Familiar Fears

The Assessment of Lesbian and Gay Fostering and Adoption Applicants

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Abstract

This thesis considers how local authority social workers go about assessing the suitability of lesbians and gay men to foster or adopt children. It also asks how far a stated lesbian or gay sexuality is problematic within this process. A constructionist approach to social enquiry is used, data being generated by interviews with social workers, as well as a case study of a lesbian couple's adoption application. Dorothy Smith's 'institutional ethnography' is also employed to examine the 'relations of ruling' that structure such assessments (Smith, 1987).

A continuum of assessment models is proposed in order to show the dominance of 'on merit' approaches which prioritise child care skills over sexuality issues. The thesis demonstrates the presence of arguments about the supposed 'risks' to children posed by lesbians or gay men. The notion of 'discrimination' in assessments is analysed, as are attempts by some social workers to challenge discrimination, and it is argued that small-scale anti-discriminatory measures are inadequate.

Constructions of the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' are discussed in relation to the 'good carer of children', and the thesis proposes the dominance of two versions: the 'good lesbian' and the 'maternal gay man'. The thesis argues that the 'on merit: prioritisation of child care skills' model relies upon

heteronormative ideas, and the case study looks at contested meanings

given to the category 'lesbian' which are also gendered and raced.

The thesis sees 'lesbian' and 'gay' as categories of knowledge, and social

work assessment as a 'making sense' activity in which *versions* of these are

produced. Such everyday practices are problematised in the thesis, and

discourse, (black) feminist and queer theories are used to analyse how the

assessment is a site for the production of knowledges about sexuality.

Key Words: Lesbians, Gay Men, Adoption, Fostering, Social Work,

Assessment, Homosexuality.

This thesis is my own work, and has not been submitted in
substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree
elsewhere.

_____ Stephen Hicks.

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Chapter 1

Mapping the Debate about Lesbian and Gay Fostering and Adoption

In 1997, Bromley council, one of the London boroughs, announced that it was to ban lesbian or gay couples, and single parents, from being considered as potential adopters (Waugh 1997). The council felt that gay and single people did not make 'normal' or 'natural' parents, and council leader Michael Tickner commented, *"Most of the children that come up for adoption have had a bad experience. We feel that such children should be placed in as normal and natural a home as possible and not have to deal with the stress of being in the care of a homosexual or a single person."* (quoted in Waugh 1997:2).

Further, in a recent survey[1] conducted by the television programme 'Panorama' (BBC 'Panorama' 1997), respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their attitudes towards issues of lesbian and gay 'rights' in various aspects of social policy and law. Whilst 64% supported the acceptability of a lesbian or gay man serving in the armed forces, and 71% supported the principle of equality for lesbians and gay men in pension rights, inheritance and tenancy agreements,

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[1] The survey was conducted over the telephone by the National Opinion Poll from 17-19 October 1997, with 977 respondents.

some 64% were against lesbians and gay men having 'equal parenting and adoption rights'. The programme suggested that lesbians and gay men having 'rights' to foster or adopt children was by far the most controversial area covered by their survey, and claimed that the general public were *"more opposed to parenting and adoption rights than to any other item on the gay rights agenda."* (BBC 'Panorama' 1997).

It seems, then, that opposition to lesbian and gay fostering and adoption is widespread, even amongst those who otherwise recognize the need for 'equality' based upon sexuality in other areas. This despite the fact that lesbian and gay parents continue to hold strong popular cultural fascinations (see BBC 'Esther' 1996; BBC Radio 4 1994; Brennan 1994; Gysin & Chalmers 1998; McRobbie 1991; Powell 1998; Weese & Wolff 1995). Why should this be the case? Why is the notion of lesbians and gay men looking after, and parenting, children seen as the final taboo, something which is culturally unacceptable even to those who support lesbian and gay 'equality' agendas in other areas of public and social life?

I argue that these are *'familiar fears'* for two main reasons; first, they draw upon a familial discourse which constructs 'the lesbian' and 'the gay man', albeit in very different ways, as outside of kinship, family and the parenting of children (Smith 1994). Second, my title also refers to the familiarity of the arguments made against lesbian and gay adoption and fostering. These everyday or

'commonsense' understandings of what lesbians and gay men are, and their attendant implications for children, pervade social work practice as much as any other area of social life and they were familiar both to me and to the social workers that I interviewed.

This thesis attempts to answer why lesbian and gay parenting is so feared via an investigation of the acceptability, or not, of lesbians and gay men as foster or adoptive carers, but it is specifically a piece of empirical research which considers how a cohort of social workers went about assessing lesbians or gay men who applied to three local authority fostering and adoption units.

Placing the Debate about Lesbian and Gay Fostering and Adoption

One of the prime reasons for conducting this research was that, apart from just two existing 'overview' studies of lesbian and gay adoption and fostering (Ricketts 1991; Skeates & Jabri 1988), none had considered social work practice with such applicants. Further, apart from my own earlier work on the perspective of applicants themselves (Hicks 1993, 1996; Hicks & McDermott 1999), no research had investigated how social workers went about assessing applicants who were lesbian or gay. This seemed to me to be a substantial gap in social work research knowledge, and especially in an area of practice regarded as politically sensitive yet dominated by 'commonsense' views about lesbian and gay parenting.

It is one of the purposes of this thesis to investigate such 'commonsense' views, but it remains the case that most adopters and foster carers are heterosexual white couples, usually married (Campion 1995; Triseliotis *et al.* 1995, 1997). There is still reluctance on the part of fostering and adoption agencies to place children with lesbians or gay men (Campion 1995; Martin 1993; Ricketts 1991; Sandland 1993; Sullivan 1995; Triseliotis *et al.* 1995, 1997), and so I wanted to consider why this was still the case. This does not mean that all local authorities reject lesbian or gay applicants, however, and there certainly are examples of successful placements reported here and elsewhere (Hicks & McDermott 1999). But it is my contention that current social work practice, law and guidance concerning fostering and adoption are unlikely to encourage lesbian and gay applicants.

Foster care involves the temporary placement of children with substitute carers, though it may sometimes be on a long-term basis. It comes in many forms (Triseliotis *et al.* 1995), but all foster carers must be formally assessed by an approved agency (Department of Health[2] 1991). Within local authorities, it is social workers that carry out such assessments, and, although a formal fostering panel is not required to make the final decision to approve applicants, many authorities do have such panels. Adoption involves the permanent placement of children with new carers, and the court must grant an adoption order. Adoptive

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[2] Hereafter referred to as DoH.

applicants have to be similarly assessed, but their final approval by a formal

adoption panel is also mandatory (Triseliotis *et al.* 1997). In both cases, social

workers carry out such assessments, part of which involves an in-depth 'home

study' usually, though not always, based upon guidelines set out in the 'Form F'

(BAAF 1991; Campion 1995:47; Triseliotis *et al.* 1997:150). It is this aspect of the

assessment of lesbian and gay applicants that is considered in this thesis.

This process is problematic for lesbians and gay men for many reasons, not least

because they are positioned as 'unusual', different from the heterosexual 'norm',

or, in Bromley's words not 'natural'. Such ideas are bolstered in existing law and

guidance on fostering and adoption, which relies upon both the 'tacit acceptance'

of gay and lesbian carers and the idea that they should be used only as a 'last

resort' (Hicks 1996). Tacit acceptance, I argue, allows for lesbians and gay men

to be approved and used as adopters or foster carers but only where the model

of sexuality used is one in which it remains a 'private and discreet' matter, as

opposed to one of political and social significance. A lesbian or gay sexuality is

here unstated and this is opposed to any notion of 'gay rights' in applying to be

considered. Linked to this is the notion of a last resort, whereby lesbians and gay

men should be used only in exceptional circumstances, where all other

preferable options have failed and often where the children are 'hard to place'

(Triseliotis *et al.* 1997:9) because they are disabled, older, or have particular

needs due to learning, behavioural or emotional difficulties.

When the consultation paper on foster placements was published following the 1989 Children Act (DoH 1990), it stated that *"...authorities and those interested in becoming foster parents must understand that an authority's duty is, unequivocally and unambiguously, to find and approve the most suitable foster parents for children who need family placement. It would be wrong arbitrarily to exclude any particular groups of people from consideration. But the chosen way of life of some adults may mean that they would not be able to provide a suitable environment for the care and nurture of a child. No one has a 'right' to be a foster parent. 'Equal rights' and 'gay rights' policies have no place in fostering services."* (DoH 1990: para. 16). This was a clear statement that the notion that lesbians and gay men ought to have the 'right' to be considered as potential carers was an inappropriate one, and signalled the acceptability of the *a priori* rejection of all lesbian and gay applicants by agencies.

Following much criticism of the "gay rights" sentence in paragraph sixteen by lesbian and gay groups[3] as well as organisations representing adoption and fostering generally, this reference was removed but the "chosen way of life" part remained in what became the Children Act 1989 guidance on family placements (DoH 1991: 25). I argue that this is a model of tacit acceptance because it does not rule out all lesbian or gay foster carers, but allows for some to be approved in exceptional circumstances. Nevertheless lesbian and gay fostering is not to be

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[3] Paragraph 16 was the original reason for the formation in Manchester of the Positive Parenting Campaign, a group that continues in existence to this day, and one which has been instrumental in getting local authorities to take lesbian and gay adoption and fostering seriously, has provided training and staged national events concerned with this issue.

encouraged under this model and cases are to be dealt with on an individual basis only. Further, the wording of what became paragraph 3.14 of the guidance (DoH 1991: 25) does allow for lesbians and gay men to be rejected on the basis of their sexuality alone if an authority so wishes, as I will show in chapter six of the thesis.

The tacit acceptance position was further reiterated in the publication of the consultation document on the review of adoption law (DoH/Welsh Office 1992). With regard to adoption by 'unmarried couples and single people', the document had the following to say:

> *...we feel that the security and stability which adopted children need are still more likely to be provided by parents who have made a publicly recognised commitment to their relationship and who have legal responsibilities towards each other...The fact that two people are married to each other is not of course in itself a sufficient guide to the likely stability of their relationship...We do not propose any changes to the law relating to single applicants, including lesbians and gay men. There are examples of extremely successful adoptions, particularly of older children and children with disabilities, by single adopters...We have suggested above that an unmarried couple should not be allowed to adopt jointly...We do not feel that this is necessarily incompatible with allowing a single*

person who has a partner to adopt. We recommend that, where

assessing a single applicant, agencies should have a duty to

assess any other person who is likely to act in a parental capacity

towards the adopted child." (DoH/Welsh Office 1992:49-50).

Immediately following the publication of the consultation document, government

ministers and especially the then Junior Health Minister, Tim Yeo, insisted that

married couples were the best placement for all children. Yeo noted that *"...the*

vast majority of children benefit from having two loving parents of opposite sexes

and adoption agencies should make strenuous efforts to find such couples."

(Yeo, reported in Marchant 1992:1). He also repeated the arguments used

previously in relation to fostering, saying, *"...Equal rights and gay rights have no*

place whatsoever in adoption work" (Community Care 1993:2), and *"...There is*

no room for political correctness or ideology in fostering [sic]*...Children's rights*

not gay rights must drive the policy." (Linehan 1993:5).

This was reinforced with the eventual publication of the white paper on adoption

(DoH *et al.* 1993), which again suggested that social work assessments ought to

be based upon 'commonsense' rather than 'ideology' (DoH *et al.* 1993:8). The

white paper clearly argued for *"a strong presumption in favour of adoption by*

married couples", with the proviso that there might be *"a small number of other*

exceptional circumstances where adoption by a single person may be sensible..."

(DoH *et al.* 1993:9). This was reiterated in guidance on adoption by the Social

Services Inspectorate, which confirmed the view that most children are best placed with a married couple because *"such a structure offers the best chance for successful development into adulthood through a stable and enduring relationship with two parents."* (Social Services Inspectorate 1996:3). Once again, this also backed up the notion that lesbians and gay men should be used only as a last resort.

Thus current law and guidance on fostering and adoption practice does allow for lesbians and gay men to be considered, though only as a 'single person with a partner' in the case of adoption. However, lesbians and gay men remain open to *a priori* rejection, or to being viewed as 'second-class' carers likely to be more rigorously assessed or expected to take 'hard to place' children (Campion 1995:60; Ricketts 1991; Sandland 1993:329).

Whilst there are examples of lesbians and gay men being rejected outright by local authorities on the basis of their sexuality alone, it is those who are accepted into the assessment process that I wanted to investigate in this thesis. It is a central argument of the thesis that the assessment itself is crucial since, apart from making written and verbal recommendations to fostering or adoption panels about the suitability of lesbian or gay applicants, I argue that it is also a process within which the social workers constructed versions of the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay' via their talk and text. It is my argument that straightforward or 'commonsense' understandings of the assessment process imagine that 'lesbian'

or 'gay' have unproblematic and fixed meanings, and that it is the job of the social worker merely to assess applicants' skills and attitudes, to test these against obvious 'child care abilities', and to describe these in their final report.

Instead this thesis argues that the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' by no means have fixed or obvious meanings amongst social workers, and that, during the process of assessment, the social workers made actively constructed versions of these categories. Thus the assessment itself is a 'making sense' activity, as is all social work in my view, and it is my argument that assessment reports present particular versions of 'lesbian' or 'gay' to panels. This thesis investigates what those particular versions are, and why these prevail within adoption and fostering practice.

I am arguing, then, that the assessment is a crucial site for the construction of meanings attaching to concepts like 'lesbian', 'gay' or indeed 'the good enough carer of children', and it is unlikely that the assessment will lose such status in the near future, since it is also bound up with notions of consideration of 'risk' (Parton *et al.* 1997). Further, both the adoption white paper and the consultation document on national standards in foster care have stressed the central importance of a thorough assessment of all applicants (DoH *et al.* 1993:2; Social Services Inspectorate 1996; UK Joint Working Party on Foster Care 1998:21). I therefore wanted to investigate this assessment process because I was interested to find out how the social workers went about making decisions as to

the suitability of lesbians and gay men to adopt or foster children. Crucially, I argue that this is about making sense of the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay'.

The assessment is key to the operations of power that are inherent in social work-ing via a social work discourse which creates knowledge about such categories. Various writers have argued that such social work knowledge is a social product, and that it therefore also operates a 'regime of truth' which organizes what can and cannot be said (Foucault 1972; Philp 1979; Rojek *et al.* 1988; Smith 1987). For the purposes of this thesis, then, I was interested to investigate the operations of power within social work assessments (Triseliotis *et al.* 1995:79), in order to analyse how, in fact, 'lesbian' and 'gay' are constructed in and through a discourse made up of institutional practices, talk and text.

By this I do not mean that lesbian and gay subjects who apply to be considered as potential adopters or fosterers do not 'exist', but I do argue that the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' are always only discursive constructions, whether they be used by those of us who go under such categorisations (Seidman 1997; Wiegman 1994) or by social workers making assessments. Thus the assessment process makes discursive reconstructions or representations of 'lesbian' or 'gay' but specifically within what Dorothy Smith has termed the social 'relations of ruling' (Smith 1987). These dictate certain versions as more acceptable, or compatible with, 'the good carer' I argue. Relatedly, queer theory has argued that the labels 'lesbian' and 'gay' are not the property of individuals, but rather categories of

knowing (Sedgwick 1990; Seidman 1996b, 1997), and this is a position which I support in the thesis. Once a person describing themselves as lesbian or gay applies to be considered by a fostering and adoption unit, the meanings ascribed to those categories become open to any number of further reconstructions by the social workers. I argue, therefore, that social work assessment reports are a series of knowledge-claims and the 'lesbian' or 'gay' applicant is ultimately known only through this textual version presented to a panel.

Crucially, this thesis is complicated by the fact that I am considering what I argue are two socially constructed activities, sexuality and social work (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Burr 1995). Neither of these is self-evident or obvious, but both have to be 'made sense of' and can, therefore, be understood in a number of different ways. Relatedly, they are both 'making sense' activities I argue, and by this I mean that the 'doing' of both social work and sexuality involves making knowledge-claims about the social world and about categories used to divide it up. 'Lesbian', 'gay', 'risk', 'good enough carer of children' and so on are all examples of such knowledge-claims, and these exist in many different and contradictory versions.

Investigating Social Work

This thesis takes what I consider to be an innovative approach to researching social work practice, and I argue this because the thesis pays close

phenomenological attention to social work-*ing*, that is the practices of social workers as interpreting activities. Whilst these are practices as recounted to me in interviews, nevertheless my concern was to investigate what the social workers did when, and how they made sense of, assessing lesbians and gay men. I was therefore, and indeed remain, concerned with the process of assessment, and what was going on at the 'micro' level of social work practice.

This is in opposition to an approach which I have not taken, that might be called the 'macro' level. This would have involved a large-scale survey of all local authorities to look at their stated policies concerning lesbian and gay adoption and fostering, and the numbers of lesbian or gay carers approved by each. I explain in chapter two why I did not choose to examine 'policies' of all local authorities, but in particular I wanted to pay close analytic attention to the assessment process. Even where an authority accepts lesbian or gay applicants, and where an assessment has a positive outcome in terms of approval, this does not mean that it is unproblematic for lesbians and gay men. Further, where an authority has a stated public position of equal opportunities, 'discriminatory' practices still occur, and this is at least partly because social work-ing is not hide bound by the existence of 'policies', important though these are (Rhodes 1992). For this reason I also chose not to investigate social work via case files and/or statistics concerning the numbers of lesbian or gay applicants.

I also felt that asking about numbers of approved lesbian or gay carers would tell

me very little, other than that such numbers are small. What I have wanted to avoid, and would still argue against, is the view that there are 'good' local authorities that approve lesbians and gay men, and 'bad' ones that do not. Of course this does occur sometimes, as in the case of Bromley (Waugh 1997), but what this does not get to grips with is *how* social workers make sense of lesbian and gay applicants, whether their employers are supposedly progressive or not. For it is also a central argument of this thesis that the heterosexual or 'heteronormative' (Warner 1993b:xxi) structures the prevailing 'relations of ruling' in fostering and adoption practice, and that lesbian or gay applicants must therefore be represented in certain key ways by the social workers if they are to be approved by panels.

'Pomo'/Discourse and Social Work

The straightforward or commonsense approach to the idea of social work assessment has been elsewhere termed 'professional idealism' by Mark Philp, who argued that social workers have been seen as free, autonomous individuals merely holding sets of 'values' (Philp 1979:84). Instead, he argued that social work values and skills are not individual acts, but rather take place within a socially determined context. Thus social work knowledge is a particular social construct which operates as a 'discourse', which he defines as a set of rules or organizing principles governing the form of that knowledge (Philp, 1979:87). Social work knowledge is therefore a social product and it has a framework that

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governs what can and cannot be said (Philp 1979:85). This is the discourse of social work, which is subject to conflict and the prevalence of dominant interests:

> *...it is necessary to locate social work within the general discourse of truth and power and to show the way in which this both produces a particular form of knowledge and, at the same time, limits social workers to it.* (Philp 1979:89).

In particular, Philp argues that it is a central task of social work knowledge to create the notion of a 'subject' (Philp, 1979:91). Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, I use Philp's analysis to understand that social workers actually create lesbian and gay subjects through their interpretations of such categories and through their practices, but that these are specific versions of 'the lesbian' or 'the gay man' often limited to what is already understood within, and acceptable to, social work knowledge. If the lesbian or gay man cannot be understood to fit with the concept of 'the good carer of children' as it is constructed by social work, then they will be rejected as foster or adoptive applicants.

These ideas have been further developed around the concept of social work discourse and postmodernism (Howe 1994, 1996; Pardeck *et al.* 1994a, 1994b; Parton 1994a, 1994b, 1996a, 1996b; Parton & Marshall 1998; Parton *et al.* 1997; Rojek *et al.* 1988; Williams 1996). Here it is important to emphasize that social work discourse is both constraining and enabling of social workers, and that

social work itself is at the *"axis of control and opposition"* (Rojek *et al.* 1988:117, 1989:8). Social work discourse does not constrain all social workers merely to reproduce prevailing and dominant ideas about lesbians and gay men, but nevertheless all versions of such categories have consequential effects, and this point is centrally developed in the thesis.

A series of claims about 'postmodern' social work have been made which I summarise here as figure 1.1:

'Postmodern' claims about Social Work

- the role of language in forming human 'selves' is crucial (Howe 1994:521, 1996:86).

- social work in the 'postmodern' can be characterized by pluralism of theories and practices, the importance of participation, a concern with the operations of power, and social work as a performative activity concerned with risk and surveillance (Howe 1994; Parton 1994a:109).

- social work is, and always has been, contested and ambiguous (Parton 1994a:95).

- the role of language within social work is not neutral, indeed it constitutes the operations of power (Parton & Marshall 1998:244; Rojek *et al.* 1988:7).

- social work has a set of 'received ideas', a key example of which is the prevalence of psychoanalytic terminology, but these are not simply accepted by all but are the site of struggles (Rojek *et al.* 1988:11)

- 'received ideas' constitute social work agency norms (Rojek *et al.* 1988:37).

- applying discourse analysis to social work allows for recognition of its changing nature, that the 'needs' of clients are actually constructed via discourse, that social work knowledge can be questioned, and that social work is power relations whereby the social worker can act as disciplinarian or surveillance agent (Rojek *et al.* 1988).

- all social work concepts, such as 'child abuse', are socially constructed phenomena which must be socially organized and achieved in each and every context (Parton *et al.* 1997:70-2).

- social work in the postmodern is characterised by change, complexity, difference and plurality (Parton & Marshall 1998:241).

- deconstruction of social work discourses, especially dominant ones, is crucial (Parton & Marshall 1998:247).

- the subjectivity of social work's 'subjects' is precarious and reconstituted in discourses (Parton & Marshall 1998:247).

- social work needs to work with 'difference', otherwise it tends to freeze identities as fixed (Williams 1996:76).

Figure 1.1

'Postmodernism' actually subsumes under it a whole series of sometimes contradictory claims, some of which have also been made previously by other theorists, notably feminist claims concerning the status of knowledge (Stanley 1990b; Waters 1996). However, here there seem to be two sets of claims as to the 'postmodern' in relation to social work. First is a series of claims about applying what is argued to be the condition of 'postmodernity' (Smart 1993, 1996) to the present state of social work (Howe 1994; Parton 1994a). Here social work under modernity is characterised in fixed and oversimplified ways (Clarke 1996), and the notion of the postmodern is used to read present social work activities such as concerns about participation, care management or the assessment of risk. This version of the postmodern I find unhelpful as it presents all previous social work as uncomplicated, non-contradictory and concerned with single agendas, none of which I support.

However, the second version of postmodern social work is one that concerns itself with the analysis of discourse, and this is an approach that I have found helpful for the purposes of this thesis. Here, claims that social work has a form of 'knowledge', subject to conflicts and the operations of dominant interests, are pertinent (Philp 1979). For this thesis attempts to analyse how social work assessments are the operation of social work discourses, in which I argue that 'received ideas' about sexuality and prevailing views, or 'doxa', are dominant, and that these produce or achieve phenomena such as conceptualizations of 'lesbian', 'gay', 'the good carer', and even 'black', 'Asian', 'Hindu', 'man' or 'woman', as I shall be discussing in later chapters (Parton *et al.* 1997:72; Rojek *et al.* 1988:8,143).

Central to such analyses, and indeed to my own in this thesis, is the role of language, which I argue is not a neutral descriptor, but instead an active constructor of meanings and concepts (Derrida 1976; Howe 1994:521; Rojek *et al.* 1988:244; Weedon 1987). It is through language that lesbians and gay men are understood and represented by social workers, and I argue that social workers' use of language is always implicated in the power/knowledge nexus (Foucault 1980) via their talk and text. Thus the thesis centrally sees social work as a making sense activity, and tries to make sense of these interpretations, a process that has been called 'reflexivity' (Pardeck *et al.* 1994a:118).

In contrast, much existing research on, and indeed teaching about, social work adopts a model in which the concepts, ideas and skills employed by social workers are seen as politically and ethically neutral. It is as though there is something called 'social work knowledge or competency' which social workers have simply to acquire. Social workers are assumed to have a series of skills and attitudes, classically being 'non-judgemental', treating 'the individual', or 'empowering' them (Rojek *et al.* 1988), which they acquire and then use to solve the problems of others. This relates directly to the 'commonsense' view of social work assessment, and I argue against this in the thesis because I do not accept that social workers ever simply describe fostering and adoptive applicants' 'skills, personalities, characters, and abilities' in their reports. Instead I investigate the precariousness of the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' and how these are reconstituted in discourses (Parton & Marshall 1998:247).

I have been arguing so far that I accept some of the claims that have been termed 'postmodern', but the term glosses a whole range of sometimes contradictory theoretical stances and it certainly does not 'sum up' the position I have taken in the thesis. I want to go on to consider how I have also used analyses variously termed feminist, queer, black and/or postcolonial via an examination of how the thesis centrally investigates 'sexuality' as it intersects with 'social work'.

Investigating Sexuality

Researching 'sexuality' is complicated by the fact that it too is an interpretation, a construct which acquires a series of different and changing meanings (Bristow 1997; Parker & Gagnon 1995). Indeed thinking *"...sociologically about something as commonplace and complex as 'sex and sexuality' provides a wide canvas of possibilities of approach and interpretation."* (Hawkes 1996:145). I wish to begin by making a series of claims about my own view of 'sexuality' which are central to the arguments of the thesis. These claims are equally applicable to the concept of 'social work' in my view:

Discovering Sexuality:

- it is both material and discursive.

- it can only be known through interpretive processes.

- it is organizationally, discursively and practically achieved.

- it is gendered, raced, classed...

- it is contested, problematic, irreducible to essentials, and far from agreed.

- it can be known as many different knowledge-claims or theories.

- it is governed by discourse, and therefore implicated in the operations of power, definitions of 'truth', and specifications of what counts as knowledge ('what can be said').

- it is practised.

- it can be formulated into a series of categories that are both regulatory and naming/confirming.

- it is institutionalized in ways which construct and repeat conventionally gendered and raced power dynamics.

- it is defined through processes of normalizing which require constant performance or reiteration.

- it operates conventional binaries in order to keep 'others' marginal, and to maintain the centrality of heterosexuality.

- attempting to understand it involves the production of knowledge; therefore all attempts to understand it - including that which makes up this thesis - can be disputed.

Figure 1.2

As figure 1.2 shows, 'sexuality' is a difficult issue to research because it is so difficult to locate:

> *Whatever sexuality might mean for the individual, it functions as a social code, normative framework, principle of social organization or simply put, a way of defining, regulating, and organizing bodies, selves, and populations which produce identities, solidarities, and relations of domination.* (Seidman 1997:212).

For the purposes of this thesis, I was interested to examine how 'lesbian' and 'gay' function as representations made by the social workers, but how, then, to investigate such representations of sexualities? As I have said, the thesis pays close attention to the social workers' talk (to me in interviews, to each other, to lesbian and gay applicants, and to adoption and fostering panels) and text (their

written assessment reports, and also other documents that I have used in chapter six), but there is a danger, here, of seeing the 'representation' of sexuality as all, but this is not the case. As Beverley Skeggs notes:

> *Sexuality is at least: a form of institutional organization (as in heterosexuality); a regulative (public/internal) discourse; a linguistic unity; a representation; a practice/behaviour; an identity; a desire; a form of citizenship.* (Skeggs 1997:119).

Crucially, therefore, I was not only interested in how the social workers represented lesbians and gay men. I also wanted to consider the assumptive heterosexuality that informs most social work-ing with regard to fostering and adoption; that is, how heterosexuality is *institutionally organized* into social work practices. Indeed, against assertions that queer theory, for example, has tended to abandon institutional analysis (Seidman 1997:156), it is my view that it can be used to examine how heterosexuality is promoted through a range of state practices (Duggan 1998), which include both examples of the law discussed earlier and the operations of social work agencies examined herein. Thus the thesis investigates social work practices as they are implicated in and constructed through the heterosexual 'relations of ruling', in order to show how these institute particular forms of working with lesbians and gay men.

Queer theory has been important in asserting that heterosexuality has functioned

only in relation to a reliance upon, yet a continual need to deny or make 'other',
'homosexuality' and the categories lesbian and gay (Sedgwick 1990:10; Seidman
1997:132; Warner 1993b). Further, it has argued for a largely Foucauldian
version of 'knowledge' (Halperin 1995; Seidman 1997) in which such categories
are practices of knowing. Here, Steven Seidman's account suggests that, within
discourse, rules are authorised for generating and validating knowledge, and that
the practices of knowing become institutionalised. Institutional agents, such as
social workers, are validated with 'expertise' and institutional authority, and
certain social practices are accorded legitimacy by their connection to dominant
knowledges (Seidman 1997:27-8).

This is a helpful way of conceptualising the knowledge about lesbians and gay
men produced by the social workers in and through their assessment practices.
In the thesis I argue that assessments depend upon a set of 'rules' or institutional
norms, and that these also dictate the kinds of practices expected of the social
workers when assessing lesbians and gay men. I argue therefore that this
produces particular *kinds of knowledge* about lesbians and gay men, with certain
versions being institutionally sanctioned. Social workers are given 'expertise' to
carry out such assessments, but this is not so straightforward as it may appear.
In the case of assessments of lesbians and gay men, the legitimacy of social
work as a professional practice is often called into question because merely
considering lesbians and gay men as the potential carers of children does not
connect with dominant knowledges about them, as some newspaper reporting

clearly demonstrates (Sunday Express 1990).

Queer theory has also helped to shift analytic focus onto heterosexuality as a socially and politically organizing principle (Seidman 1997; Stein & Plummer 1996), and to maintain that 'lesbian' and 'gay' are not fixed identities but 'ways of knowing' as I argued earlier. This problematisation of the concept of 'identity' is also central to the thesis, since I argue for the complicated interactions of identity components, and that 'lesbian' and 'gay' are not just known through claims about sexuality, but also they are absolutely gendered and raced[4]. Gendered understandings of lesbian and gay are analysed in chapter five of the thesis, and in chapter six I use a case study of a lesbian couple, one Asian woman and one white woman, in order to consider the intersecting dynamics of race and sexuality (Dhairyam 1994). This is specifically a consideration of the dynamics involved in the assessment of black lesbians or gay men, since, if I were to be analysing just race, then this would need to address how white people are as much raced as anyone else (Dyer 1997; Helen 1992). 'Queer' is a contestation of the notion of a unified 'homosexual' identity (Seidman 1996b:11), and the thesis applies this to gender and race, as well as sexuality.

By implication, then, the thesis is also an investigation of heterosexuality; that is, how heterosexuality is normalized into being central to the notion of the 'good carer' via social work practices, or via social work-ing. Although I argue that

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[4] Although I have not analyzed disability as a category in this thesis, it is also clear that it too intersects with sexuality in complex ways (Shakespeare *et al.* 1996).

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heterosexuality is invisiblised, largely absent from analysis, when thinking about who is able to meet children's needs, it is my view that focusing on lesbian and gay carer applicants can also help to spotlight the assumptions of heterosexuality in action. Heterosexuality, then, is located within social work practices via its material institutionalization, but also via its representations (Skeggs 1997:118). By this, I mean that heterosexuality is not only the assumed norm of fostering and adoption but it is also used to serve regulatory functions with respect to those lesbians and gay men who apply. This not least because I argue that lesbians and gay men are usually held to a heterosexual standard or 'norm' and this is used to make the final decision about whether they are approved, or not, as carers.

In examining sexuality, then, I have taken an approach that sees this as always intersecting with, and indeed understood through, the dynamics of gender and race (Afshar & Maynard 1994; Mercer 1994). My argument is not only that white lesbians and gay men are as much gendered and raced beings as any other (Card 1998; Dyer 1997; Ferguson 1998; Helen 1993), but that the social workers' constructions of the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay' were very much driven by anxieties about gender and race, as I show in chapters five and six. I have therefore used feminist and black analyses in the thesis, and indeed am critical of versions of 'queer' or 'postmodernism' which ignore gender and race.

'Feminism' also glosses a whole diversity of approaches (Barrett & Phillips 1992;

Bell & Klein 1996; Clough 1994; Evans 1995; Evans 1997; Kemp & Squires 1997; Meyers 1997; Mirza 1997a; Mohanty *et al.* 1991; Nicholson 1990; Stanley & Wise 1993; Weedon 1987), but I support the view that it analyses 'gender' via a knowledge-base which relies upon the category 'women' as separate from the category 'men' (Stanley 1997b:12; Stanley & Wise, 1993). This does not have to mean, however, that feminism is 'essentialist' or 'fixes identities', indeed it has a long history of understanding that the category 'women' is socially constructed, fractured and complicated (Stanley 1990b). Nevertheless, the categories 'women' and 'men', as much as 'lesbian' or 'gay', remain forceful ways of carving up the social world and I have therefore analysed how the social workers were as much concerned with gender as sexuality as, I argue, the terms of sexuality are gendered terms. I see 'women' and 'men', then, as discursive constructions as well as having material effects, such as being 'discriminated against' because of gender.

An adequate feminism, however, must also accept what Liz Stanley terms the *"epistemological ramifications of difference"* (Stanley 1997b:1), and this does not just mean 'adding in...' black and lesbian women to feminist analyses, but rather understanding that feminist knowledge, as much as any other, is implicated in the politics of its own production (Mirza 1997b; Mohanty *et al.* 1991; Stanley & Wise 1990,1993). That is because feminism is a theory of knowledge:

> *Feminism sees new knowledge, sees 'coming to know' in a different*

way, as having its origin within such ontological problematics and

the practical inquiries that arise from them. It has articulated

ontological difference as the site of epistemological distinction: a

feminist theory of knowledge linked to a feminist way of knowing,

and this in turn linked back to a feminist way of theorising being.

(Stanley, 1997b:4).

Much like claims made variously under the term 'postmodernism', there have

been debates amongst feminists about the usefulness of the postmodern

(Ahmed 1996; Bell 1993; Bell & Klein 1996; Doan 1994; Elam 1994; Flax 1997;

Mirza 1997b; Nicholson 1990; Riley 1988; Waters 1996; Weedon 1987). As with

all theoretical positions outlined so far, including 'postmodernism', 'discourse',

'queer' and 'feminism', I have chosen instead to analyse the knowledge-claims

being made rather than call myself a 'postmodern queer pro-feminist etc...' For I

argue that some of the claims made by 'postmodern feminists' are useful,

certainly to the project of this thesis, but that I do not accept them all and retain

the suspicions of others who are 'anti-postmodern'. Further, some of the

'postmodern' claims have been in existence within feminism for some time

(Stanley 1990b, 1992b) - the 'nothing new' phenomenon - whilst others are

antithetical to a feminist project (Ahmed 1996), and some versions of 'feminism'

suggested by the 'postmoderns' I do not accept (Bell 1993; Weedon 1987). Like

Stanley (1992b:6), I align myself with some of the ideas now called 'postmodern',

yet I also recognise others as having long histories within feminism and lesbian

and gay theories, for example.

Claims accepted by me, and useful for this thesis are as follows:

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'Postmodern' Feminisms

- categories such as 'lesbian' or 'woman' are necessary but also perform regulatory functions (Butler 1990; Wiegman 1994).

- globalising, white and universalizing tendencies of feminism must be disrupted (Clough 1994; Spivak 1995; Trinh 1995).

- the category 'woman' is always displaced, disrupted, hybrid (Anzaldua 1987; Elam 1994; Riley 1988).

- 'woman' is discursively and historically constructed, yet necessary to feminism (Flax 1997; Riley 1988).

- the representation of 'women' will never be decided but constantly deferred into new meanings (Elam 1994).

- 'women' simultaneously refers to real historical people and to their constructions in ideology (Elam 1994).

- feminism questions science and knowledge, and also the idea that language transparently describes the 'real' (Flax 1997; Weedon 1987).

- feminism questions dominant discourses, including those within itself, and the 'epistemic violence' done in the name of 'truth' (Mirza 1997a; Spivak 1995).

- feminism is about difference (Mirza 1997b).

- the 'objects' of feminism are discursive, and therefore feminism must study their effects as knowledges, rather than simply labelling them 'non-feminist myths' (Bell 1993).

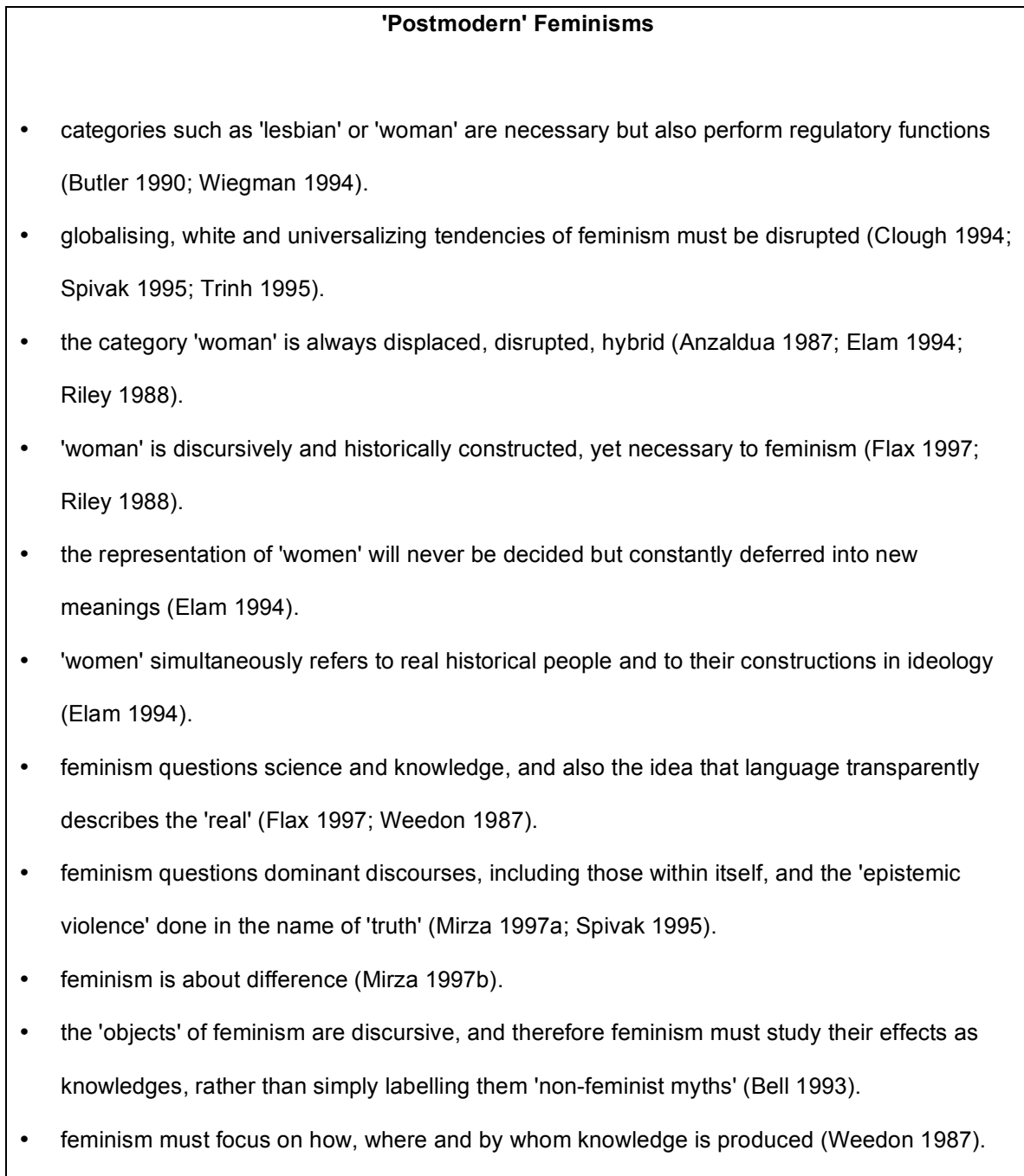- feminism must focus on how, where and by whom knowledge is produced (Weedon 1987).

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Figure 1.3

In particular, Vikki Bell's claim that we should not simply label ideas, which are non-feminist, as 'myths' is one that I have used elsewhere in the thesis. As I have noted, chapter four considers 'commonsense' constructions of risk supposedly presented by lesbian and gay carers to children, and so I have used Dorothy Smith's work (Smith 1987) in order to understand such 'everyday' notions as institutional knowledges linked to institutional practices. Bell claims that all ideas are a *"complex web of interlocking knowledges"* (Bell 1993:88), and she argues:

> *To discount these with the blanket term 'myths' or 'male ideology' is*
>
> *to ignore the ways in which these various ways of talking interrelate*
>
> *and conflict, and the institutional and power relations they deploy*
>
> *and inform. To ignore this complexity misses the opportunity to*
>
> *expose these interconnections, to investigate historical tactics and*
>
> *mechanisms, and to use the points of conflict to question the wider*
>
> *issue of making truth claims....Thus it is not simply that these ways*
>
> *of talking[...]are myths, that they are wrong, but that they constitute*
>
> *knowledges, often institutionalised as truths with practices informed*
>
> *by and informing them.* (Bell 1993:88).

However, as I have earlier noted, this thesis retains an insistence on the categories 'women' and 'men' in order to analyse gender, whilst accepting that such categories are always constituted within discourse. Within the discourse of

social work, as within any other, such categories also have material effects (Clough 1994) and it is such effects that I also analyse. Relatedly, whilst I argue that all identity categories are forms of knowledge discursively produced, categories such as 'lesbian', 'woman', 'black', 'gay' and so on retain epistemological and ontological significance for those who use them. A feminism, or indeed postmodernism or queer theory, which simply dismisses such claims as 'essentialist' is unhelpful (Brodribb 1992; Fuss 1989; Hartsock 1987a; Stanley 1990b; Waters 1996), for such categories have always been, and remain, internally fractured but with important uses for political identifications and actions. This is what has been termed the 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1987) or 'necessary fiction' of identities (Sinfield 1998).

Feminism(s) cannot deny the material socially constructed realities of gender (Stanley 1992b:241), and therefore my analysis does not just consider how gendered, raced and sexualized identities are representations, but also their effects in social work practices and institutional regulations. Where postmodern discourse disregards gender (Di Stefano 1990), where it refuses to name men's actions which are dominating, violent, or situations in which men clearly hold far more institutional powers than women (Brodribb 1992; Thompson 1996), and where it retains 'hetero-reality' as a centrally organizing force (Klein 1996), then it is antithetical to feminism I argue. Thus the thesis uses claims from feminism, postmodernism and queer theory in ways which refuse to remove gender and race from the analysis of sexuality categories.

Can Gender be Separated from Sexuality?

There have been various attempts to separate out the analysis of gender from sexuality (Rubin 1993; Sedgwick 1990), and indeed 'lesbian theory' from 'feminist theory' (Calhoun 1997, 1998; Ingraham 1996; Martin 1998; Stein 1998). Gayle Rubin argued that it is essential to separate gender from sexuality, partly because the system of sexual oppression *"is not reducible to, or understandable in terms of, class, race, ethnicity, or gender"* (Rubin 1993:22), but also because she argued against a feminist analysis of sexuality:

> *I want to challenge the assumption that feminism is or should be*
>
> *the privileged site of a theory of sexuality. Feminism is a theory of*
>
> *gender oppression. To assume automatically that this makes it the*
>
> *theory of sexual oppression is to fail to distinguish between gender,*
>
> *on the on hand, and erotic desire, on the other.* (Rubin 1993:32).

The work of Cheshire Calhoun, however, has argued for the separation of lesbian theory from feminist theory (Calhoun 1997, 1998). She suggests that available analyses of heterosexuality (Rich 1980; Wittig 1992) were actually analyses of 'patriarchy', lacking attention to the specifically lesbian relation to heterosexuality:

To the extent that feminist theory lacks a concept of heterosexuals

and nonheterosexuals as members of different sexuality classes

and thus of heterosexuality as a political structure separable from

patriarchy, feminist theory must treat lesbian oppression as a

special case of patriarchal oppression and remain blind to the

irreducibly lesbian nature of lesbian lives. (Calhoun 1997:201).

Calhoun went on to argue that 'patriarchy' and heterosexual dominance are two discrete systems, and that, for lesbian women, being 'not heterosexual' has penalties, such as being denied the chance to adopt in ways that heterosexual women are not (Calhoun 1997:204). Lesbians and gay men, she says, are displaced within the heterosexual sex/gender system, so that they have no legitimate place there. Again she uses the parenting example - being denied adoption, being denied child 'custody' or residence - to show that lesbians and gay men are *"family outlaws"* (Calhoun 1998:228-30).

Calhoun therefore argues that heterosexuality has a fundamental status absent from analysis in some feminist theory:

Social practices, norms, and institutions are designed to meet the

heterosexual system's need to produce sex/gender dimorphism -

masculine males and feminine females - so that desire can then be

heterosexualized. (Calhoun 1997:214).

Whilst this thesis supports the view that separate attention should be paid to 'the heterosexual system', since clearly I analyse how lesbian and gay subjects are constituted within the heterosexual 'relations of ruling' and, further, investigate how processes of heterosexualisation are at work in social work assessments, I do not do this by removing the analysis of gender relations. Like others (Card 1998; Ferguson 1998; Frye 1983; Stanley & Wise 1979), I analyse, for example, how the category 'lesbian' is a particularly threatening form of 'women'. Further, I investigate how lesbians and gay men are both understood absolutely within the existing discourse of gender, and that part of the oppression experienced by them as adoption or fostering applicants is due to their being perceived as 'not proper women or men.' Indeed I do not support the view that anything is currently 'un-gender', since it is a defining presence in all discourses.

Race-ing Sexuality

This thesis also takes seriously claims made by black and/or 'postcolonial' feminists, lesbians and gay men (Amos & Parmar 1984; Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992; Anzaldua 1987; Beam 1986b; Bhattacharyya 1998; Brah 1996; Carby 1982; Collins 1990; Lorde 1984; Lugones & Spelman 1983; Mason-John 1995; McClintock 1995; Mercer 1994; Mirza 1997a; Mohanty 1988, 1991; Spivak 1995; Trinh 1995). This is because I argue that 'lesbian' and 'gay' are also raced

constructions, and I specifically wanted to investigate what happens when black lesbians or gay men apply to fostering and adoption units. Partly this was because previous research had found little evidence of openly lesbian or gay black carers (Skeates & Jabri 1988), but also because I wanted to show how race, gender and sexuality intersect in complex ways.

Claims made by black and/or postcolonial feminists include the following:

Black Feminisms

- the 'epistemic violence' of claims to knowledge has positioned 'colonial' women as 'Other', the 'marginal subaltern' (Spivak 1995).
- race and gender are often pitted against each other, as though oppression comes in separate, monolithic forms (Trinh 1995).
- the 'third world woman' has been reproduced as a fixed monolithic subject by some feminist texts (Mohanty 1988:61).
- Western feminism has constructed implicitly consensual priorities that are ethnocentric and privileged, and this is a powerful discursive practice (Bhattacharyya 1998; Mirza 1997b; Mohanty 1988:63).
- such universalising feminisms explain 'third world women' only through gender and not race or class, and they are never allowed to rise above mere 'object status'; this has political effects, such as some forms of feminism being seen as imperialistic (Mohanty 1988:66).
- black women felt forced to choose between race or gender within feminism, and want feminism to acknowledge race (Amos & Parmar 1984; Carby 1982; Lugones & Spelman 1983).
- black women cannot be simply grafted onto existing feminism, but feminism itself must

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change (Bhattacharyya 1998; Carby 1982).

- black women have 'different ways of knowing' and therefore produce different kinds of knowledge (Collins 1990).

- black feminism has exposed 'whiteness' as a universalizing discourse (Mirza 1997b).

- black feminism is about racialised and gendered subjects, but not an homogeneous 'black women' (Mirza 1997b; Mohanty 1991).

