. Due to the studies occurring in varying countries, the transferability of some of the findings may be limited. The included papers in this review all focused on the recruitment and assessment in the adoption process, of some or all members of the LGBT+ community.

The findings have been organised under three determined themes, which are directly related to the recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters: Systemic challenges and their recognition; Self-certifying: decisions and doubts; and Enabling practices.

Systemic challenges and their recognition

There are three key systems which come into play in relation to LGBT+ people being recruited and assessed as adoptive parents: heterosexism, racism and socio-economic politics. In more recent literature (Goldberg, Tornello, Farr, Smith, and Miranda., 2020; Levitt, Schuyler, Chickerella, Elber, White, Troeger, Karter, Preston, and Collins., 2020; Brown., 2021) an additional system of cisgenderism is recognised to affect the adoption process. The main systemic challenge that exists is heterosexism. Perceptions of heteronormativity and cisgenderism exist at both an institutional (social care) level, which then impacts upon the individual social care practitioners assessment of the adopters. Richardson and Goldberg (2010) and Berkowitz (2011) both detail that social care agencies privilege, subtly and

explicitly, heterosexual prospective adoptive parent applicants in a number of ways. A subtle manner could be by utilizing paperwork that does not reflect LGBT+ people, and a more explicit way is by rejection from the adoption process on the grounds of being gay (Goldberg, Moyer, Kinkler, and Richardson., 2012; Messina and D'Amore, 2018a). A number of papers also detail an over-focus on gender (Brown, 2021) and gender role-modelling (Ross, Epstein, Anderson, and Eady., 2009; Wood, 2016; Messina and D'Amore, 2018a) as key questions in the assessment process. In addition, Wood (2016) reported that male and single parents had to navigate negative responses due to their gender and relationship status. This focus has led to adopters needing to showcase 'displaying families' as a way of presenting themselves as prospective parents and their capacity for parenthood (Wood, 2016, p.1709).

The overriding challenge that subtle or explicit heterosexism causes is the power that is held by social care providers and exulted over LGBT+ prospective adopters. Adopters constantly feel the professional gaze and therefore potential judgement of themselves by social care practitioners (Wood., 2016). Goldberg, Downing, and Sauck (2007) detail that lesbian women are overlooked and undeserving of parenthood, while Berkowitz (2011) commented on the powerlessness that gay men felt in their decision to parent as a result of systemic oppression. Recognition of the parallel processes which exist between the life courses of both LGBT+ adopters and children in care were also dismissed by social care providers (Matthews and Cramer., 2006; Ross et al., 2009; Messina and D'Amore., 2018b). Life experiences such as loss and separation as a result of being LGBT+ may have been experienced by the adopters, which run parallel to experiences of loss and abuse which may have occurred to children in care, yet strengths gained from these life experiences were not recognised by social care providers (Ross et al., 2009). Failure to recognise this parallel process highlights how the attitudes of social care providers lack empathy.

In summary the reviewed papers highlight that the assessment and recruitment of LGBT+ adopters is a heterocentric process, steeped in patriarchy.

Self-certifying: decisions and doubts

Barriers experienced by adopters in the recruitment and assessment process are detailed in all of the reviewed literature. Three papers detailed intersectionality as a factor during the adoption process (Richardson and Goldberg., 2010; Berkowitz., 2011; Goldberg et al., 2020). Intersectionality is viewed positively by adopters as it enables resilience and the development of community support, which are acknowledged as key needs in parenthood (Richardson and Goldberg., 2010). However, Berkowitz (2011) commented that adoptive fathers experience adoption and parenthood through all of their marginalised identities and that the intersection of their identities all played a part in their overall experience of the process and their ability to navigate it. Furthermore, intersectionality provides an opportunity for an increase in oppression and barriers to adoption, which may result in people with intersecting identities being more willing to adopt 'hard to place' children (Goldberg et al., 2020). A major experience detailed by adopters, was the decision to 'come out' with regards to their sexuality and/or gender identity. Goldberg et al (2007) detailed how 'being out' was deemed to be a sign of integrity. 'Being out' was seen as a strength which could improve the outcome of the recruitment and assessment process due to being open and honest (Averett, Nalavany, and Ryan., 2009; Ross et al., 2009; Richardson and Goldberg., 2010; Levitt et al., 2020). However it was noted in an earlier paper (Matthews and Cramer., 2006) that a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy was prevalent and that historical and social bias still exists as a fear factor and vehicle of social care bias within the LGBT+ adopter population (Ryan and Whitlock., 2008; Brown et al., 2009; Sullivan and Harrington., 2009; Richardson and Goldberg., 2010; Berkowitz., 2011; Messina and D'Amore., 2018a; Levitt et al., 2020). Three papers

(Matthews and Cramer., 2006; Goldberg et al., 2007; Messina and D'Amore., 2018a) detailed the weight of lying about sexuality and/or gender identity; this is prevalent in countries where it is not possible to complete the adoption process as a LGBT+ couple. Messina and D'Amore (2018a) highlight that regardless of the country and the legislation, LGBT+ people experience unique stressors and roadblocks on their route to adoptive parenthood.