- on the 'borders' fixed identities can be challenged via notions of hybridity, mixing, the forbidden, the queer, the 'mestiza', and identity be understood as a process, a becoming (Anzaldua 1987; Mirza 1997b).

Figure 1.4

As with earlier claims labelled 'postmodern', 'feminist' and 'queer', here it is argued that *"...the category of woman is constructed in a variety of political contexts that often exist simultaneously and overlaid on top of one another"* (Mohanty 1988:73). This is an important point, for chapter six analyses how categories such as 'Asian', 'Hindu' and 'lesbian' can be constructed as being diametrically opposed when simplistic views of 'identity categories' are employed in social work assessments.

The Contribution of the Thesis

My research makes an original contribution to knowledge on the topic of lesbian and gay fostering and adoption for a number of reasons. First, the empirical data is itself original, in so much as I have not come across any other research which investigates in any depth how social workers go about such assessments.

Existing research, including my own, gives some attention to the point of view of applicants themselves (Hicks 1993, 1996; Hicks & McDermott 1999; Ricketts 1991; Skeates & Jabri 1988) or to 'policy statements' made by local authorities (Skeates & Jabri 1988), but none has considered how lesbians and gay men are assessed within the 'Form F' process.

Second, examining the assessment process in this way, as a 'making sense activity', is also original, for little attention has been paid to how social workers reproduce social categories via such processes. The thesis considers how far it is possible to say that lesbians and gay men are 'discriminated against' within assessment, but also problematises this notion by asking what exactly might constitute a 'non-discriminatory' approach; again, a question rarely asked or answered.

Third, I approach the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' as problematic, and see these as discursive constructions, as forms of knowledge, which can be investigated for their effects as they are constructed and used by the social workers. I examine how these relate to another social construction crucial to adoption and fostering practice, the 'good enough carer of children', and suggest that only certain versions of 'lesbian' or 'gay' can be made compatible with this. Further, I also analyse how discourses of gender and race are also crucial to such categories and to decisions made about the suitability of lesbian and gay applicants. I argue that, when a final assessment report is presented to an adoption or fostering

panel, then at that point the 'lesbian' or 'gay man' exists *only as a discursive construction*. Panels do not 'know' such applicants except as how social workers represent them via talk and text.

This research sits alongside only two other previous studies (Ricketts 1991; Skeates & Jabri 1988), both very different in approach, and therefore makes only one contribution to an area little investigated. For this reason, I think it important to outline what this research is **not**, for it cannot answer all questions about adoption and fostering by lesbians and gay men. I have not considered the views and practices of child care social workers who work in area children and families teams and who are partly responsible for decisions about where to place children. Nor have I considered what happens when lesbian or gay carers are involved in court cases and/or contested hearings involving birth parents.

I have not considered recruitment practices in any depth, nor placement decisions or outcomes, because I have focused upon the assessment process, usually to the point at which a panel decides whether to approve the carers or not. Nevertheless I have not been able to give significant attention to the workings or decision-makings of panels. Nor have I researched in an authority prepared to make a public statement that it will not consider lesbian and gay applicants.

Finally, this research is not a "how to" guide to the assessment of lesbians and

gay men, and I have not considered national statistics concerning the numbers of

lesbian or gay applications and approvals. I have not researched 'public' or policy

statements made by local authorities on this issue, and have preferred to avoid

the approach of 'good vs. bad' agencies.

The Research Questions

The thesis addresses itself to the following questions:

- how do social workers assess lesbian or gay adoption or fostering applicants?
- what models of assessment are used and why?
- do particular 'ways of assessing' dominate?
- what approach do agencies take to such assessments?
- how do social workers themselves prepare for, feel about and handle such assessments?
- what areas of knowledge do they draw upon?
- what areas of questioning are used with lesbian and gay applicants and why?
- how do social workers handle issues of a lesbian or gay sexuality in assessment?
- how do social workers handle the question of lesbians and gay men 'coming out'?
- do agencies operate any policies specific to this issue?
- how do social workers present their assessment reports to panels?

- what is 'discriminatory' assessment practice with lesbians and gay men, and what is not?

- do particular versions of 'lesbian' or 'gay' prevail?

- do social workers recognise a series of 'commonsense' 'myths' about lesbian and gay parenting?

- what ideas about sexuality prevail, and what about gender and race?

An Outline of the Thesis

Following on from this chapter, I present a review of the existing research literature relating to the adoption and fostering of children by lesbians and gay men. Because such research is scarce, however, I also consider studies of lesbian mothers, gay fathers, and the children of lesbians and gay men, all of which include children from previous relationships and those born by methods of alternative and self-insemination (Saffron 1994). Chapter three examines the thesis' methodology, and here I examine my own claims-making via an investigation of epistemological, methodological and indeed grammatological issues (Derrida 1976). Chapter three also explains why I chose to use both a series of interviews with a cohort of social workers and a case study of a lesbian couple's application to be considered as adopters for the purposes of the thesis.

Chapters four to six present my analysis of the data generated thereby. In chapter four I begin to analyse how the social workers went about assessing

lesbians and gay men. Here I propose a continuum of assessment responses and consider what I argue is the dominance of the 'on merit: prioritizing child care' model. I examine what I consider to be key features which impact upon the social workers' abilities to conduct 'fairer' assessments, before using Dorothy Smith's work (Smith 1987) in order to analyse 'commonsense' understandings of 'risks' supposedly presented to children by lesbian and gay carers and central to the discussions I had with the social workers. Next I examine whether it is possible to say that assessments of lesbians and gay men are 'discriminatory' and, crucially, analyse what this means in practice. At the end of chapter four, I look at the notion of 'anti-oppressive practice' with lesbians and gay men, paying attention to those social workers who I argue were attempting to promote 'equality' measures with lesbian and gay applicants.

In chapter five, I turn my attention to the gendered nature of understandings of the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay.' As I have argued, I do not believe that sexuality can be understood apart from gender, but I was nevertheless surprised by how much 'gender anxiety', as I term it, was generated in my interviews. Here, in separate sections, I analyse how the social workers made sense of lesbian and then gay applicants, and I use a feminist analysis to propose that certain versions of 'lesbian' and 'gay', particularly in gendered terms, predominated amongst applicants who were successful in gaining approval as adoptive or foster carers.

Chapter six presents my case study of Nita and Clare, a lesbian couple who

applied to be considered as adopters. I follow their 'story' through the assessment, successful approval by adoption panel, and then subsequent rejection as the potential carers of a sibling group of Asian girls by another local authority. Chapter six investigates the dynamics involved in the assessment of a black and a white lesbian, with the intersecting aspects of religion, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality being key. I argue that the operation of fixed and 'discriminatory' racial values by the social workers were used to mask what I argue was a case of anti-lesbian rejection.

Finally, in chapter seven I provide my conclusions to the thesis. I summarize the arguments made throughout, and then address any methodological weaknesses of the research. I propose a series of areas for future research, before suggesting a model of multiple activisms as a way forward and a way to intervene in the construction of knowledges surrounding the lesbian and gay adoptive and foster carer.

Chapter 2

Reviewing the Literature

In this chapter I consider the existing research relating to the fostering and adoption of children by lesbians or gay men. Research which deals with this issue is scarce (Brown 1990, 1991, 1992a, 1992b; Ricketts 1991; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987, 1990; Skeates & Jabri 1988), and so I will address some related areas: studies of lesbian mothers, studies of gay fathers, and studies of children living with gay or lesbian carers. My justification for considering these related areas is that debates around the acceptability of lesbian or gay carers centre on the construction of knowledge-claims about lesbian/gay parents and their children, as much as about fostering and adoption specifically. Within each section, I will consider the major studies in detail, before going on to draw out the general themes emerging from the research. Finally, I will address knowledge produced by the existing studies, in order to consider how my own research questions are informed by the literature presented herein.

Empirical Studies of Fostering and Adoption by Lesbians and Gay Men:

The pioneering work of Jane Skeates & Dorian Jabri (1988) in Britain was to consider the experiences of lesbian and gay applicants to the fostering and

adoption process, and the response of local authorities to such applications. At base, their study argues for the fair treatment of lesbian and gay applicants from the position of a right of entitlement (1988:7). This means that lesbian and gay applicants should not be subject to *a priori* disqualification from the fostering and adoption process, but should be assessed, like anyone else, on the basis of their ability to provide good child care (1988:7). Skeates & Jabri argue that this constitutes a lesbian and gay 'right', and one that does not contradict the rights of children (1988:8).

Their study is based upon two research aspects: first, interviews with thirteen lesbians and gay men who had been through the fostering and adoption process (specifically, three male couples, two female couples, a single man, and two single women); and, second, profiles of policy information requested from six inner-London boroughs. Skeates & Jabri note that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from their small interview sample, and that only one person was from outside London (1988:28). Of their sample group, three people had applied to a local authority as a 'single person' and had not been out as gay or lesbian, while the remaining ten had applied as openly lesbian or gay people (1988:31). In relation to the profiles of the London boroughs (1988:60-70), I believe their research is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the boroughs concerned are all inner-London, and all had reputations at the time of the study for progressive, anti-discriminatory policies. Second, requesting policy information on paper from the boroughs allows them to present what I term 'practice in

theory'; that is, what they might like to achieve with lesbian and gay applicants rather than what was practised. Third, to focus on policy rather than social work practice does not present a picture of how social workers were dealing with lesbians and gay men in the boroughs concerned.

Skeates & Jabri provide a comprehensive list of what they term 'myths' about lesbians and gay men, which they argue have informed social work practice (1988:20/1). These include notions that lesbians and gay men are deviant, unable to provide proper gender role models to children, likely to sexually abuse children (more so for gay men), likely to bring their children up to be lesbian or gay, and not 'naturally' able to parent (1988:20/1). Skeates & Jabri question these assumptions, and make the following points: in relation to gender role modeling, they ask why fixed roles are held to be so important, and make the points that heterosexuals also provide diverse gender roles at times and that children also learn about gender from outside of the home (1988:21). They suggest that lesbians and gay men do not bring up their children to be lesbian or gay, and that sexuality is no indicator of good or bad parenting ability (1988:22/3). They also point out statistics from the Metropolitan Police which show that 96% of sexual abuse is perpetrated by heterosexual men, and yet gay men are still held to be more of a sexual risk (1988:23). They make the point that social work agencies need to question their use of such 'stereotypes', and also the construction of the 'ideal family model', in order to benefit the whole process of social work assessment (1988:24/5).

There are a number of themes that emerge from their interviews with lesbian and gay applicants, and they note that the assessment process is 'doubly discriminatory' for lesbians or gay men who are also black and/or disabled (1988:28/58). Their research found that social workers assumed applicants to be heterosexual unless told otherwise, and that, if the applicant was not out as lesbian or gay, then sexuality was not discussed at all (1988:31/36). One social worker made comments to indicate that there were suspicions that the applicant was gay, but he was never asked (1988:32).

For gay men, the 'corruption' response was common. There were concerns about why gay men would want to care for boys (1988:42), and suggestions that they had ulterior, sexual motives (1988:45). A single gay man, who was not out, felt that his social worker was worried that he would sexually abuse a child (1988:32). Interestingly, a lesbian respondent reported that her social worker had said that lesbians were the safest placement for children (1988:40).

Most of the respondents felt that it was important to be out to a local authority, and many felt that social workers would be more likely to respond positively to honesty (1988:33/37). Nevertheless, the responses of the local authorities concerned varied. One authority said that lesbians and gay men were covered by their policy of equal opportunities and that applicants would be considered on their merits (1988:47). Others said that they were unsure how to deal with such

applications (1988:42), that they had never assessed a gay couple before (1988:43), or refused to respond to such applicants (1988:45).

With regard to the process of assessment, two respondents reported that the experience was positive, but this was where the social worker either had gay friends (1988:40) and/or an understanding of lesbian and gay issues (1988:44). One gay couple felt that their social worker was misinformed about the issues, and higher management further scrutinized their application when they came to the attention of panel (1988:38). Another gay couple reported that their social worker expected them to have traditional gender role divisions within their home (1988:38). A lesbian couple said that their assessment was initially good, but when a second worker became involved she did not approve of their application, and did not want it to go to panel. They felt she had little knowledge of lesbian issues (1988:47/49).

Most applicants felt that the whole process was too long (1988:37), but it is very difficult to say whether this has anything to do with issues of sexuality. A gay couple reported further delay to their application when the borough concerned found out that they had been recommended for approval by a social worker. Their application was further scrutinized and the borough was unsure about how to handle the issues (1988:38). One woman noted that she had been approved for adoption by a borough, had children placed with her, and had been asked to run training groups for potential applicants. When she later came out as a

lesbian, she was withdrawn from the training courses (1988:34).

Skeates & Jabri (1988) provide the following conclusions regarding their interviews with lesbian and gay applicants. They suggest that those who were out as lesbian or gay received less favourable responses from local authorities (1988:49). They also believe that those who were out experienced more delay in the process of assessment, and that all lesbian and gay applicants face tougher questioning and scrutiny than heterosexual ones (1988:50). They also found that, where lesbians or gay men had children placed with them, they were more likely to be disabled children, or those termed 'hard to place' because of particular needs:

> *The most recurring reason for the allocation of a disabled child with a Lesbian or Gay parent is the belief that a child with for example, a learning disability, will not understand its parent's sexuality and will therefore not be influenced or corrupted by it. Moreover, there is also the belief that a child with a disability, like all people with disabilities, does not have sexual needs/sexuality, and could not therefore possibly grow up to become Lesbian or Gay.* (Skeates & Jabri, 1988:57).

The second aspect of the Skeates & Jabri study was to request policy information regarding lesbian and gay potential carers from six inner-London

boroughs, namely Hackney, Hammersmith & Fulham, Haringey, Lewisham, Lambeth and Camden (1988: 60-70). All of these boroughs reported that they had policies of equal opportunity that would not discriminate against lesbians and gay men, and that all applicants would be assessed on their merits as potential carers. Most also noted the need for training on issues of sexuality for their social work staff. Only three case examples are mentioned; a lesbian foster carer in Hammersmith & Fulham (1988:63), an application by a lesbian couple in Haringey (1988:65), and an approved lesbian carer, who had a disabled child placed with her, in Lambeth (1988:68).

Skeates & Jabri recognized the need for more detailed research to examine the social work practices of local authorities in relation to lesbian and gay carers (1988:74), and they were concerned that the implementation of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 (Gooding 1992:290) might cause a number of local authorities to backtrack on their commitment to lesbians and gay men.

The research of Wendell Ricketts (1991), and Ricketts & Roberta Achtenberg (1987, 1990), has documented findings relating to fostering and adoption by lesbians and gay men in North America. Their research is noteworthy for its use of the case study method (Yin 1984), in particular the Boston Foster Care Case (Ricketts 1991:67; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987:99, 1990:98), and is based upon interviews with lesbian and gay carers, young lesbians and gay men in care, and heterosexual young people living with lesbian or gay parents (Ricketts &

Achtenberg 1990:85). They suggest that there are hidden numbers of lesbian and gay carers who have not come out to social work agencies (Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:84), and that some social workers prefer to ignore issues of sexuality in assessments (Ricketts 1991:1; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987:89, 1990:84). This poses a number of problems, however, for social work agencies, as increasing numbers of lesbian or gay carers are coming out (Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987:93, 1990:87).

In terms of the social work assessment of lesbians and gay men, Ricketts & Achtenberg contend that *"...homosexual applicants are scrutinized more carefully and are held to a higher standard than are their heterosexual counterparts"* (Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:104), and report that assessments of lesbians or gay men were more thorough and rigorous (Ricketts 1991:10; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:98). Social workers often operated with a narrow concept of the 'family' in assessments (Ricketts 1991:8), and, for lesbians or gay men, sexuality came to dominate the inquiry to the exclusion of all other issues (Ricketts 1991:119). Like Skeates & Jabri (1988), Ricketts' (1991) research argues for a right of entitlement to assessment for lesbians and gay men.

Also like Skeates & Jabri (1988), they report a number of stereotypical views or 'myths' about lesbians and gay men held by social workers (Ricketts 1991:47/8; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:113), all of which are refuted by existing research (Ricketts 1991:49). In particular, they found concerns regarding lesbians' and gay

men's abilities to provide gender role models, which betray anxieties that the traditional gender system might break down. For example, Ricketts & Achtenberg (1990) report that a *"...county-appointed lawyer suggested that [a] four-year-old would do better in a 'normal' family; later he asked whether two 'strong women' would be able 'to raise a little girl to be appropriately submissive'."* (1990:111). Ricketts & Achtenberg also report that lesbians and gay men who do have children placed with them are often asked to care for 'hard to place' children (1990:104). They found that many lesbian or gay applicants felt they had to educate their social worker about lesbian and gay issues (Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987:90, 1990:85/105), and they suggest that social work training should address such concerns (Ricketts 1991:3; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987:107, 1990:113).

The case study reported in their research is that of two foster carers in Boston, Massachusetts (Ricketts 1991:67; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987:99, 1990:98). The case involved a gay couple, David Jean and Donald Babets, who were approved to foster, and had two children placed with them. Following exposure of their story in the local press, however, the children were removed from their care, and a review of fostering policy instigated. The research reports that the men's assessment was twice the usual length, and that the policy review resulted in potential lesbian or gay carers being used only as a 'last resort' (Ricketts 1991:76; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987:102, 1990:99). Ricketts & Achtenberg (1987:104, 1990:100) suggest that this case reveals that those lesbians or gay

men approved often possess special skills (both men worked in social care professions), that media attention distorts the potential for adequate policy consideration, and that lesbian and gay community opposition to such discrimination is important.

The work of Helen Cosis Brown (1990, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1998) is not empirically based, but she does consider how sexuality can be assessed by social workers in fostering and adoption. She notes that social workers often experience feelings of great responsibility when assessing people who will become the carers of children (1991:11), and when those potential carers are also gay or lesbian, workers feel there is an added 'spotlight' on their work. Many do not accept that lesbians or gay men should be assessed, but feel that they cannot say this for fear of contradicting policies of equal opportunity (1991:11). Others have assessed and recommended lesbian or gay carers, only to find that their managers will not back such a recommendation (1991:11). It is Brown's contention that opposing 'gay rights' to notions that 'children need normal families' is unhelpful (1991:11), and she suggests that the proper assessment of lesbian or gay applicants, based upon children's rights to good placements that meet their needs, is the way forward. In this way, social workers need to avoid using either negative/discriminatory or positive/over-liberal stereotypes of lesbians and gay men (1990:8, 1991:15).

Brown notes that social workers need to take seriously the existing research

knowledge about children who live with lesbian or gay carers (1991:14, 1992b:214), as this addresses stereotypical concerns about the likely effects upon children. In contrast to what she terms an 'over-liberal' response (1992a:32) in assessments, where sexuality may not be discussed because this might not be 'politically correct', Brown advocates that sexuality needs to be firmly on the agenda in all assessments (1992a:30). This means that, in assessing lesbians and gay men, social workers need to consider and cover particular issues that do not relate to heterosexuals (1990:19, 1991:16). These include the lesbian or gay applicants' experiences of their sexuality, their family reactions to this, how they feel about being lesbian or gay, their experiences of homophobia, their relationships, how they will help a child to understand their carers are lesbian/gay, and how they will relate such information to other adults in the child's life (at school, for example) (1991:16). She argues that carers need a clear sense of their own sexuality and sexual boundaries in order to be able to help children in their care (Brown 1992a:33).

In order to be able to carry out such assessments with confidence, social workers need to ask themselves what knowledge, what values, and what skills they have/need in relation to lesbian or gay potential carers (Brown 1992a:31). Brown suggests that this should be addressed in the training of workers (1990:8), and gives the example of how attitudes towards single carers as fosterers or adopters have moved on in social work theory and practice (Brown 1992a:31). Brown also notes that social workers frequently raise the issue of the potential objections of

birth parents to such placements, and she suggests that they need to address this, rather than it becoming an excuse for the justification of discrimination against lesbians and gay men (Brown 1990:21, 1991:16). She notes that, where lesbians and gay men have been properly assessed as able to provide good child care, then social workers can feel confident in addressing birth parents' concerns. Some birth parents will support such placements, some will come to change their views over time, and the views of some will be overridden in placement decisions (Brown 1991:16). Where a birth parent objects to placement with lesbian or gay carers, the social worker will have to make a decision whether to offer another placement, to withdraw the placement on the grounds that it is adequate, or to overrule the parents' wishes in favour of the child's needs (Brown 1990:21).

General Themes Emerging from Existing Research on Lesbian & Gay Fostering and Adoption:

Existing research suggests that social work theory remains largely discriminatory and pathologising in relation to lesbians and gay men (Brown 1992b:202), and that many lesbians and gay men who approach social work agencies are fearful of the power that social workers have to reject their applications (Romans 1991). Social work agencies are likely to operate a number of 'stereotypical' views about lesbians and gay men (Skeates & Jabri 1988:24). With regard to lesbian and gay applicants to the fostering and adoption process specifically, social work

agencies may have no policy on how to respond (Sullivan 1995; Taylor 1993:111), or may not know how to respond to such enquiries (Skeates & Jabri 1988:42/3; Smart 1991:17). Many social work agencies simply refuse to respond to lesbian or gay enquirers (Clarke 1991:17; Skeates & Jabri 1988:45).

Brown (1992a:30) reports that many social workers find it difficult to discuss issues of sexuality in an open manner. This may be due to a number of reported factors: general ignorance on the part of many social workers about lesbian and gay issues (Eaton 1986:6; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:105; Romans 1991:15), the operation of homophobic values (Appleby & Anastas 1998: 33; Martin 1993:132; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:88; Wisniewski & Toomey 1987:455), personal opposition to lesbian and gay fostering or adoption (Brown 1991:11; Martin 1993:141), and the holding of 'discriminatory' and 'stereotypical' beliefs about lesbians and gay men generally (Brown 1992b:214; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:113; Skeates & Jabri 1988:20/1). The implications of such findings have been that the issues of sexuality have often been ignored in assessment (Ricketts 1991:1; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:84), that the true number of lesbian and gay carers remains hidden (Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987:89), and that lesbian and gay applicants frequently report that they find themselves in the position of having to 'educate' their social worker about lesbian and gay issues (Martin 1993:170; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987:90, 1990:85/105).

Much of the existing research has considered the effects of the social work

assessment, or home study, upon lesbian and gay applicants. Although a number of lesbians and gay men report positive experiences of assessment (Skeates & Jabri 1988:40/44), these are largely outweighed by negative examples. For those lesbian and gay applicants who are not disqualified from assessment at the initial point of contact with an agency, the process is reported to be more thorough (Ricketts 1991:10) and searching (Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:104; Skeates & Jabri 1988:38/50) than for heterosexual applicants. Ricketts (1991) notes that *"...when open lesbians and gay men have succeeded in becoming foster parents, they have done so only after being thoroughly and rigorously evaluated...even more extensively than other applicants."* (Ricketts 1991:10).

Research studies also point to the frequently narrow and discriminatory conceptions of 'family' operated within social work. Social workers and their agencies, particularly when looking to place children, often promote an ideal 'nuclear family' model (Clarke 1991:16; Romans 1991:14; Skeates & Jabri 1988:24/5; Taylor 1993:109; Whitehouse 1985:21), bolstered by the adoption review (DoH *et al.* 1993:9). The promotion of this ideal heterosexual family as a social work value is found in the work of Whitfield (1991), who argues that a mother and a father model is based upon nature and biological norms, and provides correct gender role modeling to children (1991:16). This is also reported in Tissier: *"...The mother and father model is still the ideal and one should take pains to ensure it is provided for young children"* (1993:8). Examples of existing

research instead argue for flexibility in the conception of 'family' (Benkov 1994; Ricketts 1991:8; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:84).

Another theme that emerges from existing research is that of the notion of 'rights' in foster and adoptive care. Brown has noted the construction of what she terms a limiting "dichotomy" (1991:11) which opposes 'gay rights' to the notion that 'children need normal families'. The notion that no adult has an automatic 'right' to foster or adopt a child (Brown 1991:13; Ricketts 1991:13) is an important one, since all applicants, whatever their sexuality, must be subject to the scrutiny of assessment. However, the notion of adult rights as always inappropriate in fostering and adoption has been used to suggest that 'gay rights' have no place (DoH 1990). Instead, the 'right' to be considered is proposed in existing research in opposition to *a priori* disqualification of all lesbians and gay men (Ricketts 1991:13; Skeates & Jabri 1988:7). Existing research argues that lesbian and gay 'rights' do not necessarily contradict those of children, and that lesbians and gay men who have been assessed and approved as carers are able to meet children's needs (Benkov 1994:74/95; Skeates & Jabri 1988:8).

Research has shown that increasing numbers of lesbian and gay applicants wish to be 'out' to social work services (Martin 1993:119; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987:93, 1990:87), and that this should be encouraged (Skeates & Jabri 1988:7). Nevertheless, this will largely depend upon the legal position and the declared attitudes of the social work agency faced by the applicant (Martin 1993:132;

Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:88). Most lesbian and gay applicants believe it is important for them to be out during the process of assessment (Skeates & Jabri 1988:33/37), yet the study by Skeates & Jabri reported that those applicants who were out received less favourable and much slower responses from local authorities (Skeates & Jabri 1988:49).

Social workers are reported to hold a number of 'stereotypical' views about lesbians and gay men (Skeates & Jabri 1988:18), and about the likely effects upon children of living with lesbian and gay carers (Ricketts 1991:49-61). These beliefs about children's experiences are discussed later, but are refuted by all existing research (Ricketts 1991:49). The expectation that children require traditional male and female gender role modeling at home (Whitfield 1991) is also reported in existing studies of social work attitudes. Concerns that lesbians are either too 'masculine' (Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:111) or unable to provide male role models to children, and vice versa for gay men, have been found in the expectations of assessing social workers (Skeates & Jabri 1988:38).

Research to date has shown that those lesbian and gay carers who are approved may not have any children placed with them (Brown 1990:22). Where they do, lesbians and gay men are frequently asked to care for disabled or 'hard to place' children (Martin 1993:142/144; Skeates & Jabri 1988:56/7), those with 'special needs' (Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:104), or those who are black and of minority race (Barret & Robinson 1990:63).

Lesbian Mother Studies[5]:

Gillian Hanscombe & Jackie Forster's (1981) research is notable for being one of the earliest studies of lesbian motherhood in Britain[6], and is based upon informal interviews with a number of lesbians with children (1981:11).

Hanscombe & Forster (1981) report that lesbian mothers are often tested against the heterosexual 'nuclear family' (1981:17), and that the equation of motherhood with heterosexuality does not allow for the lesbian mother's existence (1981:39/44). Their study raises the issue of the lack of legal protection for lesbian families (1981:69), and in particular the concerns of the court regarding 'proper' gender role modeling for children (1981:73/78).

In an important section of their work, Hanscombe & Forster review research on children who live with lesbians, in order to dispel common anxieties. They found that the children that they spoke to were open in their attitudes to their mothers (1981:133), and they refer to a number of other studies as follows: Golombok *et al.* (1983) found no differences in the sex role or gender identity development of the children of lesbian mothers (1981:86-7); Hooker (1958, reported in Hanscombe & Forster 1981:146), and Green (1978), and Kirkpatrick *et al.* (1981)

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[5] The most recent publications on lesbian mothers in Britain are those of Gillian A. Dunne (Dunne 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). Although I am aware of these, I have not considered them here as they were published as the final draft of this thesis was being prepared.

[6] Although lesbian motherhood had been addressed earlier, especially in North America. See, for example, chapter five of Del Martin & Phyllis Lyon's (1972) *Lesbian/Woman* (Toronto: Bantam Books).

found no differences in the children's development (1981:146-7). Hanscombe & Forster found no evidence of child molestation by lesbian mothers or gay fathers, and they note that this is a largely heterosexual phenomenon (1981:148).

The work of Ellen Lewin (1993) has researched lesbian mothers within North America. One of the most important features of her work is that, contrary to many of the other studies, she argues for the similarities of experience that exist across both lesbian and heterosexual motherhood (1993:3). Lewin is careful not to equate 'mother' with 'woman', in the sense that 'motherhood' is often viewed as the more acceptable state of 'womanhood' (1993:3), and she notes that the lesbian mother must negotiate her identity within an existing gender system which does not recognize her (1993:15-16).

Lewin's study considered the processes of coming out (1993:20) and of divorce (1993:29) for lesbians previously married. She finds similarities of experience concerning divorce when compared with a group of heterosexual single mothers (1993:34), but notes that both coming out and divorce represented a move towards increased autonomy and independence for the lesbian mothers (1993:45). Those lesbian mothers who had been previously married, and had since come out and divorced, felt more fully 'themselves', but their status had been lowered in the eyes of the societal gender system (1993:46). In particular, Lewin notes contradictions inherent within the 'lesbian/mother' identity. Those lesbians who had chosen to become mothers had acquired a more conventional

status ('mother'), in contrast to their lesbian status. Motherhood, however, required more careful planning for lesbians than for heterosexual women, and so was viewed as somehow less 'natural' (1993:74). 'Lesbian/mother' therefore contains both resistant and conventional elements, and Lewin argues that it constitutes a 'dual identity' (1993:16).

Lewin's thesis is that there exists some overlap of experience between heterosexual and lesbian mothers, and she argues that, while there are some differences between them, lesbian mothers are ordinary mothers who share similarities with other mothers, and who often share in the same system of meaning of 'motherhood' (1993:181-2). She therefore argues that lesbian mothers remodel the existing culture of motherhood from within that system (1993:183), and that the concepts of 'woman' and 'mother' are thereby expanded (1993:191). Lesbian mothers also exist within chosen families, and they were able to adapt their networks to include both biological and non-biological kin relations (1993:76).

The work of Pat Romans (1990, 1991, 1992) is based upon researching the life histories of a sample of forty-eight lesbian mothers, using in-depth, guided interviews (1990:30/60). Romans too argues for the 'dual identity' of the 'lesbian/mother' (1990:1, 1991:14, 1992:98), and takes a symbolic interactionist approach in her analysis of the self as an interaction between the *"socially produced meanings"* of 'lesbian' and 'mother' (Romans 1990:4). Thus these two

'core identities' might be viewed as incompatible (1991:14), especially when the socially constructed meanings of 'lesbian' (Kitzinger 1987) and 'mother' (Rich 1976; Richardson 1993) are considered, and Romans' (1990) work was to consider how far such identities were managed and integrated.

Romans constructs a continuum (1990:67) in order to represent the women's primary identifications. At one extreme is M5 (primarily identifying as 'mother'), in the middle is an 'integrated' identity, and at the other extreme is L5 (primarily identifying as 'lesbian'). Her sample could be placed at various points along such a continuum, and she then began to categorize the women (1990:161, 1992:101) as follows: for 'concealers' (1992:101), the motherhood role was central and the lesbian role might be hidden (for example, remaining within a marriage); for 'confronters' (1992:102), the lesbian role was central and they were out in all aspects of their lives; for 'compromisers' (1992:102), the lesbian role was important, but compromises were made and they were not always openly lesbian (for example, where they feared that this might have negative consequences for their children) (1992:103); for 'co-ordinators' (1992:103), the identities of both lesbian and mother were successfully negotiated and integrated, and they felt at ease. Of her sample, Romans found that one fifth could be termed 'co-ordinators', and that the majority were 'compromisers' (1992:102-3). She found that those who had come out as lesbian before becoming a mother had coped better than those who had been a mother first (Romans 1990:186).

Just over one fifth of Romans' sample had experienced contact with social work agencies (1990:129). She found that lesbian mothers expressed serious concerns about the statutory powers held by social workers to make decisions about their children's futures (1991:14), and also about the construction of the 'ideal heterosexual family' by social work (1990:131, 1991:14, 1992:99). Lesbian families were tested against such a heterosexual standard, whilst a background of legislative measures such as Section 28 attempts to invalidate them (1991:14, 1992:99). The lesbian mothers in her sample reported concerns that social work assessments focused wholly upon their sexuality rather than on parenting issues (1991:14), and some felt they had been discriminated against. In one example, a six-year lesbian relationship was described as "ambiguous" by a social worker (Romans 1990:130). For these reasons, Romans recommends that social workers examine their own attitudes regarding lesbian mothers (1991:15), and that, in the area of fostering and adoption, local authorities should consider how they are to assess lesbian applicants whose needs are different from those of heterosexuals (1991:15, 1992:106).

The work of the Rights of Women Lesbian Custody Group (hereafter RWLCG 1986; and see also Rights of Women 1984, and the later revised Harne & Rights of Women 1997) was based upon a survey of thirty-six lesbian mothers, and focuses in particular upon their experiences of the court system in relation to custody (now called 'residence') decisions. The study found that lesbian mothers involved in court cases were subject to intense scrutiny regarding their sexuality

to the exclusion of factors to do with their ability to provide adequate care (1986:120).

Their study found that 45% of lesbian mothers had lost custody of their children (RWLCG 1986:144), a figure which is now slowly decreasing (Beresford 1994). RWLCG also found that the preparation of court welfare reports was based upon prejudiced views of lesbians (1986:147). Within the legal arena, many lesbian mothers felt that they had to prove that they were the 'ideal mother', rather than a good mother (1986:169). Two women reported that local authorities had applied for care orders on their children because they regarded lesbianism as detrimental to the child's welfare (1986:158-9). Like other studies, RWLCG suggests that much of this is based upon 'myths' relating to lesbians, and the possible effects upon the psychosexual development of their children (1986:125-133). Once more, this often betrays anxieties that the gender system will not be upheld (RWLCG 1986:132-3).

In relation to contact with social work services, the RWLCG study reports that agencies are as prejudiced as the rest of society with regard to fostering and adoption (RWLCG 1986:85). They note that lesbian potential carers may have to hide their sexuality, or that some agencies might consider lesbians on an individual merit basis (1986:86-7). Single female carers were often allocated older, 'hard to place' children (1986:85). The study suggests that much social work training is based upon traditional notions of family and childcare (1986:52),

and that it should be overhauled to educate social workers about lesbian mothers (1986:185). It also recommends that local authority policy regarding fostering and adoption be reformed to include lesbians as the potential carers of children (1986:185). Overall the study found *"...discrimination against lesbian mothers at all institutional levels, including the courts, welfare officers, and the legal profession, as well as teachers and social services, and the medical profession."* (RWLCG 1986:170).

General Themes Emerging from Lesbian Mother Studies:

Research suggests that lesbian mothers are often viewed as involved in the social negotiation of self (Lewin 1993:14/15; Romans 1990:1/4, 1991:14, 1992:98). This represents a symbolic interactionist interpretation (Plummer 1991, 1995:20; Romans 1990:4), which suggests that the lesbian mother has to negotiate her 'dual identity' from a position between what may be viewed as socially diametric poles, 'mother' and 'lesbian' (Romans 1990:67). Thus in a general sense the 'lesbian mother' is regarded as a *"theoretically impossible category"* (Lewin & Lyons 1982:250), since the institution of motherhood, rather than its actual practice (Rich 1976), is viewed as a heterosexual phenomenon.

There is some important information to be found in existing research regarding the possible 'effects' of lesbian motherhood upon the children. Green & Bozett (1991) report that, in comparison with their heterosexual counterparts, lesbian

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mothers are often more child-centred, but that they exhibit no particular

differences in child rearing practices or maternal attitudes (1991:204). They also

note that lesbian mothers are more concerned to provide positive male role

models for their children, that they develop positive coping strategies, are more

likely to work and be independent. Significantly, they also report that lesbian

mothers are likely to have lower incomes (Green & Bozett 1991:204). Saphira's

study also found no differences in child rearing practices (Saphira 1984:77), and

McCandlish found that lesbian mothers were effective parents (McCandlish

1987:24).

Hanscombe & Forster found no differences in the child development of children

of lesbian mothers from that of the children of heterosexuals (1981:86/7,146-8).

Children of lesbian mothers had open attitudes to sexuality, love and parenting

(1981:133), and none had experienced sexual molestation (Hanscombe &

Forster 1981:147). McCandlish also found that such children formed healthy

attachments to both lesbian carers, and that they exhibited healthy gender

identity and normal psychological development (McCandlish 1987:30-31). The

Rights of Women Lesbian Custody Group report that existing studies found few

differences in the parenting style of lesbian mothers in comparison with

heterosexuals, and many similarities (RWLCG 1986:129). They found no

evidence of significant differences in the development of sexuality, gender

identity or gender-typed behaviour for the children of lesbian mothers (RWLCG

1986:130-133), and note that such children did not experience sexual abuse

(RWLCG 1986:124) or trauma due to social stigmatization (1986:134).

One of the most significant debates to emerge from the research on lesbian mothers to date is that which considers how far the lesbian mother is *similar to or different from* her heterosexual counterpart. It is the research of Lewin (1993), and Lewin & Lyons (1982), which particularly argues for similarities of experience amongst both lesbian and heterosexual mothers (Lewin 1993:3). Pollack (1987), however, provides an interesting critique of such comparisons. She notes that the use of the heterosexual mother model as a norm by which to test the lesbian mother is a 'courtroom strategy' (Pollack 1987:316), but one which results in the promotion of that heterosexual model as preferable (1987:320).

This is also taken up by Polikoff (1987:326), who reports that lesbian mothers frequently have to prove their 'normality' in court, that is their approximation of the heterosexual mother model (1987:325). Polikoff argues instead for the *dissimilarities* between lesbian and heterosexual mother experiences (1987:327), and she suggests that lesbian mothers have more in common with, and more to gain from alliances with, lesbians without children, rather than with other mothers. Allen & Harne (1988) find that the lesbian mother is distinguished from others by virtue of the fact that she poses a challenge to the male order and gender system, something which heterosexual mothers do not (1988:181), and this is echoed by RWLCG (1986:29) and is often raised in popular accounts of lesbian parenting (BBC 'Esther' 1996; BBC Radio 4 1994).

DiLapi (1989) reports on what she terms the hegemony of the traditional family within social work (DiLapi 1989:118). Research reports that social work actively constructs the notion of an ideal heterosexual family model against which to test lesbian forms (Burke 1993:222; Hanscombe & Forster 1981:17; Romans 1991:14/131). Lesbian mother families are seen as threatening because they challenge accepted notions of 'the family' (DiLapi 1989:113; Romans 1992:99; Saffron 1986:3), and Romans (1991, 1992) notes that legislation such as Section 28 is a response to, and attempt to invalidate, such family forms (Romans 1991:14, 1992:99). DiLapi (1989) has suggested that the 'lesbian mother' is interesting as a concept, because this points to a contradiction within the interplay between both compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) and compulsory motherhood (Rich 1976) for women in society.

Saphira (1984) reports that she found two lesbians had openly adopted, but that this is difficult for lesbians generally (1984:21). Lewin (1993) found that some lesbians had to hide their sexuality from social workers (1993:62), and that those who were successful in fostering or adoption assessments often had 'hard to place' children in their care (1993:49-50/71), and this is echoed in RWLCG (1986:85-87). DiLapi (1989) also notes that lesbians may be barred from consideration for fostering or adoption (DiLapi 1989:114), but where they are accepted, there is evidence of discriminatory practices within the social work assessment process from existing research. Green (1987) found that the

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assessment process for lesbians is likely to be more lengthy (1987:194). Lesbian applicants will have to face the homophobia of adoption agencies, and for this reason may choose to 'pass' as a 'single woman' (Green 1987:194). Romans found that lesbians who are out in assessments do have different needs from heterosexual applicants, and that these should be considered by social workers (1991:15, 1992:106).

Romans (1992) has noted that lesbian mothers present a challenge to dominant notions of the gender order (1992:99), and this is evidenced in particular concerns about the gender development of the children of such mothers. Burke (1993) reports that her social worker was fixated on the fact that her son might not receive enough male role modeling in his life (1993:213), and on whether she and her partner felt threatened by men as lesbians (1993:215). Benkov (1994) also notes stereotypical views of lesbian couples as 'butch and femme', and anxiety about how a child's gender development will be affected (1994:219). Such concern about gender roles is also noted by Saffron (1986:32-3/35/86), and in particular the worries expressed by the courts about whether boys will receive correct gender messages from lesbian parents (Hanscombe & Forster 1981:73/78; RWLCG 1986:29/132; Saphira 1984:57-8). For example, in one case *GvG* (1977), it was noted:

> *...adolescent boys require increasingly the influence of a father*
> *rather than a mother...Mr. G is concerned that she [Ms. G.] will be*

associating with friends in the radical feminist organization...and he

is alarmed at the influence members of this group may have on his

growing sons without any male counterbalance. (*GvG*, 1977;

reported in Saphira 1984:58).

Gay Father Studies:

At present, there has been far less research attention paid to gay fathers than to

lesbian mothers[7]. The research of Frederick W. Bozett (1981, 1985, 1987d,

1989b, 1990) has been largely to consider the identity of the gay father. His work

is based upon interviews with gay men who were formerly married and had

children (Bozett 1981:553). Like Romans (1990), Bozett's thesis is that gay

fathers find themselves occupying a 'dual identity' (Bozett 1981:552), and one

which incorporates extremes of social acceptance (Bozett 1985:330). As a

'father', their identity is positively sanctioned but as a 'gay man' it is negatively so.

Bozett suggests that the gay father must resolve this conflict in a move towards

an integrated identity (Bozett 1985:331). His research found that gay fathers

typically achieve this via a 'career' (Bozett 1985:330, 1987d:4), which is likely to

consist of a number of phases. These are that the man will typically understand

himself to be heterosexual at first and will have relationships with women,

although he may always experience sexual feelings in relation to men. He will

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[7] Two new studies of gay fathers are currently being carried out; one by Fiona Tasker in the Department of Psychology at Birkbeck College London, and one by Gill Dunne in the Gender Institute at the London School of Economics.

then marry and occupy the identity of 'husband', followed by that of 'father' when children are born. As the man begins to act upon his homosexual feelings, he may begin to explore this aspect of his identity, and his marital relationship will go through changes usually leading to separation and divorce. In the final phase, he will adopt the identity of 'gay man', but is likely to maintain contact with his children (Bozett 1985:330).

This 'career' leads to the gay father achieving an integrated identity, and this involves the process of positive or integrative sanctioning (Bozett 1981:559; Green & Bozett 1991:199). This means that he must come out of the 'double closet' (Bozett 1985:337), telling heterosexual people that he is gay, and gay people that he is a father. Bozett makes the point that the 'gay world' is not particularly accepting of parenthood and children, and that this poses difficulties for the newly emerging 'gay' identity of the father (Bozett 1987d:10). By implication, the world of parenthood is assumed to be heterosexual and is not accepting of his gayness. In Bozett's research, most of the gay fathers had separated from their former female partners, leading to divorce (Bozett 1987d:9). He notes a number of options open to these men demonstrated in his findings: some remained a 'married man' and kept their homosexuality hidden, some divorced but continued contact with children, some came out as 'gay' but remained with their female partner and children, and some had no more contact with children (Bozett 1985:327), and this is directly comparable with Romans' typology of lesbian mothers (Romans 1990:161, 1992:101-3).

Bozett (1989b) also discusses the findings of other research on gay fathers. Scallen (1981; reported in Bozett 1987d:15) found that gay fathers were more paternally nurturing, less paternally traditional, more positive about the father role, and less concerned with the role of economic provider than a sample group of heterosexual fathers. Miller (1979a, 1979b; reported in Bozett 1989b:143) found that gay fathers moved along a continuum of relative covertness or openness, but that their gayness was compatible with effective fathering. Turner *et al.* (1985; reported in Bozett 1989b:144) found that sexual orientation was not the most important factor in gay fathers' relationships with their children, and that they tried harder than a sample group of heterosexual fathers to create a stable home life and positive relationships with their children.

Bozett (1989b) provides a summary of findings in relation to gay fathers, which are that they are not more 'masculine' than other gay men, that most experience good reactions from their children to their gay identity, that their sexuality is compatible with effective parenting, that their gayness does not create long term problems for their children, that sexual orientation is of little importance to their father/child relationships, that they try harder than heterosexual fathers to provide stable homes and positive relationships, and that they make efforts to provide their children with opposite sex-role models (Bozett 1989b:152-154). Indeed Green & Bozett (1991) note the absence of pathological findings in research on gay fathers (Green & Bozett 1991:213).

Bozett's research notes that professionals, such as social workers, should examine their own attitudes and values regarding fathers who are gay (Bozett 1985:342, 1987d:16, 1990:115), and that the various 'myths' surrounding them need to be challenged within education that such professionals receive. In particular, professionals should note that research has not found sexuality to be related to nurturing ability (Bozett 1985:343), and that the exclusion of gay men from consideration for foster or adoptive care on such grounds is discriminatory. Bozett makes recommendations for further research, which include the need for longitudinal studies of gay father families, and broader samples which are not solely based upon white, middle class, well-educated, urban, divorced and self-identified gay fathers (Bozett 1987d:19).

More recently, the research of Robert Barret and Bryan Robinson (1990) has acknowledged that gay fathers include foster or adoptive carers, gay men who enter into alternative insemination arrangements, and gay step-fathers, as well as those gay men previously married (Barret & Robinson 1990:62). In that sense, their research sample is broader at base, and they use a case study approach in presenting their findings. Like Bozett, Barret & Robinson acknowledge the 'dual role' of gay fatherhood (1990:xiii), and that previous research has found that homosexuality has little impact upon a child's sexual identity (1990:6).

In an important section of their research, Barret & Robinson examine how far any

of the existing 'myths' about gay fathers were true for those in their sample (1990:27-46). In contrast to the belief that gay fathers come from disturbed parental backgrounds, they found that most came from intact parental homes, and had experienced good heterosexual models and relationships with their parents. Children were also important to the gay fathers in their study (1990:35). They examined whether gay fathers were more 'masculine' than other gay men, but found this was not true. Sex role behaviour and sexual identity were found to be unrelated (1990:38). They also examined the 'myth' that gay fathers will transmit their homosexuality to their children, like a form of 'contamination'. Most of the children of the gay fathers in their sample were heterosexual, and 94% of lesbians and gay men they interviewed had heterosexual parents (1990:40).

The view that the children of gay fathers would experience high levels of stigma and ridicule was also tested. Barret & Robinson report that some of the children did experience teasing by peers, but that this was rarely a major issue as gay fathers had prepared their children for this and helped them to cope with teasing (1990:41). They found no evidence of sexual abuse or molestation of children by gay fathers (the 'corruption myth', that all gay men are likely to sexually abuse), and report that most sexual abuse of children is perpetrated by heterosexual men (Barret & Robinson 1990:42). In contrast to the notions that gay fathers are trying to hide their sexuality, or trying to 'cure' themselves of it, they found that the gay dads in their sample had an authentic desire to parent and have a family (1990:44/5). Like Bozett (1985, 1987d), Barret & Robinson (1990) suggest that

practitioners need to examine such 'myths'/values for themselves if they are to work with gay men as carers of children.

In relation to fostering and adoption by gay men in particular, Barret & Robinson report that suspicions about gay men and children generally may prevent their acceptance by professionals. During the process of social work assessment, gay men's sexuality often becomes the most pressing concern of the worker to the exclusion of all other factors (1990:63), and they also report that gay men who have children placed with them were likely to get older boys who were disabled, hard-to-place, and/or of minority race (1990:63).

The children interviewed by Barret & Robinson were well adjusted, and they had not experienced sexual abuse (1990:80). The children frequently had to cope with issues to do with their parents' divorce, where the gay father was formerly married, and had to go through a process of adjustment to this (1990:82). They also had to cope with their fathers' coming out as gay, but this did not create long-term problems. Adjustment to divorce was sometimes difficult for the children, but this could not be attributed to the father's gayness (1990:82). Like Bozett (1987c), Barret & Robinson argue for further research on gay fathers to incorporate longitudinal studies, developmental outcomes for children, and the need to find samples that are less white, middle class and self-identified (1990:147-57). Nevertheless this may be difficult given the sensitive nature of such research, and that samples are hard to reach (Barret & Robinson

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1990:149).

General Themes Emerging from Gay Father Studies:

A number of general findings emerge from the existing studies of gay fathers, as follows. Gay fathers are reported to occupy the position of a 'dual identity' or 'dual role' (Barret & Robinson 1990:xiii; Bozett 1981:552, 1985:330, 1987d:3; Green & Bozett 1991:200; Jones 1986:144). Thus gay fathers have *"...two identities that are at the opposite extremes of social acceptance: Homosexuality at the negative extreme and fatherhood at the positive."* (Bozett 1985:330). The research argues, from a symbolic interactionist perspective (Plummer 1995:20; Romans 1990:4), that many gay fathers believe their dual identities to be initially incompatible, but that these are eventually reconciled in following a typical 'career' (Bozett 1985:327/30, 1987d:4, 1989b:140; Green & Bozett 1991:199).

Research reports that there is a general and widespread prejudice against gay men with children (Barret & Robinson 1990:63; Bozett 1985:344), based upon notions that they pose a sexual threat to children and also that gay men *qua* men are not their 'natural' carers (Benkov 1994:110). It is therefore recommended that professional workers examine their own attitudes and values regarding gay men caring for children (Barret & Robinson 1990:47; Bozett 1985:342, 1987d:16).

One of the most important findings of the existing research is that sexuality *per*

se is not related to nurturing ability (Barret & Robinson 1990:6; Beam 1986c:156; Bigner & Jacobsen 1989a, 1989b; Bozett 1985:343, 1987d:15, 1989b:154; Green & Bozett 1991:198; Jones 1986:147; Miller 1979a, 1979b; Scallen 1981; Turner *et al.* 1985). Thus being gay is no *a priori* indicator of poor parenting skills, or of potential damage to children. Robinson & Skeen (1982) also report that gay fathers are no more and no less 'masculine' than other gay men (1982:1059), and that fatherhood is not linked to 'masculinity'. Bigner & Jacobsen (1989a, 1989b) found that gay fathers were better communicators with, provided more stimulation for, were more responsive to the needs of, provided more activities for, and acted more as a 'counsellor' to their children than a sample group of heterosexual fathers (1989a:180/181). Their reasons for wanting children were often similar to those of the heterosexual fathers (1989b:169), but they were likely to present less traditional male sex-role models (1989a:184). Bigner & Jacobsen also report the pressures that many gay fathers feel to be 'super-dad', in order to compensate for the wider disapproval they experience (1989a:181).

Empirical Studies of Children Living with Lesbian Mothers:

The most extensive research to date on the children of lesbian mothers has been carried out by Fiona Tasker and Susan Golombok (Golombok *et al.* 1983; Golombok & Tasker 1994, 1996; Tasker & Golombok 1991, 1995, 1997). An early study by Golombok *et al.* (1983) found that lesbian mothers made more efforts to promote contact with fathers for their children than a sample of

heterosexual mothers (1983:557-8). The lesbian mothers generally expressed no preference as to whether they wished their children to become gay or straight, but where they did they preferred heterosexual development (1983:561). The study found that the children of lesbian mothers exhibited gender-specific play and activities, with some non gender-specific (1983:561), and that their psychosexual and gender identity development was the same as those with heterosexual mothers (1983:562). The children had good peer relationships (1983:567), and their sexual orientation was usually heterosexual (1983:564). They concluded that there were no real differences in the development of the children of lesbian families from those in heterosexual ones (1983:568), and indeed the likelihood of psychiatric problems was more common in the heterosexual parent group (1983:570). In a further report (Tasker & Golombok 1991), the authors found that children of lesbian mothers exhibited usual psychiatric outcomes, sex-role and peer group behaviour (1991:185). They concluded that maternal homosexuality had *"no observable effects on children"* (Tasker & Golombok 1991:186), and did not influence their well-being.

A series of follow-up studies are reported in their book, *Growing Up in a Lesbian Family: Effects on Child Development* (Tasker & Golombok 1997). The children of lesbian mothers had been around ten years of age when the study began in 1976, but were also seen in 1991, when they were aged around twenty-five years (Tasker & Golombok 1997:1). In summary, the young adults from the lesbian mother families were more likely to have thought about their sexuality, and the

possibility of a same-sex relationship, than those from the heterosexual mother families, but they were no more likely to have become lesbian or gay (Tasker & Golombok 1997:45). They reported significantly better relationships with their mother's new female partner than did those from the comparison group whose heterosexual mothers also had new partners (1997:53), and there were no differences in their relationships with their mothers (1997:54).

The young adults from the lesbian mother families were also significantly more positive about their 'family identity' than the others (1997:65), and, although more likely to recall having been teased about being lesbian or gay themselves, they were no more likely to have been, or remember having been, ostracized by peers (1997:87-88). They were more positive about lesbians and gay men as a group, and more likely to have lesbian or gay friends (1997:98-99), and there were no differences in the two groups' abilities to form, and quality of, adult sexual relationships (1997:129). The young adults from the lesbian mother families were no more likely to have experienced mental health problems, anxiety or depression (1997:135). Indeed the study concludes:

> ...the findings from the present study show that young people
> brought up by a lesbian mother do well in adulthood and have good
> relationships with their family, friends, and partners. In policy
> decisions about who should and should not be allowed to raise
> children, negative outcomes for children should not be assumed on

the basis of a mother's sexual orientation. (Tasker & Golombok 1997:155).

Green (1978) studied children raised by transsexual and lesbian parents, and found that they showed gender-typical and heterosexually-oriented behaviour (1978:693). He concluded that the children of lesbian parents exhibit typical psychosexual and sexual identity development, and that this is no different to that shown by children of heterosexuals (1978:695-6). In a follow-up study (Green *et al.* 1986) of sixty lesbian mothers and their children, those children were statistically unremarkable as compared to those raised by heterosexual mothers (see Rivera 1987:212).

Kirkpatrick *et al.* (1981) found that child pathology is not related to mothers' sexuality (1981:547). They report that the lesbian mothers in their study were keener to provide male figures for their children than the heterosexual mothers (1981:549), but that there is no difference in the gender development of the children in either group (1981:551). Kirkpatrick (1987) also found that there are no damaging consequences for children with lesbian mothers (1987:207), and she argues that professionals need to note this (1987:210).

Charlotte Patterson's work has argued for differences that exist between the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents (Patterson 1992, 1995). Children of lesbians were more likely to see themselves, and be seen by others, as lovable,

affectionate and protective of younger children, and sometimes scored better on ratings of 'well-being' than the children of heterosexuals (Patterson 1992:1032). She argues for research which does not concern itself solely with heterosexist concerns about the children of lesbian parents, and which does not always compare them with a heterosexual standard. Instead *"...the time has come for child development researchers to address a broader range of issues in this area"* (Patterson 1992:1038), which should include examining the diversity and differences that exist between and among gay and lesbian families (Patterson 1992, 1995).

To summarize further studies, research shows that the children of lesbian mothers exhibited usual gender-typed play (Green & Bozett 1991:208; Hoeffer 1981:539; Hotvedt & Mandel 1982:283; Nungesser 1980:185), that they showed no differences in sex-role behaviour (Green & Bozett 1991:208; Hoeffer 1981:542; Steckel 1987:78), that they had good peer friendships (Benkov 1994:64; Green & Bozett 1991:207; Hoeffer 1981:543; Hotvedt & Mandel 1982:282; King & Pattison 1991:296) and that they exhibited no differences in their psychosexual development from the children of heterosexual mothers (Benkov 1994:62; Cramer 1986:504; Gantz 1983:xix; Green & Bozett 1991:207). Lesbian mothers in these studies were more likely to provide male role models for their children (Hoeffer 1981:538; Nungesser 1980:183), and were less likely to have a preference for the sexuality of their children (Nungesser 1980:183). They were less concerned to provide gender-typed toys (Hoeffer 1981:541) and

more likely to promote non-traditional career and life choice concepts for their children (Green & Bozett 1991:209; Hotvedt & Mandel 1982:283). Boys were more likely to be aggressive, for example, in heterosexual homes (Steckel 1987:78), and girls in lesbian homes chose less traditionally gender-typed careers (Green & Bozett 1991:209). Lesbian mothers also instilled positive self-images in their children (Green & Bozett 1991:209; Steckel 1987:81).

Lesbian mothers did not differ from heterosexual mothers in their self-concept or maternal attitudes (Mucklow & Phelan 1979:881), and those who were open with their children about their sexuality from the start experienced fewer problems (Pennington 1987:63) Indeed Pennington (1987) notes that lesbian mothers, like the gay fathers reported in Bigner & Jacobsen (1989a:181), sometimes felt that they had to over-compensate, to be 'super-mum' in order to counter wider disapproval (Pennington 1987:65).

Children of Gay Fathers:

There is far less existing research on children who live with gay fathers (Green & Bozett 1991:206). What does exist shows that such children have positive relationships with their fathers (Green & Bozett 1991:206), that gay fathers were protective of their children, especially in shielding them from social stigma (Bozett 1987a:45), and that most of the children of gay fathers grow up to be heterosexual (Bozett 1987a:47).

A study by Bailey *et al.* (1995) considered the sexual orientation of adult sons of gay fathers and found that, of those whose sexuality could be rated with confidence, 9% were nonheterosexual and 91% heterosexual (Bailey *et al.* 1995:126). They therefore argued that *"sexual orientation was not positively correlated with the amount of time that sons lived with their [gay] fathers."* (Bailey *et al.* 1995:128).

Issues for Children of Lesbians or Gay Men:

Reports from children with gay or lesbian parents show that they experience loving and affectionate homes (Mason-John 1991:8), and that they are proud of their parents (Wakeling & Bradstock 1995:57). There is evidence, particularly in Gantz (1983), that such children may experience emotional problems where their parents have been through a previous divorce (Gantz 1983:59), but this is due to the divorce process and not their parents' sexuality.

Children who have gay or lesbian carers do experience teasing or stigmatization by peers (Benkov 1994:186; Saffron 1996; Wakeling & Bradstock 1995), and it is important not to deny this. What is important, however, is how such homophobia is challenged, and how parents help children to cope with this (Benkov 1994:193/4). Most children experience some form of teasing, not least those who do not conform to gender-type (Sedgwick 1991), and lesbian or gay carers have

usually prepared their children for such problems. Such teasing is often exaggerated, however (Benkov 1994:64), and used as a reason to suggest that lesbian or gay parenting is wrong. Benkov (1994:64) makes the point that it is homophobia that should be challenged, rather than suggestions of removing children from their carers being made. Many children of lesbians or gay men therefore report that they learn 'who to tell' amongst their peer group (Benkov 1994:201; Gantz 1983:12; Green & Bozett 1991:206; Saffron 1996:176; Wakeling & Bradstock 1995:57). Some were concerned that peers would think that they were also gay (Bozett 1987b:40; Pennington 1987:64), but this seems to relate to assumptions that girl children of lesbians, and boy children of gay men, will become so.

To summarize, then, the overriding point of all such existing research is that a carer or parent's sexuality is not the determining factor in a child's health or well-being (Green & Bozett 1991:206; King 1995; Saffron 1996). Children of lesbians or gay men are no more likely to have emotional problems, adopt opposite sex-typed behaviour, or become gay, than the children of heterosexuals (Saffron 1996; Riddle 1978:49). Indeed Riddle (1978) makes the point that gay or lesbian people can offer positive role models to children of less traditional sex-roles (1978:51), and she notes that children are not simply 'empty vessels' whose psychosexual and emotional development is solely determined by parents (1978:53). In fact, most lesbian or gay people have heterosexual carers/parents (King & Pattison 1991:296). There is no evidence of child sexual abuse by gay or

lesbian carers in the existing research (Benkov 1994:68; Hotvedt & Mandel 1982:282; King 1995; King & Pattison 1991:296), or of neglect (Hotvedt & Mandel 1982:282) or pathology (Green & Bozett 1991:207; Steckel 1987:78).

Cramer (1986) argues that professionals should take account of such research knowledge (1986:506), as do Brown (1991:14, 1992b:214), and Tasker and Golombok (1997:155). The *raison d'être* of such research can be problematic, however (Pollack 1987). Benkov (1994) suggests that the research addresses itself to notions that children should not be 'exposed' to gay or lesbian people (1994:38), and that it sets out to prove that the children of lesbian and gay carers are 'normal' in their development (Benkov 1994:62). Largely this revolves around anxieties to uphold and promote traditional gender roles and heterosexuality (Benkov 1994:59).

Conclusion: Learning from Existing Research

There are a number of points raised by the existing research on lesbians and gay men as adopters and foster carers, and as parents generally, which are therefore relevant to this study. Some of the existing studies argue for the right of entitlement of lesbians and gay men to be assessed as potential foster or adoptive carers 'the same' as anyone else (Brown 1991; Ricketts 1991; Skeates & Jabri 1988). However, as Skeates & Jabri clearly point out, research does not exist which considers in any detail the practices of social workers assessing

lesbian and gay applicants, post-Section 28 or otherwise (Skeates & Jabri 1988:74). Hence the need for this study, in order to apply a critical perspective to the idea of assessing everyone 'the same', and to examine the assessment practices used by social workers with lesbians and gay men.

Lesbian and gay adoption and fostering is frequently presented as a case of adults', or gay, 'rights' over those of children (DoH 1990), Brown's 'dichotomy' (Brown 1991:11), yet it does not have to be seen is this way (Brown 1991; Skeates & Jabri 1988:8). Once again, this thesis will consider whether this is an interpretation made within social work fostering and adoption units. Where lesbians and gay men are accepted into the assessment process, then existing research points to 'discriminatory' practices; a range of 'myths' about lesbians, gay men and their effects upon children (Ricketts 1991:47; Skeates & Jabri 1988:20), narrow conceptions of who makes a 'family' (Ricketts 1991:8), a focus on sexuality in assessment to the exclusion of all else or, at the opposite extreme, the practice of ignoring it (Ricketts 1991:119). This thesis, then, will consider these points in order to assess whether they are the case with the social workers interviewed. Also, and more importantly, this study will apply a critical perspective to what constitutes a 'discriminatory' practice within an assessment of a lesbian or gay applicant, arguing that this is not so 'straight-forward' as it may appear.

Significantly, gender, race and disability issues are key to existing research, all of

which points to the anxieties about gender roles raised by lesbian and gay

fostering and adoption (Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:111; Skeates & Jabri

1988:21). Skeates & Jabri reported a process of 'double discrimination' for black

lesbians and gay men (1988:28), and all note the likelihood that disabled children

be placed with lesbian or gay carers (Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:104; Skeates

& Jabri 1988:56). I intend to examine the gendered nature of constructions of

'lesbian' and 'gay' by the social workers, and to examine the particular issues for

black lesbian and gay applicants (Beam 1986b; Jones 1986; Lorde 1984; Mason-

John 1995; Seneviratne 1995). I also intend to consider whether the 'unspoken

policy' of placing disabled children with lesbians and gay men continues.

Existing research recommends that social work agencies and social workers

need to examine their own 'attitudes' and 'values' (Goodman 1990:122; RWLCG

1986:185; Romans 1991:15; Steinhorn 1985:35), but my approach, as I have

argued in the previous chapter, is not to see constructions of 'lesbian' and 'gay'

as mere 'values' held by individual social workers. 'Lesbian' and 'gay' exist at the

levels of discourse, practice, organization and text, and they are contested

concepts that have many versions within social work that I intend to analyse.

Existing research says that 'out' lesbian and gay applicants receive less

favourable responses, or are placed under greater scrutiny (Ricketts &

Achtenberg 1990:104; Skeates & Jabri 1988:49-50), yet tends not to specify how

these are manifested. This study aims to examine these claims too, in order to

suggest practices which do disadvantage lesbian and gay applicants via special

scrutiny because of their sexuality alone. Existing studies also point to contradictory responses amongst social workers, often with a lack of any policy back-up, which range from the homophobic to the supportive. This study looks for a range of responses amongst the social worker cohort, and will specifically consider how 'homophobia' is manifested, whether policies exist, and how some social workers attempt to develop 'anti-oppressive' assessment practices with lesbians and gay men.

However, before turning to an analysis of the data from the social worker cohort, it is important that I explain **how** I went about its generation. For this thesis is also a series of knowledge claims made by me, and it is to such questions of epistemology, methodology and grammatology (Derrida 1976) that I now turn.

Chapter 3

'Big Old Lies'[1] : the Poetics of Methodology

'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the waste-paper basket and forget all about it. (Woolf 1928:6)[2] .

I was glad when somebody told me, "You may go and collect Negro folklore."...From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to

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[1] Hurston (1935:8).
[2] All page numbers for *A Room of One's Own* refer to the 1945 edition published by Penguin (London).

look through at that. (Hurston 1935:1)[3] .

Methodology chapters traditionally concern themselves with the 'doing' of research, wherein the researcher explains how the data was generated and the reasons for adopting such an approach to the 'getting of' knowledge. I intend to do this here, and I shall explain my reasons for using interviewing and case study methods for this research. However, I also think it crucially important to adopt a critical epistemological position which explicates my construction of such versions of knowledge, and one which also analyses how my text is a representation of the world and not a series of social 'facts' (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Stanley & Wise 1993; Weedon 1987).

In this sense, then, I am as much interested in the practices which go into the construction of a research *text* - here a Ph.D. thesis - as I am in those which generate data, and I want to examine how research texts traditionally suggest themselves to be 'the truth' of the social (Schratz & Walker 1995). This is what might be termed the 'methodology of methodology'. For, as well as being concerned with how knowledge is generated and by what it is constituted, methodology must also be about how the research is written, structured, edited and textualised; that is, its poetics or grammatology (Atkinson 1990; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Derrida 1976; Coffey & Atkinson 1996; Kitzinger 1987:22).

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[3] All page numbers for *Mules and Men* refer to the 1990 edition published by Harper Perennial (New York).

For these reasons, I have chosen to "read" my methodology through texts by two women who were absolutely concerned with these points, Virginia Woolf's (1928) *A Room of One's Own* and Zora Neale Hurston's (1935) *Mules and Men*. I will argue that they help to illuminate questions of qualitative research methodology but particularly, and more importantly, its textual practices.

The Textual Speaking 'I'

Virginia Woolf's (1928) *A Room of One's Own* anticipates many of the current concerns of debates about research epistemologies, despite the fact that her posthumous reputation has been constructed in ways which largely 'organize out' her radical ideas (Spender 1982:672). For in *A Room of One's Own* are questions about the notion of the speaking 'I', a deconstruction of the notion that text=truth, and ideas about whether one is an insider or outsider within language. All of these are central to methodological poetics since the researcher *"cannot avoid expressive tropes, figures, and allegories that select and impose meaning as they translate it"* (Clifford 1986:7). Thus the research text is a construction of reality, a version of events, rather than the 'truth' of what was found or discovered 'in the field.' And relatedly it is *the researcher's* text, produced by a thinking, experiencing and theorizing self that is represented as the speaking 'I' (Stanley & Wise 1990:39).

Virginia Woolf was very interested in this textual speaking 'I', which she called in

A Room of One's Own[4] *"a convenient term for somebody who has no real being"* (Woolf 1928:6). Indeed she gives her reader a choice of possible names to give to this speaking 'I' (Woolf 1928:6-7) since she sees this as unimportant. The point that Woolf is making here is that the 'I' that is speaking to the reader in a text is at the very least unreliable, but certainly not 'truthful'. Texts do not tell 'the truth', they tell versions from which the reader will make sense.

This is very pertinent to questions about the speaking 'I' in methodological poetics. For in traditional methodologies, the researcher is at once absent and present; absent in the sense of there being no interpreting being within the text (Stanley and Wise 1993:58), but present in the sense of adopting the role of the all-knowing, objective researcher who tells us the 'truth.' The 'I' is removed - 'I did...', 'I found...', or 'I think...' all obliterated - to be replaced by the objective third person - 'This research has shown...', 'The figures prove...', 'It is arguable that...' - so that the text appears as 'neutral, scientific, fact' (Kitzinger 1987:24). In terms of research poetics, this is as much achieved in how the textual functions, in how methods are constructed as carriers of truth. We are constantly told that the knowledge generated is truth because methods are valid, that they were consistently and objectively applied, that the research is reliable, all of which can be read as circular arguments serving only to elide their status as mere knowledge-claims.

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[4] Hereafter referred to as *A Room...*

Instead I would like to argue for the *unreliable* research author here, since the 'I' that is writing this text is presenting my version of social events as I interpreted them. I will suggest that you - the reader - should not accept text=truth, but instead should ask yourself whether you can indeed trust me? For this text may be lies, but I will also go on to suggest that the biggest lie of all, in my view, is the construction of research texts that claim all-knowing truth status. This they do via poetics, but this is dangerous because all texts are *"constructed truths...made possible by powerful 'lies' of exclusion and rhetoric. Even the best ethnographic texts - serious, true fictions - are systems, or economies, of truth."* (Clifford 1986:7).

I argue that a large part of textual poetics revolves around shifts and changes in the speaking 'I', fractured into a series of 'beings' in the research text and field. There is, at the very least, myself, the speaking 'I' who is the author of the text, the set of 'I's who were my research subjects, and there is you, the 'I' that is the reader. But how can you be sure which I am presenting, for like a shape-shifter[5] 'I' choose to present aspects of myself, and of my research subjects, which can never be the whole of me or them, which can never sum up such complex selves. Don't be fooled by the idea that my subjects speak directly to you - remember that they are filtered through me, that I have reconstituted them for

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[5] Shapeshifters, for the uninitiated, are beings able to take on the shape (appearance) of other forms, objects, other species, other beings, at will. See 'Star Trek: Deep Space Nine' (Carson 1994) in which the character of Odo is a shape-shifter who can take on humanoid, as well as object, forms. Shape-shifters even have terms of abuse for humanoids, calling them 'monoforms' and 'solids'. This idea has particular cultural resonance at present, also featuring in the film 'Mimic' (Del Torro 1998).

you. I may take on their shapes, but I can also change myself at will. I am a shape-shifter...

Shapeshifting 1: Interviewing

A social worker enters the room. He is black, and I guess him to be in his late fifties. He looks at me suspiciously for I am a stranger within his domain, his place of work. "Hello," I say, and he replies, "Hello." He now looks less suspicious, more friendly, but still he does not know who I am. At least, this is what I think to myself, but then maybe he does know, for he knows that I am coming to his office, this gay man who is researching lesbians and gay men who foster or adopt. "I'm Steve," I say, "...I'm the person who's looking at lesbians and gay men who foster or adopt. You'll have seen the letter from me..." "Oh yes," he says. We're awkward but amiable. I wonder what he thinks of me, of my sort. No doubt I've already formed several impressions of him, his difference from me. He still hasn't told me his name, and then he says, "I'm Wayne, I'm on the adoption team, you're seeing me later." "I know," I say, for I have a detailed schedule which tells me when I'm seeing him. He introduces me to his two young daughters who happen to visit him at the office.

Later, it is time for 'the interview'. He's a bit late, "very busy," he says. We sit in a small side room and I explain to him a little more about the research project. I ask him whether it's okay to tape-record the interview and he says this is fine. I turn on the tape-recorder, checking for the pulsating red lights that show the recording levels. As usual, this creates a boundary, the idea that 'the interview proper' has now started. Initially we are nervous but I ask him easy questions to begin with. He's brought some assessment forms with him to help explain some of the process to me.

I begin to notice how he's saying things as much as what he's saying. He has some problems with the words 'lesbian' and 'gay', preferring 'homosexual' but more often phrases which refer to 'it' without actually saying 'it'. Antagonism begins to creep in on my part, but I decide to remain calm and put my questions to him politely. He settles down, forgets about the tape, and begins to tell me what he really thinks about gay people and the idea of their caring for children. He suggests several times that sexuality is no big deal and that social workers are perfectly fine with it. "He means that I'm making it a big deal," I think.

I find his ideas about lesbians and gay men pretty awful and I try

to counter his arguments with other perspectives. Nevertheless my overriding thought is this: "How come he feels so comfortable in putting me down?" "He's black," I think to myself in a white liberal kind of way, "surely he understands about oppression?" But, unlike the black women I've spoken to so far, he chooses not to make any links across race and sexuality. Instead he keeps going on about the heterosexual 'norm' and telling me examples from his own life which fit with this; his marriage, his wife, his children, how lesbian and gay people are always so uppity. "I'm a threat," I think, "he's being polite - 'professional' even - but he hates me and my kind."

My data substantively consists of the results of interviews with a cohort of twenty-eight social workers from three local authority fostering and adoption units. 'South River Council' is an inner-London authority which has a unit divided into a fostering team and an adoption team. Here I spoke to seven workers; one senior and six social workers, one of whom was a locum worker[6]. At the time that I visited, October 1994, South River Council had one gay male couple doing fostering. 'North River Council' is a larger inner-London borough and has a fostering and adoption unit which is made up of four teams; under 11s fostering, over 11s fostering, a permanency team (generally adoption, but some long-term fostering) and a leaving-care team. Here I spoke to eleven workers; the children's

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[6] A temporary worker brought in to cover sickness or leave of permanently employed staff.

care services manager, two team managers, an equalities officer, and seven social workers. At the time that I visited, April 1995, North River Council had two gay male couples and a single lesbian fostering children over eleven, and a gay male couple registered with the leaving care team. The 'North Eastern Council' is a large metropolitan authority in the north of England. Its unit is divided into three teams; a 0-8 years team, a 9-plus team, and an initial response team dealing with all enquiries and referrals. Here I spoke to ten workers, all social workers on the teams. At the time that I visited, March 1996, the North Eastern Council had a single gay man doing emergency (short-term) fostering, and a lesbian couple fostering for the 9-plus team.

I chose to employ interviewing as a method because, primarily, I was interested to find out how social workers made sense of the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay' in relation to the potential to foster or adopt children. Epistemologically, I reasoned that, in order to generate data on such interpretations, experiences and understandings, I needed to talk to the social workers so that I could record their accounts (Mason 1996:40). Nevertheless I was aware that interviews are re-countings of events, and that meanings would be achieved between myself and the interviewee in each and every contextually-dependent situation.

I did not want to use either survey-based data or observational data. I felt that a survey would not allow me to pick apart the constructions of meanings attaching to such concepts as 'lesbian', 'gay', or 'carer', and I also decided that, in

dialogue, I might be more able to encourage the social workers to discuss any reservations they might have about lesbians and gay men caring for children. As I have previously noted, I was also interested to investigate 'micro'-levels of social work practice with lesbians and gay men, far more than any global picture about a comparative study of agencies across the country. I wanted to get to what the social workers felt they had done in their practice when assessing lesbian or gay applicants and I did not think that a survey would provide me with such data. Observing social work assessments in action was not an option for me anyway, since agencies would not allow this. But I was also very wary of the idea that, if I had 'observed it', it would somehow be more 'truthful'. Observations 'in the field' are still interpretations of what is happening by the researcher (Clifford & Marcus 1986).

Having decided to pursue interviewing as a method, I then had to make decisions about where to conduct the research. I wanted to speak to social workers in local authority fostering and adoption units because they handle the vast majority of fostering and adoption work, while a small amount is handled by voluntary agencies (Triseliotis *et al.* 1995, 1997). In thinking about which local authorities to approach, I had to bear a number of factors in mind:

- I wanted to approach at least one agency with a 'radical' reputation; by this I mean a local authority with explicit statements of equal opportunities which included lesbians and gay men, and preferably one which had either

participated in the Skeates & Jabri (1988) study and/or had something of a national reputation for being 'politically correct.' My reasons for this were that I wanted to research in at least one authority about which commonsense notions were that 'there was no discrimination against lesbians and gay men' within that agency.

- I wanted to approach at least one inner-London borough, partly for the reasons outlined above, but also because I felt that some of the London boroughs had developed more experiences of working with lesbians and gay men through anti-oppressive work carried out via equalities initiatives in the 1980s and under the Greater London Council (Greater London Council 1985; Greater London Council Women's Committee 1986).

- I wanted to ensure that I spoke to black, as well as white, social workers; that I spoke to both fostering and adoption workers; and that I spoke to at least some men (most social workers being women).

- I wanted to approach at least one agency which had a good 'reputation' amongst the lesbian and gay communities, especially those involved in fostering and adoption.

- I wanted to ensure that I spoke to some lesbian and gay social workers because I was very interested to see whether their experiences were markedly different from those of heterosexuals.

- In contrast to the London boroughs, I wanted to approach an agency in the north of England since I had been aware that the Skeates & Jabri (1988) study had a London-bias. I already knew that my case study (chapter six) would

draw upon data from two further authorities, one in the north of England and one in the Midlands.

- I was not interested to do a 'macro-level', large-scale comparative study of agencies across the country; as I have previously noted, I was not interested in the 'good authorities versus bad authorities' version of social work practice. Instead I decided to focus on a small number of agencies but to try to interview a fairly large number of workers (in the end, twenty-eight).

- I was also mindful of the practicalities of access (Burgess 1984; Lee 1993), which I shall discuss later. I felt that my research topic was likely to be a sensitive issue (Lee 1993; Renzetti & Lee 1993) for local authorities and so I was unsure as to whether I would be able to persuade agencies to give me permission to carry out the research, let alone whether social workers themselves would actually talk to me.

This presented me, pragmatically, with the issue of access to willing research sites and subjects, and achieving this relied upon a combination of factors. First, I was able to secure 'sponsors' (Lee 1993:131) for each site. By this I mean that I was able to develop a contact with a worker in each authority who was supportive of my research, and, more importantly, acted as an advocate for the research project. These three women - a lesbian who worked as an equalities officer for social services, a heterosexual woman who was a fostering social worker, and a lesbian who was a fostering social worker - were central to negotiating access to do the research and I think crucial to the research

happening at all. Finding them was the result of a combination of my existing contacts through earlier research, my involvement with lesbian and gay fostering and adoption support networks, and some degree of serendipity. All three met with some suspicion about the project from colleagues, and some stated resistance. There were always some social workers in each of the authorities who refused to speak with me, often the case with 'sensitive' research topics (Lee 1993:122).

Second, I had to work hard to negotiate access myself. I spoke with senior managers and entered into correspondences about the research project. In each case, negotiating access took a period of six months from the point of initial contact to the point at which I was able to visit the authority. I met with some suspicions about my motives, but I found that I was able to reassure managers and workers by sending them detailed outlines of the research project. Their main concerns were that I would expose the practices of authorities or individual workers to hostile scrutiny, ridicule or even media attention, and so it was important that I made careful negotiations around confidentiality and also explained the content and purpose of my interviews.

I found that I had to do some 'reassurance'-work here, emphasising that I was not out to 'trap' or ridicule individual workers. Reports back from my 'sponsors' indicated that the most frequent concerns of the social workers were that I would be disparaging about their attempts to assess lesbian and gay applicants, or that

I would not think them 'right-on' enough. This raised the issue of potential interviewees feeling possibly intimidated by the prospect of talking to a gay man about assessing lesbian and gay applicants, and the idea that they would have to be 'politically correct' in what they said. As I will discuss, I did not find this to be the case when doing the interviews.

I 'reassured' potential research subjects by outlining my project and the content of interviews. I made it clear that the purpose of the interviews would be to find out their views and how they had handled assessments of lesbians and gay men, whatever their position on this topic. I found that the fact that I was also a social worker at the time that I did the research[7] made a big difference. I was able to emphasize that I saw social work as a complex and difficult activity without 'easy answers', and this helped greatly with access to willing subjects - they saw me as 'one of them' on this level at least.

Of the twenty-eight respondents, 22 were women and 6 men; 5 were lesbians, none were gay men and 23 were heterosexual; 6 were black and 22 white (of whom one was Jewish); none were disabled; 17 worked in fostering, 7 in adoption and 4 were managers. I did find that adoption workers were consistently more likely to refuse to participate in the study than were fostering workers.

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[7] I was employed as a Social Worker (Job-Share) for children under eleven and their families at a voluntary project in Manchester. I worked half-time (I couldn't have done the PhD if I'd been a full-time social worker!), doing children and families work, including child protection.

Method 1: The Interview

> *The interview is an important research technique in empirical sociology. Interviews may either be formal, using a structured interview schedule, or informal, the interviewer being able to follow up points made by the interviewee. Interviews may also provide either quantitative or qualitative data. Doubts have been expressed concerning the reliability of the interview. Thus its very formality may mean that the respondent does not act 'typically'. The interview is not a neutral social relationship and the respondents' perceptions of the interviewer may well affect replies.* (Abercrombie *et al.* 1994:221).

This version of 'the interview', taken from a dictionary of sociological terms, expresses some of the poetics classically employed to make claims for the 'scientific' status of the data generated. Typically, as here, the interview is seen as a research tool, structured so that respondents are asked exactly the same questions as others in order that the tool remains reliable. The interviewer is expected to remain detached and objective in order to minimize interviewer-effects that are seen to influence the respondent. Thus the respondent may give 'false' replies based upon how they perceive the interviewer, they may say what they think the interviewer wants to hear, or the interviewer may indeed 'bias' responses by giving too much away about themselves, by showing their

opinions, by entering into a dialogue with the interviewee, and so on (McCracken 1988:26).

Such versions of the interview are about making truth-claims for the material generated. What they ignore is that an interview is a dialogic relationship between researcher and researched, and that no two interviews are ever likely to be 'the same.' Thus my own view of the interview was that each and every one would achieve contextually-dependent forms of knowledge, rather than 'truth'. The interview generates accounts of events which are negotiated between interviewer and interviewee (Mishler 1986; Schratz & Walker 1995), dependent upon how each 'reads' the other person, and which are also bound to leave out information which the interviewee feels they do not want to discuss.

The traditional view of the interview has been much critiqued, especially in feminist and postmodern accounts (Coffey & Atkinson 1996; Finch 1984; Fontana & Frey 1998; Graham 1984; Mason 1996; Oakley 1981; Phoenix 1994; Reinharz 1992; Wise 1987). Ann Oakley criticised 'the interview' for its claims to a neutral, objective and scientific status, and noted that, in traditional versions of the interview, the researcher was to be removed, an 'objective tool' (Oakley 1981:32); *"...the paradigm of the 'proper' interview appeals to such values as objectivity, detachment, hierarchy and 'science'..."* (Oakley 1981:38). Instead, Oakley found that her women interviewees asked her questions back, and that she formed relationships beyond that of interviewer-interviewee with some of

them which she felt were non-hierarchical (Oakley 1981:47). Thus she wanted to acknowledge the role of 'the personal' in constructing research knowledge, and she felt that she shared a similar social location to her interviewees:

> *Where both share the same gender socialisation and critical life-experiences, social distance can be minimal. Where both interviewer and interviewee share membership of the same minority group, the basis for equality may impress itself even more urgently on the interviewer's consciousness.* (Oakley 1981:55).

Nevertheless, claims made by Oakley and other feminists (Finch 1984; Reinharz 1992) about the status of knowledge via interviewing are themselves problematic. The work of Sue Wise (1987) is important here, as she has argued that Oakley (1981) and Finch (1984) actually avoid confronting the power dynamics that exist between all researchers and their subjects. She does not accept that power imbalances are solved via women's shared structural position:

> *"In the research relationship, being women takes us so far, being a feminist a bit further, personal style and skill play an important part, but there comes a point at which structural inequalities do interfere with communication and understanding...;we can, and do, exert power over each other."* (Wise 1987:74).

Thus there are important objections to the suggestion that women share the same standpoint within a researcher/researchee relationship. Whilst they do share experiences of structural oppression as women, they do not share the same positions of power within the research itself, and the power of the researcher, not least to write a version of other women's lives, must be acknowledged rather than ignored. Second, there is no single foundational truth of women's lives that can be easily accessed by better 'feminist' interviewing. Third, the notion of a shared subject position between woman researcher and women subjects does not acknowledge the material and structural differences that exist between them, not least due to class, sexuality or race.

These critiques are also evident in the work of Ann Phoenix (1994), who discusses the dynamics of race that divide women, as a black woman interviewing both white and black female subjects. She is unhappy with the suggestion that woman-to-woman interviewing necessarily produces rapport through shared gender identification: *"Nor are the power positions between researcher and researched fixed dichotomies; the balance of power between interviewers and interviewees shifts over the course of a study."* (Phoenix 1994:55). More importantly for Phoenix (1994), the work of Oakley (1981) or Finch (1984) glosses over material differences between women such as racial difference.

Instead I argue that the interview is a dialogic relationship in which notions of power are shifting and changing according to how the subjects are positioned within particular discourses. Additionally, the interview is a re-counting of events, a narrative account (Mishler 1986), a 'version' rather than fact and it 'generates' data as opposed to 'collecting' it. This is an important distinction since data are not *"... 'out there' as an already existing stock of knowledge, ready to be collected and independent of our interpretations as researchers"* (Mason 1996:36).

Jennifer Mason (1996) characterizes the 'qualitative interview' as one which uses a relatively informal style, based upon a thematic, topic-centred, biographical or narrative approach, and in which the epistemological assumption is made that data are generated via the interaction between interviewer and interviewee(s) (Mason 1996:38). I felt that the idea of using structured interviews that did not deviate from a set script would be unhelpful. I wanted to be able to follow up respondents' own areas of concern, and to examine their experiences of assessments where possible. This meant that my interviews were unstructured (Fontana & Frey 1998:56), but used a series of "planned prompts" (McCracken 1988:35) which allowed me to ensure that I covered my key areas of interest with each respondent. For example, I wanted to know whether each respondent had done an assessment of a lesbian or gay applicant, I wanted to know whether they had undergone any training on this issue, and I wanted to know what they made of certain key anxieties usually raised about the children of lesbians and

gay men. Thus I used a prompt sheet to guide me, and I have included my interview schedule as Appendix 1 (p. 406).

The interviews usually lasted between one and two hours, and I recorded them in two ways; first, I used a tape-recorder to record the interviews which I later transcribed. In each case, I asked whether tape-recording was acceptable and in only one case did the interviewee object (here I took notes throughout). Second, I made detailed notes on my impressions of the interview immediately afterwards, and I found this was especially important in later remembering the 'tone' of interviews (whether interviewees seemed to be hostile or friendly towards me, whether they had any particular views they wanted to get across, and so on).

I piloted and refined my interview questions as I went along. Initially I had planned a whole series of questions concerning post-panel issues, looking at whether lesbians and gay men actually had children placed within their care. After interviews in South River Council, the first authority I visited, I found that these questions were not the central focus of my research and, more importantly, I did not have enough time to ask them. Instead I re-focused my questions onto the issue of assessment of carers. I experimented with asking the social workers about some of the most commonly raised objections to parenting by lesbians and gay men, and I found that these were particularly fruitful and engaging debates for the interviewees. In particular I found that these questions 'allowed' social workers to state some of their oppositions to lesbians and gay fostering and

adoption.

However, I did not always ask each social worker 'exactly the same' questions, as I wanted to allow for dialogue. Where a social worker had done an assessment of a lesbian or gay man, we spent some considerable interview time on this looking at how they had gone about this piece of work. Where a social worker had no such experience, then I asked them how they might go about it.

Of course my interviews did not run in a smooth, problem-free manner. I found that certain terms and meanings were not shared between myself and the social workers and so we had to work to reach understandings; for example, when I asked how they went about assessing an applicant's 'sexuality', several of the social workers took this to mean 'sexual activity' rather than identification with categories such as lesbian, gay or heterosexual. Other terms covering the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' were used by the social workers, but not generally by me: 'sexual preference', 'sexual orientation', 'homosexuality', 'differently sexually-oriented.' Several other events interrupted the 'neat' planning of my interviews: during two interviews my tape-recorder batteries ran out and I found myself having to take notes whilst listening to interviewees; when I visited the North Eastern Council I was not well, but could not face the idea of trying to rearrange a series of meetings with ten social workers and so went ahead as planned, but feeling pretty awful.

One of my key interviewees, a senior manager of children's services, used what I considered to be 'avoidance tactics' with me. When I arrived on the morning of the day our interview was planned, I met her in the lift and she told me that she was 'in a bad mood'. Later she rearranged the interview for another time, and I began to think she didn't want to see me, despite having agreed to be interviewed. When we did the interview, she refused to be tape-recorded but made a joke that tapes 'could be used as evidence in formal complaints and inquiries.' During the course of the interview itself, she kept saying things like, "...Oh I could say more, but I won't..." which, of course, I found frustrating. Later she asked me whether I would write a report on the findings for her child care services section and I refused. I arranged to meet with the Equalities Officer to do some feedback, which was our original agreement, but my attitude was that, if a large social services department wanted to seriously consider its practice with lesbian and gay carer applicants, then it ought to commission its own research. I did not want to become a 'cheap' alternative for such work, yet I struggled with this decision.

I received some feedback from the social workers about the interviews and this was generally positive. Maude, for example, told me that the workers felt that they had been able to get their points across to me without feeling threatened or 'put-down.' I think that this was because, even where I was interviewing people whose views I found abhorrent, I did allow them to make their points clearly and I listened to what they had to say. There were some interesting dynamics involved

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in the interviews, for example:

- at least three of the interviewees asked me to turn off the tape-recorder part way through because they wanted to make a point that they did not want to be recorded on the tape; one of these was the belief that it was more appropriate to place disabled children with lesbians or gay men because they would not understand, or be influenced by, the sexuality of their carers; another was to make a criticism of what the worker argued was homophobia on the part of her manager.

- I found that some of the workers sometimes told me details about their own sexuality, and/or sexual history; for example, one heterosexual woman told me about sexual experiences she had had with other women when younger. I did not feel it appropriate to stop people from telling me personal details when they wanted to, and yet I was also concerned as to whether they had really 'consented' to giving me such information since it was not the substance of my thesis.

- several of the workers were worried that I would think them 'stupid', 'professionally inept', 'not politically correct enough about lesbian and gay issues' and so on, while others simply refused to speak with me for reasons I cannot know but can only guess at.

- many of the workers told me that they really enjoyed the interviews, that they rarely had the opportunity to talk about and reflect upon these issues, and that they hadn't noticed the time 'slipping by'. This is what Raymond Lee refers to

as the 'cathartic effect' of interviewing around sensitive topics (Lee 1993:107).

Shapeshifting 2: Presenting a 'Self' in Interviews

When interviewees cannot be placed into a category of 'dispossessed' or 'powerful', and especially when they express views you abhor or hold status positions well above yours (which does not necessarily mean that they are powerful within the problematic being studied), the relation between researcher and subject becomes more problematic...My first concern was to gain access, and thus while I did not claim to be born-again, I most certainly did not present myself as a Jewish, lesbian, socialist feminist. I was not engaging in covert research, but neither did I wish to jeopardize the project. I did not lie, but I did not tell the whole truth - I said I was a sociologist of law (which, from their perspective, was bad enough)... (Herman 1994:14/15).

Like Didi Herman, who interviewed members of the New Christian Right in Canada concerning their attitudes towards issues of lesbian and gay equality (Herman 1994), I found myself in the position of an openly gay researcher approaching large and bureaucratic social work organizations, often interviewing social workers whose views I found objectionable and who felt perfectly at ease to make homophobic comments despite knowing that I was gay. However, like

Herman, my concern was to gain access to local authorities and indeed to just those social workers who had reservations about lesbians and gay man as foster or adoptive carers.

For this reason, issues of the presentation of 'self' for me as a researcher were of prime importance and worked on many different levels. In order to gain access to the local authorities, I presented myself as a genuine, serious academic researcher, interested in the policies and practices of the organization: I used University letter-headed paper and described my project and willingness to maintain confidentiality.

Doing the interviews raised issues about how much of my 'self' I should divulge to interviewees, and indeed how I was presenting myself to them. I certainly formed impressions of them, and positioned them in certain ways, and no doubt they did so in relation to me. My approach to the interviews, even where the social workers expressed what I considered to be anti-gay remarks, was to tell them that I was interested to hear what they had to say. I did not discuss my own views about lesbian and gay fostering and adoption except where they asked me questions back and here I felt that I should answer them (Oakley 1981). Where I disagreed with what was being said, I let them express their views and would then present an alternative argument to see what they made of it. Nevertheless, I also did the reverse; where social workers expressed views in line with my own I would present opposing arguments to them.

This revolves around the idea that I was being partly 'covert' in my approach (Bulmer 1982; Fielding 1982); because I did not say to each and every social worker, 'I am a gay man, and my views about lesbian and gay fostering and adoption are...' it has been assumed that I was deceiving my interviewees on some level[8]. Such self-presentation was also an issue for Herman (personal communication 1995), but in both our cases ethical concerns meant that we felt unable to actively deceive research subjects. For Herman, this meant that she used techniques of avoidance/not answering questions fully, in order to obscure her personal point-of-view, otherwise her subjects would refuse to speak to her (Herman 1994:15; personal communication 1995):

> *I thus felt uncomfortable leading them to believe, through a*
> *sympathetic tone or smile, that I might be supportive of their cause.*
> *On the other hand, I was also motivated by an activist concern to*
> *acquire useful information, and in this sense the research*
> *resembled the covert model. To do this, I needed to establish some*
> *kind of trust or empathy during the interviewing process. And yet I*
> *found this was achieved at a personal cost, particularly when some*
> *individuals expressed the most vicious perceptions of lesbian and*
> *gay sexuality.* (Herman 1994:15).

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[8] This was commented upon at my formal upgrading panel from MPhil to PhD, where a comment was made that one of my interviewees 'didn't really know what he was saying', as though I had trapped him into making homophobic statements. I have also found that this idea is often raised when I have presented my research in academic settings.

I also felt that, were I to present all my views on lesbian and gay fostering and adoption to each and every potential interviewee, this might prevent those who disagreed with me from coming forward. Nevertheless I did not actively 'deceive' them; I made my views clear when asked and I told them that I was a gay man. What is more interesting to me is the assumption that, where a social worker expressed homophobic views to me, I must have 'duped' them into doing so. This is certainly not how I experienced the interviews; those social workers who expressed homophobic views seemed to me to feel only too secure in doing so, at least because they were relying upon dominant discourses concerning sexuality. The view that I, as the researcher, was always in a position of power, able to dupe my interviewees into making statements they did not really mean, does not hold for me here. Instead I felt that they positioned me in a less powerful position, as gay, as a researcher, as someone who did not work in fostering and adoption, in comparison to them, heterosexual, working in a large organization of which I knew relatively little, and experienced in fostering and adoption work. At other times, however, the reverse was true; they positioned me as an 'academic with all the answers' who might ridicule or catch them out. Notions of power here then shift across the course of a research project and across the course of an interview (Phoenix 1994). But this also brings me back to the question of 'shapeshifting', for what is a truthful presentation of 'self' in interviews? Is this ever possible?

Very little was said directly to me and when I tried to be friendly

*there was a noticeable disposition to **fend** me off...The men*

would crowd in and buy soft drinks and woof at me, the stranger,

but I knew I wasn't getting on...Then one day after Cliffert Ulmer,

Babe's son, and I had driven down to Lakeland together he felt

close enough to tell me what was the trouble. They all thought I

must be a revenue officer or a detective of some kind. They were

accustomed to strange women dropping into the quarters, but

not in shiny gray Chevrolets...The car made me look too

prosperous. So they set me aside as different...I took occasion

that night to impress the job with the fact that I was also a fugitive

from justice, 'bootlegging.' They were hot behind me in

Jacksonville and they wanted me in Miami. So I was hiding out.

That sounded reasonable. Bootleggers always have cars. I was

taken in. (Hurston 1935:60-61).

Zora Neale Hurston used the representation of 'selves' throughout her life and work (Hemenway 1977), and in *Mules and Men* (Hurston 1935) and also *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Hurston 1942), she describes how she was initially positioned as an outsider by the people of Eatonville - the place where she had grown up - when she went back there to collect and research black folklore. She felt that they did not trust her initially - *"The glamor of Barnard College was still upon me.*

I dwelt in marble halls..." (Hurston 1942:174-5[9]) and so, in order to gain trust, she presented another 'self' to them, and, in typical 'Zora style,' this self was pure fabrication, for she certainly was not a fugitive or bootlegger.