Another barrier experienced by LGBT+ adopters was the perception of bias by social care providers and personal bias/self-doubt (Goldberg et al., 2007; Ryan and Whitlock., 2008; Brown, Smalling, Groza, and Ryan., 2009; Sullivan and Harrington., 2009; Richardson and Goldberg., 2010; Berkowitz., 2011; Messina and D'Amore., 2018a; Messina and D'Amore., 2018b; Goldberg et al., 2020; Levitt et al., 2020). Bias by social care providers stemmed from feelings of not being families of choice for an adopted child without a clear reason and also widespread discrimination on the grounds of sexual and/or gender identity. Personal bias or self-doubt was expressed by some adopters and was linked to the historical context and social biases of LGBT+ people not being able to adopt, and the fear of rejection (Brown et al., 2009; Sullivan and Harrington., 2009; Messina and D'Amore., 2018a; Goldberg et al., 2020). In summary, the reviewed papers highlight that intersectionality can impact upon LGBT+ people's experience of the adoption process. More specifically disclosure of sexuality and/or gender identity and the perception of bias due to the historical socio-political context of being LGBT+ is a key barrier to navigation of the adoption process.

Enabling practices
Facilitators to inclusive and enabling practices was a feature in seven of the reviewed papers (Ryan and Whitlock., 2008; Brown et al., 2009; Ross et al., 2009; Richardson and Goldberg., 2010; Goldberg et al., 2012; Wood., 2016; Brown., 2021). One of the challenges discussed,

was insufficient support and communication between adopters and social care providers (Goldberg et al., 2012). More exclusively to LGBT+ adopters, a lack of understanding regarding sexuality and/or gender identity creates barriers to adoption, this is exacerbated for Trans people (Brown., 2021).

Enabling practices are wide reaching and include social care providers recognising that all couples, regardless of their sexuality and/or gender identity, may differ from one another in their ability to navigate and manage the adoption process (Goldberg et al., 2012). Wood (2016) identified that in terms of inclusive conversations with a social worker, sexuality is not the primary concern of LGBT+ adopters when navigating the adoption process. Other identity intersections, such as relationship status, compounded sexuality. Enabling practice means that LGBT+ adopters must be assessed in a methodical manner, the assessment must be meaningful and move away from a sexuality and gender heteronormative; this means moving away from the notion of gender role-modelling and taking a more nuanced approach to gender and relationship composition (Wood., 2016).

Enabling practices were identified as providing an institutionally validated form which reflected LGBT+ family constellation and terminology (Brown et al., 2009; Brown., 2021), links to community support networks, peer support (Ryan and Whitlock., 2008) and LGBT+ allies who work within social care (Richardson and Goldberg., 2010). However, a lack of inclusive policies can lead to confusion by social care providers and personal biases coming to the fore (Brown et al., 2009). Adoption professionals practicing their skills in clinical supervision with LGBT+ people, is seen as a commitment to inclusive practice (Brown et al, 2009). This is further supported by Ross et al (2009) and Brown (2021) who suggest that a knowledgeable professional, who is able to ask important, but sometimes challenging,

questions to LGBT+ adopters in a culturally competent way, is a way of showcasing inclusive social work practice. Two papers provided key messages regarding what enabling practice 'looks like' (Ross et al 2009 and Brown 2021). They detailed that social care practitioners should utilise and develop their strengths-based attributes by acknowledging LGBT+ identity as a strength, and provide advocacy in a heterocentric system and that they go out into LGBT+ communities and educate them regarding the specific strengths that they bring to adoptive parenting (Ross et al., 2009; Brown., 2021).

In summary, the reviewed papers detail that enabling practice should include the development of inclusive policies, which include using forms which are representative of the LGBT+ community. There should also be a recognition of relationships within LGBT+ community and the terminology that is used. Lastly, cultural competence and active support of LGBT+ communities and inclusion of their people for peer support is fundamental to enabling practices within social care.