This example illustrates quite neatly some of the problematics involved in suggestions that the researcher-interviewer ought to present an honest self to the interviewees. It is impossible for the interviewer and interviewee to ever fully 'know' each other during the process of an interview; instead, each gleans small pieces of information about the other and begins to position that other accordingly (Silverman 1989). The idea that I could have presented a complete and honest self to my interviewees seems to me to be impossible, but also based upon the idea that there is a single, essential self that could be so neatly summed up.

The social workers made sense of me, positioned me according to certain information about me (Edwards 1993), but were not duped by me into making false statements. Indeed, if it can be argued that I was 'duping' the social workers into making false statements, then it can equally be argued that they were 'duping' me, presenting more flattering versions of their practice, or what has been called 'managing impressions of themselves' (Lee 1993:75).

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[9] All page numbers for *Dust Tracks on a Road* refer to the 1986 edition published by Virago (London).

An 'Institutional Ethnography'

Having described the interview as 'method', I now wish to return to its methodological implications. I used the interview within the context of conducting what Dorothy Smith has termed an 'institutional ethnography' (Smith 1987:160), and I show how I used this analytically in chapter four. This is a research methodology that explicates the institutional relations that determine the everyday worlds in which the social workers were practising. Smith argues that an institutional ethnography should uncover the 'relations of ruling' which govern everyday social relations and practices. The relations of ruling are forms of consciousness, created via the construction of practices and discourses, which belong to organizations and to those discourses therein (Smith 1987:3) Thus the relations of ruling are the dominant ways of making sense of our everyday worlds; here, the dominant ways that the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' are made sense of within fostering and adoption practice, and they are also the practices which sustain and reproduce such versions of the world; here, the assessment practices which continue to reproduce certain representations of the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay'. Thus an institutional ethnography analyses discourse in order to investigate what are constituted as 'norms'.

Methodologically, an institutional ethnography must begin in the everyday practical reasoning of individuals, and it is for this reason that I used the interview to understand how the social workers theorized about lesbian and gay

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applicants. An institutional ethnography should therefore analyse how the work

done by the social workers is constitutive of their everyday worlds, and how

these practices sustain institutional processes. Where such practices are

performed by many social workers, and/or repeatedly so, then they can be

understood to be the social relations of ruling governing such practices (Smith

1987:166). I have summarised Smith's (1987) methodology in diagrammatic

form:

AN INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

start with the standpoint of the
actors; a women's standpoint,
or the standpoint of the
excluded

THE PARTICULAR

analyse the texts produced
in order to look for their
problematics; to make the
everyday world problematic

AN INSTITUTIONAL
ETHNOGRAPHY
LOOKS FROM THE
EVERYDAY AT THE
SOCIAL RELATIONS
OF RULING

use these to investigate
the organizational processes
within which the everyday is
embedded

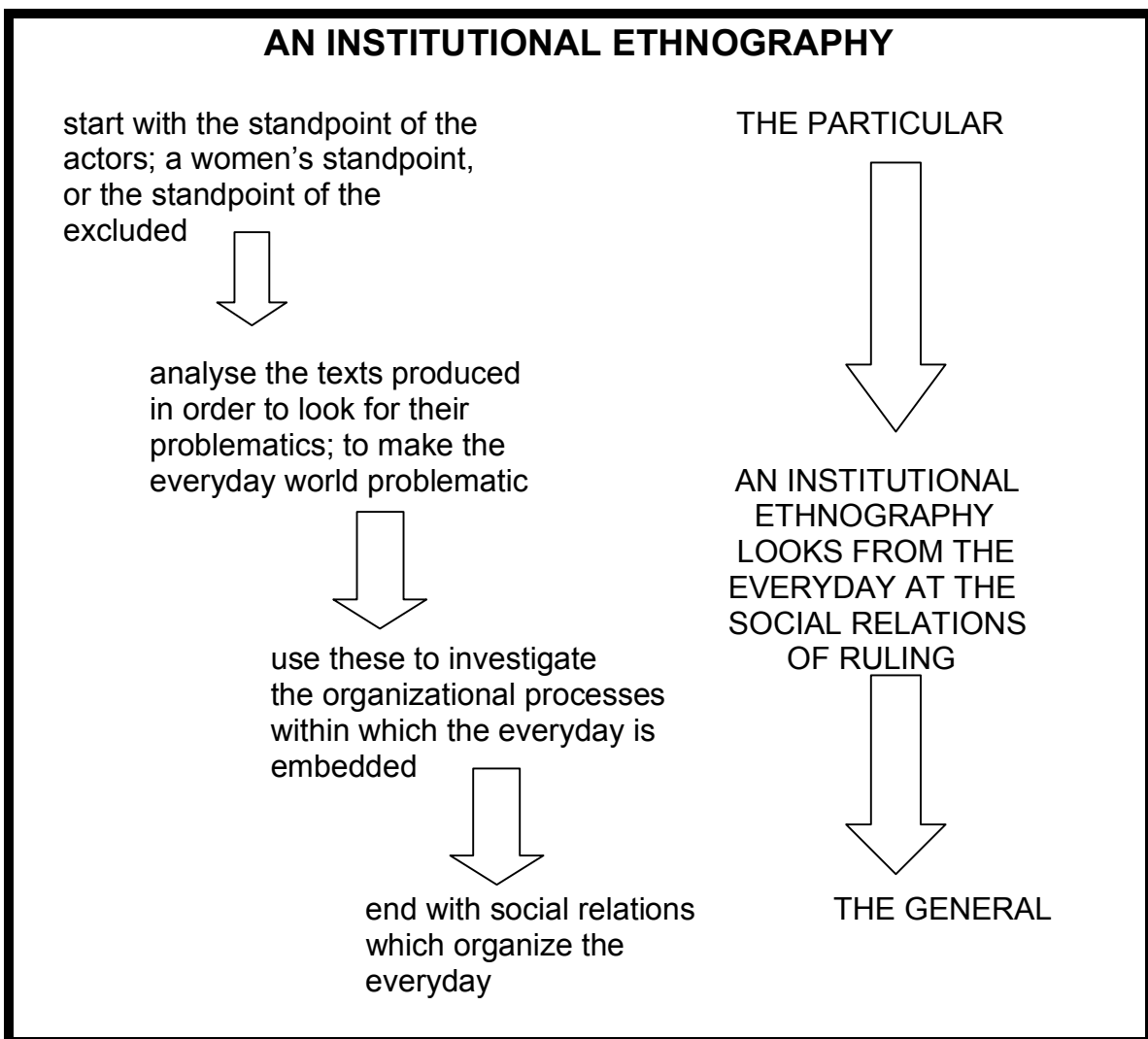end with social relations
which organize the
everyday

THE GENERAL

Figure 3.1

The first point of an institutional ethnography, then, is to consider the standpoint of the actors within the social situation being investigated; that is, to investigate their everyday worlds (Smith 1987:105). The sociologist-researcher must begin with these daily, local social relations, and so here my aim was to generate data that were about the social workers' everyday understandings of assessing lesbian and gay applicants.

Smith's feminist sociology is concerned to explicate how women are outside the frame, 'the other', of the dominant relations of ruling, and so how she can develop a sociology from the standpoint of women, *"a way of seeing, from where we actually live"* (Smith 1987:9). Men's views of the world, their versions of knowledge, masquerade as the universal, and so women's standpoints occupy a critical epistemological position here, even though they do not share a common viewpoint (Smith 1987:78). This was something of a problem for me, since quite clearly some of the social workers did occupy positions outside of the heterosexual relations of ruling - as women, as black, as lesbians - while others did not - as white, as heterosexual, as men. Nor were there easy alliances here; for example, some of the white heterosexual men I interviewed were clearly critical of homophobic and sexist ideas, some of the white heterosexual women were homophobic and against lesbians and gay men caring for children, and a black heterosexual man also held homophobic and sexist views. Nevertheless I felt that I could use the social workers' accounts in order to understand the everyday world in which they were social work-ing lesbian and gay applicants.

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The next stage of the institutional ethnography is to analyse the 'texts' produced by the social actors in order to look for their problematics. The mechanics of this analytic process are summarised in Appendix 2.a (p. 410). Here, however, the word 'text' refers to understandings, both verbal and written, discourses and social practices. Thus I looked at how the social workers constructed versions of the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' in relation to the 'carer of children', both in their talk and in how they later represented these in written format (e.g. the assessment report). However I believe that I was also investigating what I term social work assessment 'scripts', and by this I mean the standard ways that lesbian and gay applicants are regularly assessed by social work units. Here I was investigating how social work practices constitute 'norms' (Smith 1987:155), such norms taking on both the expectations of how lesbians and gay men ought to be assessed as suggested by fostering and adoption panels for example, and the dominant ways of going about such assessments based upon key assumptions made about the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay'. Here then I was largely looking to understand how the social workers made sense of lesbian and gay applicants, and to consider both dominant and critical versions of such knowledge.

The third stage is to use these texts in order to investigate the organizational processes within which the everyday understandings are developed. Here I was making sense of how the social workers' versions of 'lesbian' and 'gay' were both

constituted by, and constitutive of, dominant assessment practices. For example, how did the version of 'lesbian' as a threat to men become constitutive of, and also constituted by, an assessment practice in which lesbian applicants were asked many questions about their attitudes towards men, whether they had male friends and so on?

This takes us to the final stage of the institutional ethnography, in which we can analyse how social texts become social work practices which, when performed by many workers, constitute the social relations of ruling which organise the everyday worlds of the social workers. Thus we have moved from the particular - the social workers' everyday standpoints - to the general - the dominant relations of ruling within social work practice which produce particular versions of 'lesbian' and 'gay'. In this sense, that is the purpose of the remainder of the thesis and I have specifically analysed the 'relations of ruling' in section three of chapter four, but I used the interview in order to generate data which would help me to analyse the everyday worlds in which social work-ing with lesbian and gay applicants took place.

Shapeshifting 3: "Are you a feminist, then...?"

My research text analyses gender as a key determinant of social relations, and especially of the ways that the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' were understood by the social workers, and further, the way that social relations are structured on the

basis of oppression due to gender in which women are disadvantaged in relation to men. Social work contributes to such 'relations of ruling' (Smith 1987) as much as any other social structure or organization. Chapters five and six particularly analyse what I have called 'gender anxiety', but also how the relations of ruling within fostering and adoption favour compulsory heterosexuality, the maintenance of traditional gender roles and the privileging of men's power within social work and understandings of the 'socialization' of children. My analysis in the thesis, then, has been significantly influenced by work on feminist research and epistemologies.

Early work on feminist research (Eichler 1987; Finch 1984; Oakley 1981; Roberts 1981) was largely concerned with ensuring that women's lives and experiences were represented in what had formerly been androcentric studies, developing 'non-sexist' qualitative methods and using these in less exploitative ways (Reinharz 1992). However, this raises some problematics since we need to ask questions like, 'what is particularly feminist about the interview?', and, 'what is wrong with feminists using quantitative techniques to produce knowledge?' (Graham 1983; Jayaratne 1983; Mason 1994). Additionally, the suggestion that power dynamics can be removed from research relationships is a nonsense (Wise 1987). Feminist research which sees feminism in method alone does not specify the basis for this being feminist knowledge, and so this is not accountable or indeed particularly ethical knowledge. Nevertheless feminist researchers also argued clearly for reflexive practices which located the construction of knowledge

via the researcher's own experiences (Roberts 1981:16).

However, it is important to note that this was not, by any means, the sum total of work on the idea of feminist research (Stanley 1997b:205). Contemporaneous with these developments were other versions which proposed a feminist methodology concerned with epistemological issues (Bowles & Klein 1983; Smith 1987; Stanley & Wise 1983a, 1983b,1993). Liz Stanley & Sue Wise (1983b) were critical of the notions that feminist research was about simply 'adding women into' existing versions of 'science' (1993:30), that it should just be research 'on, for and by women' (1993:30), or that it should be concerned with method, and only 'soft, qualitative methods' at that (1993:34). Instead they argued that the 'feminism' of feminist research was located in a way of 'seeing reality differently', that feminism was about having a feminist consciousness about the world and, therefore, about interpreting 'reality' (Stanley & Wise 1993:43). Relatedly, they also argued clearly that the researcher, as an experiencing being, was and ought to be central to the research process; thus researchers ought to show how 'the personal' is implicated in how they produce knowledge (Stanley & Wise 1983b, 1993:150). Later they called this an 'intellectual autobiography' (Stanley & Wise 1990:23), the idea that researchers ought to show how knowledge has been constructed, both in the research process and through writing. Thus all knowledge, including feminist knowledge, *"results from the conditions of its production"* (Stanley & Wise 1990:39), and therefore:

...knowledge is actually a crucial part of the 'textually mediated

relations of ruling'. It is political knowledge through and through,

because it necessarily derives from the world-views,

assumptions and frameworks concerning knowledge (that is, the

epistemologies) of its producers; and these are typically highly

particular groups of men who give voice/text to the social world

as seen, understood and colonised by men like themselves.

(Stanley & Wise 1990:39).

Stanley & Wise did not accept the existence of a single feminist version of research, and certainly not a single version of knowledge, and here they argued that women's stand*points* were multiple not least along axes of sexuality and race (Stanley & Wise 1990:47). Thus there co-exist a number of epistemologies, but these cannot be placed in any hierarchical relation. Instead, they argued that their feminist epistemology, what they have called a *feminist fractured foundationalism,* is preferable because it makes more ontological sense (Stanley & Wise 1993:228, 230).

The new edition of *Breaking Out* (Stanley & Wise 1993) provides a summary of their feminist epistemology, and it is worth discussing it here as it has so influenced my ideas on what counts as knowledge, my own 'intellectual autobiography'. In their feminist epistemology (Stanley & Wise 1993:8-9):

- the researcher exists on the same critical plane as those being researched; both are able to make knowledge-claims about the world which may be contested; the 'researcher' does not have 'scientific, objective' access to 'better theory',

- the 'researched' ought to include men, and not just women, for feminists,

- all research proceeds from the researcher, a person who is making knowledge-claims,

- all knowledge is, therefore, a version of the world which can be debated,

- what are seen as 'structures' in social life are analysed, recognising that these are in fact everyday regular occurrences and inequalities which come to be defined as 'facts',

- the statement that 'women are oppressed' is axiomatic to feminism, but there is a crucial recognition that differently located women have different experiences, and that they can and do exercise power at different times,

- the category 'men' is therefore also open to be prised apart,

- different categories of 'women' have different material experiences, and therefore epistemologies, and so feminism has to change its ways of working accordingly,

- that the idea of a 'self' is always socially constructed,

- and that there is a social reality that exists beyond our constructions of it, but this is not the unproblematic, foundationalist version of traditional social science.

The question remains as to whether I am 'doing' feminism (Digby 1998), and by implication how my epistemology is also one that relies upon 'seeing the world' as gay, as white, and as a man. In the thesis, I have adopted an approach usually termed 'pro-feminist' (Brod 1998; Hearn 1998), yet I also dispute the notion that there is one 'feminism', as do others (Kemp & Squires 1997; Stanley 1997a), and have argued in chapter one for a feminism which locates sexuality and race as key dynamics and which takes some of the claims of postmodernism seriously.

It is also important that I analyse how the notion of a 'gay epistemology' relates to that specified by feminisms; that is, is there a distinctly 'gay' way of seeing the world and of constructing knowledge? Certainly I have experienced many examples of my being reminded, personally and academically, that my research 'is gay', and this is frequently employed as some kind of academic 'put down' (and see Morgan 1981:101, 1992:165; Spender 1981), but this does not mean the same thing as understanding the world 'from a gay standpoint.' Does such a discrete standpoint exist? For, if nothing else, this thesis demonstrates how fractured the category 'gay' remains. In relation to defining gay epistemology/ies, I acknowledge two key texts of importance here, Liz Stanley's *Is There A Lesbian Epistemology?* (Stanley 1992a) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (Sedgwick 1990), which I would like to discuss.

Stanley's (1992a) paper examines the ways in which knowing, as a lesbian, is a

political process, and is therefore about questions of power, about who knows and why. For the lesbian, problematic is the privileging of heterosexual knowledge:

> *It is the presumption of heterosexuality which for me signifies what is socially and politically extra-ordinary, a puzzle, something epistemologically and ontologically strange. Presumptive heterosexuality sees itself as a defining characteristic, not only of human kind, but also of the behaviours and constitution of animals, and the behaviours and constitution of plants and vegetables.* (Stanley 1992a:18).

Stanley (1992a) goes on to outline features of a lesbian epistemology, which include the construction of social reality through shared social meanings, the notion of experiencing, both as the self and as a social being, the impossibility of making any foundational knowledge claims, the basis of knowledge in ontology, and the use of categories in our daily thinking and theorising, which cannot be rejected but can be made less rigid. She is therefore proposing a distinct lesbian epistemology, shared by women who go under the category 'lesbian', which is different to how others, gay men, heterosexuals, see the world, and therefore how they construct knowledge:

> *...there is a distinct lesbian epistemology, a viewpoint on and a*

construction of knowledge - both other people's and our own.

This does not mean that every lesbian woman sees the world in

exactly similar ways....but [there is]...a particular set of

experiences shared by lesbian women-loving women in a

heterosexual world. (Stanley 1992a:66).

What I draw from Stanley's (1992a) paper is that lesbians and gay men, in

different ways, 'know reality differently' (see also Stanley and Wise 1993: 32).

This I take to mean that we examine 'knowledge' critically for the ways that it

rests upon an assumed and central heterosexuality. Relatedly, however, I have

also argued for seeing 'lesbian' and 'gay' as forms of knowledge, which must also

be examined for their effects.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work (1990) acknowledges the fact that much of

modern Western thought is structured, and fractured, by what she terms the

crisis of homosexual/heterosexual definition (p. 1). In terms of developing

theories of a gay epistemology, Sedgwick has the following to say :

*The **special** centrality of homophobic oppression in the twentieth*

century...has resulted from its inextricability from the question of

knowledge and the process of knowing in modern Western

culture at large. (Sedgwick 1990:33/34).

For Sedgwick, then, much of what we know is structured by our own particular sexual epistemology: we view the world through women's, men's, gay, lesbian eyes. For gay men and for lesbians, the 'closet' is *"...the telling secret"* (p. 67) of gay lives, a speech act of silence (p. 3) which is the defining structure for gay oppression. Relatedly, categories such as 'lesbian' or 'gay' *are* categories of knowledge.

Gay men, then, know the world in a different way, due to *"...the epistemological distinctiveness of gay identity and gay situation in our culture..."* (Sedgwick 1990: 75). A piece of work on gay men by a heterosexual researcher will 'know' from a different epistemological position than that by a gay one, Kath Weston's point (1991: 13), though, as I argue later, not necessarily a 'better' one. My own gay epistemology, learning from feminist and lesbian research debates, would hope that such positions be explicated by the 'knower', and is thus predicated upon a number of important points:

- Gay people 'see reality differently' (this is Stanley and Wise's phrase, 1993:32). By this I do not mean that gay men are born with an essentially different world view. I believe that it is largely socially constructed, but it is 'different' in many of its claims to those of heterosexual 'knowledges'.
- Gay men therefore share some epistemological experiences, and it is through these that we construct the category 'gay', however much a 'necessary fiction' (Sinfield 1998:40) it is. Certainly it is a necessary fiction since there are wide

divergences of standpoint within the category 'gay', and this point is developed in chapter five.

- Sexuality is a key determinant of social relations, and there is no knowledge that is not produced from a particular location; heterosexual, lesbian, gay and so on. Nevertheless social relations are also as much racialised and gendered.

- The categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' do not exist other than as knowledge-claims. Understandings of these categories are 'versions' that can be contested.

- Gay, lesbian and heterosexual research subjects 'know' the social world as much as I do. They experience different oppressions (ontology), and theorize from their own experiences, not from mine.

- The researcher exists on the same critical and theoretical plane as the researched (Stanley 1992a:31). I do have power as a researcher, particularly in terms of writing a research product, and it is important that I examine the sources of such power, but my research subjects can, and frequently do, resist my theorizing in favour of their own.

- My own epistemology is as much research data/material (Chung Yuen Kay 1990) as theirs, and I should explicate my position as fully as I can; that is, explain how and why I come to know what I do.

'Writing Culture', or Secrets and Lies

"...truth is only to be had by laying together many varieties of error." (Woolf

1928:104).

Stanley (1997b) has argued for the 'open text' as a feminist form of knowledge

and writing, and what I want to propose here is a 'deconstructive text' (Derrida

1976). By this I mean a text which foregrounds poetics, 'writing' itself, in order to

show to 'you', the reader, that the textual is also a representation of the world,

also a form of knowledge.

Jacques Derrida (1976) argued that the text is always already full of its own

deconstructiveness, and that 'true' textual meaning was open to continual

deferral, not least because language itself is not a neutral mediator of thought.

His concept of writing *sous rature* (Derrida 1976) is therefore helpful in showing

how the text is haunted by the trace of other, absent meanings. Thus we could

write here ~~TEXT=TRUTH~~. In a sense, we could apply this to the notion of the

'speaking voice' and shapeshifting; for 'my' voice here speaks in this text to 'you'

but it speaks 'as' others - Nita, Wayne, Fazila, Clare and so on. My voice is

haunted by the absent presence of my research subjects, since I shapeshift in

order to present them to you, and yet it is always me that speaks. Nevertheless

for Derrida there is no authentic speaking subject here, since all these voices are

haunted by earlier traces of meaning, by ideas constructed out of a language

system preceding the individual (Derrida 1976).

I suggest that a deconstructive text should therefore:

- maintain reflexivity about its own poetics, in order to demonstrate how textual devices are also constructors of meaning,

- accept that language is a key constructor of meaning, but that meaning in language is never fixed but constantly open to contestation and deferral (Derrida 1976; Weedon 1987:24),

- specify its methodology, that is how knowledge is produced, but including attention to grammatology, that is how it is written (Derrida 1976),

- present different 'fictional' forms, foregrounding the reader's ability to deconstruct the notion that text=truth.

This text may deconstruct itself in that it mixes different, and conflicting, forms of writing in the presentation of methodology - fictions, personal accounts, stories, quotations, narrative and so on - in order to demonstrate methodological poetics in action. Thus a concern with research poetics shows the fruitlessness of searching for 'truth' represented in writing. Woolf, in *A Room...,* asserted this, noting that *"...one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold"* (Woolf 1928:6). Indeed the entire text of *A Room...* constantly returns to this theme, reminding us that what is authored in research too is a form of fiction (Krieger 1983):

> *'Truth' is a social construct, in the same way that objectivity is; and both are constructed out of experiences which are, for all practical purposes, the same as 'lies' and 'subjectivity'. And so we see all research as 'fiction' in the sense that it views and so constructs 'reality' through the eyes of one person.* (Stanley & Wise 1993:171).

Method 2: Case Study or 'Auto/biography'?

> *CASE STUDY: The detailed examination of a single example of a class of phenomena, a case study cannot provide reliable information about the broader class. But it is often useful in the preliminary stages of an investigation since it provides hypotheses which may be tested systematically with a larger number of cases...Cases are selected to represent what, on the basis of theory or prior knowledge, are thought to be contrasting examples...Case studies may provide data of a richness and detail that are difficult to obtain from broader surveys, but at the cost of a lack of generalisability.* (Abercrombie *et al.* 1994:46-7).

In addition to the interviews with the social workers, I also conducted a detailed case study of a lesbian couple's application to adopt. This forms the entirety of chapter six of the thesis, in which I analyse the experiences of the couple, whom

we decided between us to call 'Nita and Clare'. Once again, the process of

analysis is summarised in Appendix 2.b (p. 412). However, I think that it is

important to begin with a definition of what is meant by 'a case study', the

standard version demonstrated by the quotation from Abercrombie *et al.* (1994).

There are a number of definitions within existing literature (Abramson 1992;

Bradshaw & Wallace 1991; Feagin *et al.* 1991; Hamel *et al.* 1993; Hartley 1994;

Langrish 1993; Orum *et al.* 1991; Platt 1988, 1992; Ragin & Becker 1992; H.

Rose 1991; Schuller 1988; Sjoberg *et al.* 1991; Stake 1994, 1995; Stoecker

1991; Yin 1981, 1984, 1992, 1993). Yin (1984), for example, suggests that a

case study is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon

within a real-life context, when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its

context are unclear, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin

1984:23). Stake (1995) writes that case study is *"the study of the particularity and*

complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important

circumstances" (Stake 1995:xi), while Stoecker suggests case studies are *"those*

research projects which attempt to explain wholistically [sic] *the dynamics of a*

certain historical period of a particular social unit." (Stoecker 1991:97-8). Orum et

al. (1991) argue that a case study is *"an in-depth, multifaceted investigation,*

using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon. The study is

conducted in great detail and often relies on the use of several data sources."

(Orum *et al.* 1991:2).

My own definition of a case study would be that it is an in-depth, interpretivist

investigation of a social group, persons, community, activity or events, bordered by a set of boundaries which are said to define 'the case'. Case studies rely upon multiple sources of evidence, and the use of multiple methods. Where my understanding of case studies differs from the definitions in existing literature is in the fact that I would like to emphasize the role of auto/biographical processes (Cotterill & Letherby 1993; Stanley 1992b, 1993, 1994; Swindells 1995) in their production, an idea which raises the issue of case studies as 'fictional accounts of lives', a point I shall return to later.

There are many reasons why I decided to use a case study as part of the research for my thesis. In particular I felt that, because lesbian and gay fostering and adoption is so little researched and because issues concerning the assessment of such carers are complex, then it would be helpful for the reader to have at least one in-depth story, something that would be engaging but also exemplary. I also wanted to show how my research data is both complex and detailed, dealing with aspects other than just sexuality alone. I therefore felt that Nita and Clare's story, dealing as it does with issues of gender, race and ethnicity as much as lesbianism, would help to illuminate such intersecting dynamics. I anticipated that a case study would focus on the processes of social work assessment, and also be able to investigate the differing meanings given to these by the actors themselves, and I wanted to be able to look at an assessment from a number of points of view.

So why did I choose to work with Nita and Clare for my case study? Partly this was opportunistic; they had expressed interest in my research, and when I suggested working with them on a case study they were only too pleased to help. This involved no small amount of labour on their part, since I asked them to participate in three separate interviews, each of at least 90 minutes. But more especially, they felt it was likely that the social worker that had assessed them, Barbara, would also agree to be interviewed, and they were prepared to let me see their assessment report form (Form F) which contained detailed personal information.

Additionally, I wanted to locate human subjects within the text of my thesis, but of course this was not a simple issue, and I cannot say that Nita and Clare have been straightforwardly 'allowed to tell their story', since ultimately it is my representation of them that is this text. Nevertheless I have worked closely with them on this case study, seeking their active feedback on my writings, and I have used their own words wherever possible. By this I mean that I have relied upon their own theorizing of events as much as my own, that we inhabited the same 'critical plane' from which to interpret social actions (Stanley & Wise 1993: 8), rather than suggesting that I have been able to get to a single foundational 'truth' about the case. We developed a good research relationship, and I hope that I have been able to reflect Nita and Clare's active resistance to oppression, their resistance to being concretely positioned by social workers, and their active theorizing of their own experiences in this text.

What interested me most about doing a case study, however, was not the issues of design and method, but rather the auto/biographical processes that were involved in constructing Nita and Clare's 'story'. Stanley (1992b, 1993) argues that the easy distinction popularly made between autobiography and biography is in fact not so easy (Stanley 1992b:3; 1993:42). Any auto/biography is an artful construction within narrative, and versions of a 'life' may be hotly contested as Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* so expertly points out (J. Rose 1991). Thus the text has a complex relationship with the material realities of the life it describes (Stanley 1992b:243). In this sense, then, I have not simply recorded a faithful rendition of the 'truth' of Nita and Clare's accounts. I have interpreted what they said, taken the parts that I felt to be significant or meaningful to my research, and put them together as the case study. However, I do see the text as an interplay of my writing with their voices, and I think that they are very much 'present' in the text.

What I am arguing here, then, is that doing a case study involved processes of constructing a *version* of life experiences. Thus the different voices within the case study are contestations of what happened, and they do not always agree. For example, Barbara told me that she thought through the kinds of questions she would need to ask a lesbian couple in advance of doing the assessment. Nita and Clare, however, argued that they were responsible for raising the specifics of lesbian adoption and that Barbara would not have done so if they

hadn't. How, then, do we understand such claims based upon experience via memory? Many positivist researchers have argued that such claims are problematic and unreliable, but like Stanley (1994), I cannot see why knowledge based upon experience should be any more or less problematic than other claims. 'Experience' itself is never 'raw' and obvious, but must be made sense of (Scott 1993) and all claims are rooted in the knowledge-production processes (Stanley 1994:146).

As I have said, it is the interplay of voices, of versions of the past, that interested me most in doing the case study, so where there were disagreements I recorded them. I gave my accounts to Nita and Clare to get active feedback from them, and they commented on these. These comments form the basis of footnotes provided in my final version of chapter six. I argue that case study allows for the generation of complex and contradictory data that can highlight the contestation of meanings given to events or concepts by different social actors. The social 'world' is messy, contradictory and full of dispute, and so the case study is helpful for showing this. This is why I felt it was methodologically appropriate to a 'story' which, at the very least, was concerned with contestations of categories such as 'lesbian', 'Hindu', 'Asian', or 'gender role'.

One of the most frequent objections to case study research is that it proves nothing, since relying upon a case of one does not allow for generalization (Abercrombie *et al.* 1994:47). However, this critique is based upon a positivist

epistemology that sees knowledge as inhering in the statistical generalisability and validity of findings. Case studies are not based upon such an epistemology in my view, since they are concerned with the investigation of a single case in detail in order to theorize about actors' accounts of social processes. A case study is not a population 'sample' from which to generalize statistically. Indeed a case may be studied for its uniqueness and diversion from the 'norm' alone (Langrish 1993).

Many writers argue that case studies use analytical, rather than statistical generalization (Yin 1993); that is, they can be used to generate, and generalize to the level of, theory (Hartley 1994:225; Orum *et al.* 1991:13; Platt 1988:17; Yin 1992:126, 1993:39), and it can be seen from my own case study of Nita and Clare that I believe this to be true. I have theorized from the data concerning the intersecting dynamics of race, gender and sexuality, and have generalized from this about how the category 'lesbian' is represented via the processes of social work assessment.

Stoecker (1991) interestingly points out that writers such as Yin (1984, 1993) defend case study research by claiming that it incorporates 'scientific rigour' (Stoecker 1991:92). Yin (1984) is very keen to emphasize the validity and reliability of case study research, especially through the use of triangulation and multiple cases. In his article, 'The Case Study Method as a Tool for Doing Evaluation' (Yin 1992), Yin clearly states that case study assumes a *"single*

objective reality that can be investigated by following the traditional rules of

scientific inquiry." (Yin 1992:128). Stoecker (1991) argues that, instead of

defending the scientific rigour of case studies, we might critique the foundational

basis of such an emphasis. Certainly I do not assume a 'single objective reality'

as the basis for my case study research and, relatedly, would not argue that my

research design has allowed me access to such a seamless 'truth' about the

social world. I also argue that a case study is particularly appropriate where

detailed sensitive information (Lee 1993) is needed regarding the processes and

interactions of social work policy and practices.

I was therefore able to study events from a number of different 'points of view',

what some writers call 'triangulation' of the data (O'Connell Davidson & Layder

1994:55; Silverman 1993:156). For example, in looking at their assessment by

Barbara, I used mixed sources as follows:

Mixed Data Sources in the Case Study

social worker version   Form F report version

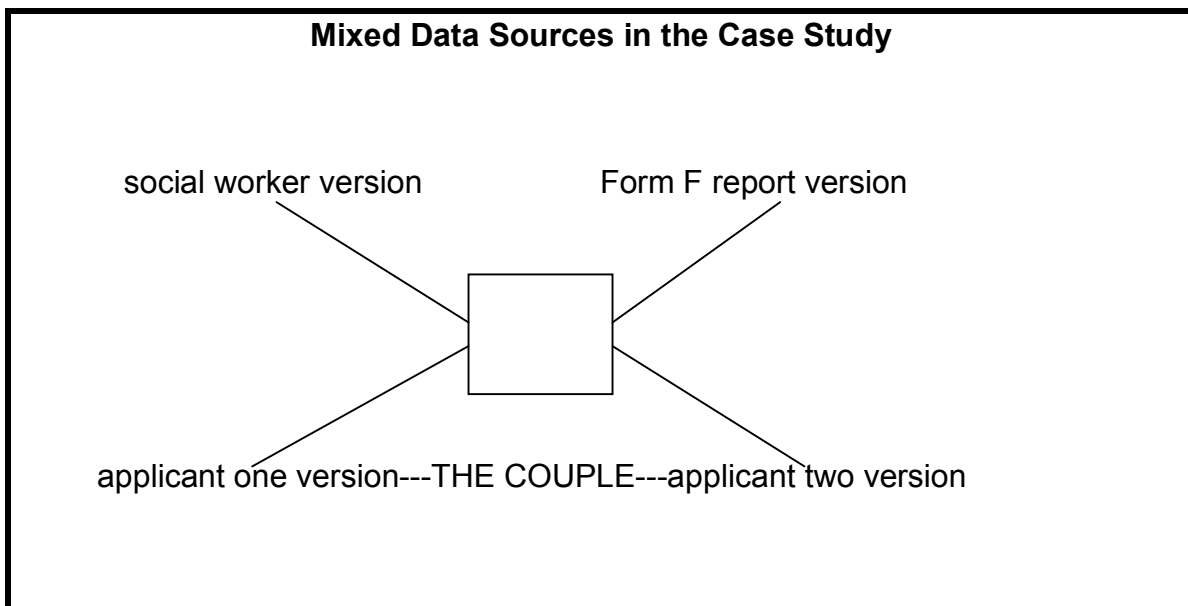applicant one version---THE COUPLE---applicant two version

Figure 3.2

I also had to define what I saw as my 'case', and the boundaries for my data sources, and I used the following:

- three in-depth interviews with Nita and Clare, looking at pre-assessment, assessment and post-assessment issues.
- an interview with the assessing social worker, Barbara.
- the 'Form F' assessment report presented to the adoption panel.
- the Midlands Council Equal Opportunities Policy Statement.
- letter from the Assistant Director (Children's Services) of the Midlands Council to the couple.
- letter of complaint by the couple to the Chief Executive of the Midlands Council.
- complaint investigation reports of the Investigating Officer (Midlands Council) and the Independent Person.

My methods, therefore, were in-depth qualitative interviewing, for which I used an interview guide (schedule), but also the analysis of documentary sources. I recorded my interviews on audio tape (with Nita and Clare) and by hand (with Barbara who did not want to be taped), and then transcribed these verbatim. I reviewed each interview before going on to do the next one, noting questions I needed to ask again and areas that were emerging as significant from the data. The research involved a number of ethical issues especially concerning

confidentiality. I made agreements with my subjects about how to refer to them

and I felt I had to be especially careful not to identify the Northern City Council,

since Barbara was the only black worker in the adoption unit, and Nita & Clare

could be easily identified as a 'mixed race', and the first out lesbian, couple to

adopt. Their Form F report also contained detailed personal information, and we

agreed that the couple would delete their names, and any parts they did not want

me to read, from the document.

Shapeshifting 4: Researching Black and Lesbian Lives

Can, and should, a white gay man research the lives of lesbians and black

women? This is the question that I intend to address here in relation to the case

study, because this was a dilemma: if I do not accept that there is a single

foundational truth to be accessed, then how far is it ethically and politically

possible to research the lives of people 'other' than myself? And this is also to do

with questions of representation: *"whether, and how, we should represent*

members of groups to which we do not ourselves belong - in particular, members

of groups oppressed in ways we are not." (Kitzinger & Wilkinson 1996:1). For the

case study is a representation of black and lesbian women's lives.

All of this is concerned with the question of *epistemic privilege* which suggests

that those who experience particular forms of social oppression, due to racism,

sexism, homophobia, therefore have a privileged access to an understanding of

reality. This is by virtue of the fact that they see both the oppressors' versions of the world but also their own. They see the centre from the point of view of the margin, having a kind of double vision on reality (hooks 1984).

The notion of epistemic privilege has held much sway in research terms, particularly where it is oppressed groups that are being investigated. For some, the complex ethical and political dilemmas involved in negotiating the power dynamics that are always present in all research can be easily solved by reliance upon the notion of epistemic privilege. This is realized by the idea of 'matching' the characteristics of the research subjects with the researcher along the lines of race or gender, for example. But we have seen that this did not work for Zora Neale Hurston in the case of *Mules and Men* (Hurston 1935), where those she was researching regarded her with suspicion. Claudia Bernard (1994), similarly, is a black woman who researched with other black women, and she argues that, *"even though both the researcher and her respondents may share a subordinated position in society, the power dynamics between them in the research process are not lessened...these become more complex."* (Bernard 1994:21). Like Wise (1987), Bernard also points out that research relationships are always built upon unequal power, and that this cannot be so easily disappeared by 'matching' (Bernard 1994:21).

In fact, as I have been arguing, what is more dangerous is an assumed similarity or sameness (Hurd & McIntyre 1996) between researcher and researched simply

on the grounds of race, gender or sexuality. It is politically significant that this is questioned by black researchers, lesbians, gay men and feminists (and of course combinations of those), but rarely when white researchers interview other white subjects (though see Frankenberg 1993), or heterosexuals other heterosexuals.

If we consider the notion of epistemic privilege in relation to researching lesbians and gay men, then an article by Joseph Styles (1979) is explicitly concerned with 'insider/outsider' status in 'gay research'. What interests me about Styles' (1979) work is that he discusses how far he was an 'insider', both of a gay male subculture but also as a participant observer in sexual activity in a gay bathhouse. Styles makes the point that he initially believed that, as a gay man, he *"was in a position to conduct research that would be close to the experience of gay men themselves."* (Styles 1979:136). This is a 'standpoint' claim, based on the notion of a common experience as members of a category 'gay'. However, Styles goes on to describe how, in researching sexual activity amongst gay men in a bathhouse, he remained an 'outsider' as he himself did not initially engage in sex with other gay men (Styles 1979:142). Later he did participate in sexual activity, and says, *"I began to use myself - my own experiences, my perceptions, my desires, my interests - as a way of clueing myself into the concerns of other bath-goers. After all, I was now a 'real' insider."* (Styles 1979:142).

Styles goes on to suggest that his notions of 'insider/outsider' were not so easily fixed in the research field, and he is ultimately dismissive of epistemic privilege:

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"There are no privileged positions of knowledge when it comes to scrutinizing human group life." (Styles 1979:148). He describes 'outsider' and 'insider' myths in research, suggesting that 'outsider' myths hold that only outsiders have the necessary distance and objectivity needed to study particular groups, while 'insider' myths hold that only insiders have the ability to appreciate the 'truth' of a group's experiences (Styles 1979:148). Styles concludes by saying that he did not possess any special access to the life of the baths merely because he was gay (Styles 1979:148).

This is an important critique of notions of epistemic privilege, for, whilst there are different epistemological positions, these are not hierarchical; nor, I argue, does belonging to the same epistemological 'community' give a researcher privileged access to the 'truth' of their researchees' lives. Bat-Ami Bar On (1993), for example, suggests that epistemic privilege is usually seen as a function of 'distance from the centre', which sets up competing claims for the most marginal, therefore 'privileged', experience (Bar On 1993:89). She argues that such claims to expertise on the basis of a privileged view of the world are a 'master's tool' (Bar On 1993:97), presumably as objectionable as all other claims to truth made by malestream research.

What points, then, am I making about my own researching of black and lesbian lives? Am I saying that it is simply okay for anyone, any man, to research black and lesbian women? Well no, I am not and, relatedly, I believe that the issue of

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participants' active choice is a crucial one here. I believe that it is ethically important for all subjects to have the choice to participate in research or not. Barbara, Nita and Clare chose to participate in my research because they trusted me as a researcher and knew something of my views regarding gender, sexuality and race. Nor am I saying that my account is more 'authentic' simply because I am gay. It is my version of their experiences that forms the research text, and this would have been very different if it had been done by a lesbian researcher, a black researcher, a woman researcher.

The point made by Stanley (1992a) here about ontological difference is important. Thus I do not share a lesbian or black or women's ontology, because these are *"different way[s] of being in the world...rooted in the facts of oppression."* (Stanley 1992a:253). In that sense, then, I can research lesbian and/or black women's lives, but cannot claim to represent the 'truth' of their experience, but then I would not do so anyway because that is naively realist. Lesbian and/or black women researchers might produce preferable accounts or reject mine based upon their experiences.

Thus stand*points* exist, but they do not have epistemic privilege over one another, and therefore my point is that researchers cannot claim such privilege via 'matching'. As I have shown, with regard to race, gender and sexuality, one response to the notion of epistemic privilege is to take the position that one should only attempt to represent the lives of subjects similar to oneself, or even

only to speak for oneself and no-one else, a position taken by Joyce Treblicot (1988:3; 1994).

As a researcher I chose to speak about and theorize the experiences of 'others', but I do not claim that I am speaking *for* them. This I cannot do, for the research is contextually and situationally produced by me. I do not simply represent the reality of other people through my research because I cannot do that, and I do not think research does so. But then *all* research represents 'the other' (Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1996a) in some form; if the research has subjects, then such representation is occurring (Wolf 1992:12).

To return to my original question, then, I am making a political or ethical justification for my inclusion of in-depth interviewing with black and lesbian women in my research. First, my research is a large-scale study of the social work assessment of lesbians and gay men who apply to foster or adopt children. To leave out black and/or lesbian subjects would be, as Edwards (1990, 1996) has noted, ethically objectionable in itself. Second, I believe that the women in question - Nita, Clare and Barbara - chose to participate in the project, and I think that this was at least partly because they knew that my stance as a researcher was pro-feminist, but also analytical of race and sexuality as key dynamics of social processes.

More importantly I am not claiming that my inclusion of black and lesbian voices

is some kind of simple description of their authentic realities. Research is no easy representation of a foundational world, and I have not included them to 'spice up' an otherwise white project, or in order to claim that I have allowed black or lesbian voices 'to be heard' in my text. For it is not they who are speaking, it is me, a white gay man who is the researcher. Indeed it is always possible that they may produce their own preferable accounts of their experiences, and they certainly may object to mine.

Conclusion: A Palimpsest?

Longwood, Fla.

Aug. 20, 1934

Dear Dr. Boas,

I am full of tremors, lest you decide that you do not want to write the introduction to my "Mules and Men"...Mr. Lippincott likes the book very much and...wants a very readable book that the average reader can understand...So I hope that the unscientific matter that must be there for the sake of the average reader will not keep you from writing the introduction. It so happens that the conversations and incidents are true. But of course I never would have set them down for scientists to read... (Zora Neale Hurston, letter to Franz Boas of Columbia University anthropology department, Aug. 20 1934, from collection of the American

Philosophical Society Library; in Hemenway 1977:163-4).

Here I have been writing over my own writing, demonstrating the basis upon which the text - this thesis - has been constructed, but also showing that the social actors' own accounts have also been 'written over' by me. Text is a representation and, in terms of the subject matter of this thesis, that is also what fostering and adoption assessment reports are, a representation of the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay'. I have argued therefore that this text is both deconstructive and 'unreliable' in order to show that all research is fiction, a narrative, a form of storytelling, even 'big old lies' (Hurston 1935:8).

However, my argument is also that those researcher-narrators who absent themselves from texts, from their knowledge-claims, are far less trustworthy. Zora Neale Hurston's shapeshifting 'self' - that she bothered to present a narrating 'self' at all in a collection of black folklore - is at least more honest because we catch glimpses of her within the text of *Mules and Men* (Hurston 1935). If we have an awareness of the researcher within the text, then at least we, as readers, can interrogate them. I have argued that the 'self' is not fixed either in interviews, case studies and so on, or within the text. Instead research texts present multiple, shapeshifting selves, and the 'biggest lie' is to absent this self through notions of objectivity.

I have used the examples of the interview and the case study in order to show that my research data are recountings of events in which meaning is situationally-dependent and achieved (Parton *et al.* 1997). Thus interviews, for example, can and should be ethically conducted, but they do not represent the subject's 'own voice', nor does this remove inequalities from research relationships. Case studies, similarly, rely on the role of the auto/biographical in their construction, so are helpful in demonstrating that data are competing versions of social events.

I have argued for the adoption of a critical epistemological position that explicates the production and reproduction of research knowledge via work 'in the field' *and* 'in the text'. This also involves a specification of what counts for knowledge, and I have shown this via the examples of feminist and gay epistemologies. 'Scientific' research methods do not guarantee 'true' knowledge, but instead all knowledge or theorizing is experientially based and, also, contestable.

Indeed the language we use is itself a constructor and giver of meaning, rather than a neutral descriptor (Derrida 1976; Weedon 1987). It was Derrida's assertion that 'speech' is no more authentic than 'writing' (Derrida 1976) but this logocentric notion is frequently employed by researchers when they make claims that they are presenting the 'real speaking voices' of their subjects, or the 'experiences of the oppressed' or the 'hidden voices of the little-researched' and so on. Instead I have shown that the notion of epistemic privilege does not give

researchers easy or 'better' access to the 'truth' of their subjects' lives.

Rather our research texts re-write social actors' experiences; we write over these like a palimpsest, not totally erasing the trace of the voices of our subjects, but nevertheless very much re-presenting them. Further, epistemologies of the oppressed have indicated that we must account for how we have produced the knowledge which we call 'research', for ultimately this text is *my* version of the data. But at least a deconstructive text allows 'you', the reader, to disrupt the idea that what I write is 'truth'. Perhaps, instead, the question you should ask yourself is this: *"How shall I ever find the grains of truth embedded in all this mass of paper?"* (Woolf 1928:28).

Chapter 4

The Social Work Assessment of Lesbian and Gay Carers: introducing data from the research study

This chapter introduces my analysis of the data from the social worker cohort, and is concerned to discuss what I argue to be evidence of 'discrimination' against lesbian and gay applicants in the assessment process. It is divided into five sections, and in the first I present evidence of a range of assessment practices, using the concept of a continuum in order to show how the social workers went about assessing lesbians and gay men. In section two I identify what I consider to be the key factors influencing the outcome of such assessments; that is, whether there are significant themes arising from the data set which indicate a 'likelihood' that lesbian or gay applicants will be treated 'on merit'. Section three goes on to discuss the view that assessments of lesbians and gay men are governed by a series of everyday 'myths', explaining why I am unhappy with such a view, and then examining how the social workers constructed the idea of 'risks' posed to children by lesbians and gay men. Here I employ Dorothy Smith's 'everyday world as problematic' (Smith 1987) in order to make sense of the work involved in socially accomplishing the discourse of what I have called 'the good carer.'

In the fourth section I argue that my research has uncovered evidence of

assessment practices which are 'disadvantageous' on the basis of a lesbian or gay sexuality. I shall explain what I mean by this, before going on to analyze evidence from my interview data. I look at how the social workers handled questions about sexuality, and at the debate about whether lesbians and gay men should be asked "the same questions" as everyone else in assessments. The final section pays significant attention to those social workers whom I interpret as attempting to 'make a difference'; social workers who were keen to develop what they saw as 'anti-discriminatory' assessment practices with lesbians and gay men. This involves, perhaps most importantly, analysis of what is meant by 'anti-discriminatory' *and* 'anti-oppressive practice' in relation to lesbians and gay men (Appleby & Anastas 1998; Brown 1998; Burke & Harrison 1998; Dalrymple & Burke 1995; Dominelli 1998; Hidalgo *et al.* 1985; Logan *et al.* 1996; Thompson 1993, 1997).

SECTION ONE: The Assessment Process

Most, but by no means all, social work agencies employ the assessment structure, or at least a variation upon this, provided in *Form F: Information on Prospective Substitute Parent(s)* (BAAF 1991) for the purposes of the 'home study' of foster or adoptive applicants (Campion 1995:47). Both social workers and applicants therefore commonly use the phrase "Form F", and this has given rise to the idea that there exists a standard assessment practice which ought to be followed in all cases. Indeed, Form F itself says that it was *"designed to*

*provide fostering and adoption agencies with **a standard way** of collecting and presenting information about prospective substitute parents."* (BAAF 1991:1, my emphasis).

In investigating whether lesbians and gay men are 'discriminated against' in the assessment process, then, the most commonly held assumption would be that they should be tested against the 'standard' model: Are lesbians and gay men treated 'the same as' or 'differently to' heterosexuals? However, this poses serious problems since it is my contention that there is **no** standard assessment. Assessments are likely to cover broadly similar areas, but each and every one differs, not least in the ways that they are structured as a whole, and the place that the home study occupies, but also because each person being assessed presents new information which has to be interpreted by the social worker.

Little attention has been paid to the role of assessment in social work practice, but where it has been discussed, the 'standard model' approach prevails. This tends to construct assessment not as a practice or process, but merely as a set of key tasks, common sources of information and areas that ought to be covered (Coulshed 1988; Curnock & Hardiker 1979). What this completely ignores, then, is the role that 'making sense' of information plays in assessment, which is what I am arguing that all social workers do. Commenting on traditional views of assessment, Judith Milner and Patrick O'Byrne argue that there are *"only too many linear, prescriptive and stylised assessment formats that come nowhere*

near meeting the complexities, uncertainties and ambiguities of current social

work practice." (Milner & O'Byrne 1998:3).

Milner and O'Byrne go on to discuss the work of Smale & Tuson (1993), who

identified three key models of assessment; the questioning model, where the

social worker processes answers, and the agenda is worker-led; the procedural

model, where the agenda is led by agency function and checklists are used; and

the exchange model, where people being assessed are also viewed as experts

on their problems, and the emphasis is upon exchanging information rather than

interpreting (Milner & O'Byrne 1998:29). All these writers favour the 'exchange

model', and yet there is a key problem here which is the suggestion that social

workers *do not interpret information*. I am arguing absolutely against this view, for

I see all assessments as *constructions* or *'versions of the world'* that are formed

via the interpretations of social workers.

Milner and O'Byrne do acknowledge this dilemma, however, because they note

that there *"can never be a truly neutral perspective"* (Milner & O'Byrne 1998:30),

and they later suggest:

> *Assessments have to be more like qualitative than quantitative*
>
> *studies, and be 'making sense' activities rather than ones*
>
> *clinging to naive realist epistemologies. Influenced by*
>
> *postmodern perspectives, we believe that no single theory can*

fully tell the truth and that there is anyway a plurality of truths.

(Milner & O'Byrne 1998:47).

It is just this 'making sense activity' which I have investigated in this thesis, for I am arguing that the social workers made sense of the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay' when considering foster or adoptive applicants, and, further, that they did this throughout the whole assessment process. The social workers theorized what 'lesbian' or 'gay' meant, in relation to the care of children, in advance of and during the home study part of the assessment, and they constructed a version of such categories in their later textual and discursive representations. Thus Milner and O'Byrne do acknowledge that *"the particular theoretical approach that a social worker implicitly holds, or selects, influences the questions asked when reaching for depth of understanding."* (Milner & O'Byrne 1998:51-52).

I shall be arguing this throughout the thesis, but in addition I shall argue that the way that social workers theorize the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay' takes place within existing and available discourses of sexuality (Mills 1997). That is, views of sexuality are not freely constructed but are at least partly governed by prevailing cultural beliefs, some of which are discussed in this chapter in relation to lesbians and gay men (see section three).
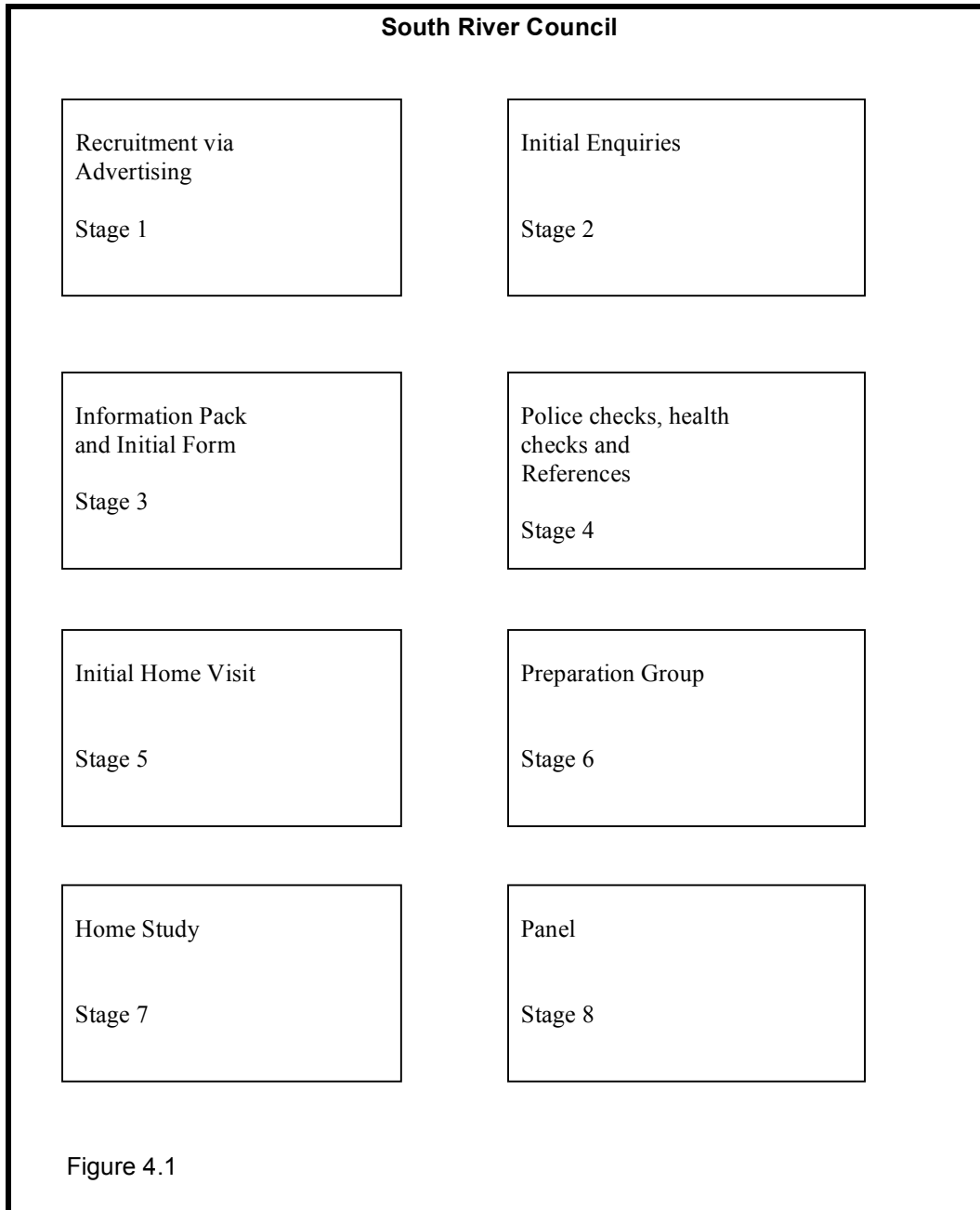
Such beliefs also inhere in assessment processes designed to construct the 'good enough carer of children' in fostering and adoption, and I shall argue that

this rests upon ideas of 'heteronormativity'. Thus within social work there is a prevailing, and heteronormative, discourse concerning the 'good carer' which also allows for what can and cannot legitimately be said about the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay'. Where we have views of assessment as needing to be an 'equal playing field', or being concerned only with equal opportunities - what Milner & O'Byrne argue should be *"equal access to resources"* (1998:65) - then such analyses ignore the operations of power going on within social work-ing. This constructs a liberal view of assessment, in which lesbians and gay men should be treated 'the same' and are expected to fit into existing structures. No account is taken of how being lesbian or gay may actually disadvantage applicants within an assessment process used to work with heterosexuals.

Assessment Approaches

I wanted to look for the range of assessment approaches employed by the social workers when assessing lesbians and gay men, and so I began by asking them questions about the process itself. What were the different stages of assessment as a whole that had to be negotiated by applicants? Where did the home study fit into the assessment process? I found that, although similar, the assessment process varied between the three authorities in question. In South River Council, the home study occupied stage seven of an eight-stage process. North River Council, however, had a nine-stage assessment process, in which the home study occupied stage eight. In the North Eastern Council, the process was more

lengthy, with eleven stages of which the home study was stage ten (Figures 4.1 -

4.3) :

South River Council

Recruitment via Advertising Stage 1	Initial Enquiries Stage 2
Information Pack and Initial Form Stage 3	Police checks, health checks and References Stage 4
Initial Home Visit Stage 5	Preparation Group Stage 6
Home Study Stage 7	Panel Stage 8

Figure 4.1

North River Council

Recruitment via Advertising Stage 1	Initial Enquiries Stage 2
Basic Information Form completed Stage 3	Allocation to a particular social work team Stage 4
Initial Home Visit Stage 5	Preparation Group Stage 6
Basic checks and References Stage 7	Home Study Stage 8
Panel Stage 9	

Figure 4.2

North Eastern Council

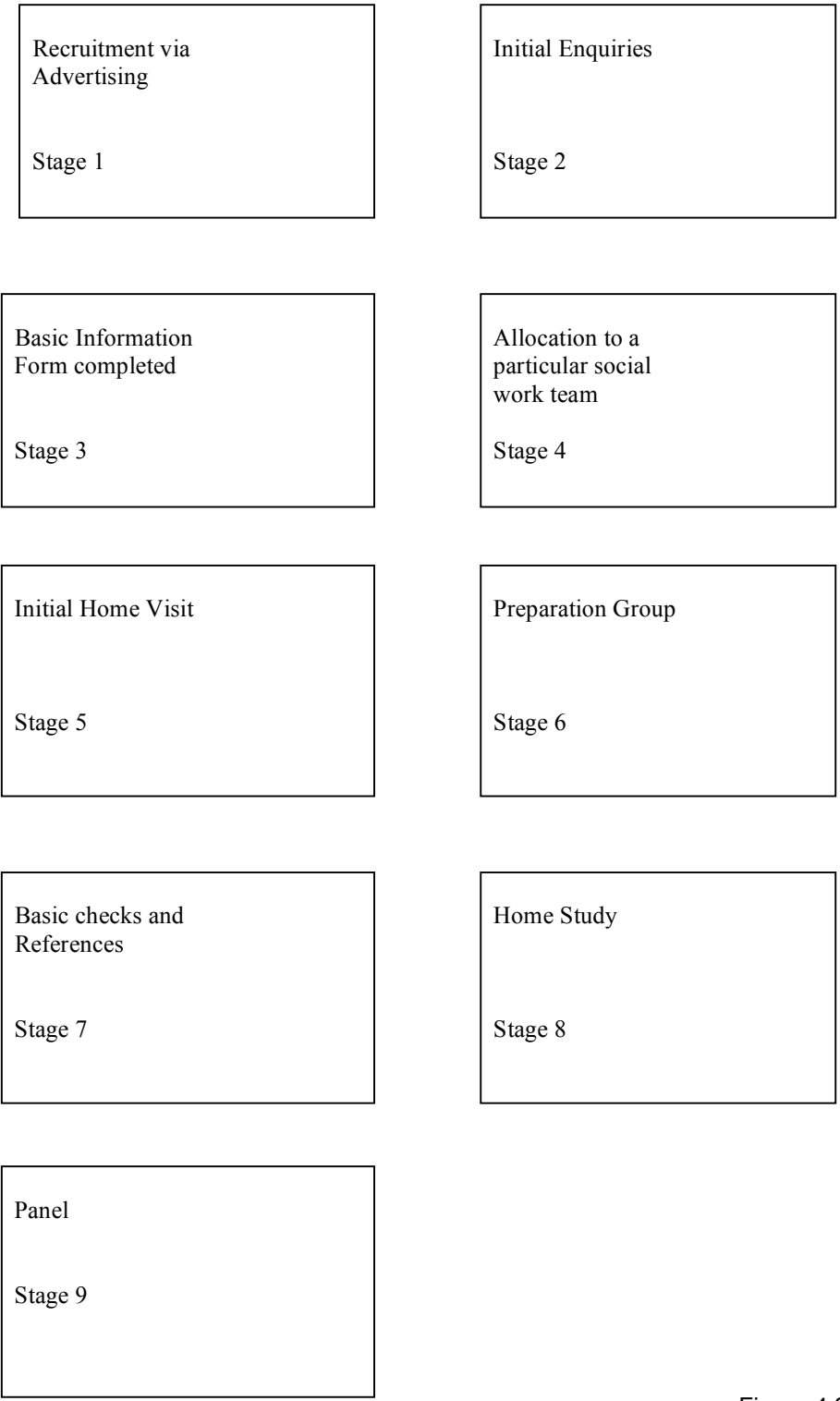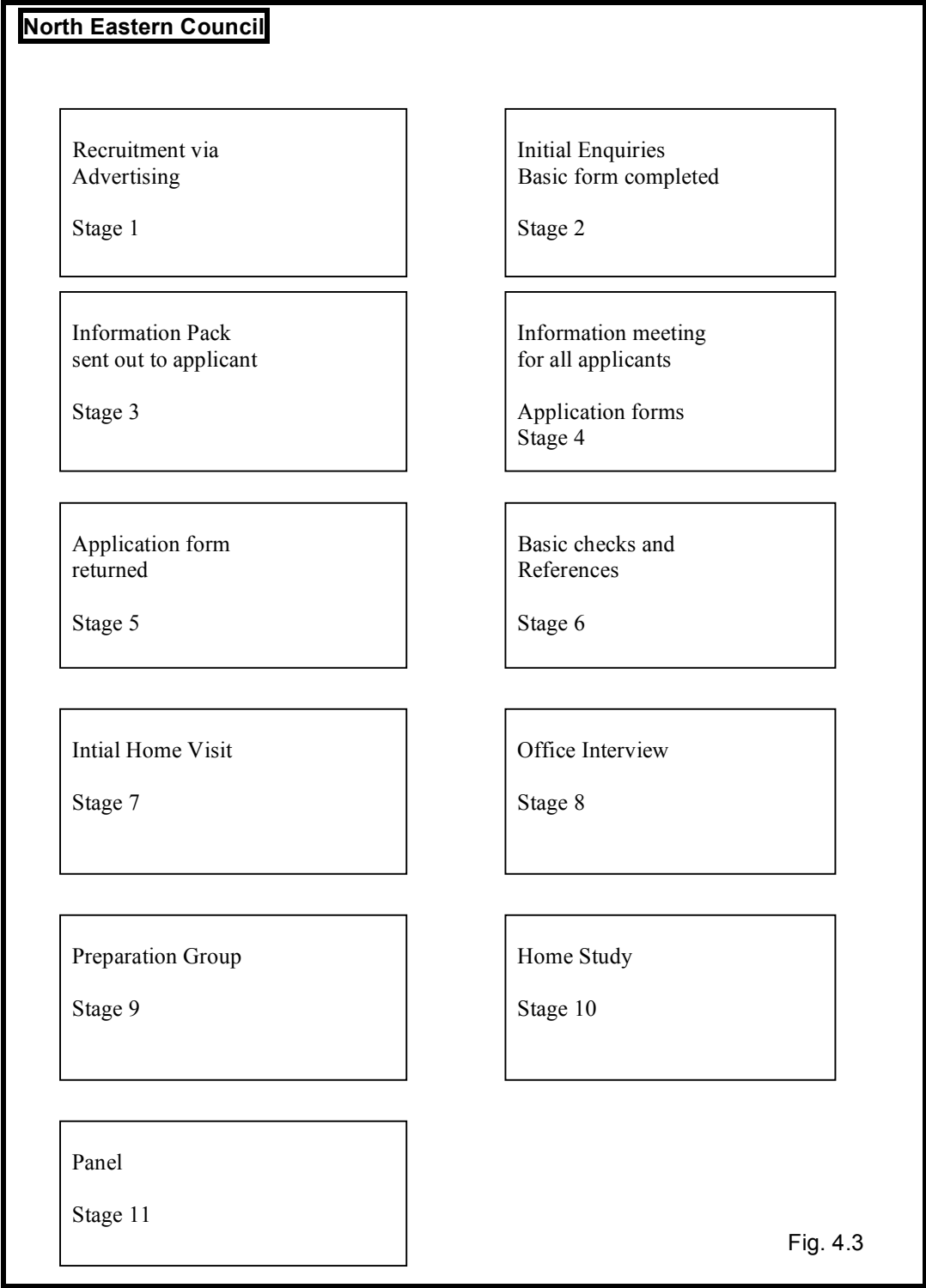|	
Recruitment via Advertising Stage 1	Initial Enquiries Basic form completed Stage 2
Information Pack sent out to applicant Stage 3	Information meeting for all applicants Application forms Stage 4
Application form returned Stage 5	Basic checks and References Stage 6
Intial Home Visit Stage 7	Office Interview Stage 8
Preparation Group Stage 9	Home Study Stage 10
Panel Stage 11	

Fig. 4.3

Thus I found a marked difference across social work agencies in terms of the

assessment process as a whole. I found, for example, that both North River

Council and North Eastern Council placed far more emphasis upon the role of the preparation group in assessing applicants than did the South River Council. We cannot, therefore, assume a 'standard' way of assessing applicants across different agencies in terms of process.

Before going on to look at how these agencies handled the issues raised by lesbian or gay applicants, I also asked the social workers about Form F (BAAF 1991). I found that most used Form F as a basis for their assessments, but none stuck to it rigidly. South River Council were only just starting to use Form F at the time that I was interviewing social workers there (October 1994), and before this had been using a locally designed format. As I have already said, this did not surprise me for it was not my view that assessments are ever 'standard'; instead I expected social workers to differ in the ways that they carried these out.

Looking at Form F itself (BAAF 1991), there is anyway some contradictory advice in this respect. As I have noted, it suggests a "standard way" of collecting information (BAAF 1991:1), and also goes on to argue that Part 1 of the form "comprises **factual** information" while part 2 "contains guidelines for writing a **descriptive** report" (BAAF 1991:1, my emphases). Both of these - fact-gathering and description - deny the 'making sense' role of the assessor. Later, however, social workers are warned to *"examine the basis of their own value systems so that their own agendas do not impinge on those of the families they are preparing...Stereotyped notions of the ideal family should be examined critically.*

A particular type of family structure does not guarantee parenting skills or parenting capacity." (BAAF 1991:2). Whilst this does begin to recognize the role of the assessor's 'values' in assessing, nevertheless this also suggests that these should be held in check and that assessment ought to be an objective, fair, but *not an interpreting* activity.

In looking at the particular dynamics that arose for the social workers in assessing lesbians or gay men, I found that three key areas were consistently mentioned and discussed; the idea of treating applicants 'on merit', the role of local authority policies of equality of opportunity, and the relative importance to the social workers of a policy specific to lesbian and gay fostering and adoption.

'On Merit'

> *The "policy" as such, although it's unwritten so it's more of a general view, and also the practice around it, is that any person or persons who approach the agency as a gay or lesbian person would be taken on merit...There is no "policy against...", and in fact they should be considered like any other family.* [Social Worker, NR4[8]].

---

[8] Codes refer to data as follows: 'SR' = South River Council, 'NR' = North River Council, and 'NE' = North Eastern Council. Numbers are used to distinguish between respondents. 'NR4' therefore refers to the fourth respondent in the North River Council.

The social workers frequently spoke to me about taking an 'on merit' approach to assessing lesbians and gay men. This approach usually suggests that sexuality itself is no determinant of the ability to care for children, and so lesbian or gay applicants ought to be given the chance to be assessed like anyone else. This approach also suggests that child care abilities are the most important factor in carrying out assessments and that, in theory, lesbians and gay men are no more or less likely to be able to demonstrate these than any other applicants. Up to a point, this approach is fair enough since it acknowledges that sexuality in itself does not determine parenting ability (Patterson 1992), and it is an approach commonly raised in defence of lesbian and gay applicants. My argument, however, is that the 'on merit' approach rests on the idea of treating lesbians and gay men "the same" as everyone else, and that it therefore carries with it a number of problems for such applicants.

Thus 'on merit' tends to be ill-defined, or poorly thought-through, so that 'we treat lesbians and gay men on their merits' is frequently stated but rarely specified. As I shall later argue, a key question here is 'the same as what...?'
Therefore the phrase 'on merit' actually glosses a whole range of approaches (see the continuum model below). It operates a 'sameness' model of equality, in which lesbians and gay men are expected to be treated the same as heterosexual applicants and to demonstrate the same skills (see section four), and so downplays a lesbian or gay sexuality, seeing this as *secondary to* child care skills, and sometimes as unimportant. Thus the phrase *'irrespective of*

sexuality...' can actually mean a denial of the importance of sexuality to

applicants and to the assessment process. Further, 'on merit' is usually a reactive

model to sexuality, and by this I mean that lesbian and gay issues tend not to be

thought about unless they arise with a specific applicant.

'We don't have a policy on this...'

I asked the social workers about questions of agency policy regarding lesbian

and gay fostering and adoption. Parallel research regarding the placement of

black children with black carers has found that some local authorities had

developed policies specific to this issue (Barn 1993; Rhodes 1992). Whilst

'having a policy' is no guarantee of good, or indeed anti-oppressive, practice

within fostering and adoption units or on the part of social workers, Rhodes

argues that sustained political changes in social work practice are difficult to

sustain without policy back-up:

> *Although the link between policy and practice may be fuzzy and*
>
> *change may occur in the absence of a policy initiative, it is,*
>
> *nevertheless, unlikely that it will be sustained without some form*
>
> *of policy directive.* (Rhodes 1992:83).

Many of the social workers who spoke to me supported this view in relation to

assessing lesbian or gay applicants. Primarily they felt that, in the absence of

any agency policy, were they to argue for the approval of lesbians or gay men as carers, then as individual social workers they would be "sticking their necks out", open to a whole range of criticisms should anything go wrong or should the press get hold of such information.

On the issue of 'policy' I found two significant themes; none of the agencies had a policy specific to lesbian and gay foster or adoptive carers, and all of the social workers referred me instead to their local authority statements of equal opportunities. This confirms my argument that the relationship between social work policy and practice is both a complex and dynamic one; the social workers who were practising in the most 'anti-oppressive' ways regarding lesbian and gay applicants were doing so in the absence of any specific policy, but, relatedly, even where agencies had stated policies of equal opportunity this did not prevent examples of what I will argue are 'discriminatory' practices. To suggest that there are "good" agencies which, having stated commitments to challenging discrimination against lesbians and gay men, therefore do not 'discriminate' is unhelpful. Similarly, to suggest that "bad" agencies are those with no policy does not account for the complexity of practice situations where individual social workers may be 'doing' anti-oppressive practice regarding lesbian or gay applicants. That is why I have argued against the 'good and bad authorities' approach to this issue throughout the thesis.

All of the authorities that I visited had statements of equal opportunities, and the

social workers regularly referred to these. They also linked equality of opportunity to the 'on merit' approach to assessment. Nevertheless, I found different degrees of commitment to equal opportunities. At one extreme was a feeling that it was 'imposed "right-on"-ness' with which the social worker did not agree:

> *Their stated policy is equal opportunities, and once you've said that you can't very well renege on it because somebody is something 'different'...Whether I agree with it or not is, at the moment, beside the point because you're asking me about [local authority].* [Social Worker, SR1].

At the other end of the spectrum, some of the social workers felt that statements of equal opportunities guaranteed absolutely nothing since they were not enforcible:

> *If the department says, "Yes we will deal with everyone equally and fairly," then I think we should actually do that and not just say 'No' to people. I've said that the department is not putting its money where its mouth is, because it made no sense even encouraging gay people to apply if ultimately we will find some reason not to actually take it any further than their enquiry. But I was reminded very forcefully that I am obliged to do what the*

department says, but I wasn't happy because I think it's just

hypocrisy. I'd rather not assess people who've actually said they

are gay if we're then going to find some reason not to approve

them. I don't think that [local authority] is necessarily as

progressive as it appears to be. [Social Worker, NR10].

Interestingly I found that those social workers who were the most cynical about

relying upon a notion of equal opportunities were those most committed to

attempting anti-oppressive practice. The black women and lesbian social

workers who spoke to me, comprising two groups of five out of the twenty-eight

in the cohort, were particularly critical of equal opportunities which they largely

saw as a liberal equality approach. They drew upon their own experiences, and

upon practice examples of taking black women, lesbian and gay applicants to

panels, in order to explain to me how much harder it was for such applicants to

gain approval as foster or adoptive carers. They clearly argued that lesbian, gay

and/or black applicants had to 'jump through more hoops' in the assessment

process. I argue that this is because, in a liberal equality approach, black,

lesbian and gay applicants are constructed as "other" to, and having to match up

to, a white heterosexual 'norm' (Mac an Ghaill 1989).

None of the authorities in question had formal policies on fostering and adoption

by lesbians and gay men. All of the social workers referred to this, and, whilst I

accept that such policies may exist, I have yet to come across an authority with

one which has been formally ratified by a social services committee. This remains a contentious area of social work practice, and in one example, which hit press headlines, Hampshire County Council decided not to exclude lesbian or gay applicants from the fostering process but were clear that *"any application to become a foster carer, including by gay or lesbian people, should be considered on an individual basis and on its merits, concentrating exclusively on the interests of the child."* (Community Care 1993:2). I did find evidence of moves, particularly by lesbian and gay workers, to 'work up' policies on lesbian and gay fostering and adoption, but none had been as yet successful. I discuss such attempts in section five.

Models of Assessment

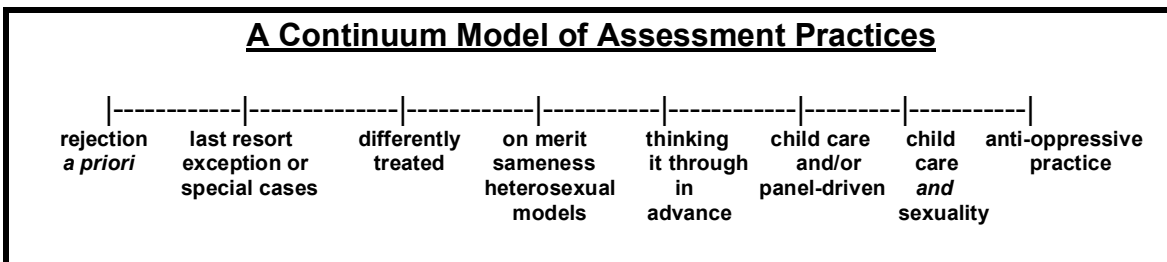| A Continuum Model of Assessment Practices							
rejection *a priori*	last resort exception or special cases	differently treated	on merit sameness heterosexual models	thinking it through in advance	child care and/or panel-driven	child care *and* sexuality	anti-oppressive practice

Figure 4.4

I have interpreted a range of models of assessment from the social worker data, which is represented in the form of a continuum at Figure 4.4. My argument is, therefore, that the social workers assessed lesbian and gay applicants in a whole range of ways and that these have different implications for the potential for 'discrimination'. Reading from left to right, the models are as follows:

Not 'on merit' Categories:

- **rejection *a priori*** - here no actual Form F assessment occurs, since a lesbian or gay sexuality has already been assessed to be incompatible with the 'good carer' or the ability to care for children. All lesbian or gay applicants are rejected outright on the basis of their sexuality alone. None of the agencies in question had such a 'policy', but I did find evidence of (i) lesbians or gay men being prevented from being assessed by 'unstated' positions taken by teams that they would be unsuitable, and (ii) statements that adoption panels, in particular, would be so unlikely to approve lesbian or gay applicants that social workers felt it was not worth pursuing such assessments. Policies which reject all lesbian or gay applicants outright do exist, however, as in the case of Bromley Council (Waugh 1997).

- **the 'last resort'** - this position suggests that lesbians and gay men are generally the least suitable carers of children, but they can be used as a 'last resort' (Hicks 1996), as was emphasized in the adoption law review (DoH/ Welsh Office 1992). Here lesbians and gay men are assessed, but their sexuality is viewed as a problem and therefore unsuitable for most children. However, in special or exceptional circumstances, lesbians and gay men can be used as carers, and this is usually where the children or young people being placed are viewed as 'hard to place' due to their being disabled and/or having learning difficulties, behavioural or emotional problems. This model is frequently commented upon by lesbian and gay carers themselves, who feel

that it operates a "second-class citizens get second-class children" dynamic (Hicks & McDermott 1999).

- **'differently treated'** - this model of assessment makes no claims to treat lesbian or gay applicants 'on merit', or to treat them 'the same' as heterosexual applicants for the purposes of the assessment. Instead, they are expected to 'jump through a series of extra hoops' which are applied to them only because of their sexuality. Examples would include having to undergo psychiatric assessment (Smart 1991) or taking applications to panels for approval to go ahead with an assessment (that is, in advance of any assessment having occurred), reported to me by a social worker on an adoption team. Nevertheless, different treatment can, and does, have both negative *and positive* outcomes for lesbian and gay applicants and this is discussed in section four.

'On merit' categories:

- **the 'on merit' model** - this model has been previously described, but I also found that the social workers tended, therefore, to apply ideas and concepts relating to heterosexual applicants to lesbians and gay men, and that is because it is based upon the idea of treating everyone "the same". For example, the notion that lesbian adoptive applicants *must be* childless, infertile, and therefore coming to adoption as a 'second-best choice'. When I pointed out to one social worker on an adoption team that lesbian applicants might come to adoption as a first choice, she responded by telling me that she

would expect to assess their progress in 'coming to terms with the loss of not having a biological child' and would be looking for applicants who were 'resolved with this issue' [Social Worker, SR5].

- **"thinking it through" versus "just see how it goes"...** - some of the social workers, who were operating various forms of the 'on merit' categories, told me that they would pay attention to the issues of sexuality in advance of commencing an assessment of lesbian or gay applicants. They said they would 'think it through': *"I would have sat down and worked out the things that I would want to cover with them, you see..."* [Social Worker, NR4]. This was in contrast to the position adopted by other workers which might be summed up by the phrase 'just see how it goes...' Here, the social workers told me that they would deal with the issues of sexuality as and when they arose in the 'home study' assessment itself: *"I tend to kind of wait and see what I've got when I go to see them, and I tend to do that in all my work...I think I've got an awareness of the issues but perhaps I just go blindly into things and then think, 'Oh that's interesting,' but I could make better use of my time to actively think about it..."* [Social Worker, SR7].

- **prioritizing 'child care'** - this model of assessment sees child care skills, or the assessed ability to look after children, as constituting the main focus of the assessment and the most important factor in the likelihood of carers being approved. This is the standard 'equality' approach to assessment (see, for example, UK Joint Working Party on Foster Care 1998:21). It prioritizes child care abilities over sexuality, and it was the argument most frequently used by

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those social workers who took an 'on merit' approach to applications by lesbians and gay men. Sexuality is seen as no determinant of the ability to care for children, which it is not (Patterson 1992), and therefore sexuality is sometimes here seen as unimportant or not to matter: *"I'm quite clear that we should be looking at a person's parenting capabilities and their caring capacity, and not looking at their sexuality."* [Senior Social Worker, SR3]. Sometimes here I found the social workers emphasized the issue of meeting children's needs over and above those of adults, and there was an attendant suspicion on the part of some workers that lesbian and gay applicants were applying to meet their own needs and not those of children: *"I do have to keep reminding people that we are child centred and we do not offer a service to adults, we offer a service to children...so I don't want to 'recruit carers from the lesbian and gay community' because I don't want to make them into a special case. I'm not looking to recruit from them, I'm looking to recruit people who can look after children regardless of their lifestyle or sexual orientation."* [Team Manager, Fostering, NR9]. I also found that the social workers who prioritized child care often told me that this was because lesbian and gay applicants would not be approved by panels unless they did so. Thus assessments became panel-driven in focus, with the social worker covering what they anticipated would be the questions that would be raised by the panel. One of the lesbian social workers, Annie, was very critical of this and yet she understood the role of the social worker in constructing a particular version of the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay' for panels: *"I had to try to work out what I*

thought the panel would ask me about this lesbian couple, and it would have been pointless me taking a report to the panel unless I was happy that I'd done so. Basically **you have to represent applicants' thoughts and feelings in a way that suits the panel**.*"* [Social Worker, NE10, my emphasis].

- **child care *and* sexuality** - this model was less commonly argued by the social workers, but I found it was raised by nearly all of the lesbians who spoke to me. It argues that both child care skills and sexuality should be key areas of any assessment of lesbian or gay applicants, but that both of these should be seen as a part of the whole. Sexuality must be addressed but should not be allowed to dominate the assessment to the exclusion of all else, a criticism commonly lodged by lesbian and gay applicants themselves (Hicks 1996). What this model also takes on board is that assessing lesbians' and gay men's child care abilities is important, but assessments also need to address questions of their sexuality, a theme that I have developed in my discussion in chapter six.

- **anti-oppressive practice** - this position was the least evident of all the models in my research, and I was not surpised by this. 'Anti-oppressive' practice is by no means an agreed social work concept and it is discussed in section five. An anti-oppressive model of assessment would look at homophobia, racism, and sexism as they impact upon lesbian or gay applicants, and would consider how the notion of the 'good carer of children' is constructed via traditional views of race, gender and sexuality. It would, most importantly, examine the theoretical assumptions about sexuality upon which

the assessment is based. It would see child care and sexuality as key to any assessment, but would also take account of how the assessment process, which has been traditionally constructed to assess white heterosexual couples, disadvantages lesbian and gay applicants. Examples here would include: how do preparation groups disadvantage lesbians and gay men, often the only ones in an otherwise heterosexual group setting? how do questions about infertility and childlessness, or links with biological family actually rest on heteronormative assumptions? or, why are lesbians and gay men expected to prove that their sexuality is not a 'risk' to children in ways that heterosexuals are not?

SECTION TWO: Key Themes Across the Data Set

Here I identify the most significant factors, arising from the data set as a whole, which were likely to indicate that agencies, and individual social workers, were attempting to treat lesbian and gay applications 'on merit'. I looked for the key factors that seemed to influence the social workers to assess lesbians and gay men more positively, and I did this by constructing comparative tables for each authority. The table for the South River Council is given below as an example:

Key Themes: South River Council

	Policy	Experience of...	Team	Research	Training	Values	Lesbian or gay?
SR1	On merit Equal Opps	None	Not raised	Not aware	CQSW and PQ None	Liberal Double burden	No
SR2	On merit etc	Gay couple and lesbian	Raised rarely in adoption	Not raised	CQSW some, PQ none	Anti-opp Positive Black issues	No, but knows gay people
SR3	On merit etc	She has approved cases	Tends to be avoided	Own exper-ience	PQ - 2 day course	Anti-opp but child care focus	Lesbian mother
SR4	On merit etc	None but research on this	Raised rarely and negative	Read and quotes from research	CQSW yes; PQ - 2 day course	Anti-opp Positive	No, but knows gay people
SR5	On merit etc	None	Some discu-ssion in adoption	Not raised	PQ - 2 day course	Liberal but child's needs	No
SR6	On merit etc	None	Some	Not raised	Not CQSW, PQ - 2 day	Positive but not about male carers	No
SR7	On merit etc	Current lesbian couple asst.	Some	Hasn't seen any resea-rch	PQ - 2 day course	Positive Feminist Worried about male carers	No, but knows gay people

Figure 4.5

In analysing the data, I looked for key themes which related to the 'stance' taken

by any team and individuals, and might best be described as the practice context

within which the social workers were conducting their assessments. Here, then, I

looked for the policy position taken by the authority, whether the social worker

had experiences of assessing lesbians or gay men, whether the team raised and

discussed this issue (or 'took a position'), and whether the social workers knew of

existing research in this area. In addition, I also looked for individual

understandings of categories such as 'lesbian' or 'gay' and personal commitment

to issues of anti-oppressive practice. Here I looked for any training on lesbian and gay issues undertaken by the social workers during, or post-qualifying, values statements made by them about lesbian or gay carers, and whether they were themselves lesbian or gay, or lesbian and gay-'friendly'.

Key Themes from the data: Practice Issues

- **policy** - the public stance taken by the authority affected both the likelihood that lesbians and gay men would apply to that agency in the first place, and also whether the social workers to adhered to the concept of 'fair' assessments for all. None of the agencies had a policy on lesbians and gay men as carers, but all had equal opportunities statements to which the social workers referred. The social workers told me that equal opportunities statements which explicitly mentioned sexuality (or 'sexual orientation') were important in attracting enquiries and applications from lesbians and gay men. All of the twenty-eight interviewees in the cohort told me that their agency adopted an 'on merit' approach to lesbian and gay applicants, despite my arguments that individuals used different approaches in carrying out assessments. Even where social workers did not approve of lesbian and gay carers, they were reminded by equal opportunities statements that they ought to treat them 'fairly'.

- **experience of such applications** - whether a fostering or adoption team, and indeed an individual social worker, had previous experience of handling applications by lesbians or gay men was another significant factor, and in this I

found great variation within and across agencies. In South River Council, four out of seven respondents had no experience of assessing lesbians or gay men, although one of these four had been researching this issue herself. Of the remaining three, two had previously assessed lesbians and gay men but in former jobs, and one was currently assessing a lesbian couple for respite foster care when I visited. In North River Council, four of the eleven respondents had some past experiences of assessing lesbian and gay carers. In the North Eastern Council, three out of ten workers had practice experience of assessing lesbian or gay applicants. I did find, however, that others had experiences of acting as a support or link worker to approved lesbian or gay carers. Those social workers with previous experience of working with lesbian and gay carers were far more conversant with the issues involved in carrying out such assessments and were far clearer on the kinds of questions they felt needed to be addressed with such applicants. They also had more confidence in their ability to take such assessment reports to a panel. A panel which had never considered an application by lesbians or gay men was seen by all the social workers to be a major stumbling block to approval, and this particularly applied to the adoption panels in all three authorities.

- **team 'culture'** - the stance adopted by particular teams, including whether lesbian and gay fostering and adoption was actively discussed and debated, was also significant. I found that adoption teams were far less likely to have approved lesbians or gay men, far more likely to have incorporated more 'discriminatory' arguments about lesbian or gay applicants, and adoption

workers were far less likely to agree to speak with me for the purposes of my research. This does not mean that all adoption social workers were 'discriminatory', and some actively opposed what they saw as prejudice within their teams. Fostering teams were generally more likely to have debated and discussed lesbians and gay men as potential carers, but often only where specific applications had been made. In South River Council, six of the seven workers told me that lesbian and gay carers were rarely discussed amongst team members and one worker said it had never been discussed in her experience. In North River Council, there had been some discussion of the issues in the fostering teams especially as these had two gay male couples and a lesbian single carer on their books. The adoption team rarely discussed these issues and one worker felt any discussions had been particularly homophobic. In the North Eastern Council, one fostering team regularly discussed the issues, and this was at least largely due to the presence of lesbian social workers on the team. There had also been a 'lesbian and gay issues working party' which had actively raised the topic for debate amongst all teams. All the teams had discussed the topic at some point and so the social workers were far more conversant with current debates about areas for assessment.

- **the relevance of research** - some of the social workers were aware of key areas of research knowledge which they used to counter arguments made against the suitability of lesbians and gay men to care for children. These were especially to do with existing knowledge concerning the 'effects' of lesbian or

gay parents upon children and concerning the gender and sexuality of known child abusers. In South River Council, one of the social workers had read research on the psychosocial development of children of lesbians and gay men, and used this to counter perceived risks to such children. Another worker told me that she was not aware of research, but used her own experiences as a lesbian mother to help construct her arguments. In North River Council, research was only mentioned by three workers, two of whom referred to figures regarding sexual abuse in order to argue that children were most at risk from known heterosexual men. Another worker had detailed knowledge of the Tasker & Golombok (1997) studies (discussed in chapter two) and used these to counter perceived risks to children. In the North Eastern Council, six of the ten workers mentioned figures regarding sexual abuse but none had knowledge of research on the children of lesbians and gay men. I found, most significantly, that the social workers were unlikely to be aware of existing research studies concerning the children of lesbians and gay men (e.g., Patterson 1992).

Key Themes from the data: Understandings of 'lesbian' or 'gay'

- **training** - I asked the social workers whether they had experienced any pre- or post-qualification training which looked at lesbian and gay issues as a whole, or which was directly concerned with lesbians and gay men as carers. In South River Council, the entire unit had recently undergone some training about lesbian and gay issues in fostering and adoption by a voluntary training

agency, a rare event indeed. This, however, had been at the request of one of

the social workers who had been researching this issue herself and had

become increasingly concerned by what she perceived to be homophobic

ideas suggested by some of her colleagues. Two of the seven workers told me

that their social work qualification courses had covered some aspects of

lesbian and gay issues, and five had attended the recent post-qualifying

training event. Otherwise there had been no training on this issue for workers.

In North River Council, one social worker out of eleven remembered covering

lesbian and gay issues in his social work qualifying course, and one other had

received some training post-qualification. None of the other social workers had

done any training covering lesbian and gay issues. When I spoke to the

Equalities Officer for North River Council, she told me that she was keen to

develop such training programmes, but, when I put this to the Children's Care

Services Manager, she told me that she did not consider this to be a priority

for fostering and adoption workers. She felt that training on issues of child

protection was far more pressing, but she did feel that some general equalities

issues training might be appropriate for the fostering and adoption panels. In

the North Eastern Council, none of the ten social workers had covered lesbian

and gay issues as a part of their qualifying courses, and none had received

any such training post-qualification.

- **'values' / 'making sense' of 'lesbian' and 'gay'** - I have interpreted a whole

range of 'values'-positions amongst the social workers concerning how they

made sense of the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay' in relation to the potential to

care for children. In South River Council, two of the seven workers took

ostensibly liberal 'on merit' positions, but one of them used the argument that

lesbian or gay carers posed a 'double burden' for children (see section three),

and another felt that I was emphasizing adults' over children's needs in

discussing this issue. Three other workers adopted positive and anti-

oppressive stances, one of whom drew direct parallels with her own

experiences as a black woman and another of whom emphasized the need for

child care skills amongst potential carers. The two final workers adopted

positive approaches to lesbians and gay men but both had reservations about

men, of whatever sexuality, as carers (see chapter five). In North River

Council, two of the eleven workers adopted liberal equality models, whilst five

adopted positive, anti-oppressive stances. Of these five, two drew direct

parallels with black carers again based upon their own experiences as black

women, one of these positioning herself as the only 'radical' member of an

adoption team which she considered to be homophobic. A further two workers

took up positive equality stances which tended to emphasize child care skills

as the main focus. The final two adopted less positive positions, one having

concerns about the poor 'role models' provided by lesbians and gay men (see

section three), and the other focusing on children's needs and being

suspicious that lesbians and gay men had an adult's and gay rights agenda. In

the North Eastern Council, half of the ten workers adopted positive, anti-

oppressive approaches, three of whom based this upon their own experiences

as lesbians and one of whom drew upon her experiences as a black (Asian)

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woman. The three male workers adopted 'on merit' equality models which were also pro-feminist in their analyses. The final two workers took up equality models which emphasized the need to look for child care skills as well as understanding sexuality issues.

- **being lesbian or gay** - finally, I found that workers being lesbian (I did not manage to speak to any openly gay male workers), or having experiences of working or living alongside lesbians and gay men as colleagues and friends, did make a difference to how they constructed ideas of what a 'lesbian' or 'gay man' was like and, crucially, whether these were seen as being compatible with 'the good enough carer' of children. Those workers who were heterosexual and had no personal experience of lesbians and gay men tended to construct the most discriminatory views of a lesbian or gay sexuality - as other, exotic, abnormal, threatening and so on. In South River Council, I spoke to one lesbian, and three women who had lesbian and gay friends or family. In North River Council, I spoke to one lesbian, and three workers told me they had lesbian and gay friends and family. In the North Eastern Council I spoke to three lesbians, and three other workers told me about lesbian and gay friends and family.

I suggest, therefore, that where a social worker and/or agency scored positively on most or all of these key themes, they were more likely to be conversant with the issues involved in assessing lesbians and gay men, and more likely to construct versions of 'lesbian' or 'gay' compatible with the 'good carer'.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize here that these are not claims to 'representative figures' for the authorities in question, since I did not speak to all workers in the fostering and adoption units, and indeed some of them refused to speak with me.

Similarly, the key themes do not 'predict' a likelihood to approve lesbian or gay applicants. At the times that I visited the authorities, the South River Council had no lesbian carers on their books but did have one gay male couple doing fostering. North River Council had one single lesbian foster carer and two gay male couples doing fostering, and the North Eastern Council had a single gay man doing fostering and a lesbian couple fostering. None had any openly lesbian or gay adopters.

These represent very small percentages of approved lesbian or gay foster carers, and as I have noted there were no approved lesbian or gay adopters. As I have shown, even where an agency has a stated equal opportunities position and workers conversant with the assessment of lesbians and gay men, there are other workers who do not approve of such applications, as there are managers and members of panels. It is for these reasons that I chose instead to focus on how the social workers constructed versions of 'lesbian' or 'gay' in and through their assessment practices.

SECTION THREE: Constructions of 'Risk'

Some of the arguments most commonly used against lesbians or gay men as potential foster or adoptive carers are constructed in the form of notions of 'risk' posed to children (Hicks 1997). These are most frequently:

- **the 'double burden' argument** - the idea that children being placed in substitute care have enough to cope with, either from their previous experiences of abuse or in coming to terms with being fostered or adopted, so that to place them with carers who are 'different' because of their lesbian or gay sexuality creates a double burden for the child.

- **the teasing argument** - the idea that children who are placed with lesbians or gay men will be mercilessly teased at school and suffer poor and damaged interactions with their peer groups. This is the idea that children will suffer stigma by proxy due to living with lesbian or gay parents.

- **the abnormal gender role models argument** - the idea that children need and learn gender role models from their parents, and so they should have a male and a female parent if they are to develop a healthy gender identity in the future. This is the idea that lesbians and gay men cannot provide balanced gender role models, or that the role models they provide are distorted.

- **the corruption argument** - the idea that children will suffer by association with lesbians and gay men. This argument suggests that such children will themselves become gay by force of example, or that they will be corrupted into the ways of gay sex (including being sexually abused) by lesbian or gay

carers.

- **the 'pawns of the gay rights lobby' argument** - the idea that lesbians and gay men are not really interested in parenting or helping children, and that they are just using children to make a political point for gay rights and equality with heterosexuals. This argument suggests that lesbians and gay men apply to foster or adopt just to prove a point, and that they are promoting the gay (adults') rights agenda at the expense of children's needs.

I wanted to examine these arguments as a part of my research because I was interested in how the social workers made sense of them, whether they had heard them, how they used them, or how they might counter them. Certainly I found they were key themes in all the interviews, and were therefore central to how the social workers made sense of 'lesbian' or 'gay'. These arguments are commonly reviewed in writings on lesbian and gay parenting (Martin 1993; Ricketts 1991; Saffron 1996) but are often referred to as 'myths' or 'stereotypes' about lesbians and gay men (Benkov 1994:58; Rights of Women Lesbian Custody Group 1986:125; Skeates & Jabri 1988:17).