Advances and gaps in the included literature

Two advances in research were identified in the review. Firstly, there has been an increase in Trans inclusion; four papers included Trans people, with three since 2020 (Goldberg et al., 2020; Levitt et al., 2020; Brown., 2021). Secondly, all sixteen reviewed papers recognised that there are influencing factors that affect LGBT+ people that operate at institutional and social work practitioner levels.

There were a number of gaps in research that were identified in the reviewed papers. There was minimal discussion in the papers regarding relationship configuration, only two papers explored single parenthood and the adoption process (Ross et al., 2009; Sullivan and Harrington., 2009). In addition, very few papers considered the full timeline journey through

the adoption process of pre- to post-placement and the experiences of adopters during this entire timeframe. Whilst the inclusion of Trans people is an advance, it should be noted that Trans people only featured in four papers (Ross et al., 2009; Levitt et al., 2020; Goldberg et al., 2020; Brown., 2021) and queer people were represented in two papers (Ross et al., 2009; Levitt et al., 2020). In addition, bisexual people were only represented in three papers (Ross et al., 2009; Levitt et al., 2020; Wood., 2016). This highlighted a gap in the published research as research is needed that explores all members of LGBT+ community. The majority of the studies were conducted in the USA, with only two being from the UK. One gap of particular note was that only three papers considered the impact of intersectionality on the adoption process (Richardson and Goldberg., 2010; Berkowitz., 2011; Goldberg et al., 2020).

In relation to enabling practices, gaps in the literature were identified specifically related to understanding what facilitators of inclusion were; there was some discussion in seven papers (Ryan and Whitlock., 2008; Brown et al., 2009; Ross et al., 2009; Richardson and Goldberg., 2010; Goldberg et al., 2012; Wood., 2016; Brown., 2021), but there is a clear gap in the research. The final gap was that only five papers (Matthews and Cramer., 2006; Ross et al., 2009; Richardson and Goldberg., 2010; Messina and D'Amore., 2018a; Messina and D'Amore., 2018b) considered the experiences of LGBT+ adopters throughout the entire timeline from pre- to post- placement.

Discussion

This scoping review has identified three key patterns that can affect the recruitment and assessment of LGBT+ adopters: systemic challenges and their recognition; self-certifying decisions and doubts; and enabling practices. The main challenge faced by LGBT+ adopters

is that adoption is viewed through a lens of heterosexim. Heterosexism has long been deemed as unintentional and unthinking by society, institutions and long-standing advocates of LGBT+ people, thus allowing for a societal absolution from the responsibility of tackling it (Fish., 2006). The impact of heterosexism is far reaching as it creates a perception of what a viable family structure looks like; and that structure is based upon heteronormative assumptions. The scoping review highlighted that the framework utilised in adoption services is one which supports the development of heteronormative adoption experiences. The terminology and forms used in the adoption process favoured binary terminology such as 'mum' and 'dad' and did not recognise nuances within sexuality and gender, for example asexuality and relationship status (Wood., 2016; Brown., 2021). This lack of inclusion ensures that adoption services 'make sense' of the relationships and family dynamics within a heteronormative context (Butler., 1990; Burr., 2003). This is a narrow lens within which to view the very complex, yet positive, strengths that LGBT+ people have developed as a result of their own life experiences and 'coming out'. These strengths can play a key role in drawing parallels to the challenges also faced by adopted children in their life course. Specific challenges can be navigated by LGBT+ people, but only with a supportive agency who actively seeks to promote the strengths of LGBT+ families and therefore validates them.

Limitations of the review

The scoping review identified 16 primary research papers, which whilst not unusual for LGBT+ research, it should be noted that the papers were predominately from North America. This may limit the applicability of findings to other countries. The included papers reflect the time, location and socio-political positioning in their contribution to the body of knowledge regarding the recruitment and assessment of LGBT+ adopters. The world is fast-changing with many governmental and legal alterations, and these should be considered when exploring the relevance of the review findings. There is very little data available regarding

subsections within the LGBT+ community, for example, people who are asexual, bisexual or engaged in consensual non-monogamous relationships. Future research that includes these groups is important, to ensure that they are included and that their needs are understood and met during the recruitment and assessment process for adoption.