Skeates & Jabri (1988), for example, have the following to say about what they term *"misrepresentations and untruths"* (1988:23):

> *[T]his hostility...amounts to no more than a belief system wholly*
> *based on a false set of assumptions about lesbians and gay men*

and their lifestyles. These assumptions themselves stem from

the incorporation of a large number of myths and stereotypes

about lesbians and gay men...However, the most damaging of

these myths and stereotypes are those whose effect is to throw

serious doubt on the desirability of allowing lesbians and gay

men to be in close contact with children and young people.

(Skeates & Jabri 1988:18).

I believe that use of the word 'myth', however, is unhelpful here for understanding

how the social workers used what I have preferred to term 'risk-based'

arguments. 'Myth' tends to suggest a pre-existing set of beliefs to which the

social workers had access, as in *"...**myth** n. (primitive) tale embodying esp.*

ancient popular belief or idea" (Oxford Dictionary). This suggests a passive

model of the construction of ideas in which such pre-existing 'myths' are 'pulled

off the shelf' at will by social workers; or it suggests that 'myths' take the role of a

dominant ideology of which the social workers are the passive dupes. Instead,

my argument is that some of the social workers did use risk-based arguments,

certainly all of them referred to them, but that these are *actively constructed*

versions of the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay'. The social workers, if they so wished,

made arguments about the risks posed to children by lesbians and gay men that

were specific to fostering and adoption, but this was an active process which

involved their discursively representing lesbians and gay men as 'dangerous', for

example.

Thus I argue that this is the construction of social work *discourse* (Parton & Marshall 1998; Philp 1979; Rojek *et al.* 1988) concerning 'lesbians', 'gay men' and the notion of the 'good enough carer of children', 'discourse' being:-

> *...not a disembodied collection of statements, but groupings of utterances or sentences, statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence. Institutions and social context therefore play an important determining role in the development, maintenance and circulation of discourses.* (Mills 1997:11).

The point that I wish to make here is, then, that a discourse serves regulatory purposes, thus having concrete effects in everyday social work practice:

> *...discourse is not just speech; it is embedded in a historical and cultural context and expressed often in the frame of a scenario or cultural performance. It is about practice...Insofar as the discourse evolves it begins to effect the practice.* (Obeyesekere 1992:650, quoted in Loomba 1998:103).

Constructing a view of the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay' as carrying the risk of

stigma is a particular view of sexuality and one which, I think, concomitantly

stigma*tizes*. It also has the effect of requiring social workers to spend efforts and

time convincing others (e.g. panels, courts) of the quite ridiculous notion that the

children of lesbians and gay men will never suffer any teasing ever, something

which cannot really possibly be true of any child anywhere. Further, it serves the

regulatory function of ensuring that only those lesbian and gay applicants who

can demonstrate the ability to deal with such potential teasing will be approved.

Of itself this is no bad thing, but what such a version does not address is the

source of such teasing in the first place, that is a heterosexuality which claims

that lesbians and gay men are immoral, abnormal or whatever.

This example begins to demonstrate why simply 'opposing' risk-based arguments

with the assertion that 'they are not true' becomes meaningless. Instead I argue

that it is *impossible* to say that all children who have lesbian or gay parents will

never be teased, it is quite possible that some of them *will* grow up to be lesbian

or gay, it is possible that they may develop critical attitudes about traditional

gender roles and may demonstrate non-traditional gender role behaviour. It is

also possible that some children will find the idea of living with lesbian or gay

carers simply too shameful, and it *cannot be said* that all men and women who

go under the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay' are constitutionally incapable of ever

abusing power and/or abusing children.

Instead I am interested to examine how such heteronormative discourses, both in

their discursive construction and in their practice effects, divert attention away from heterosexuality. For example, it could as easily be argued that most children being placed in substitute care have been formerly 'victimized' in heterosexual households (usually by men), that heterosexuality continues to exert prejudice, and physical and emotional violences, against lesbians and gay men, that children who do not exhibit 'correct' gender behaviour also suffer such opprobrium, that young lesbians and gay men suffer greatly as a consequence, or indeed that the vast numbers of children who do not live in heterosexual two-parent families are similarly disadvantaged.

The social workers rarely made such arguments, however, because, even where they opposed the notion that the children of lesbians and gay men were 'at risk', they nevertheless were constrained to represent lesbian and gay applicants to fostering or adoption panels in ways which did address these arguments. For example, some of the social workers told me that they did not have concerns about the gender role models presented by lesbians and gay men, yet they also said that they would have to address this concern because panels would raise it. I have also developed this argument in chapter six with regard to the panel-driven nature of Nita and Clare's assessment.

'The Everyday World As Problematic', or Problematizing 'Common Sense'

What is going on here then? It is helpful to analyze the construction of such

knowledge-claims by focusing on social work practice as an 'everyday world'
which should be 'made problematic', in Dorothy Smith's words (Smith 1987).
Smith argues that a feminist sociology should begin its analysis not within
discourse, which she defines as abstracted and textually mediated social
relations, but within our daily, local worlds (Smith 1987:98). This problematization
of 'the everyday world' aims to make visible these social relations, or the
'relations of ruling' by which it is organized (Smith 1987:88). It is exactly this
which interests me here in terms of analyzing the 'relations of ruling' that
structure what are in fact 'everyday' arguments about the children of lesbians and
gay men.

Such risk-based arguments are 'everyday' in the sense that they are the regular
stuff of television talk-shows, press reports, radio phone-ins, discussions in pubs
or on street corners, or indeed within universities, about lesbian and gay
parenting generally (see for example BBC 'Esther' 1996; BBC Radio 4 1994;
Brennan 1994; McRobbie 1991; Powell 1998; Weese & Wolff 1995). They are
'common sense' arguments, well known to, and well used by, the social workers.
Nevertheless, as Smith argues, an amount of work is required to constitute such
arguments as 'norms' (Smith 1987:155), and it is the heterosexual relations of
ruling which structure the social accomplishment of these as 'knowledge' about
lesbian and gay parents.

What Smith argues is that this socially accomplished knowledge is achieved via

practices which construct the world "as texts" (Smith 1987:3) but that this takes place within existing 'relations of ruling', which are:

> *a complex of organized practices...as well as the discourses in texts that interpenetrate the multiple sites of power. A mode of ruling has become dominant that involves a continual transcription of the local and particular actualities of our lives into abstracted and generalized forms...Forms of consciousness are created that are the properties of organization or discourse rather than of individual subjects.* (Smith 1987:3).

I think that this notion of the relations of ruling is helpful for understanding why the social workers felt largely constrained to address risk-based arguments about lesbian and gay applicants, even where they did not support such arguments themselves. Fostering and adoption assessments are *"a complex of organized practices"* (Smith 1987:3) which constitute the world 'as texts' via discursive and written representations, or via talk and text. The social workers regularly talked about the expectations demanded of such work by panels, for example. We can see these expectations, therefore, as revolving around 'norms' of gender and sexuality, and relatedly, panels, assessment reports, assessment interviews, and so on as practices which are constituted by heterosexual relations of ruling. Fostering and adoption, I suggest, are governed not only by Smith's relations of ruling which exclude women's ways of seeing, but also by those which prioritize

and shore up things heterosexual. Men's versions of the world, and heterosexual versions of the world, are portrayed as neutral knowledge, as the 'norm' (Smith 1987:19). It will become clear in chapter five that I see the social workers' anxieties about gender and sexuality as closely entwined, and so I see no reason to remove the specificity of Smith's arguments about gender here.

Thus the everyday world for the social workers here is a heteronormative one, one in which prevailing discourses concerning sexuality legitimate what is desirable, undesirable, acceptable and unacceptable (Bristow 1997:170). These also legitimate what can and cannot be said about the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay', and that is why the social workers were constrained to represent versions of these categories which addressed the risk-based arguments. Such was the force of the heteronormative social work discourse of 'the good carer' here.

The 'double burden' argument was used by those social workers who were the least happy about lesbians and gay men as carers:

> *But it's not the sexuality that's important is it? It's what the*
> *sexuality may or may not do to the child, how it affects the child.*
> *Children being placed with foster parents are traumatized*
> *anyway by definition and I think we also know that children have*
> *a horror of being different...different from the gang, different from*
> *the group. So what we're looking at is traumatized children, and*

traumatizing them again because they haven't got a mother and

a father is reinforcing difference. It needs a child who is quite

strong and stable and secure in him or herself to be able to cope

with being different and our children who come into care don't

have that inner stability and security. [Social Worker, SR1].

Here the social worker constructs an argument with a child 'at risk' at the centre.
Lesbians and gay men are represented as the source of (additional) trauma
because their sexuality is seen as 'difference'. Cathy also argued that having
lesbian or gay carers would be *"something extra that the child is going to have to
come to terms with...and you don't want to add any extra difficulties..."* [Social
Worker, SR5]. However, others did not accept the 'double burden' argument.
Maude, for example, pointed out that it was not long ago that black families were
often seen as dysfunctional by social work agencies, and she drew a parallel with
lesbians and gay men to argue against any difference from the white
heterosexual standard being seen as 'abnormal'.

Still others took a middle-ground option, in which they argued that some children
would not cope with lesbian or gay parents, particularly those who craved
'normality' and 'wanting to be like everyone else':

I do have some sympathy with this argument and that is because

some kids do find giving explanations about their position as

fostered quite hard, and I'm aware that the children of lesbians

and gay men are often quite troubled by that as well, you know

having to tell their mates... [Social Worker, NE7].

The 'middle-grounders' took two positions from this; either that the 'double burden' was strong enough to argue that lesbian and gay carers were always inappropriate for some children, or that this could be worked through as long as carers were able to handle such issues with the child in question.

I found contradictory views concerning the age at which it would be appropriate to place children with lesbians or gay men, and this related directly to the notion of 'double burden'. Some of the social workers felt that it was more appropriate for older children to be placed with gay carers, but this was sometimes because they felt that older children were less 'corruptible.' Wayne, for instance, argued that older children would have already formed a view of gender roles and sexual relationships, so would be less likely to take on the role models provided by lesbian or gay carers. Others, like Liz, felt that children over eleven were more likely to cope with the 'difference' of having lesbian or gay parents, or would be better at giving explanations of their situation to peers. The reverse of this argument was to make the point that younger children are not so 'corruptible' because they understand less about issues of sexuality, or that they would cope better with lesbian or gay carers because they would not be aware of this, a similar argument applied to the placing of disabled children with lesbians and gay

men, as we shall see later.

The risk to children from teasing, or stigma by proxy, was also high on the social workers' agenda:

Teasing and bullying, the sort of teasing and bullying that leads to suicide, are very much to the forefront of people's minds at the moment, so if I did need some sort of proof that children are picked on because they're perceived to be different it's that, because children have to be like everybody else as their egos are just not strongly developed enough to be able to branch out on their own and be different, and to carry that differentness and not be damaged by it. [Social Worker, SR1].

Here the social worker constructs lesbians and gay men as so 'dangerous' or 'risky' to children that this might result in child suicides. However, I found that this was an unusual response in terms of the social worker cohort. Most of them did address the teasing issue, but felt that children get teased for many different reasons - due to being in care, due to being fostered or adopted, due to being black, due to being fat and so on. What they were looking for in assessments were lesbian and gay applicants who acknowledged this as a possibility and were prepared to address it with the children and with peers and schools if necessary:

One of the questions I always ask, and I ask it because it's an experience I have as a black person, is, "What happens if somebody calls your child a name? or says, 'Your Dad is this or that'? How would you deal with it?" I say this to white families who have black children, "What happens if the child gets called a nigger, or black #!x+, or whatever? How would you deal with that?" So I'd also put that to a gay couple and ask how they'd respond, because in terms of teasing you get different responses from people, and a child might be experiencing name-calling at school because their parents are gay...[Social Worker, SR2].

The social workers wanted lesbians and gay men to be able to help children cope with any possible teasing, and many felt that applicants needed to be 'out' and positive about their sexuality in order to do this - *"...children shouldn't be made to feel there's somehow something wrong or secretive about the carers' relationships"* [Social Worker, NE4]. Gill also felt it was important that such children had some regular contact with others who had lesbian or gay parents, a point rarely raised by the social workers.

The risk of poor gender role models was also commonly discussed, and this is also evident in chapter five where I argue that such gender anxiety was key to the ways that the social workers intepreted the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay'.

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Lesbians and gay men were frequently constructed as outside of gender norms:

> *What lesbians and gays don't have is the set-up that fulfils*
>
> *society's accepted norms, so you've got all that confusion about*
>
> *'who's Mum and who's Dad?' So we have to find that for a child,*
>
> *because lesbians and gay men can talk until they're dumb to the*
>
> *child about his or her needs and how to meet them, but they*
>
> *can't turn themselves into a father and a mother which I think is*
>
> *the child's basic needs. One person can't give as much as two,*
>
> *and the two is more than the sum of the father and the mother,*
>
> *it's more than two...it's a completeness.* [Social Worker, SR1].

Many of the social workers, however, argued against such views of lesbians and gay men, and some argued that we should not be promoting traditional gender role models. Nevertheless, most of them were keen to address this point in assessments and were keen that lesbian and gay applicants were able to present a 'range of male and female role models' in their daily lives, families and friendship networks, which the social workers could then represent to panels. The social workers frequently told me that panels were looking for 'gender balance' and this argument is similarly developed in chapter five.

Concerning theories about corruption, I found some concern that lesbians and gay men would present negative views of heterosexuality and/or expect children

to become lesbian or gay:

> *You'd need to ask them how they're going to cope whichever*
> *way it goes with that child, whether they turn out to be gay,*
> *lesbian or heterosexual, and how that's going to make the carers*
> *feel. What sort of images are they going to present to the child*
> *about sexuality? For example, what sort of assumptions are they*
> *going to make about a sexually abused child, and what images*
> *are they going to present of, say, a birth father who has sexually*
> *abused the child? What image are they going to present of*
> *people who are heterosexual? Like...would it be 'they all abuse*
> *people' and that sort of thing?* [Social Worker, SR5].

In another example, a panel asked the social worker whether the applicants had any friends who 'weren't gay or lesbian' [Social Worker, SR6], while Wayne argued that lesbians and gay men would not be able to 'socialize children into the norm' of relationships. All of these are examples of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), the idea that children might turn out to be lesbian or gay and that this would constitute a failure. However, I found that many of the social workers were less worried about this argument and felt less need to address it in their assessment questions or reports.

Maude argued against the idea of 'corruption':

I do believe that children do acquire influences very early on in

their lives and we are responsible for those influences, but for me

it's the idea about what people consider to be normal 'families',

and what is the norm. My experience, coming from a Caribbean

background, was that there were lots of Aunties and Grandmas

within a community and I don't think it's affected us that much

being brought up in that environment. I know we are influenced

but the dominant society's influence is more prevalent... [Social

Worker, SR2].

Others quoted research showing that children were not adversely affected, or

argued against the idea that children 'copy' the sexuality of their parents. None of

the social workers supported the view that lesbians or gay men posed a greater

sexual risk to children, although there were reports that such views were held by

some who refused to speak with me. All of the social workers I spoke to argued

against this idea, pointing out that most sexual abuse of children is by known

heterosexual men. They did not make claims that gay or lesbian people were

incapable of abusing children, but did argue against any greater likelihood.

Indeed some argued for less likelihood, especially by lesbian carers. None of the

social workers felt they had to address the issue of potential child abuse due to a

lesbian or gay sexuality in their assessment reports. Nevertheless, at least one

social worker was questioned about this when she took her report on a gay male

couple to fostering panel.

Finally were the arguments made about lesbian and gay applicants having a 'gay rights/adult rights' agenda, over and above the 'needs of children', Helen Cosis Brown's false 'dichotomy' (Brown 1991:11). As I have earlier argued, lesbian and gay applicants' access to being assessed or 'being considered like anyone else' **is** an issue of 'gay rights', since it is about not discriminating against lesbians and gay men on the basis of their sexuality alone. This political point, however, is often reframed by its opponents as pushing an adults' rights agenda over the needs of children (Whitfield 1991), and some of the social workers took this view.

Anya felt that children placed for fostering do not have the inner security to cope with having gay parents, and so to place them with lesbians or gay men was to consider the rights of adults over those of the child. Here we can see that the paramountcy principle of the Children Act 1989, that decisions should always be made in the best interests of the child, can be used as the ultimately 'politically correct' way to reject lesbian or gay carers (Reece 1995). Wayne was concerned that gay or lesbian applicants just wanted to 'prove a point', that they could be 'as good as heterosexuals', while Denise was worried that social workers might be using children 'as the vanguard' of change in attitudes about lesbian and gay parenting. Caroline also made the point that she did not want to give any special consideration to the needs of lesbians and gay men in terms of recruitment and assessment of carers because she felt that would be meeting adults', not

children's, needs.

Here the spotlight is removed from potentially discriminatory social work services, and this is Davina Cooper's point about discourses which identify sexuality as a private matter leaving lesbians and gay men *"vulnerable to claims that they are trying to push into the public realm unacceptable sexual practices"* (Cooper 1995:69; see also Cooper & Herman 1991). The unquestioned 'right' of heterosexuals to be assessed as potential carers is so because heterosexuality is invisiblized into the practices of the relations of ruling within fostering and adoption.

Thus I am arguing that constructions of risk-based arguments concerning children being placed with lesbians and gay men were 'everyday' to the social workers in their settings. In analyzing these arguments I wanted to start from the social workers' experiences of them (Smith 1987:105), and I found that they were competent knowers; they knew the arguments well, had used them frequently, and, in many ways, were the most loquacious on these points out of all that we discussed in the interviews. They identified them as key anxieties, and by this I mean that the social workers had to address these arguments in their assessments whether they agreed with them or not, because they identified this as a *practice expectation.* Thus the arguments worked something like a Foucauldian panopticon (Foucault 1979:200), exerting a disciplinary power upon the social workers on the basis of a normalising judgement concerning 'the good

carer'. This is what Cooper and Herman define as a form of self-policing, where some *"lesbians and gay men may be accepted into the 'norm,' but only at the continued exclusion and further marginalization of those who cannot or will not."* (Cooper & Herman 1991:77).

I have analyzed these risk-based arguments as constitutive of the 'relations of ruling' (Smith 1987, 1990) which establish organizational discourses and practices which prioritize and 'naturalize' heterosexuality. Where this is challenged, as in the case of lesbian and gay applicants to fostering and adoption, then organizational practices insist that lesbians and gay men constitute a potential 'risk' since they fracture the heterosexual relations of ruling. It is for this reason that the social workers have to spend large amounts of time and labour addressing risk-based arguments concerning lesbians and gay men. This is a dilemma, for some of them argued that, if they did not do so, then the outcome for lesbian or gay applicants might be rejection by fostering or adoption panels. Where many people, individually, are involved in large amounts of social work-ing which constructs such risk-based arguments, then these constitute the heterosexual social relations which govern fostering and adoption assessments.

SECTION FOUR: What is 'Discrimination' in Assessment?

In this section I analyse what I consider to be examples of the differential treatment of lesbians and gay men in the fostering or adoption assessment

process. When I started my research, some five years ago, I had set myself the question of whether assessments of lesbian and gay applicants were 'discriminatory' or not, but I now find this a very difficult question to answer as I hope will become clear. I have no difficulty in saying that the rejection *a priori* of all lesbian or gay applicants on the basis of their sexuality is a form of discrimination, since this quite clearly is an example of persons in a similar situation being treated differently because they belong to a particular 'class' or group (Banton 1994:1; Sohrab 1996:114). However it is certainly not clear that this would constitute discrimination in the eyes of the law (Sandland 1993).

What is far more complicated, however, is the consideration of how those lesbians and gay men, who are accepted into the application process by agencies, are treated within the assessment. Quite clearly, some social workers believe that they treat everyone 'the same', but, as I have shown, there is no such thing as a standard assessment and so, when considering lesbians and gay men, I have to ask 'the same as what?' However, I shall also be arguing that lesbians and gay men are differently treated on the basis of their sexuality, and I shall give examples of social work practices which I think do just this. Different treatment does not automatically disadvantage lesbians and gay men however, and in some cases it actually advantages them. Some anti-oppressive models of practice are based upon different treatment in that they argue that lesbians and gay men are 'different' to heterosexual people, that they have different needs which should form a part of the assessment and that they are always already

disadvantaged within a system which inherently favours the heterosexual. Here then I will consider debates about 'sameness vs. difference' models of equality taken from feminist writings (Bacchi 1996; Evans 1995; Scott 1997; Sohrab 1996), in order to assess whether different treatment is good or bad for lesbians and gay men.

'Sameness' Models of Equality

In the sameness model of equality, all groups should be treated the same, so in Judith Evans' version this represents a liberal approach to feminist claims, where women want equality with men and to be treated the same as men within the existing system (Evans 1995:31). This is very much an 'Equal Opportunities' model that ignores questions of difference (Williams 1996).

The sameness model applied to fostering and adoption assessments is the 'on merit'/'equal opportunities' version which emphasizes child care skills and downplays the importance of sexuality. Here no account is taken of lesbians' and gay men's 'difference' from heterosexuals, or whether they have particular needs, but instead the usual models of (heterosexual) assessment are applied. Examples here would include asking about childlessness, not taking any account of how lesbians and gay men might feel as the only non-heterosexual people in preparation groups, giving no consideration whatsoever to targetting lesbians and gay men in recruiting carers, not asking about their lesbianism or gayness,

or relying upon traditional kinship models of 'family' when assessing lesbians' and gay men's support networks.

In the sameness model, then, there is no differential treatment, but this actually disadvantages lesbians and gay men by expecting them absolutely to fit in with the heterosexual relations of ruling. One of the consequences of this, I argue especially in chapters five and six, is the 'heterosexualisation' of lesbian or gay applicants by and during the assessment process; lesbians and gay men have to be represented to panels in the most 'heterosexual' forms possible and those that are 'too lesbian, too gay' will be rejected.

The consequences of sameness models also include expecting lesbians and gay men to interact with an unequal system (Sohrab 1996:55), so here they have to prove more than heterosexual people about their fitness. An example *par excellence* of this is having to answer to the anxieties about risk discussed in section three. Further, sameness models reinforce the status quo of the existing system (Sohrab 1996:55), so here the assessment programme remains one which favours heterosexuals over and above others, and lesbians and gay men may be positioned at the point of last resort (Hicks 1996).

Sameness equality models with regard to assessing lesbians and gay men can be illustrated by the example of 'whether to ask them about their sexuality or not?' This remains a debate amongst social workers, and I found it to be so with

those that spoke to me. One such view of sameness is that social workers should

not ask lesbians or gay men anything about their sexuality, since heterosexuals

are not asked such questions and so this would be 'discriminatory.' This was

reported to me by Jo, herself a lesbian and a senior social worker:

When I read the assessment reports there was nothing in there

about how these [gay] men had come out for instance. And I

remember having a big argument with the social worker that had

done the assessment because he was saying, "We don't need to

know about those things," and his attitude was that it was not

'right-on' to ask those questions. I was saying, "This would be an

important part of those men's lives and it's important to

understand how they dealt with that, what did it mean to them?,

how did they handle it?, were people supportive?..." etc. And it

was like, "We don't need to ask that, we don't need to know

about that, we take that as read," and I was saying, "You

shouldn't take anything 'as read'...You have to ask people what

those things mean to them." If that had been a straight couple

then those things wouldn't have been avoided, but here the

attitude was that, if you started 'homing in' on the fact that they

were gay, you would therefore be stereotyping them. I think this

social worker genuinely thought that by asking about a person's

sexuality you were discriminating against them. [Senior Social

Worker, SR3].

This came up a number of times. Angela, a lesbian who worked on a fostering team, told me that other social workers had approached her for advice on assessing lesbians or gay men: *"They'd ask, 'Do you think I ought to ask...?' and, 'Is it appropriate to ask...?' or even, 'Is it discriminatory to ask...?'..."* [Social Worker, NE1]. I therefore wanted to investigate this issue of whether to ask lesbians and gay men about their sexuality or not, because it illustrates very nicely the debate about sameness/difference equality models.

My argument is that it would be extremely unhelpful for all concerned to conduct an assessment of lesbians or gay men that did not discuss their sexuality. It would disadvantage lesbian and gay applicants by preventing them from discussing major aspects of their lives and histories, by not allowing them to think through the particular dynamics and potential problems specific to lesbian or gay fostering and adoption, and by setting up potentially disastrous situations when children are finally placed within their care.

This also exemplifies the 'same as what...?' question that I have earlier raised; that is, when social workers say that they think that lesbian and gay applicants should be treated 'the same', then I ask 'the same as what?' Quite clearly it is impossible to treat lesbians and gay men 'the same' as heterosexuals since many of the questions heterosexuals get asked are irrelevant to lesbians and gay

men (e.g. questions of infertility, questions about marriage), but concomitantly, there are specificities to living under the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay' which need exploration (see Martin 1993). Here then we return to the point that there is no standard assessment against which to judge lesbians and gay men. Nevertheless the 'sameness' model of assessment has great currency amongst social workers, backed up by notions of equality of opportunity and 'on merit' models.

Outings: Should you ask if someone is gay or lesbian?

A key dilemma for social workers operating 'sameness' models, then, is whether to ask if someone is lesbian or gay and how to do so. For heterosexuals are rarely, if ever, asked detailed questions about their sexuality. Certainly I found that the social workers, if anything, assumed an understanding of what 'heterosexuality' was in applicants that presented as heterosexual. Some of them told me that they had begun to ask heterosexuals questions about their sexual activity ('do you have an active sex life?', 'do you still have a sexual relationship?', 'how and where do you show affection?', were some examples), but none asked how applicants knew that they were heterosexual, came to an understanding that they were heterosexual, what heterosexuality meant to them, how they expressed their heterosexuality and so on. These are all questions that lesbians and gay men are regularly asked of their sexuality, yet heterosexuality is so much 'normalised' that it is absent from assessments.

Therefore, in trying to operate sameness models with lesbians and gay men, the idea of asking about lesbianism or gayness can appear to be "discriminatory" on this basis because it is asking things which are not asked of heterosexuals. However, I shall argue against this, showing that trying to treat lesbians and gay men "the same" as everyone else actually disadvantages them within the assessment process.

My first example is the assumption made by some of the social workers that a lesbian or gay sexuality was solely the business of applicants, and therefore the onus was upon applicants to raise sexuality within the assessment. Some of the social workers told me that there should be 'no reason' why lesbians and gay men could not 'come out' and discuss aspects of their sexuality within the assessment; indeed there were suggestions that lesbians and gay men who did not do so, or were fearful of the consequences of doing so, were 'dishonest', 'unsuitable' and also 'in denial about their sexuality.'

This version of sameness sees a lesbian or gay sexuality as a 'private' matter belonging to the individual, and it is therefore up to applicants to raise it. There is no recognition of reasons why lesbians and gay men might be fearful of raising their sexuality (the possibility of their applications being rejected, for example), and no recognition of how the assessment system (the heterosexual 'relations of ruling') might actually discourage 'out'-ness. Social workers who took this view

said they would not ask applicants if they were lesbian or gay because that would not be treating everyone "the same".

My second example is those social workers who felt it was important to discuss a lesbian or gay sexuality but were reluctant to ask this straight out. These social workers talked of 'signalling to applicants' that a lesbian or gay sexuality was not a bar to being assessed, of referring to equal opportunities statements that included sexuality, of ensuring that lesbian and gay issues were covered in carer preparation groups, and of trying to include questions about lesbians and gay men in all assessments. They felt that the home study stage of the Form F assessment was the most appropriate point at which to discuss lesbianism or gayness, and talked of 'offering applicants opportunities' to talk about their sexuality at this point. Nevertheless many said that they would still be reluctant to ask an applicant straight out whether they were lesbian or gay.

However, my argument here is that sameness models disadvantage lesbian and gay applicants because they work to prevent active discussion of sexuality in the assessment process. My first example shows how sameness assumes that lesbian and gay applicants are no different from others and so, if they do not raise sexuality themselves, then this is seen as 'their' problem. My second example shows how sameness assumes that asking lesbians and gay men about their sexuality is a form of "discrimination" because it is 'treating them differently.' Both point to problems with the sameness model of equality as it is

applied to lesbians and gay men.

'Difference' Models of Equality

Difference models of equality suggest that lesbian and gay applicants are *not* the same as heterosexuals, but that they should nevertheless be seen as possessing equal worth (Evans 1995:47). Evans terms this either 'difference-equality' or 'radical-equality' forms of feminism, in which sexual politics point to the oppression of women within the existing system (Evans 1995). Difference models thus reject the equal opportunities position because the group in question - here, women - will always remain disadvantaged with a system that favours men.

With regard to lesbians and gay men, then, difference models ought to assert the specificity of lesbian and gay experience within the heterosexual relations of ruling, and acknowledge that issues of homophobia need to be dealt with in order not to disadvantage the 'group'. Thus the different treatment of lesbians and gay men within the assessment system is preferable because it does not expect lesbian and gay applicants to fit in with existing heterosexual models.

Treating lesbians and gay men differently because of their sexuality can, however, have both negative (disadvantageous) and positive (advantageous) effects. It is disadvantageous, I argue, where lesbians and gay men are expected to prove themselves doubly 'worthy' in ways that heterosexual applicants are not,

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and where this is solely because a lesbian or gay sexuality is regarded as a 'risk' in and of itself. Examples here include:

- taking a request by a gay male couple to be considered for adoption to the adoption panel in advance of any assessment; here the social worker told me that this was to check out with the panel whether the application could be taken any further. Panels do not consider requests for assessment under usual circumstances, and this was done in this case solely because the couple were gay men. This is an example of the 'extra hoop to jump through'.

- asking a lesbian couple who had applied to adopt to provide a third named referee; under usual circumstances applicants provide two referees and this was done solely because the applicants were lesbians (this is discussed in the case study of Nita & Clare in chapter six).

- asking a gay male couple who had applied to adopt to undergo psychiatric testing (Smart 1991:17); in this example this was solely because the couple were gay men, and under usual circumstances this does not happen.

- allowing assessment and approval of lesbian or gay applicants only because they have requested, or been specifically identified for, the care of particular disabled children, usually considered 'hard to place' (Triseliotis *et al.* 1997). Here lesbian and gay carers are used as a 'last resort' for children that social workers have been unable to place elsewhere, children who may be considered 'less corruptible' and even 'too stupid to understand about sexuality' because of their disability: *"With lesbian or gay couples we tend to*

want to persuade them to take children with special needs and that's because

it's easier for us to actually justify that and take the case to court on that basis,

that they are filling a gap or providing a special resource." [Social Worker,

NR10].

Clearly these are examples of 'different but worse' treatment (Sohrab 1996:58),

which may also trap lesbians and gay men into reified roles where their

'difference' is constructed as 'natural' (Sohrab 1996:64). By this I mean that

'different but worse' models assume that lesbians and gay men are essentially

different from heterosexuals and therefore expect them to prove themselves

twice over. Relatedly, the heterosexual relations of ruling remain the standard

against which lesbians and gay men are judged here; are they as 'psychiatrically

sound' as heterosexuals, for example?

Nevertheless I also found examples of different treatment which I think

advantage lesbian or gay applicants, and this is where such practices attempt to

tackle the inequalities inherent within the assessment programme. I found only

two examples:

- offering preparation courses which acknowledge forms of discrimination
  experienced by applicants; although I did not find an example of this relating to
  sexuality, in chapter six I describe how Nita told me that she was invited to a
  course for black single adoptive applicants only.
- placing recruitment advertisements in lesbian and gay spaces (including

press), and having explicit statements that sexuality is no bar to being considered; an example of this exists in fostering information sent out by Manchester City Council which includes a leaflet aimed directly at lesbians and gay men (Manchester City Council, no date)[2].

These examples are 'different but better' (Sohrab 1996:63) since they acknowledge that the assessment programme is already unequal since it is governed by heterosexual standards. However, the problem with all differential treatment is that it skirts, and does not deal with, the issue of structural inequality. Differential treatment, even with advantageous outcomes for lesbians and gay men, leaves the *status quo* - the heterosexual 'relations of ruling' - of assessments in place.

Should Lesbians and Gay Men be Asked Specific Questions?

I want to argue here that there *are* questions specific to a lesbian or gay sexuality that should be asked of such applicants during the assessment.
Questions about developing a sense of oneself as 'lesbian' or 'gay', and at what point in one's life, coping with a lesbian or gay identity in childhood, adolescence or adulthood, coming out to others including family members, the reactions of others to one's lesbian or gay identity, the attitudes of a particular culture,

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[2] This leaflet was designed at the request of, and in large part by, the Positive Parenting Campaign in Manchester, a group concerned with lesbian and gay parenting issues. Nevertheless it is supported by the Council, is sent out with all fostering packs, and is being currently rewritten and updated.

ethnicity or religion towards lesbianism or gayness, the development of a positive sense of a lesbian or gay self, understanding a lesbian or gay sense of self in relation to gender, ethnicity, race, religion, and culture, one's relationship to the lesbian and gay community via political/social activism and/or the gay scene, the development of a network of support including relationships with other lesbians and gay men, the emergence of a sexual identity and the forming of adult relationships with partners, the relevance of being gay or lesbian in the workplace, the realization that parenting might be possible for lesbians or gay men and the particular reasons for choosing adoption or fostering, attitudes regarding how potential children will be told about one's sexuality, how this will be communicated with schools, health professionals, birth and extended families of children, or how potential teasing of children will be handled by carers are just some of the key areas that I am arguing ought to be raised during the assessment of lesbians and gay men, as do others (Brown 1991; Martin 1993). Further, in earlier research (Hicks, 1993) and in research for the case study which forms the basis of chapter six of this thesis, lesbian and gay applicants themselves commonly reported the need to discuss the specificities of adopting or fostering as a lesbian or a gay man.

Nevertheless, this was not always agreed by the social workers, and there remains a debate as to whether lesbians and gay men should be asked 'special' questions in an assessment. Once again, this is the crux of the sameness/difference models; sameness suggesting that to ask lesbians and gay

men 'special' questions is to be "discriminatory", difference suggesting that asking such questions is an important part of assessing the specificity of being a lesbian or gay adopter or foster carer.

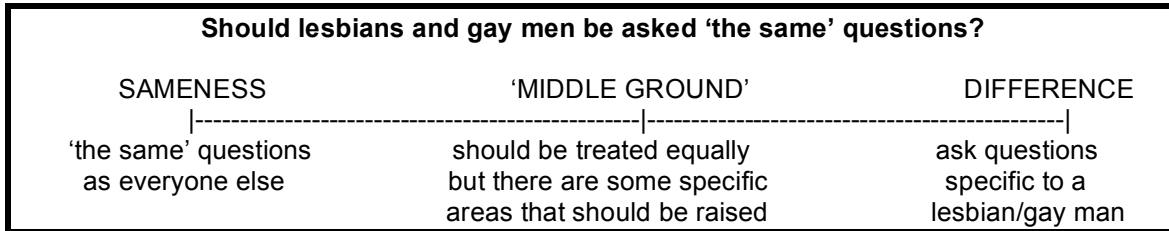| Should lesbians and gay men be asked 'the same' questions?		
SAMENESS	'MIDDLE GROUND'	DIFFERENCE
|--|--|		
'the same' questions as everyone else	should be treated equally but there are some specific areas that should be raised	ask questions specific to a lesbian/gay man

Figure 4.6

When I asked the social workers whether they felt there were questions that needed to be asked in an assessment specifically because the applicants were lesbian or gay, I found a range of responses, represented at Figure 4.6 . Adopting a 'sameness' response, the idea that all applicants must be treated exactly "the same" and that to ask any different questions based on sexuality would be 'discriminatory', was the least common response, but nevertheless it was held by some people. For example, Caroline, a team manager, told me that all applicants were asked about their sexuality and sexual relationships regardless of whether they were heterosexual, lesbian or gay.

Nevertheless I found that most of those social workers who adopted the sameness response qualified this by moving towards what I have termed the 'middle ground: same but different' category. By 'middle ground: same but

different' I mean the response which says that lesbian and gay applicants ought to be asked 'the same' questions and treated 'the same' as everyone else in the name of equality, but that there are some areas specific to a lesbian or gay sexuality which it is helpful to discuss and which such applicants often raise themselves, such as coming out, forming adult relationships, dealing with prejudice and so on. For example, Richard started with a sameness response but qualified this by moving towards the 'middle ground':

*I think I've already said that we should be asking **everybody** questions about their sexuality, about their relationships, about how they divide up roles in the home if it's a couple, about their social life, their commitments, and so on and so forth. So I don't think we should be asking specific questions. However, the only thing that I can say about that is, bearing in mind what I've been saying about vulnerability and so on, I think there are questions about the attitudes which will make fostering very difficult for them, and that is not just from families but from social workers as well. There was somebody who used to work here who felt very strongly that we should not be looking at lesbians or gay men as foster carers on religious grounds. So I think we do need to look at the particular support needs of certain groups. But it's not like we do 'ask everyone the same questions' anyway, because the process isn't like that and you don't ask everyone the same, and*

if something like 'coming out' comes up then, yes, that is something I'd want to discuss. [Social Worker, SR6].

I think that sameness responses sprung from a genuine wish on the part of most of the social workers to treat all applicants fairly, but it tended to avoid or ignore questions of a lesbian or gay sexuality unless these "came up" during the assessment, which usually meant that they had to be raised by applicants themselves.

'Middle ground' and 'difference' responses were evenly split amongst the remaining social workers in my cohort. 'Middle grounders' clearly argued that all applicants ought to be treated "the same" because this was not 'discriminatory', yet they also had to acknowledge that there were some areas specific to being lesbian or gay which needed discussion. I found those areas mentioned were: coming out, adult relationships, possible vulnerability to allegations of abuse, whether they were accepted by family, how they might tell a child about being gay, whether they were trying to 'prove a point', whether they understood they might be rejected, and issues about gender roles. I think that the problem with the 'middle ground: same but different' approach is that it does not think through, in any systematic way, the full range of issues pertinent to lesbians and gay men adopting or fostering. Instead issues seem to arise on an *ad hoc* basis, and this discussion is developed in my case study of Nita and Clare in chapter six.

'Difference' approaches were also raised by some of the social workers. For example, Jo, a senior social worker and herself a lesbian, said that it was vital to cover lesbian and gay issues with such applicants. More importantly she felt that it was not 'discriminatory' to do so, and that such questions were vital in investigating applicants' sense of 'self' and their ability to care for children. Audrey, more pragmatically, explained that lesbian and gay specific issues would in all likelihood be raised by adoption or fostering panels, and so she argued that it was pointless for a social worker to present an assessment report which had not addressed itself to such concerns.

I found that the social workers raised issues of 'difference' that they felt needed to be addressed either by themselves, or because they predicted that these would be raised by panels. Issues raised by the social workers were as follows:

'Difference': Specific areas raised by social workers

coming out
how/when understood they were gay/lesbian
potential bullying of children
forming adult relationships
dealing with prejudice
potential for allegations of abuse
how do they view 'heterosexuality'?
how will they cope with being 'outed' by children?
how 'lifestyle' differs from others
gender role models
handling contact with child's birth family
how they demonstrate/show affection
how to tell a child they were lesbian/gay
their network of friends/family, and who knows about their being lesbian/gay
how would they cope with prejudice within the fostering/adoption system?
are their support networks single-sex?
do they want to foster gay young people?

> why do they want to be parents?
> "do they have anything to prove?"
> involvement in lesbian/gay scene and/or community activism
> how will they cope with a young person's heterosexuality?
> if they are single, what will happen if they start a relationship?

Figure 4.7

However I also found issues specifically referred to as being raised by adoption and fostering panels:

> **Areas raised by Panels**
>
> sleeping arrangements
> how they show affection
> nudity in the home
> gender role models
> how will they deal with schools, and any potential teasing?
> concerns about stated gender preferences of children
> how do they allocate roles in the home?
> "can they [gay male couple] do laundry?"
> "do they know anyone who isn't gay?"
> how settled is their relationship?
> do they know other lesbian or gay carers, for support?

Figure 4.8

I believe that the two figures demonstrate quite different agendas, however. Figure 4.7 shows the social workers largely concerning themselves with, first, some of the specificities of lesbian and gay applicants' lives and, second, some of the risk-based arguments concerning children that I discussed in section three. The list at 4.7 is not as comprehensive as my own earlier examples of lesbian and gay-specific questions (page 216), and is clearly more risk-based, especially in terms of maintaining heterosexual role models for children. Figure 4.8 shows panels having a marked tendency towards 'protection of children' issues, and, more tellingly, towards the 'heterosexualisation' of lesbians and gay men; that is

ensuring that lesbian and gay applicants who are successful are represented as closely to the heterosexual 'norm' as possible. I develop this idea in chapters five and six.

Whilst I have supported the idea that lesbians and gay men do need to be asked 'different' questions specific to their sexuality, I have also admitted that this tends to 'fix' lesbians and gay men in positions close to essentialism; the idea that their/our difference is 'natural' (Sohrab 1996:64) and that 'lesbian' and 'gay' can be specified as having obvious agreed meanings. The question here then is how do we know what specific questions to ask lesbian or gay applicants without fixing a version of 'lesbian' or 'gay' which ought to be addressed like some check-list? For example, it might be assumed that all lesbians and gay men should be asked about 'coming out' and that 'healthy' lesbians and gay men have done so, but coming out has been critiqued within lesbian, gay and queer theories, not least by black lesbians and gay men (Seidman 1997).

Resolving 'Sameness vs. Difference'?

Joan Scott argues that the sameness/difference dichotomy is unhelpful since it puts in place an 'impossible choice' for feminists: *"If one opts for equality, one is forced to accept the notion that difference is antithetical to it. If one opts for difference, one admits that equality is unattainable."* (Scott 1997:765). She suggests that sameness models cannot be the only grounds upon which equality

can be achieved. Indeed sameness models offer the impossibility of equality, since, because - in my example - lesbians and gay men cannot be identical to heterosexuals in all respects, then they cannot expect to be equal (Scott 1997:766). Scott instead argues for equality claims that rest upon acknowledging difference, not an essential difference, but one which retains ambiguity and disrupts fixed binaries, like gay/straight (Scott 1997:768).

I have argued that any claims to treating lesbians and gay men 'equally' in the assessment process rely on something unspecified; that is 'equality with what...?', 'the same as what...?' That is, how do we specify 'equality' here? Sameness models I have shown to be disadvantageous, but arguing for 'difference' models of equality nevertheless retains heterosexuality as the defining standard against which lesbians and gay men are judged in fostering and adoption. It is for these reasons that I develop arguments about the 'heterosexualisation' of lesbians and gay men in the remainder of the thesis. Instead, an assessment process which challenges the heterosexual 'relations of ruling' of adoption and fostering would neither rely upon sameness nor difference models. Working towards such models of assessment, as they affect lesbians and gay men, is difficult and the area within which the notion of an 'anti-oppressive' social work practice is most frequently suggested.

SECTION FIVE: *"Getting it Right..."*: Social Work, 'Anti-

Oppressive Practice', Lesbians and Gay Men

"I think I would be quite wary of getting it right, and putting the right amount of emphasis on sexuality, because it would be something that either adoption or fostering panel would be looking at..." [Social Worker, NE5].

"I was aware that I was assessing them individually, more than I would have done with a heterosexual couple, so I had to check that out...and maybe that was my anxiety about getting it right and feeling there was a spotlight on me, yes..." [Social Worker, NR7].

"It was one of the first ever lesbian couple applications to go to the adoption panel, and I felt I had to fight...well, I don't know about 'fight,' but I felt I had to get it right..." [Social Worker, NR6].

Social workers who want to 'get it right' with lesbian and gay applicants do so for two main reasons; first, they want to produce an adequate assessment which concludes as to whether the lesbians or gay men in question will make good enough carers of children, and, second, they want to assess lesbians and gay men in a way which is not discriminatory on the basis of sexuality. This is a difficult balancing act and by no means were all the social workers interested in

achieving it. Some of them focused solely on the needs of, and potential risks to, children so much that they were uninterested in whether lesbians and gay men experienced discrimination or not. Still others had reservations about the fitness of lesbians and gay men *per se* to care for children. These are largely examined in the remainder of this thesis, and so here I wish to focus on those social workers whom I understood as attempting to 'make a difference', to develop 'anti-discriminatory' and adequate models of assessment in relation to lesbians and gay men. This is because I am keen not to produce a piece of work that suggests that "all social workers are homophobic."

What is 'Anti-Discriminatory' and 'Anti-Oppressive Practice' with Lesbians and Gay Men?

There is a growing literature on 'anti-discriminatory' and 'anti-oppressive' social work practice (Burke & Harrison 1998; Dalrymple & Burke 1995; Dominelli 1998; Thompson 1993, 1997), alongside a small number of publications which consider social work in relation to lesbians and gay men (Appleby & Anastas 1998; Brown 1998; Hidalgo *et al.* 1985; Logan *et al.* 1996). Literature has distinguished between anti-discriminatory practice, which is the attempt by social workers to ensure that their services are provided fairly to all without discrimination on the basis of race, gender, age, sexuality, class or disability, and anti-oppressive practice, which takes a wider structural view that social work is a part of a society in which racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, classism and disablism are

endemic and mediated via discourses, practices, organizations, texts and representations (Thompson 1993). However, those texts that take anti-discriminatory or anti-oppressive practice as their focus tend to marginalise or ignore questions concerning lesbians, gay men and social work.

Indeed I intend to argue here that specifications of an anti-discriminatory practice are usually limited, and certainly extremely problematic, when attempting to apply them to lesbian and gay adoption and fostering. Definitions of anti-discriminatory practice suggest that it is *"a form of social work practice which addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work that is done with 'clients' (users) or workers"* (Dominelli 1998:7), or that it *"seeks to reduce, undermine or eliminate discrimination and oppression, specifically in terms of challenging sexism, racism, ageism and disablism..., and other forms of discrimination or oppression encountered in social work."* (Thompson 1993:33). The question remains, then, how such statements of intent might be put into practice, and it seems to me that this involves specifying what terms such as 'power', 'oppression' and 'discrimination' mean within a social work context. As I have already argued, this is no 'easy' task when considering assessments of lesbian and gay carer applicants: **what** would constitute an example of 'discrimination' here?

My answer is that we need to return to my arguments for seeing social work as a 'making sense' or theorising activity. Social workers need to examine the theoretical bases for what they construct as 'knowledge about' lesbians and gay

men which can be seen as a concern with anti-oppressive practice, rather than relying upon set formulae for a social work which is anti-discriminatory. The notion that anti-discriminatory practice with lesbians and gay men can be achieved by following 'steps one to five...' is unhelpful.

Furthermore it is my argument that much of the theoretical basis for the literature on anti-discriminatory practice is flawed in its conceptions of issues such as 'power', and that this is unlikely to produce anti-discriminatory outcomes for lesbians and gay men, much less a wider concern for the anti-oppressive. 'Power', in the literature, is frequently seen as a thing which social workers 'have', while, relatedly, their clients 'do not'; it is a thing to be given up by social workers to clients or to be shared with them (Dalrymple & Burke 1995:15; Dominelli 1998:8).

This is not a concept of power that I have recognized in this thesis. In chapter one, I argued for the relevance of feminist, queer, postmodern and discourse models of 'power'. Here a central concern ought to be an analysis of how 'knowledge about' lesbians and gay men is implicated in power via the competing versions to 'truth' about sexuality and gender which are produced. Assessments of lesbians and gay men are textually mediated examples of the 'relations of ruling' (Smith 1987) within social work, and they are also knowledge-claims about categories like 'lesbian' or 'gay', usually made by social workers who are given socially validated expertise via their place of authority within the institution

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(Seidman 1997:28). Thus here social work knowledge is never neutral, nor indeed is the language used by social workers (Brown 1998:19; Rojek *et al.* 1998; Weedon 1987).

One of the major problems with existing versions of anti-discriminatory practice is, therefore, their reliance upon notions that 'lesbian' or 'gay' are states of being held by fixed, rational subjects. Therefore, lesbians and gay men are assumed to have an unproblematic status, or 'identities', which social workers ought to simply be careful not to oppress or discriminate against. Instead, I have been arguing through this thesis for 'lesbian' or 'gay' to be seen as categories of knowledge, around which competing claims are made within discourses which define and regulate how lesbian or gay selves, desires and so on 'can be known'. Thus the hetero/homo-sexuality binary exists as a power/knowledge regime (Seidman 1997:150), rather than as identities which have fixed levels of power. The analysis in this thesis, for example, shows how the categories 'lesbian' or 'gay' are by no means obvious in their meanings to social workers, and nor are their meanings the property of those individuals who describe themselves as such.

The existing literature also tends to rest upon 'liberal' ideas about notions of power and (in)equality. My argument would therefore be that this leaves in place a central, 'benign' heterosexuality, which becomes the standard to which lesbians and gay men are held. In the literature, terms like 'justice', 'power-sharing' and 'participation' are used (Appleby & Anastas 1998; Dominelli 1998;

Thompson 1997) but it is far from clear how these might be applied in our example of the assessment of lesbian and gay carers. George Appleby and Jeane Anastas (1998), for example, talk about applying the concepts of caring, justice, independence, and freedom to social work with lesbians and gay men (Appleby & Anastas 1998:6-7), yet there is no analysis of how such terms and ideas are absolutely gendered, raced and sexualized (Cooper 1994; Evans 1993).

Lesbian and gay access to 'justice', for example, is limited in a whole range of arenas, not least of which is the law (Gooding 1982; Herman 1990), but more importantly, as I have already been arguing, liberal equality models do not necessarily produce 'non-oppressive' social work assessments. Concepts such as justice, freedom and so on translate very easily into the *'on merit'/treat lesbians and gay men "the same"* models of assessment that I have discussed, but such liberal approaches fall apart when considered in relation to models which see dominant discourses as defining lesbians and gay men as 'outside' of concepts like 'carer of children', via the law or via cultural knowledge.

'Getting It Right...'?

Instead I have chosen to focus here on strategies adopted by those social workers who were attempting to promote what they saw as anti-discriminatory assessments of lesbians and gay men or anti-oppressive practices. I shall argue

that attempts at anti-discriminatory assessments were usually frustrated by their taking place within a practice context structured by the heterosexual 'relations of ruling'. Thus a focus on anti-discriminatory practice, that is not discriminating against individual lesbian or gay applicants, is limited in my view and likely to be only a short-term, 'sticking-plaster' measure. Anti-oppressive practice, however, ought to show a wider concern to challenge existing categories of knowledge concerning the 'good carer', including those forms of social working used with lesbian and gay applicants. Thus, drawing on my previous arguments, we need to look for approaches which:

- assess lesbians and gay men on the basis of their child care skills *and* the relevance of their sexuality,
- do not apply standard heterosexual models of assessment,
- do not ignore the importance of sexuality,
- crucially, acknowledge that lesbians and gay men are always already disadvantaged within a system which favours the white heterosexual norm,
- consider the impact of heterosexism, but also how this operates within social work,
- do not expect lesbians and gay men to uphold traditional versions of gender, or indeed of men's power and privilege,
- examine the version of 'lesbian' or 'gay' being constructed through the assessment itself.

These are difficult points to practise within the current context of adoption and fostering, which I have already argued is governed by the heterosexual 'relations of ruling' (Smith 1987). A dilemma for the anti-discriminatory social worker here is that, in attempting to conduct a less discriminatory assessment on the basis of sexuality, does this deny the importance of other factors such as race and gender, and further will this actually result in approval given the current expectations of 'good carers' by adoption and fostering panels? The difficulty in implementing any positive action within social work is partly that it relies upon social workers actually not 'discriminating' (Cooper 1994:92), but also having support from their management (Cooper 1994:93), which here would need to include adoption and fostering panels, and sometimes local councillors too. We shall see that, on both counts, attempts by some of the social workers to promote anti-discriminatory work with lesbians and gay men were foiled by lack of support from managers or panels.

My visit to the North Eastern Council was partly prompted by the fact that I knew, via other contacts, that the unit had always had a high percentage of lesbian and gay staff working there. I therefore wanted to visit to see how much of a difference this made to practice: did having openly lesbian and gay social workers make any difference to practice with lesbian and gay carer applicants? My view is that it did. The North Eastern Council social workers were far more used to discussing lesbians and gay men as potential carers, and had developed far more of a team 'culture' of 'on merit' approaches than in other authorities.

Note that this was not a supposedly 'radical' inner-London borough. Many of the

social workers, including those who defined themselves as heterosexual,

acknowledged that having openly lesbian and gay staff (although, when I visited,

the gay men had left for other jobs) made a big difference. They referred to the

issues being 'kept alive', 'on the agenda' by lesbian staff, and they also felt able

to seek advice from their lesbian colleagues.

This did not resolve all problems however, and in particular the lesbians I spoke

to felt that management had not backed staff on these issues. Angela felt that

they had been actively hostile at times:

> *I do think as a team with a large proportion of lesbians, and*
>
> *indeed a gay man at one time as well, there is a certain amount*
>
> *of being very wary of us. We always seem to be in conflict with*
>
> *management and I always felt that sexuality was a part of it.*
>
> *When it was raised, of course, it was said that it wasn't a part of it*
>
> *but it was the thing about being perceived to be threatening in*
>
> *whatever ways people find lesbians and gays threatening.* [Social
>
> Worker, NE1].

Apart from keeping the issues on the agenda, lesbian and gay staff had also

been central to the establishment of a 'Lesbian and Gay Issues Working Party'. I

was given access to records of their meetings. The Working Party recorded

minutes of meetings for only nine months, from July 1990 to March 1991, but made some achievements in working for change concerning lesbian and gay carers. The meetings were set up initially to attempt to generate some practice guidelines around assessing lesbian and gay applicants, although such guidelines never materialised. Early meetings wanted to find ways to attract more lesbian and gay carer applicants, and members contacted other authorities to find out their approaches. Subsequently the Working Party:

- met with representatives of the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), to consider their position, described as one of 'equal opportunities for all.'
- tried to organise training for foster/adoptive carers on issues of sexual identity as they affect gay young people: aims were agreed but the training was not implemented.
- circulated a discussion paper on lesbian and gay adoption and fostering to all teams, including area child care teams, for consultation: there was poor take-up of discussion amongst the teams generally. This discussion paper was drawn up partly in response to a newspaper article which argued against gay fostering (Sunday Express 1990).
- made a formal response to paragraph 16 of the Department of Health's fostering guidance consultation paper (DoH 1990), pointing out that all applicants should be considered and that the phrase about 'gay rights' would allow local authorities to exclude lesbians and gay men, which they felt was

discriminatory.

- advised their authority's press/publicity section to prepare a statement on their stance concerning lesbian and gay carers.

- wrote an addendum to their comments on paragraph 16 (DoH 1990) which reviewed research on the children of lesbians and gay men (specifically Golombok *et al.* 1983; Green 1978), and also pointed out that professional bodies such as BAAF, the National Foster Care Association (NFCA), and the National Council for Civil Liberties (the then NCCL) had similarly objected to paragraph 16.

There are a number of points to be made about attempts by the lesbian and gay social workers, including the Working Party, to make changes to practice with lesbian and gay carers. First, they show a wider concern with anti-oppressive practice; that is, I argue that they were about challenging categories of knowledge. However, a lack of management and panel support for these initiatives crucially meant that key ideas were blocked or 'organized out' (Cooper 1995:69); no practice guidance was worked up, no training provided for foster carers, and little encouragement was given to discussion of the paper written by the Working Party. Indeed their ideas met with some suspicion and invoked a 'threat' for the authority as an institution. Second, however, the group achieved some not insignificant small changes; raising awareness of the issue amongst teams and contributing to the eventual removal of the "gay rights" statement from what eventually became Children Act 1989 guidance on family placements (DoH

1991). Nevertheless, it is difficult to say that this had any effect upon the assessment of lesbians and gay men generally. What may have been crucially achieved, however, was some support amongst lesbian, gay and some heterosexual staff to keep the issue 'on the agenda' and to argue, at the very least, for 'on merit' child care approaches.

I also found that some of the social workers raised the idea of 'matching' lesbian or gay social workers to assess lesbian or gay applicants, and this I argue is an example of anti-discriminatory practice in action. This idea was often raised within the context of practices where black applicants were assigned at least one black social worker to consider their cases. Similarly, some of the social workers felt that lesbian or gay social workers had been purposely asked to assess lesbian or gay applicants. In another case, Maude told me that she had assessed a gay man alongside a gay 'consultant', brought in to work on the case with her. Maude argued that this was a helpful experience for her, as she was able to check out how she was assessing sexuality issues with Doug, the consultant. However, other social workers argued against the idea of 'matching', because they felt it was unnecessary (heterosexual social workers who felt confident in assessing lesbians and gay men, and gay social workers who felt 'matching' was not a straightforward answer), or because they had other concerns:

> *I think it would be asking too much of a gay man or a lesbian*
> *woman not to feel more empathetic with a gay or lesbian applicant*

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than somebody who was not, and I think that would be very difficult

and almost asking too much. There's an argument for them not

doing it, unless they can demonstrate that they're actually not

biased and can be objective and not let that issue cloud everything

else. [Social Worker, SR1].

Wendy also felt that she had not been allocated assessments of lesbians because there would be some suspicion on the part of her fostering panel that, as a lesbian herself, she would not be able to be 'objective' in her views. However, other lesbians in her unit had undertaken assessments of lesbian or gay applicants.

My view of the 'matching' debate is rather like my view of 'matching' in questions of research methodologies (see chapter three). Matching is no easy answer to complex questions, and certainly does not 'solve' questions of power dynamics that always exist between applicant and assessor, whether that assessor be lesbian, gay or heterosexual. Thus I argue that matching is anti-discriminatory in that it is an example of a small concession made to lesbian or gay applicants within the context of an otherwise unchanged assessment dynamic.

Nor am I happy with the idea of setting up lesbian or gay workers as 'experts' on conducting assessments of lesbians and gay men. This can result in heterosexual workers not having to think about, or engage with, lesbian and gay

issues, and it does not follow that a lesbian or gay social worker will automatically conduct a 'better' assessment. Indeed, Annie told me that she found assessing a lesbian couple more difficult than she had expected because they assumed that she would not have to ask them about lots of areas because she too was a lesbian.

I am arguing against 'matching' as an easy answer to anti-discriminatory practice, then, because it does not remove the need to conduct a thorough assessment, and it does not remove the need for social workers to 'make sense' of lesbian or gay applicants through the assessment process. This does not mean that I think lesbian and gay social workers shouldn't assess lesbians and gay men, but I do not think that any assessment is ever 'objective, bias-free' and so on. As I have been arguing throughout, all social workers have particular understandings of the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' and these will always inform their representations via talk and text of applicants. Therefore I do not think that matching contributes to better assessments of lesbians and gay men.

What is perhaps more crucial is what the social workers expressed as their 'attitudes and values' about lesbians and gay men. For these *are* their versions of such categories, they are their 'making sense' in action. Thus those who talked about 'getting it right' were worried that they had to be 'politically correct' about lesbians and gay men, to the extent that this sometimes resulted in feelings that they could not question lesbian and gay applicants too much or they would be

being "discriminatory". Again this is an unhelpful approach: good assessment practice with lesbian and gay applicants has to be able to say that some will be unsuitable, for various reasons not to do with being lesbian or gay as such, and that they should therefore be rejected. However, the criteria for such rejections must be clearly on the basis of unsuitability to care for children and not related to the 'difference' of being lesbian or gay. Alternatively, other social workers felt that some of their colleagues held extremely "discriminatory" views about lesbians and gay men but would not state these openly for fear of being seen as "not right-on enough." Presumably this was why some workers refused to speak with me, for fear that their ideas about lesbians and gay men would be questioned and exposed.

Maude, a black heterosexual woman who worked in an adoption team, spent some time talking with me about what she called her change in attitudes about lesbian and gay applicants. She told me that, when she qualified as a social worker, she had not really come across any lesbians or gay men, but, when she joined an adoption team, an assessment of a gay couple came in. Maude said that her colleagues refused to do the assessment, whereas her attitude was, "Well, I don't know much about gay people, but I don't think they should be unfairly treated, and so I will do the assessment and maybe I will learn about their lives." Maude conducted the assessment alongside a gay consultant colleague, and she told me that this was extremely helpful for her and that she had requested it because she felt she did not know enough about gay people to

be able to conduct the assessment fairly.

I found this a very interesting and refreshing example. Maude argued against people who thought that they knew 'all the answers' about race, about sexuality and so on (this she would see as 'political correctness'), but instead admitted that she had had to learn about lesbians and gay men and did not profess to 'know everything'. She felt she had still more to learn. This interested me because here was a social worker talking about the role of 'making sense' of 'lesbian' or 'gay', and acknowledging different versions, albeit in a rather different way from me.

Of my three examples, then, it is this one that I focus on in the remainder of the thesis. I think that this is crucially the way forward in developing anti-oppressive assessment practices with lesbians and gay men; to make not just small changes within existing practices but to argue instead for an approach that takes 'social work' and changes it as a whole bottom-to-top, challenging the heterosexual relations of ruling, or the heterosexual hegemony within the cultural politics of knowledge that construct 'lesbian' and 'gay' (Seidman 1997). This is certainly no easy task, but I suggest some ways forward in my concluding chapter.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have proposed that a range of assessment models, which can be placed along a continuum, are currently in use with lesbian and gay

applicants. My data from the social worker cohort leads me to suggest the dominance of the *'on merit' prioritising child care model,* and this will be further examined in subsequent chapters.

I have also demonstrated key themes which I argued were important to the social workers' assessments of lesbian and gay applicants, and how 'risk-based' arguments about supposed effects upon children were central to how the social workers later represented versions in their assessment reports. I argued that these risk-based arguments were constitutive of the heterosexual relations of ruling (Smith 1987) currently dominating adoption and fostering practice. I went on to analyse 'discrimination' in assessments, arguing that sameness models of equality were unhelpful, though they are largely supported by the current system, and that assessments needed to acknowledge 'difference' in the sense of dealing with the specificities of being a lesbian or gay carer.

Finally I have proposed that an analysis of the relations of ruling (Smith 1987) within adoption and fostering is key, since changes in how lesbians and gay men are assessed can only be made if we consider how 'lesbian' and 'gay' are made sense of within the context of prevailing discourses of sexuality. Further, sexuality is not understood in isolation and I shall use chapters five and six to show how it was also an absolutely gendered and racialised concept for the social workers, and examine the consequences of this for lesbians and gay men as gendered subjects, and for black lesbians and gay men in particular via my

case study.

Chapter 5

Assessing Lesbians, Assessing Gay Men

This chapter is divided into two sections that consider data from the social worker interviews with regard to the assessment of lesbian carers and the assessment of gay men. Both point to the importance of the dynamic of gender in assessing sexuality.

Section 1: 'lesbian\mother': Assessing Lesbian Carers

"...I felt cheated...I wanted to talk about child care, and I wanted to prove to them that I could be a good parent, that I had experience of kids, that I knew about child development ...All they wanted to do was talk about me being a lesbian." [Lesbian Foster Carer].

"...It feels like social workers are less threatened by lesbian, than gay, carers...I think the image of a single female carer is much less threatening than two men together, as it's a much more traditional caring role." [Social Worker, NR8].

"...I've heard many women say that in fact they have a 'right' to

be parents ...One of the contradictions I saw is that, if you

choose then to reject the normal process - so to speak - of going

with a guy to have children, since you have rejected that, still that

child has to be a man's child. Only the man can partly make that

child for you to have, so isn't that a contradiction? You hate men

maybe? But you still need his service one way or the other..."

[Social Worker, NR4].

What happens when a social worker is asked to assess the suitability of a person

or couple describing themselves as lesbian? When the categories 'lesbian' and

'carer of children' are brought together in this dynamic, then how do social

workers actively theorize the category 'lesbian mother' via assessment practices?

And just how 'discriminatory' are these practices? Does the assessment focus

exclusively on lesbian sexuality? Are lesbians seen as more acceptable carers

than gay men because they are women? Why, on the other hand, is the 'lesbian

mother' seen as such a threat by some? Is this because she comes to represent

the ability of women to bring up children without men? In this section I address

these, and other, questions, drawing upon data from my interviews with the

social workers.

I use examples of feminist theories (Butler 1990; Carabine 1996; Harne & Miller

1996; Pollack 1987; Richardson 1996a; Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1993) in order to

analyze the specific 'threat' that the lesbian mother poses to male power, and how that power is defended via social work-ing. 'Male power' can be a rather loose concept, but I use it here to mean, first, the structural and institutional dominance by men of key decision-making bodies within social work assessment, such as management positions or fostering and adoption panels (Cavanagh & Cree 1996); second, the defence of a masculine heterosexuality through social work discourses concerning 'the good carer'; and third, the active construction within such discourses of the category 'lesbian' as threatening to men. This 'threat' is graphically represented by the last of the quotations that open this section, taken from one of my interviews with a social worker. Here is the idea that all women 'need' men's *"...service one way or the other,"* and that children belong to men.

'Dual Identities'?

The notion of the 'identity' of the 'lesbian/mother' (Starr 1995) is of crucial importance here, because, as discussed in chapter two, existing literature has theorized that 'lesbian' and 'mother' represent two distinct identities - 'dual identities' (Romans 1990, 1992) - which must be negotiated, co-ordinated, intersected by women who inhabit both categories (Lewin 1993; Romans 1990, 1992; Starr 1995). Pat Romans (1990, 1992) argued most strongly for such an analysis, locating this 'dual identity' thesis within a theoretical framework suggested by symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Plummer 1975, 1991,

1995). She argued that, for such women, 'lesbian' and 'mother' were two core identities, and yet these were given opposing meanings in terms of their relative acceptability within the wider society (Romans 1990:20). Whilst the label 'mother' was understood to be acceptable along the lines of meaning attached to a gendered heterosexuality and familial concepts, the label 'lesbian' was a 'threat' to the norms of gender, motherhood and the family (Romans, 1992:99). Thus in symbolic interactionist terms, the 'lesbian/mother' had to mediate her presentation of self and identity in her everyday interactions with others, and also in the way that she gave meaning to her own understanding of herself (1990:4). Romans termed 'co-ordinators' those women who had managed an *"integration of both roles...having brought the heterosexual and lesbian aspects of their life-styles into successful relation to one another."* (Romans 1992:103).

The work of Ellen Lewin (1993) also argued that the identity of 'lesbian/mother' must bring together two apparently incompatible elements (1993:16), but that such an identity was negotiated within the existing socially constructed systems of gender and motherhood. Thus Lewin's work emphasized the similarities between identities adopted by both heterosexual and lesbian mothers, since both had to negotiate an identity within the shared system of meaning attaching to the concept of 'motherhood' within - here North American - culture (Lewin 1993:182).

I want to argue against the 'dual identity' thesis here, and this is for a number of reasons. First, it relies upon the assumption that the categories 'lesbian' or

'mother' have single and fixed meanings, whereas I have been arguing that such categories are open to a number of different and contextually-dependent constructions or representations, some of which serve regulatory and discriminatory functions. My data does not support the suggestion that social workers simply theorize 'lesbian' as a stigmatized and negative identity that has to be somehow integrated with the valued and positive identity represented by the category 'mother/carer of children'. Second, symbolic interactionism suggests that identities are individually picked-out from a kind of psychological 'shopping-list', whereas I argue that such categories are political through-and-through (Rich 1976, 1980; Stanley 1984) and are therefore open to hetero-sexist interpretation as much as any other. Thus some 'identity categories' carry wider negative connotative meanings. In this sense, the category 'lesbian' can never exist outside of the regulatory discourses of heterosexuality (Jagose 1994:162). A 'lesbian' who applies to foster or adopt will be subject to regulatory practices, discourses, and representations that inhere in the process called 'assessment'. Third, I do not think that a symbolic interactionist understanding of the 'lesbian/mother' deals with the 'threat' that this poses to what I shall be arguing are heteronormative constructions of the 'good carer'. Indeed, in feminist terms the lesbian/mother represents a threat to male power (Pollack 1987:318).

The question to be asked here is how can a lesbian mother be understood as "heterosexual", as both Romans (1990) and Lewin (1993) suggest? Whilst I do argue that she may be represented in 'heterosexualised' ways (and see chapter

six also), the lesbian mother is not "heterosexual", and the category actually disrupts conventional understandings of (heterosexual) motherhood. The 'lesbian mother' cannot be understood by grafting existing frameworks of the 'heterosexual mother' onto her, as the former challenges understandings of the latter, rather than their easily intersecting.

This feminist understanding of the lesbian/mother 'identity' is argued by Christina Starr (1995), who points out that such categories do not necessarily 'intersect'. Instead;

> *The one identity which informs both more than anything and which keeps them connected, like thread running through two disparate pieces of fabric, is that I am also a woman...It is feminism, then, which most informs my motherhood and, perhaps, which most informs my lesbianism.* (Starr 1995:182).

Here, I analyze data from my social worker interviews, then, concentrating on the ways in which my respondents theorized the category 'lesbian/mother', and I argue that such theorizing was always gendered, as much as it was about sexuality. I argue that the social work assessment of lesbians is a regulatory practice designed to 'organize out' certain versions of 'the lesbian', that is to prevent their approval as fosterers or adopters, but also one which favours another version, what I have called the 'good lesbian carer'. Specifically, I

concentrate on the key themes arising from the data, which are: lesbians and men (attitudes towards men, the 'anti-men' idea), gender role models, preference for caring for boys or girls, whether lesbians *qua* women are more acceptable as carers, caring for sexually abused girls, assessing lesbians as 'single women', and the 'lesbian threat'.

By no means was the category lesbian always negatively theorized by the social workers with regard to fostering or adoption, and some of my respondents constructed versions of the 'lesbian mother' which were positive. Indeed some of the social workers I interviewed were also themselves lesbian (actually five out of the twenty-eight). So I shall not be dealing with solely negative constructions here, and my data is contradictory in this respect. This did not surprise me, however, as I did not expect to find that "all social workers discriminate against lesbian applicants". Nevertheless, even where social workers constructed positive versions of lesbian carer applicants, for the purposes of approval at panel, my argument is that these were still a particular version of 'the good lesbian carer'. The notion of 'the lesbian' as a challenge to conventional heterosexuality or understandings of gender was 'organized out' of assessments.

Social Workers Assessing Lesbians: evidence from the data

Lesbian applicants are frequently asked about their attitudes towards men, and whether they have male friends (Hicks 1996:19), and so I asked the social

workers whether this was a factor in their assessment practices. I found that most of the social workers theorized that the concept of a lesbian carer would be problematic, if not for themselves then for others such as the panel or children, in gendered terms. Specifically, social workers that had assessed lesbian applicants felt that they had to address attitudes towards men:

I guess if we were faced with a lesbian couple who came along and said, 'We think all men are absolutely awful' - but that's a myth as well, that there are women like that - but I'd think, 'I'm not convinced you've got the approach which is in the interests of children...It's fine for you but if you feel you have to bring children up like that then I'd feel unhappy.' [Social Worker, NE5].

We talked about gender role models in the assessment, because they both had brothers, or certainly one had brothers who would be visiting with his children, and any child placed would have been reciprocating those visits. Also they had men friends - as people do! - who visited them, and they were very conscious of wanting men to be a part of their life, and not wanting to say, 'Men are awful and hideous.' [Social Worker, NR6].

This draws upon particular versions of gender role modeling theory (Golombok & Fivush 1994:75), which suggests that children will only fully acquire gender via

interactions with, and the ability to model the behaviours of, both male and female adults. As I argue below, I think that social workers' reliance upon 'role model theory', which has been critiqued by social psychology and feminism (Golombok & Fivush 1994), is located within traditional fostering and adoption practices which favour heterosexual couples as being able to provide children with 'role models' of a gendered heterosexuality.

Thus where concerns to maintain a conventional gendered heterosexuality are particularly evident in social work assessment practices - at fostering or adoption panels, for example, where men traditionally hold key management and decision-making positions within social work hierarchies - then this becomes especially significant:

> **Lisa:** *...With the lesbian young woman that was taken to panel, that was a big thing, you know, 'Where are the men in this woman's life?'...*
> **Steve:** *A big thing for the panel?*
> **Lisa:** *Yes...*[Social Worker, NR7].

Thus I found evidence of the social workers utilizing the notion of lesbians being anti-men, or unable to provide balanced gender role modeling, for which they developed a number of practice responses. The first was to re-present the 'lesbian' in ways that would be acceptable to the notion of the 'good carer' held

by themselves or by fostering or adoption panels. Lesbians were described by social workers in their assessment reports as having men in their networks (which, of course, many did have), or as having male family members, and as being 'not anti-men'. Others, however, were critical of this approach, such as Annie, herself a lesbian social worker:

It's the whole thing about role models which people are obsessed

with; that, if you are a lesbian couple, there's no male role model,

or with gay men that there's no female or indeed male role

model, and I don't agree and I don't really understand it because

it doesn't take much brain to see through it. [Social Worker,

NE10].

The second approach was to discourage or prevent applications by lesbians who were perceived as being too threatening with regard to 'heteronormativity' (Warner 1993b:xxi). Lesbians who were, or were perceived or constructed as being, too radical, or did not know enough men, were therefore positioned as being too far outside of heterosexuality and therefore inappropriate as potential carers:

It's to do with them being integrated, and having relationships

with the wider community, and the child having an experience

that is wider than just the household. I'd be looking for a rounded

personality, someone who's not only seeking friendships with

people who share their own sexual orientation but who also has

a family life. [Fostering Team Manager, NR9].

I think that these are prime examples of social work assessment as a regulatory

practice, and one that disadvantages or discriminates against those who fall

outside of the heteronormative 'good carer'. By 'regulatory', I mean that such

practices seek either to represent lesbians in ways that are acceptable within

compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), as 'safe', 'heterosexualised' (Wilton

1996c) and unthreatening to gendered norms, or to institute assessment tools

which uphold particular versions of the 'good carer'. Requiring lesbian applicants

to have enough men in their daily lives - and how many men are enough to

satisfy this measure? - is a example *par excellence* of a regulatory

heterosexuality which constructs heterosexual couples as somehow naturally

able to provide balanced gender roles for children, but lesbians as unable to do

so.

I was interested to discover and highlight such social work-ing practices because

it is my view that these constitute 'discriminatory' measures with regard to lesbian

applicants, and act to gatekeep or 'organize out' (Cooper 1994, 1995:69) those

versions of the lesbian that are threatening to the idea of the 'good (heterosexual)

carer'. In Cooper's 'organizing out' thesis (Cooper 1994, 1995), it is liberal lesbian

and gay politics within local government services which fail absolutely to analyze

constructions of heterosexuality as the norm. Instead, those aspects of the categories lesbian or gay, which are perceived to threaten this liberal discourse, are removed via practices that focus on them as problematics:

> *The limitations of a discursive framework which identifies homosexuality as a matter of private sexuality articulated to public (asexual) citizenship rights becomes particularly apparent where state bodies are requested positively to support gay lifestyles, for instance, through education policies, adoption and fostering provision and community funding. Because proactive heterosexual strategies are naturalized into invisibility, it is lesbian and gay forces who remain vulnerable to claims that they are trying to push into the public realm unacceptable sexual practices.* (Cooper 1995:69).

Thus I argue that 'rounded personalities', people with a 'family life', those who are 'integrated', and indeed do not know only other lesbians and gay men, are all active constructions of the good lesbian carer here, and they problematise aspects of the lesbian which threaten the invisible, yet central, construction of heterosexuality at the core of the notion of the 'good carer'. Constructing the good lesbian carer relies upon fixing a series of *"coherent gender norms"* through *"regulatory practices that generate coherent identities"* (Butler 1990: 17), and it is worth comparing the points I am making here with the table 'Heteronormativity:

Who Makes a Good 'Parent'?' (Figure 6.2) on page 369 of chapter six.

Of course, other social workers recognized such practices and argued against them. June, for example, is a heterosexual woman who works on a fostering team:

> **June:** *If I was assessing a lesbian couple, would I be worried that they were going to turn their girls into a man-hating little person, is that the kind of thing you're asking?*
>
> **Steve:** *Yes, that's certainly something lesbians get asked...*
>
> **June:** *Oh yes, 'Do you like men? Can you prove it? Will this child grow up to be a man-hating girl?'...No, I wouldn't take that approach I don't think.* [Social Worker, SR4].

How, then, was the notion of lesbian gender role models theorized by the social workers I interviewed? A key example of how the social workers thought about this was in their considerations of whether it would be appropriate to place girls or young women who had been sexually abused by men with lesbian carers. I found opposing views here; at one extreme was the view that young women would need positive male role models in the future in order to see that not all men were abusive, but that lesbians might be unable to provide these, or even that they would reinforce negative views of men held by abuse survivors:

> *If relationships with men have failed in the past, then you need to*
>
> *look at how they view men and how they're going to represent*
>
> *them to that child...*[Social Worker, SR5].

Such a view seems to me to be actually about protecting male power and deflecting attention away from men's sexual violence, in the sense that the notion of the 'positive male role model' is used here to reinforce the theory of the man who perpetrates sexual abuse as the *aberrant* or pathological exception (Armstrong 1996; Hester *et al.* 1996; Kelly 1988). At the other extreme was the idea that lesbians present strong, positive role models for young women:

> *You're more likely, if you're a girl living with two lesbian women,*
>
> *to have a stronger opinion of what women can be, what they can*
>
> *achieve and things like that, rather than if you were living in a*
>
> *household where the woman was beaten up.* [Team Manager,
>
> NR5].

We have here, then, two views of the 'lesbian carer', both of which seem to me to be equally premised upon the construction of the category lesbian as outside of usual gender norms; here the lesbian is either likely to present unbalanced and negative views of men, or she is inherently likely to present positive, strong and healthy role models of being a 'woman'.

I was interested in how the social workers handled the stated child gender preferences, if any, of lesbian applicants. Fostering and adoption applicants are routinely asked whether they would prefer to care for girls or boys, and such preferences are usually accepted and taken seriously by social workers and panels (Triseliotis *et al.* 1995, 1997). Indeed there is a specific space on the Form F (BAAF 1991) for this question to be addressed. As I have described in chapter six, Nita & Clare were dissuaded from stating their preference to care for girls only by Barbara, their social worker, who believed that this would not be accepted by the adoption panel. In my social worker interviews, I found one example where a lesbian couple's stated preference to care for girls only was accepted:

> *With most people that come through, we tend to want to know*
> *what they're asking for, and no I wouldn't advise them to say*
> *they'd take both if we knew they just wanted to take girls*
> *particularly when we can see the benefit of that kind of resource,*
> *so they weren't ever advised to say they'd take both. It was quite*
> *clear and we were upfront about it and it was just accepted at*
> *panel without any argument.* [Social Worker, NE9].

However, the appropriateness of lesbians caring either for girls or boys was a key question that the social workers told me was routinely raised by panels, and one which they largely felt compelled to address in their assessment reports:

It came up at the panel, and it was, 'Should it be girls or boys?' I

said, 'Well, any child, it doesn't matter because this particular

family have a lot of contact with other families and other set-ups

and what-have-you, and I think that children would feel

comfortable.' So that certainly came up at panel. [Social Worker,

NR6].

There was some evidence from my interviews with social workers of what has

elsewhere been termed the 'safety is a nice lesbian' dynamic (Carter 1993:102).

This is a key example of the gendered nature of understandings of the category

lesbian, in which lesbians *qua* women are theorized as the 'natural' carers and

protectors of children in opposition to men, including gay men, seen as

'unnatural' carers and posing a sexual risk to children. This has largely to do with

the gendering of the institution of child care via motherhood (Rich 1976), so that

lesbians are placed upon what Carter calls 'the pedestal' of virtue (Carter

1993:103):

The pedestal is always limited as a critical tool. If lesbian

households are safer than male headed ones it is important to

examine the many complex reasons why this might be the case,

rather than suggest that it arises out of the essential safeness of

lesbian sexuality. It simply will not do to infer that lesbians are

constitutionally incapable of abusing power. (Carter 1993:103).

My argument here is that some of the social workers theorized the category lesbian as meaning 'automatically' likely to protect children from abuse, or to be appropriate carers for abused children, which may appear to contradict my earlier arguments about lesbians being seen as too much outside of the heteronormative 'good carer', but I did find contradictory evidence within what the social workers told me. Here I think that it is gender that is being analyzed as the key dynamic, and so lesbians are understood first and foremost as women, and therefore as more 'natural' and 'safer' carers. For example, Maude, a social worker on an adoption team told me:

> **Maude:** *I think it might be a bias I've got, but I think I'd feel better with two women...I've never worked with two women but maybe it's just to do with feeling comfortable amongst women really, more than anything else. You know, there's nothing else that I could say...*
>
> **Steve:** *Do you mean that you'd feel more comfortable doing an assessment with women...or would you feel more comfortable with the concept of two women fostering or adopting?*
>
> **Maude:** *I think I'd feel more comfortable with both, with women fostering and adopting.* [Social Worker, SR2].

This point arose in several other interviews: Audrey, a manager of fostering and adoption teams, told me that she felt lesbians were *"more palatable than gay men"* within social work and to panels; Pete, who worked with young people leaving care, felt that he had focused far more on gay men than lesbians in his interview because social workers tended to be less concerned about women as carers than men; Sarah, a fostering social worker, felt that lesbian carers were less threatening than gay men because of the traditional caring role associated with women; Gloria, who worked on an adoption team, said that most derogatory comments were made about gay men not lesbians; Fazila felt that her adoption panel might approve a lesbian couple but not gay men; and Mark, who worked on a duty team, felt that there was far more of a tradition of women doing foster or adoptive care which meant that lesbians were more accepted than gay men. With regard to children who have been sexually abused, Pete told me:

I think that people tend to see - particularly if we're looking at sexual abuse I think - they see sexual abusers as men, even though as I say they tend to be heterosexual men, and I think the idea of placing somebody who's been abused with men is not on really. [Social Worker, NR3].

Tom, who worked on a teenage fostering team, also commented:

I would say it was more appropriate often - particularly for

children abused by men - to place them in lesbian households,

and that would include boys and girls. I think as a choice for boys

who've been abused by men, I'd prefer them to go to a lesbian

couple, or single woman, if only to allay the child's fear of what

might happen next sort-of-thing. But I think I'd probably be

happier placing with women rather than with men generally,

because women tend to be less abusive, in the main, compared

to men. [Social Worker, NE4].

Here, then, is a key contradiction in my data, and therefore in the ways that the social workers theorized the gendered nature of the category 'lesbian'. On the one hand, Cathy, an adoption worker, had told me that lesbians might reinforce negative views of men for children who had been sexually abused and that this would be inappropriate. Here the lesbian is understood via her sexual identity, perceived to be a threat to men because it is seen as a sexuality without men. On the other hand, Pete, Tom and others felt that placing with women, including lesbians, was more appropriate since most children are abused by (heterosexual) men. Here, instead, the lesbian is understood via her gender identity, perceived to be 'safe' for children because she is seen as a woman without men. Most interestingly, all of the lesbian social workers that spoke to me did not operate with the 'safety is a nice lesbian' dynamic. They were keen to emphasize that the category lesbian did not automatically equate with non-abusive. Whilst they made reference to the fact that most sexual abuse is

perpetrated by heterosexual men, they also pointed out that not all lesbians make good foster or adoptive carers.

I also found evidence of the social workers assuming that it was more appropriate for lesbians, rather than gay men, to take younger children. I found that lesbians were far more likely than gay men to be considered by the social workers for longer-term forms of care (including adoption), and for children under eleven. Gay men, as I shall discuss later, were often considered to be the appropriate carers for young people (teenagers), usually young men, and for shorter-term forms of fostering. Sarah, for example, asked me whether I had noticed that lesbians tended to request younger children. I pointed out that it was my view that assessment practices actually construct notions of what is appropriate for specific carers, and then channel those applicants into approval in that way. I asked Melba, who worked on a fostering team for young children, about some carers she had worked with:

> *Steve: What about the lesbian couple in [London borough], what did they get in terms of placement?*
> *Melba: They had placements but they had little ones, who actually ended up staying with them quite a while, but the gay men had over-elevens.* [Social Worker, NR11].

I also asked the social workers about the 'single women' question, because I

knew, both from anecdotal evidence and from earlier research (Hicks 1993), that

some lesbians had gone through the process of assessment as 'single women'.

This meant hiding or concealing their sexuality, either actively or sometimes

passively, in the sense of not bringing it up in discussions. Even when social

workers suspected, or had guessed, that a woman was lesbian, they colluded

with the silence about sexuality, either avoiding the topic altogether or by talking

only about former relationships with men. This may be largely to do with the 'tacit

acceptance' model, in which to state the lesbian sexuality of a woman applicant

would be to state the unacceptable and would therefore prevent her approval by

panel. For example, Fazila told me:

> *Fazila: But I have this sense of feeling that I have known of*
>
> *women, particularly who've come from lesbian backgrounds, that*
>
> *haven't felt able to share it, not necessarily with me because I*
>
> *haven't been the worker involved, but I'm pretty sure we did*
>
> *approve at least two women in the past that I know.*
>
> *Steve: 'Single women'...?*
>
> *Fazila: Yes, and I know that they are lesbian, but I don't know*
>
> *that they shared that with us and it's not my right to read that*
>
> *they are 'therefore worse'...* [Social Worker, NE3].

Another adoption worker, Martin, also raised this issue:

I placed a boy for adoption with a single woman in another authority, and she lived in the house with another woman. Her Form F had been written about her, with the other woman under "other people in the household", and although everyone was clear about how this other woman fitted in, in terms of caring for the child, no-one asked about their relationship. It wasn't in the assessment report, and no-one asked during the matching process, and I never asked the applicant or her social worker, and the boy's social worker never asked and the panel never asked. I guess in a way we were opting out, but I do think if the other person living in the house had been a man then we would have asked, and I guess we didn't ask because we weren't really sure if you should ask. I think my feeling was if I'd done the assessment I would've been unhappy about not putting in what the nature of their relationship was, because it felt like you didn't get the whole picture, like there was a big hole. I wanted to know whether in the assessment it had been asked about and a decision was made not to put it in there, or if it just hadn't been asked about. In some ways it made life easier because it made it hard for adoption panel to challenge them on those grounds, because I feel that if we went to our adoption panel with a lesbian couple I'm not convinced that they would say it was fine.
[Social Worker, NE5].

This point also came up in a number of the interviews with social workers. When I asked them whether they had any lesbian carers, several respondents replied along the lines of, "If you mean openly lesbian, then no...". Many of the social workers recognized that their single women carers, either in the past or amongst present carers, may have been lesbians, but they suggested that openly acknowledging this in an assessment would have prevented the approval of such women by panels.

The 'Lesbian Threat'?

Law reports on *B v B (Minors) (Custody, Care and Control)* (see Family Court Reporter 1991; Family Law 1991; Family Law Reports 1991) point to the distinctions made in constructions of different versions of the category 'lesbian' in law. The judgment in *B v B* stated:

> *...what is so important in cases is to distinguish between militant lesbians who try to convert others to their way of life, where there may well be risks that counterbalance other aspects of welfare and are detrimental to the long-term interests of children either in relation to their sexual identity or corruption, and lesbians in private. In this case, I am dealing with two lesbians who are private persons who both do not believe in advertising their*

lesbianism and acting in the public field in favour of promoting

lesbianism...So it is a wholly different kind of case from that of

the militant lesbianism... (1 FLR: 410).

I have used this example to show the distinctions made in discourse surrounding the lesbian (Jagose 1994) between the acceptable ('private') lesbian and the 'militant', the lesbian as a threat (Stanley & Wise 1993:88). I think that my data from the social worker interviews illustrates how such distinctions are made, discursively and textually, by the social workers with regard to how lesbianism is represented as 'the good carer' or as unacceptable. The most unacceptable 'lesbian' is the militant lesbian, and it is my view that this particular version is the one that constructs the lesbian as most threatening to male power, to compulsory heterosexuality and to a regulatory gender system.

In this version of the lesbian 'threat', applicants may be theorized as having rejected men, and this is why they are so threatening:

"...lesbians are oppressed because we are particularly

threatening women - women who aren't dependent on men and,

in this sense, 'free women'." (Stanley & Wise 1993:88).

Returning to the quotation which I discussed at the start of this section, here children are seen as the property of men, and so the threatening lesbian - who

has rejected men - is selfish in her application to foster or adopt because that is the only way that she is able to get a child. I think that this view was expressed to me by Wayne, an adoption worker:

> Take a woman who is - say - twenty-five, maybe thirty, well why is it that she wants to adopt? Has she ever been in a relationship with a man? How does she know she won't have a child and who told her so? What made her believe she wouldn't? Lots of women out there are single and they have their own children and they don't even want to know about the father, you know... I've known women who don't want the guy except that she wants a child. Women do have these things going for them sometimes. So why would a young, healthy woman want to adopt without going through that process? If the reason you're doing it is totally a rejection of men, that is a different situation. [Social Worker, NR4].

I put it to Wayne that some lesbians are not interested in trying to have a biological child, and that they have chosen adoption as a first choice, not because they have failed to, or cannot, have a birth child. In fact I gave him the example of Nita & Clare, discussed in chapter six. His response was to suggest that they were using the child to bring a 'warmth' to their relationship that he obviously felt would be lacking. Wayne's version of 'the lesbian' is one of threat,

women who have rejected men, equating lesbianism with lack (Jagose 1994:111).

A Feminist Analysis

I have been arguing that my research with the social workers found social working here acting as a regulatory practice, in which lesbian applicants were, at the very least, represented according to the heteronormative expectations of the 'good carer', and, at worst, rejected as 'too radical, too political, too challenging of men, indeed **too lesbian**'. This relied upon fixing such a category as having a singular meaning: the lesbian as 'threat' to male power, gendered norms and heterosexuality.

I am not arguing that all the social workers responded in this way, and I have suggested that the lesbian social workers operated differently. They demonstrated Brown's model of assessment which was neither positively nor negatively stereotypical (Brown 1991, 1992a), in that they argued that the category 'lesbian' did not mean either automatically unable to care for children or automatically 'safe, able to care'.

Nevertheless, here I want to focus on the regulatory practices that I discovered in the social work assessment of lesbians. What perhaps surprised me the most when looking at the data was the fact that the social workers continued to raise

issues of gender, far more than sexuality, with regard to lesbians, and it is this 'gender anxiety' that I focus on here.

It might be appropriate here to start with the question "what is a lesbian"? (Wilton 1995:29). The category brings with it a multiplicity of contradictory meanings, so much that the notion of 'a lesbian' is hard to define (Butler 1991:15; Takagi 1996: 250; Vicinus 1989). Indeed, among lesbians *"...there is profound dissensus about lesbian identity, with essentialist and constructionist theories of varying kinds and degrees giving rise to contradictory and often competing performances of 'lesbian', as well as political and theoretical positions."* (Wilton 1995:29). This is certainly not to say, however, that the 'lesbian' does not exist - certainly she does, and the word describes an important political, epistemological and ontological category (Stanley 1992a). Attempting to define what is a lesbian, however, is probably impossible and certainly objectionable. Instead, a focus on lesbian epistemology and ontology is a more productive project (Stanley 1992a: 2). The existence of the category depends upon a shared set of experiences and knowledge, but it does not describe a 'type' of person (National Lesbian and Gay Survey 1992).

Asking a woman how many men she knows is a practice which rests upon a particular interpretation of 'lesbian', and one in which gender anxiety is to the fore. Social work, and social workers, do not have any agreed sense of what is a lesbian (Brown 1992b), and my data shows a number of different interpretations.

However, in the majority of cases the social workers relied upon the most readily available of cultural definitions of 'lesbian' - or, in Foucauldian terms, the most powerful definition exercised through the regulatory discourse surrounding 'the lesbian' (Foucault 1978) - which constructs the lesbian as a threat and invokes gender anxiety.

The regulation of the lesbian 'threat', and the consequent distinction made in discourse between the 'good' and the 'bad' lesbian, has been discussed in earlier work on court cases concerning custody disputes over children involving lesbian mothers (Arnup 1989, 1995; Arnup & Boyd 1995; Gavigan 1995; Harne & Rights of Women 1997; Hitchens & Price 1978/79; Hunter & Polikoff 1976; Polikoff 1990; Rights of Women Lesbian Custody Group 1986). Much of this work points to what we might term the dilemma or debate about 'court-room strategies', in which lesbian mothers have to present a version of themselves as the 'good carer' to the court:

> *Good lesbian mothers, women who live quiet, discreet lives, who*
> *promise that they will raise their children to be heterosexual, who*
> *appear to the outside world to be heterosexual single parents,*
> *have in recent years increasingly succeeded in winning custody*
> *of their children. "Bad" lesbian mothers, women who are open*
> *about their sexual orientation, who attend gay and lesbian*
> *demonstrations and other public events, and who view their*

lesbianism positively or as one aspect of an entire challenge to

society, are almost certain to lose custody of their children to

their ex-husbands. (Arnup 1995:382-3).

This was picked up in some of the earliest work on custody cases involving lesbian mothers (Hitchens & Price 1978/79; Hunter & Polikoff 1976). Hunter & Polikoff pointed out that distinctions in court were being made between the so-called 'discreet' lesbian and the lesbian living in an open and ongoing relationship with another woman. Thus in the case *Mitchell v. Mitchell*, the court awarded custody to the mother on the condition that she not live with her female companion, and that she associate with her only when the children were away at school or with their father (Hunter & Polikoff 1976:697-8; see also Hitchens & Price 1978/79:455).

Hunter & Polikoff advise court-room strategies or trial tactics that they argue increase the likelihood of the lesbian mother winning custody of her children. These include presenting herself as living alone, and providing expert testimony that argues that lesbianism is not the most important factor in her parenting abilities. She should also emphasize her positive relationships with men in her network (Hunter & Polikoff 1976:715-729). Hitchens & Price also argue for expert testimony which points out that the children of lesbians are no more likely to grow up to be gay, to have confused sex-role identification, or be socially stigmatized (Hitchens & Price 1978/79:464-68). They conclude that such testimony *"...can*

*serve to **lessen the impact on the court of the mother's lesbianism**, thus creating a situation where the mother may be judged on her own individualized merits."* (Hitchens & Price 1978/79:479, my added emphasis).

Thus lessening the impact of lesbianism is largely about diverting attention away from the challenge that lesbians pose to compulsory heterosexuality, gender roles and male power, their *"ability to raise children autonomously from men."* (Arnup & Boyd 1995: 79). In the work of Hunter & Polikoff (1976) and Hitchens & Price (1978/79), this is acknowledged as a court-room strategy, most likely to win the lesbian mother custody of her children, but it involves a presentation and construction of a certain kind of lesbian self, the 'good/discreet lesbian'. Arnup & Boyd argue that this has been necessary because the legal system has shown a *"profound resistance to parenting outside the institutions of heterosexuality and patriarchy"* (Arnup & Boyd 1995:81), and that lesbians in court have had to *"act as 'straight' as possible"* (Arnup & Boyd 1995:83).