Conclusion

It is evident from this review that LGBT+ people encounter heterocentric and cisgender practices within adoption services internationally. This, alongside personal bias and self-disclosure of sexuality/gender, has an impact on their perceptions and experiences of the recruitment and assessment processes as prospective adopters.   Examples of enabling, inclusive practice is evident in the literature, however this varies considerably and is associated with individual adoption professionals, rather than the adoption agencies themselves. In other words, it operates largely at micro-, rather than macro level. It is vital that social workers and social care departments integrate LGBT+ people's identity intersections into their recruitment and assessment procedures as prospective adopters. This is in stark preference to focusing on the person's LGBT+ identity, with perceptions and biases regarding what this might mean for parenthood. Crucially, the drivers for such positive change need to operate at organisational and policy levels, rather than being the sole responsibility of social care practitioners. Only through facilitation of inclusion and acceptance of individuals as a whole will best practice in adoption social work be realised.

Data from New Family Social

Data gathered by New Family Social in recent years is also applicable to this scoping review. The most recent census of members was undertaken in 2021, 281 people responded. In terms of sexual orientation 87.2% identified as gay/lesbian, 5.3% bisexual, 3.6% multiple orientations, 1.4% queer, 0.7% asexual, 0.7% other orientation not listed, 0.7%

pansexual and 0.4% straight (New Family Social, 2021). In relation to gender identity 68% identified as male, 28% female, 2% multiple gender identities, 1% non-binary, 0.4% genderfluid and 0.4% other. There were no responding members who identified their sole gender identity as agender, genderqueer, intersex, third gender or trans. New Family Social (2020) determined from a survey of 153 LGBT+ adopters/prospective adopters, that 4 in 10 of those respondents currently in the adoption assessment process expected their sexual orientation to be a barrier prior to starting their adoption journey. Within this survey, 90.8 per cent of respondents described their sexual orientation as either gay or lesbian, 5.2 per cent identified as bi, 2.6 per cent identified as queer and 1.3 per cent identified as asexual. 1 in 7 detailed that their sexuality was a barrier during the adoption process. Finally 1 in 3 felt that their sexual orientation had been a barrier in their adoption assessment. These results show a 4% increase since 2017 in LGBT+ adopters feeling that their sexual orientation or gender identity is a barrier to their assessment to adopt. Also of note is the misunderstanding of adoption agencies regarding consensual non-monogamy. This type of relationship is not exclusive to LGBT+ people, however it causes concerns for prospective adopters when being honest in self-disclosing their relationship status. The same concern was felt by bisexual prospective adopters as they were uncertain if disclosing that they were bisexual rather than gay or heterosexual would hinder their application – in some cases they were actively encouraged to identify as gay or heterosexual in order to ease the assessment process. From these concerns it is possible to determine that non-binary people may also face the expectation of conforming to a male or female identity.

Recommendations for policy and practice

The gaps identified in the review findings mean that recommendations are likely to alter over time as result of emerging evidence and shifting political agenda globally. With this in mind, current recommendations for social care agencies and practitioners are:

They should develop inclusive policies and assessment forms, which are representative of the LGBT+ community.

Acknowledge the experiences that LGBT+ people may have encountered, and recognise how that may affect their ability to navigate the adoption process. This includes cultural competency training, including recognition of varying relationship construction within the LGBT+ community.

Active engagement and support of LGBT+ communities and utilise the skillset of LGBT+ adoptive parent members for peer support, clinical supervision of social work practitioners and in development of inclusive policies. This includes ensuring that the language and actions used are not heterocentric.

Evaluate the content of adoptive parent preparation programmes to ensure all prospective adopters feel respected and included.

Be certain that social workers are suitably trained to show empathy towards adoptive parents, regardless of their sexuality and/or gender, whilst also working with confidence and with the skillset and attributes expected of a social care practitioner.

Ensure that decision-making practices regarding the adopted child/children remain at the centre.

Recommendations for further research

Currently the literature regarding the recruitment and assessment of adoptive parents is predominately surrounding gay and lesbian people, there is limited research regarding other identities within the LGBT+ community. In order to advance inclusive social work practice, it is recommended that all sections of the British LGBT+ community are considered, most notably Trans, Queer, Asexual, Pansexual, and others who feel their voice is not heard.

It is not fully understood what facilitators of inclusion are in relation to social work practice. Therefore further research to determine how social work practitioners can enable and facilitate inclusive practice for LGBT+ people is much needed.

The literature does not focus specifically on the impact of intersectionality in relation to the recruitment and assessment of LGBT+ adopters, this inclusion would provide further insight into their experiences and needs.

The majority of the studies are from North America, the undertaking and inclusion of British research would provide greater international context to the body of knowledge.

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