In re-reading this work on lesbian custody, I was struck by the similarities between the 'good/discreet' lesbian, who is awarded custody of her children, and the 'good lesbian carer' constructed by many, though not all, of the social workers that I interviewed. I am also reminded of my own arguments in chapter six about the heterosexualisation of lesbians (Wilton 1996b, 1996c) in the case of Nita & Clare (see page 346). I set about constructing a table which compares the 'good/discreet lesbian' of custody cases with the 'good lesbian carer' found in the

data from my interviews with the social workers, and this is shown at Figure 5.1:

THE 'GOOD LESBIAN'	
The good/discreet lesbian mother who wins custody.	**The good lesbian carer who is approved for fostering/ adoption.**
Discreet, quiet, non-'promoting' of lesbianism.	Able to deal with anti-lesbian prejudice of birth families, some children/young people and panel.
Prove or promise to raise kids straight, with correct gender-role identification.	Not threatening to gender norms, integrated with heterosexuals. Positive role model of a woman.
Provide male role models, and heterosexual role models.	'Gender anxiety': likely to know men, have male role models, present positive images of men. Integrated into wider (heterosexual) community and family.
Probably not in a lesbian relationship, though not always.	'Single women': issues of sexuality not raised.
Lesbianism not central to her child care abilities.	The 'on merit' model: child care abilities emphasized as paramount.
Does not involve herself in political activities, does not see lesbianism as a challenge to society and/or male power.	Non-'militant', non-radical, not political.
Can argue that her lesbianism will not influence or stigmatize children - use expert psychological testimony.	Able to deal with teasing of children, able to cope with heterosexual children or emergent heterosexuality of children.

Figure 5.1

Figure 5.1 therefore illustrates the most common themes emerging from my data

in terms of how the social workers theorized bringing together constructions of

the categories 'lesbian' and 'carer of children (mother)' as 'the good lesbian

carer'. These themes do not 'truly represent' the lesbian applicants in question, but rather show how the regulatory processes of social work assessment here construct an acceptable version of that category within the discourses surrounding 'the good carer'.

Early examples of lesbian feminism (Abbott & Love 1972; Faraday 1981; Frye 1983; Johnston 1973; Martin & Lyon 1972; Radicalesbians 1970) identified the lesbian as threatening to male power since lesbians were seen to exhibit a sexuality without men (Abbott & Love 1972:19), especially in the case of lesbian mothers (Martin & Lyon 1972:123). But all agree that it is as women, as much as because of sexuality, that lesbians are oppressed:

> *What is a lesbian? ...on some level she has not been able to*
> *accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most*
> *basic role of her society - the female role...* (Radicalesbians
> 1970:172).

An example of the lesbian as 'threat' is that of 'single women', evidenced in my data. When suspected - and sometimes known - lesbians are assessed by social workers as 'single women' only, even when they are living with another woman as in the case reported to me by Martin, then lesbianism is the absent presence. The sexuality of the woman in question is left unstated by the assessing social worker, so that the version presented to the fostering or adoption panel is a

'single applicant'. This relates directly to the model of 'tacit acceptance' of lesbian or gay carers - subsumed under the misnomer 'single people' - in the adoption white paper (DoH *et al.* 1993). Here then lesbianism is a lacuna, and so the 'single woman' comes to represent the '**absolute** good carer': female, caring, protective, single, with no men around the home to worry about, as long as - in this case - lesbianism is left unstated. Bring a stated lesbianism into the frame, and a whole series of cultural anxieties about gendered heterosexuality are brought into play.

These cultural anxieties were evident in the social workers' responses to the assessment of lesbians. Many of them were concerned that their fostering or adoption panels (especially adoption panels) were 'too conservative' and unlikely to approve lesbian applicants. With regard to the 'good lesbian carer', I found - in summary - that lesbians were asked whether they had male friends, what male role models they could provide, and about their attitudes towards men. Concerning heterosexuality, lesbians were asked whether they could provide a balance of gendered role models, whether they had heterosexual friends or influences, and to show that they knew people other than lesbians and gay men. Lesbians were frequently expected to provide heterosexual referees, and to show that they had regular contact with other 'families', heterosexual not lesbian ones. Concerning gender, there was a debate about whether lesbians provide the correct gender messages to sexually abused children, lesbians were asked about their attitudes towards gender roles for children, and there was some

concern that a stated gender preference for girls or boys would cause problems with approval.

A particularly helpful feminist response, here, is to turn things around and to actually ask then "what is heterosexuality?" and how does it function? (Maynard & Purvis 1995a; Richardson 1996a; Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1993). This is a novel way of using my data, since the data is - on the surface - about lesbians and about gay men, but I think that it also tells us a lot about heterosexuality. Such an analysis of oppression relating to both gender and heterosexuality has been central to lesbian feminism for many years (Bell & Klein 1996; Harne & Miller 1996; Jeffreys 1993; Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group 1981; Radicalesbians 1970; Rich 1980).

With regard to fostering and adoption assessments, heterosexuality is largely absent from analysis, as it is generally (Kitzinger & Wilkinson 1993:3), rather like 'whiteness' (Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993). Identifying what heterosexuality is, or how it works, is rare (Kitzinger & Wilkinson 1993:5), but when lesbianism enters the frame, then heterosexuality is threatened, so much that some have suggested that the lesbian cannot be 'woman' as it is traditionally constructed under heteronormativity (Wittig 1992). Thus the lesbian mother - the lesbian carer applicant - is a threat to patriarchal institutions such as the family (Pollack 1987:318), and so she is judged against an implicit heterosexual norm (Pollack 1987:320).

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I think that my data supports the view that fostering and adoption assessment

practices are based upon heteronormativity, so that lesbian applicants displace

implicit assumptions behind social work practices:

> *...most of the conceptual frameworks we use to theorize human*
>
> *relations rely implicitly upon a naturalized heterosexuality, where*
>
> *(hetero-)sexuality tends either to be ignored in the analysis or is*
>
> *hidden from view, being treated as an unquestioned paradigm."*
>
> (Richardson 1996b:1).

But I have also been arguing quite clearly that this heterosexuality is gendered

absolutely (and I use chapter six to show how it is also raced). Diane Richardson

notes that *"heterosexuality inscribes difference; it is a construction of 'otherness'*

in gendered terms" (Richardson 1996b:6), and so in the assessment of lesbians

there was much confusion amongst the social workers about a perceived 'lack' of

gender difference within, say, a lesbian couple. This 'gender difference' is

therefore looked for elsewhere by the social workers, using questions like, "how

many men do you know?" and so on.

This also links directly to the social workers' questions about the gender and

sexual development of children placed with lesbian carers. Concerns that

children should receive the correct amount of male and heterosexual role models

betray what Michael Warner calls 'fear of a queer planet' (Warner 1993a), and what Cindy Patton suggests is, in fact, heterosexuality's dread; *"...the possibility of turning into a queer (or turning out to be queer)..."* (Patton 1993:150). Thus in traditional sex role socialization theories, lesbians can only ever be 'mal-socialized deviants' (Stanley & Wise 1993:102) who may pass on such role models to children, those models being either 'queerness' or one which questions male privilege. Lesbians generate gender anxiety, here, because they cannot be 'read off' against gendered heterosexuality in any unproblematic way:

> *The heterosexualisation of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female." The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist" - that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender.* (Butler 1990:17).

Thus gender anxiety here relates not only to the concerns of the social workers in assessing lesbian applicants as potential carers, but also to their theorizing of the supposed 'effects' of lesbianism upon the gender and sexual development of children that might be placed within lesbian homes. Conversely, fostering and

adoption assessments have traditionally so much constructed heterosexuality as equating with 'good carer' that the (hetero)sexuality of such applicants is rarely, if ever, addressed. Thus I am arguing that there is an unacknowledged assumption that heterosexual carers will automatically 'socialize' children into correct gender and sexual identities, but that this is also a regulatory social work practice:

> *...the "unity" of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality.* (Butler 1990:31).

Here we are, then, a long way from a 'dual identities' analysis. Instead I found that 'the lesbian' generated a whole series of gender anxieties for the social workers, and also concerns about the threat that the lesbian posed to heterosexuality and male power (specifically, the example of the cultural assumption that children are the property of men). My analysis of the 'good lesbian carer' points to a social work-ing which is actually about constructing, and shoring up, such normative heterosexuality in relation to who makes a good carer for children.

In the next section, I go on to consider how the social workers handled applications to foster or adopt by gay men, and - once more - I found that 'gender anxiety' was a key dynamic.

Section 2: Assessing Gay Men

If a sexuality is to be disclosed, what will be taken as the true determinant of its meaning: the phantasy structure, the act, the orifice, the gender, the anatomy? And if the practice engages a complex interplay of all of those, which one of these erotic dimensions will come to stand for the sexuality that requires them all? (Butler 1991:17).

The elaborating of certain erotic preferences into a 'character' - into a kind of erotically determined essence - can never be a disinterested scientific enterprise. The attempted stabilizing of identity is inherently a disciplinary project. (Bersani 1995:2-3).

A homosexual couple applied to adopt...I think they were actually applying for a physically handicapped child. The social worker took it to the panel initially for a decision, before she started the home study, and I think the answer came back that it was okay to go ahead with it. It wasn't something that we could let go by, because not many people come here and offer to adopt a physically handicapped child...and, if you're talking about a child that has a mental handicap or had got learning difficulties of some kind, then maybe it wouldn't have been so obvious to them that the couple were differently sexually oriented...[Social

Worker, SR5].

In this section I analyze the data from interviews with the social workers, concentrating on what they had to say about assessing gay men as the potential carers of children. I construct a comparative analysis with the data on assessing lesbians, focusing on the gendered understandings of the category 'gay', the issue of gender role models, whether it is boys or girls that the social workers thought gay men should care for, how gay men *qua* men are seen as the potential carers of children, constructions of the 'gay man' as sexually predatory or abusive, what are seen as appropriate placements for gay carers, and how the notion of the 'single male carer' was handled.

Further, I consider two areas which I found came up in relation to gay men that did not with regard to lesbians; and these are, first, the generation of an 'anxiety' about the "vulnerability" of gay men to allegations of child abuse by the children in their charge, and, second, adoption especially being seen as a less appropriate form of care. Finally, I go on to present an analysis of what might be termed 'the promotion of homosexuality', in which I consider how 'gay-ness' disrupts heterosexuality as the unmarked norm in fostering and adoption.

Throughout this section I have also drawn upon data from a further small-scale case study. This is the story of John, a single white gay man, who applied and was approved to foster Ismail, a young heterosexual man of Muslim Turkish

Cypriot origin. John had been in a previous heterosexual relationship at the time of his fostering application, and so was not explicitly 'out' as gay. Some time after he had been fostering Ismail, John met and began a relationship with Rob, an Asian gay man of Indian descent who grew up in Britain. Rob moved in, and so John informed the social workers of this development, which he believes they handled very badly. The couple later made a request to be considered as the carers of Nazan, Ismail's sister, but they were refused, despite the fact that Nazan wanted to be placed with her brother.

A Return to the 'Dual Identities' Thesis?

In chapter two I showed how the research of Frederick W. Bozett, like Romans' (1990, 1991) work on the 'lesbian mother', concentrated on the 'identity' of the gay father. This he also saw as a 'dual identity' incorporating the extremes of social acceptability, 'gay' versus 'father' (Bozett 1981, 1985, 1987d, 1989b, 1990). Bozett similarly argues that the typical 'career' of the gay father involves moving towards the successful integration of a conflicting identity, achieved through a series of phases (Bozett 1985:330). Bozett argues that the gay father has to 'come out' of a 'double closet', telling heterosexual people that he is gay and gay people that he is a father (Bozett 1985:337).

Bozett's work (1981, 1985, 1987d, 1989b, 1990) is problematic in much the same ways as that of Romans (1990, 1991), since it rests on the notion that gay fathers

work towards achieving *"an identity as a gay and an identity as a father..."* (Bozett 1981:552), which rests within psychological and personal processes:

> *By actively functioning both as a gay as well as a father, in time he can eliminate cognitive dissonance and place himself in the cognitive category of gay father. By these means, then, the gay father achieves identity congruence and self-acceptance.* (Bozett 1981:559).

Once more, the notion of an identity category here is a fixed, singular one, seen as belonging to the individual subject. When gay men present themselves to be considered as potential foster or adoptive carers, however, it is highly unlikely that social workers construct their 'identities' in this way. First, my data will show that the category 'father' is by no means universally *"culturally accepted and respected"* (Bozett 1981:552) by the social workers who are confronted with having to assess men as the potential carers of children. Second, the category 'gay' has no agreed understanding amongst social workers either; for instance, some social workers do *not* hold 'negative

stereotypes of homosexuality' (Bozett 1981:552). Thus here I want to examine the data in order to understand the kinds of "versions of gay" being constructed by the social workers via their social work-ing.

Social Workers Assessing Gay Men: evidence from the data

When a fostering or adoption applicant presents themselves to a social work agency as 'a gay man', any number of understandings of that category might be used by the assessing social worker. This is a point made by Butler (1991) with regard to the category 'lesbian':

> I'm not at ease with "lesbian theories, gay theories" for...identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes....So I am skeptical about how the "I" is determined as it operates under the title of the lesbian sign, and I am no more comfortable with its homophobic determination than with those normative definitions offered by other members of the "gay or lesbian community." ...For it is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier, since its signification is always to some degree out of one's control, but also because its **specificity** can only be demarcated by exclusions that return to disrupt its claims to coherence. (Butler 1991:13-15).

Thus describing oneself as 'gay' in no way guarantees how this will be understood by social workers. The category itself is always partly regulatory since, first, it privileges sexuality over any other categories that might have been used; 'white', 'working class' and so on. Second, uses of the category 'gay' by the social workers are *always* regulatory since 'gay' is interpreted and represented by

them as 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' to the notion of who makes a good-enough carer of children. Third, however much choosing to define oneself as the 'stable identity' gay is a limiting project (Bersani 1995: 2-3; Edwards 1994:113), this *absolutely does not* guarantee any reading of that category by others, here the social workers.

As with the assessment of lesbians, I found that gender was a key concern of the social workers when they talked to me about gay men. Just as the category 'lesbian' raised anxieties about correct gender role modelling, and the need for a conventionally balanced (heterosexual) view of gender, so too with gay men:

> *In their social groups, are they only socializing with men because they are also men? Are they socializing with men who are the same, like a club? What women do they know? To ask things like that would be useful...*[Social Worker, NR4].

Lisa also raised this:

> **Steve:** *Did you talk to them about gender issues in terms of what women were in their network?*
> **Lisa:** *Yes because that came up at panel too, and I knew that would come up in panel...Yes I did, do you want to know what came out of that really...?*

Steve: Yes...

Lisa: I mean, yes they had sisters who visited occasionally. There wasn't a lot of regular contact...Well it was regular but infrequent, the contact with the sisters, but they were important and good relationships that they had but they weren't rushing to the house all the time. They certainly had colleagues through work, some lesbian women, and a few neighbours. Primarily it was a male household but it wasn't exclusively male. There were women around, and certainly in the assessment I picked up that they'd been very encouraging of the mothers of the young people, that they'd looked after in the supported lodgings scheme, to be involved, so I didn't feel there was any difficulty that they had including women in their lifestyle and in their world. It was just that their interests were probably spent more with men.

Steve: And that came up at panel as well?

Lisa: Yes.

Steve: Do you remember what was said?

Lisa: I think it was just that they said, 'What about the women?' and I just said, 'Yes I've addressed that,' and I don't think it was a big thing...Certainly I was expecting it because, when they were used by another local authority, then I know that their panel were asking that...'Where are the women?' [Social Worker, NR7].

As with my analysis regarding the data on lesbians, this demonstrates the kinds of cultural gender anxieties brought into play by the category 'gay'. Here, once again, is the theorization of gender role models, seen as coming from within the home and from the carers only, seen as directly modeling gender for children (Golombok & Fivush 1994), and more importantly seen as a problem because not conventionally 'gendered' in heterosexual terms.

My analysis of whether gay men were seen as the appropriate carers for girls or boys showed a marked gender preference for boys and young men by the social workers. Rarely, if ever, were gay men seen to be appropriate as carers of girls or young women, although this did happen in some cases. The social workers did one of two things here; first, they assumed that gay men would want to care for boys or young men only, and talked about their gay carers in these terms. I found this to be the case, even where the gay carer(s) in question had been approved to care for boys and girls. Second, others argued that it was inappropriate for gay men to care for female children, and that they would not place girls with male carers. Tom told me that this was the case, yet he began to question the basis for this practice:

> *I suppose you could understand that, if it were a single straight*
>
> *man, it would be inappropriate to place fifteen-year-old girls with*
>
> *him, but you wouldn't use the same argument for gay men. In*

fact, that same argument would say you shouldn't place boys

with gay men if the idea is that single straight men could seduce,

or be seduced by, or have sexual relationships with teenage

girls. [Social Worker, NE4].

This shows a contrast to what I found in relation to the assessment of lesbian carers. Lesbians were sometimes asked not to make a statement of preference to care for girls or young women (see chapter six on Nita and Clare, for example), and were frequently approved for, and seen as the appropriate carers of, both boys and girls. Gay men, however, were largely held to be the appropriate carers of boys and young men only by the social workers. Rarely were they approved to care for girls (although this *does* happen in some cases).

'Maternal' Men or 'Perverts'?

My analysis of the data has discovered what I term a 'discourse of suspicion' concerning the idea of men as the carers of children. Social workers are far less used to working with men as clients (Cavanagh & Cree 1996), and, in fostering and adoption, I believe that there are assumptions made about the role of the woman in a heterosexual couple as primary carer, protector, and nurturer. This is at least partly because social workers are used to dealing with children who have been subjected to the physical and sexual violences of men (Hearn 1990, 1998; Kelly 1988; Pringle 1995):

Men are more likely to be accused of abuse and we're actually

normally recruiting a lot of single women, or women with male

partners, and a lot of it is about the women protecting the males

in the household...If the children have been abused, then they're

likely to have been abused by a male (but not always), so for gay

men this is a particular problem because they don't have a

female that can back them up and take over...We do have

[straight] partnerships where the male is at home and the female

is working, so the male is doing the basic care of small children,

but we haven't - interestingly enough - had gay men offering to

look after very small children and I would say we would probably

have quite a bit of time convincing a panel as to why, and that is

to do with prejudice about why men want to care for small

children. [Team Manager, NR9].

Gay men, then, bring this 'discourse of suspicion' into play for the social workers

doing assessments, because when they apply to foster or adopt - and this

applies to 'single men' also - the assessing social worker has to confront a male

household, a household in which it is unlikely that there is a woman that they can

position as carer, nurturer, protector. Instead, gay men bring two sets of cultural

anxieties into play here; gay men *qua* men are not seen as the 'natural' carers of

children and, relatedly, as *gay* men they disrupt the conventionally heterosexual

model of 'the family' which still holds sway in much fostering and, especially, adoption practice.

There is little evidence that men do much child care within heterosexual partnerships (VanEvery 1996) and much that they are responsible for most physical and sexual violences against children (Archer 1994; Hester *et al*. 1996; Kelly 1988). The social workers were often suspicious of the category 'men' in relation to child care, although they did make exceptions to this. Nevertheless, I found several references to the idea that men are not generally regarded as the 'natural' carers of children. Further, in the case study, John told me that his assessment as a potential foster carer focused on his position as a 'single man', seen in itself as unusual, in order that the social worker could check out his ability to perform a range of caring tasks for Ismail. I argue, therefore, that social work here traditionally relies upon the idea that women protect children from men. Gay male applicants are a problem here because the social workers have no women in the household assessment to rely upon in terms of the protection of children.

When analyzing the data, I became very interested in the language used by the social workers in relation to the categories 'men' and also 'gay men'. Around the category 'men' I observed the construction of a discourse of 'dangerousness' and 'non-care' of children, and this is represented in Figure 5.2:

```
THE CATEGORY 'MEN'

predatory
abusers
need to be protected from allegations by children
not 'natural' carers
not nurturers
more likely to sexually abuse than women
need to be careful about, or shouldn't be, touching or bathing children

'there is more of a tradition of women bringing up children'
'boys who've been sexually abused shouldn't go to men'
'we're prejudiced against male carers'
'why do men want to care for children?'
'every male person is going to be a threat to them...'
```

Figure 5.2

I found that, for those social workers who believed that gay men could make good foster or adoptive carers, there was a tendency to reverse this discourse in order to present the category 'gay' as equating with the notion of *'maternal men'*. The social workers theorized that gay men would either act as a 'positive male role model' for children who had had abusive experiences of men in the past, or they represented gay men in terms that are more usually applied to women as carers:

```
THE CATEGORY 'GAY MEN'

affectionate
warm
really open
caring
gentle

'he took a very female role'
'men can be gentle, caring and the other side of things'
'one of them actually took on a much more traditional maternal role, and the other paternal,
and people are looking for those in panel...'
'they were so open and easy to work with'
'he offers traditionally "Mum"-things, and traditionally female strengths...'
```

Figure 5.3

My argument here would be that such terms, as they were used by the social workers, are not mere descriptors, but rather active linguistic constructors of meaning (Barthes 1977). Thus language here is no neutral conveyor of an already-agreed concept - such as 'gay' - but instead demonstrates the social workers' theorisations of such a category. This is also quite clearly bound up with their practices, so, where a social worker takes a report on a gay carer to fostering or adoption panel for approval, that report is also a textual representation of the category gay. Here, then, 'gay men' are largely represented or constructed as *'maternal'*, and some of the language in Figure 5.3 represents gay men *in heterosexual terms*:

> *"...one of them actually took on a much more traditional maternal role, and the other paternal, and people are looking for those in panel..."* [Social Worker, NR7].

However, in contrast to the way that gay men were constructed as 'maternal' by the social workers, as a different form of 'men', they were also regarded with suspicion as *gay* men. Here the focus was far more upon sexuality rather than gender, and this relates to the persistent connotation of 'pervert', 'predatory' and 'paedophile' by the category 'gay'. This 'corruption theory' (Berry 1987) surfaced a number of times in my data. In the case study, John told me that, when he came out to his social worker about his relationship with Rob, he was asked questions about the nature of his relationship with Ismail and whether this had

ever been sexual. This question was never addressed in John's fostering assessment or approval, but only when he came out as gay.

Lisa told me that her fostering panel also raised this question:

> *What did come up in panel was the protection thing...I felt it was quite hard going through the panel and, although people feel they're terribly fair and right-on about these things, there was underlying stuff around. This was about protection and I can only think that assumptions were being made that a young person going into this household was going to be more at risk because these people were gay. I thought that was really unfair, but I had addressed all the usual stuff about how to deal with young people who've been abused, and how the carers will protect themselves, in my assessment so I said, 'Well, I've actually addressed that...' But I was really quite shocked by that.* [Social Worker, NR7].

Caroline, a fostering team leader, also told me that she would be questioned by her panel about why gay men would want to care for younger children. She related this to the idea that carers in all-male households would need to be very clear about how to protect themselves from allegations of abuse, or from situations which could be interpreted as abusive, but she felt that this would be a

bigger issue for gay men:

Gay men are going to have a much more difficult time because,
well, there are more men abusers and men are seen as more
predatory and not the natural carers of children. [Team Manager,
NR9].

The social workers frequently mentioned this *'pernicious association with child*
abuse' [Social Worker, NE6] for gay men, but I found that they linked this to two
major areas; first, they told me that it was fostering or adoption **panels** that
maintained such 'prejudices', and, second, they linked this to what they described
as gay men's extra "vulnerability" to allegations of child abuse, which I discuss
later.

Gloria, who worked on an adoption team, told me that some of her social work
colleagues held what she called stereotypical views of gay men:

Colleagues will say, 'Oh they're so promiscuous.' We had a
discussion about sexuality one day and I just could not believe
what I was hearing because I was under the misconception that I
was working with enlightened beings! I was absolutely shocked
because I could not believe the homophobic utterances. One
colleague said, 'You have to accept that it is a fact that

homosexual men are so promiscuous,' and another said, 'I can't

bear the thought of what men do sexually.' So the stereotypical

thing is promiscuity and instability and disgusting sexual

practices and contamination of innocent minds, all that kind of

thing. [Social Worker, NR10].

This 'discourse of suspicion' was frequently cited by the social workers as a reason why decisions were made not to place children in the care of gay men. In one example, Jo, a senior social worker with a fostering team, told me that a social worker looking to place a fourteen-year-old young man, who had been abused by an older man, would not consider placing him with a gay foster carer because this was seen to be inappropriate. The social worker said that the gay carer would be more likely to be at risk of allegations of abuse, but Jo felt that the social worker thought 'gay men will have sexual relationships with children'.

As with lesbian carers, the issue of whether to place children who had been sexually abused with gay men was a key point for the social workers. As I have already noted, there was a general suspicion about the appropriateness of men *per se* caring for such children, but this was linked to the idea that male carers - whether gay or straight - act as 'role models' to such children by force of example. Thus I found that one version, here, was to argue that children who have been sexually abused should not be placed with men, especially as most will have been abused by an adult male:

I was talking to a social worker about a referral she had made of a young man who needed fostering. One option I offered was the gay male couple, but she was concerned that, as this young person had been abused by a man, how would that be for him, being placed with two men? I don't see it as being a problem but clearly it was for her. [Social Worker, NR3].

However, I also found some evidence of a version which suggested that gay men could act as 'positive male role models' to such children, since the children would then see that not all men are abusers, an idea which I have criticized elsewhere (Hicks, forthcoming).

Neither of these versions of the gay man - the *'naturally "maternal" positive male role model'* or the *'predatory abuser'* - seem to me to be particularly helpful in terms of conducting assessments of gay men who apply to foster or adopt. They encapsulate Brown's positive and negative stereotypes (Brown 1991, 1992a) in which the category 'gay' is used in an unquestioning way that confers upon it a fixed and determinate meaning. Where such a meaning is given to the applicant in advance of any assessment, this is likely to impair the social worker's ability to assess child care skills, and indeed sexuality.

Relatedly, I also looked at evidence from my data about the 'type' of placements

for which gay men are approved, and/or have children placed within their care. In addition to the preference for placing boys or young men which I have already mentioned, I found there were five significant factors which tended to characterize the children placed with gay men. First, gay men were seen as the appropriate carers of older children, usually over the age of eleven; second, they were far more likely to be approved as foster carers rather than adopters; third, they were often given shorter-term and/or emergency placements rather than children being placed with the view to permanency; fourth, they were sometimes seen as the appropriate carers for disabled children, including those with a learning difficulty, a point confirmed in existing research (Ricketts 1991; Skeates & Jabri 1988); and, fifth, they were often seen as the carers of young gay men.

I asked the social workers about how they went about assessing 'single men', since I wanted to find out whether the same dynamics arose as had with the 'single women' question. The social workers told me that a single man applying to foster or adopt was, in itself, unusual and so this raised a series of questions which seem to me to relate to issues of gender and sexuality. The social workers told me that a single man is likely to provoke a series of questions for themselves and for panels, since social work agencies often work with the assumption that (heterosexual) men (in partnerships) do not care for children. Applications by single men, then, although in themselves rare, do raise questions about their motives in wanting to care for children, and about their sexuality. Many felt that 'single man' was often read as 'gay', but certainly 'odd' because panels were so

unused to the idea of men as primary carers of children. Annie told me that she

had never heard a request by a placing social worker for a single male carer:

> *I can't ever remember seeing a placement form where someone*
>
> *has written 'this child needs a single male household.' I have seen*
>
> *'single female' quite a lot, and never 'two men' or 'two women'...*
>
> [Social Worker, NE10].

In my case study, John told me that his application to foster Ismail was unusual

as he was a 'single man' at the time. The assessing social worker made much of

this in the assessment, John remembered, checking out that he was able to

perform a range of caring tasks. He also felt that there was some degree of

suspicion about his motives in wanting to care for a young man, but this was not

raised openly until John later came out as gay when he began his relationship

with Rob. Applications by 'single men', then, including those few by men who are

heterosexual, raise the 'discourse of suspicion' which I have discussed earlier in

relation to the category 'gay'. This is in marked contrast to applications by 'single

women', where I found no evidence of such suspicions. Single men were also

seen as being particularly "vulnerable" to allegations of abuse by children in their

charge, and it is to this question that I now turn.

I found that many of the social workers constructed the idea that gay men would

be more "vulnerable" to allegations of abuse being made against them. Several

talked about this in terms of gay men taking a greater 'risk' than others by fostering or adopting, and they constructed this 'risk' in a number of ways; first, gay men were seen to be more "vulnerable" because allegations would be likely to confirm the stereotype of them as 'predatory abusers', whether that allegation were true or not. Here concerns about the media getting hold of such stories were paramount, and this betrays a wider concern amongst fostering and adoption units that the press might expose them for approving gay, or indeed lesbian, carers. What is most interesting, here, was the way that the social workers placed responsibility for this issue onto gay men themselves; they talked of gay men 'taking a greater risk', of gay men 'being more vulnerable' and of how 'hard it was for gay men to protect themselves'.

Second, men are more likely than women to be accused of abuse, the social workers told me. Richard, who worked on a fostering team, explained that figures from the National Foster Care Association showed that it was almost always male carers who were accused of abuse by children, usually for what were seen as forms of 'inappropriate touching'. Richard told me that his unit advised male carers in heterosexual partnerships never to be alone with children and not to involve themselves in intimate care such as bathing. For gay men, he said, this was a problem and so they were more "vulnerable". A team manager also told me that gay men do not have a woman to protect them from what she called 'mischievous allegations' by children in the home, and so she felt that the issues of self-protection were much harder for gay men.

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Two points arose from this; one was that some placing social workers used these ideas to argue against using gay carers. In one example, Jo told me that a social worker had decided she did not want to place a young gay man with a gay foster carer. She argued that the boy had been in a "relationship" with a thirty-year-old man when he was just eleven, and so she felt that the gay carer would be more vulnerable to allegations of abuse by the young man. Second, where an allegation was made against a single gay carer, this was largely 'read' by the social workers via 'gay'-ness; by this I mean that the allegation itself was talked about in terms of 'the gay issue', and it became 'a gay issue' as opposed to 'an allegation issue'. Rarely do social workers focus on the heterosexuality of the - vast majority of - men who do abuse children in their care, but instead investigations focus on 'what happened' and who committed the abuse. In my example here, however, an allegation that the social workers decided was false was 'read' as a 'gay issue'. Rose, the social worker, told me that, in discussions about this allegation, the word "vulnerability" was used again and again to describe the gay man in question. This may be seen as a coded response to the anxieties that this carer embodied for the social workers - *single, gay, man*.

I also found, in line with my findings that gay men were generally understood to be the appropriate carers of young men needing short-term placements, that *adoption* was seen as less appropriate for gay men. Maude told me that she had volunteered to do an assessment of a gay male couple who had applied for

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adoption, despite never having done such an assessment before, because no-one else in her team wanted to do it. She felt that many of the social workers were embarrassed about the idea of assessing gay men, and the team overall had no previous experience of adoption by gay men. Another example is the one represented by the quotation from the social worker that I used to preface this section; here, a gay male couple applied to adopt and had to be taken to the panel for a decision to be made that the social workers could go ahead with an assessment. This is an example *par excellence* of disadvantageous (different) treatment of gay applicants, since it is not usual practice to take applicants to panels in advance of an assessment. Second, the social worker told me that the couple were more readily accepted by the panel because they had applied to adopt a learning disabled child, a rare resource indeed, and they also felt that the child might therefore be less aware that the carers were gay, and presumably less 'influenced' by this.

Three adoption workers told me that their panels were 'more conservative' than fostering panels, and therefore *extremely unlikely* to countenance applications by gay men. Martin also told me that his adoption panel would see this as 'forcing a gay lifestyle' onto the child in question. These social workers also made the point that it was gay *men*, not lesbians, that they felt would not be acceptable to their adoption panels. This is not to suggest that applications to adopt by lesbians are easily or universally accepted - far from it - but I did find that gay men are far less likely to be considered and/or approved for adoption. I also know this to be the

case from previous research (Hicks 1993, 1996); there are few gay men

approved as adoptive carers. Adoption retains the more conservative views of

'family life' both in practice and legislation (DoH *et al.* 1993; Triseliotis *et al.*

1997), and gay men challenge or threaten this on the grounds of gender *and*

sexuality.

'Gay is to straight as...': ***Promoting*** **Homosexuality?**

> *The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual*
>
> *frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-*
>
> *called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight **not** as copy*
>
> *is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic*
>
> *repetition of "the original"...reveals the original to be nothing*
>
> *other than a parody of the **idea** of the natural and the original.*
>
> (Butler 1990:31).

I want to argue, then, that applications to foster or adopt by gay men do bring into

play a set of cultural anxieties about **heterosexuality** and its supposed natural-

ness for some of the social workers, but certainly for fostering and adoption as a

whole. Using Butler's (1990) argument, gay applicants are regarded by the social

workers as different, as potentially able to care but not the same as the

heterosexual carers that they are used to assessing. Whilst this does set in

motion a whole range of ideas of what is a 'gay man', as I have shown, this also

throws some not insignificant focus onto assessment practices which rest upon an assumed and invisible heterosexuality. In Butler's version, this heterosexuality has no original essence, but instead has to constantly repeat and perform versions of itself:

> *...the parodic or imitative effect of gay identities works neither to copy nor to emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and **panicked** imitation of its own naturalized idealization.* (Butler 1991:22-23).

Thus there is no original heterosexuality possessed by straight applicants, but instead this in constructed during each assessment by the social worker, and it relies upon often unstated, but equally as much constructed, social norms around 'balanced gender roles', 'correct sexual development', compulsory heterosexuality and a kind of 'everyday, boring normality.' This, of course, contrasts nicely with the 'exoticism' given to lesbians and gay men who apply.

My data on the assessment of gay men points to this assumptive 'normality' of heterosexuality within the social workers' accounts, or what I have termed a 'heteronormativity' in chapter six. The heterosexual couple, and the 'nuclear family' (Brosnan 1996), were acknowledged by the social workers as the 'norm' in fostering and adoption practice, to the extent where some told me that they found themselves using the model of 'the heterosexual couple' in order to assess gay

men or lesbians:

> *What I started doing was just an **ordinary** assessment which was*
>
> *the **standard** form, and so I was looking at the caring capacity of*
>
> *the individuals, as opposed to whether they're gay or not, and so*
>
> *my questions were geared generally to **'male and female'** which is*
>
> ***what we have usually**...and I'm thinking, 'Well this is ridiculous*
>
> *because these are two guys here...'* [Social Worker, SR2, my
>
> emphasis].

Relatedly, I found the social workers constructing 'gendered difference' within the gay couple, representing one as 'the man' and one as 'the woman' in order to deal with the expectations of panels. This was largely because some of the social workers, and their panels, read caring tasks as *gendered* tasks; thus discipline, care, cooking and so on were often seen in traditionally gendered terms, with men often assumed to 'do' discipline whilst women 'do' care, protection, and cooking. In one example, Jo told me that a fostering panel looking at a gay male couple had asked whether they were able to do laundry.

I also found evidence of the anxiety that gay men would not be able to provide the correct role models of heterosexuality. Panels often wanted reassurance that gay men knew *heterosexual* people, not just other gay people, and some of the social workers were concerned about children not being able to 'learn

heterosexuality' from gay men:

> *If the child lives with them, then the point is will the child see this as*
> *an easy thing to accept rather than making a relationship with*
> *someone of the opposite sex? And if the two of you go to bed in the*
> *same room and the child's room is next door, what sort of*
> *messages do you believe he will get from that? Is the child likely to*
> *take on the same orientation, because it's the child I'm concerned*
> *about, not the two individuals...* [Social Worker, NR4].

In another example, Cathy, a social worker on an adoption team, had similar anxieties about maintaining heterosexuality:

> *I'd ask gay men how they would see a boy...I mean presumably it*
> *would be a boy that you would place with them, I would imagine, so*
> *how would they see that relationship developing as they got*
> *older...would they want them to be either lesbian or gay or*
> *whatever...?* [Social Worker, SR5].

The concept of two gay men bringing up a young boy to *"become a lesbian"* expresses the absolute, and irrational, fear of queer-ness here. In one reading of 'gay is to straight...', then, I found that the social workers were *panicked* by applications from gay men. Because the category 'gay' points to the institutional

locus of heterosexuality within fostering and adoption practice, 'gay' is read as a threat, and the motives of gay applicants, I found, were questioned on the basis that they were '*promoting* homosexuality.' This relates to the reading of lesbian and gay applicants as wanting to 'prove a point' as discussed in the risk-based arguments in the previous chapter, rather than being *really* interested in caring for children, an interpretation of their 'motives' as suspicious and part of an adult 'gay rights' agenda (DoH 1990; Whitfield 1991).

Where institutional heterosexuality is too much threatened by gay applicants, there is a further panic concerning the idea of a 'critical mass', or the notion that *too many* gay men may apply and be approved which would upset the hegemonic position of heterosexuality. In one example, a senior manager, who was involved in the investigation of an unfounded allegation made against a gay foster carer, remarked, "...And we've just approved another gay man this morning." Here I also found that gay applicants, unlike heterosexuals, were seen as wanting to 'promote' their 'homosexuality':

> *One of them was much more active politically around his*
> *sexuality and, in the preparation group, he really hammered it*
> *home, and a bit too much I think because every issue that came*
> *up he wanted to address sexuality which was a bit over the top in*
> *the end. This need to promote and promote and promote raised*
> *a big question for us about how resolved was he with his stuff?*

Because of his need to put sexuality on the agenda of everything, we just wondered whether he'd be able to see the complete young person really, as opposed to just their sexuality...As it could be with sexuality, or race or whatever, how sort of threatening might that be to a young person coming in? What if somebody just wanted to do it in a low key way? [Social Worker, NR7].

What I am arguing here, then, is that the social workers worked with an 'inside/out' binary system of thought, in which heterosexuality, the norm, the everyday, the invisible was assumed *a priori* to equate with 'the good carer' of children. However, when assessing gay men the social workers' theorisations of that category, and indeed the social work practices they adopted, constructed 'gay' as other, exotic, different, and often outside of what were seen as appropriate constituents of 'the good carer'. In my case study, for example, John told me that, when his partner Rob attended a child care review meeting, the social worker asked him, "Who is this?" John replied, "My partner, Rob," to which came the response, "What's this meeting got to do with him?" It is extremely unlikely that a heterosexual couple, living together and caring for a foster son, would have been questioned in this way.

Thus I have been arguing that applications to foster or adopt by gay men disrupt both gender *and* sexuality norms, and this accounts at least in part for the small

numbers of gay men who are approved for adoption and/or to care for younger children. It is heterosexuality that is in panic here, but it seems to me that it is a far more stubborn and far less fragile heterosexuality than that suggested by Butler (1990). Butler's (1990) view of heterosexuality is that it is always performatively produced. She calls this *"a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which [heterosexuality] is constituted"* (Butler 1997:17). Whilst I support the view that heterosexuality is performed in and through the assessment practices of the social workers, Butler's argument does not account for the institutional locus of heterosexuality within fostering and adoption practice. For example, 'heterosexuality' is promoted within legislation and guidance concerning fostering and adoption, not least in the white paper on adoption where the married couple are referred to as the preferred 'family structure' (DoH *et al.* 1993:9). As I have also argued, the social workers relied upon an unspoken assumption that heterosexual relationships included a woman who would be responsible for protection of children from men. Heterosexuality is here so central and assured that the risk posed by heterosexual men to children is overlooked simply because women are in the equation. Gay men, however, bring such anxieties to the fore for the social workers, as they question the assumptions of such a gendered heterosexuality.

We might return to some feminist theorisations of institutional heterosexuality here, for it has been within feminist theory that heterosexuality has been critiqued as something enforced or compulsory (Rich 1980; Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1993),

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even as eroticised dominance (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group 1981; Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1996b). Sue Wilkinson & Celia Kitzinger (1996b) have argued that, in Butler's (1990) version, hetero- and homo-sexualities become merely interchangable, but if that were the case then there would be no evidence in my data of such 'heterosexual panic' amongst the social workers having to assess gay men. The category 'gay' does *not* here mean merely 'different', but is at the very least a 'threat' to the heteronormative version of 'the good carer of children'. This institutional locus of heterosexuality within fostering and adoption practice is anything but the fragile version suggested by Butler (1990).

Conclusions

In this chapter I have analyzed how the social workers made sense of the categories 'lesbian\mother' and 'gay father' in and through their assessment practices. I have argued that 'the lesbian' represents a threat to the institutional dominance of men within social work, and to a masculine heterosexuality, both of which are defended in discourses concerning 'the good carer'. In their theorisations of 'lesbian', I found that the social workers demonstrated 'gender anxiety' via their concerns about the ability of lesbians to provide gender role models, the attitudes of lesbians towards men, and the appropriateness of lesbians' stated preferences for caring for girls or boys. I have argued that assessment practices 'organize out' the version of the 'bad lesbian' and favour the 'good lesbian carer', a construction which I have represented at Figure 5.1.

This argument is developed in the following chapter, where I look at 'who makes a good parent?' under heteronormativity.

With regard to applications by gay men, I have argued that there are different ways of making sense of the category 'gay', and that these were demonstrated by the social workers. I found a reliance amongst the social workers on the "ethnic identity" model of 'gay' (Epstein 1987), where 'gay' is regarded as a discrete 'cultural' minority. This version of 'gay' was more acceptable within fostering and adoption, and to panels, but is one of 'liberal difference'. Here gay men have to be interpreted and represented by the social workers *in largely heterosexual terms*. Thus the construction of 'maternal men' is a key example that I found whereby the category 'gay' is made acceptable via heteronormative ideas; gay couples are 'read' via gendered difference, and are associated with 'maternal' qualities.

As with lesbian carers, I found 'gender anxiety' in how the category 'gay' was assessed. Social workers were concerned about whether gay men knew enough women, and they demonstrated a preference for placing boys/young men with gay carers. I also found what I have termed a 'discourse of suspicion' in relation to gay men; as *men* they were not regarded as the 'natural' carers of children, and as *gay* they were either constructed via notions of the 'maternal' or as predatory 'perverts'. I found that the social workers showed quite specific ideas about the types of placement that were appropriate for gay men, and these

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tended to be older children, fostered not adopted, on a short-term basis, often of disabled children or young gay men. Rarely were gay men seen as appropriate adopters.

I have argued against the 'dual identities' thesis in both cases, and this is because concepts such as 'lesbian', 'mother', 'gay', 'father', 'carer' are always political not just individual; that is, they are social constructions not 'psychological choices'. Thus 'lesbian\mother' and 'gay father' have to be reinterpreted *through and via* the social workers and their practices, which take place within a heteronormative system; no accident, then that few gay men are approved for adoption, or that 'the good lesbian carer' is the favoured version.

My argument is that such social work-ing results in assessment practices which favour the 'on merit' model of assessment. 'Child care' skills were emphasized by the social workers making positive assessments of lesbians or gay men, which rely upon the liberal/"ethnic"-minority version of 'lesbian' or 'gay' (Epstein 1987). Here lesbian or gay applicants are seen as an oppressed minority who should be treated the *same* for the purposes of assessment, a consequence of the 'sameness' models discussed in the previous chapter. Thus I found that the social workers tended to rely on assessment practices which they used for heterosexual applicants, and I develop this argument in relation to the 'heterosexualisation of lesbians' in the following chapter on Nita and Clare.

Chapter 6

Nita and Clare: A Case Study of the Dynamics of Race[9], Gender and Sexuality in Assessment

Nita and Clare are a lesbian couple, one Asian and the other white, who made an application to be considered as adopters to their Local Authority, hereafter referred to as 'Northern City Council'. This case study follows the story of their application, subsequent assessment by the Northern City Council's Social Services Department, and eventual approval by the adoption panel. It then goes on to describe an application that the couple made, after having been approved as adopters, to be considered as the carers for a sibling group of seven Asian girls of Indian heritage. The Authority responsible for the care of the girls, which is in the Midlands and is hereafter referred to as the 'Midlands Council', considered whether to place them with Nita and Clare at both a linking meeting and matching panel, but eventually turned them down for reasons which will be described below.

This case study is based upon data generated from three interviews with Nita and Clare, an interview with their social worker, Barbara, and documentary sources; namely their Form F assessment report, correspondence between the couple and the Midlands Council, and formal reports of the investigation of a

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[9] There is an academic convention of placing the word 'race' in inverted commas in order to indicate that it is a socially constructed category. It is my view, however, that in this sense 'sexuality' and 'gender' are as much socially constructed as 'race', and so I have chosen not to employ this convention for the purposes of this chapter.

complaint made by the couple. The chapter is structured in three sections. Section one is a narrative account, designed to acquaint the reader with the story of what happened, and with the characters involved. The second section presents an analysis of Nita and Clare's assessment and approval as adoptive carers, and the final section examines how the intersecting dynamics of race, gender and sexuality were variously interpreted in relation to their application to be considered as the potential carers for the girls. In section two, I argue that, although their Form F assessment was largely a positive experience for them, and more importantly one which resulted in their approval as adopters, nevertheless Nita and Clare were represented to the adoption panel in ways which relied upon specific constructions of the category 'lesbian'. In the third section, I focus on how these intersecting dynamics of race, gender and sexuality became key sites for the contestation of social work meanings attached to such concepts, and how the figure of the 'black lesbian' (Smith 1994) was crucial to this process.

Section One: Nita and Clare's story

Nita and Clare live in a terraced house in a city in the North of England. They have been together for five years. Nita is thirty-five years old, and is a woman of Indian heritage who grew up in Britain. She trained as a teacher but now divides her time between writing and working at a local Asian women's training project. Clare is thirty-three years old, and is a white woman of English and Irish heritage.

She works as a teacher in a local secondary school. Both women are able-bodied, neither practises any religion, and they see themselves as middle class.

Their Application to Adopt:

Nita and Clare were the first openly lesbian couple to make an adoption application to the Northern City Council. They knew that other lesbians, who had not come out, were providing foster or adoptive care for the Council, but Nita and Clare made a decision that they wanted to be 'out' throughout the process of their application. They explained to me why this was the case:

> **Nita:** *We're living together anyway, and we couldn't face the thought of being so deliberately deceptive when mostly we're not in our lives, and we're not deceptive about our sexuality, we're just, you know, selective with the truth depending on the circumstances. We don't deny our sexuality overtly in that way, and we didn't want to get ourselves into the position of doing that, or implicating other people in lying as well because of the business of having to have referees and so on...*
>
> **Clare:** *...And we just thought also that if we were going to do it, and that we did so pretending that we weren't lesbians, then, one, that really cut here [at the heart], you know, "I've got to pretend to be something that I'm not because it's a bad thing to*

be" and, two, what sort of basis would that be for a child? It's like

saying, you know, "You mustn't tell anybody and if you do..."

Nita and Clare applied to be considered for adoption, and were eventually approved for the adoption of up to three children aged nought to seven years. Although they were approved by panel as a couple, it was Nita, in fact, who was the named adopter in law, and this was for two reasons; first, that adoption law currently does not allow for unmarried couples to be joint adopters, and this is unlikely to change (DoH *et al.* 1993), and second, because the couple had specifically offered themselves to adopt Asian, or Asian mixed race[10], children the Northern City Council were keen to match black children with black adopters.

I asked Nita and Clare what had prompted them to make their adoption application. Nita said that they knew a lesbian couple that had successfully adopted, and that the couple was also an Asian woman and a white woman, and that Nita knew the Asian woman quite well. She said that this *"sowed a seed"* in her head about the idea of adoption. Clare said that she had always thought that she might want children one day, but had never considered the idea of giving birth. For both women adoption was a positive, and first, choice:

Clare: *When we talked about having children, we didn't talk*

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[10] By 'Asian mixed race', I mean a child who is of mixed racial parentage, having one Asian parent by birth. The term 'Asian' is also specific here to the Indian sub-continent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh). Nita is of Indian heritage, and the couple was considering children from the sub-continent or those with a heritage from the Indian sub-continent.

about 'having' children, we talked about adopting, so that's how it

started. It didn't start from, "We'd really like to have children, how

shall we do it? Shall we adopt? Shall we...", it started, "No...let's

adopt." It was only when we started on the adoption process that

we had to justify why it was that we were adopting, and it was

only when we started to tell other people that we had to justify it,

that we had to start thinking, "Why are we saying adoption?"...So

it was always that way around.

Nita: *...But as far as we were concerned, it was immediately*

obvious to us that we wanted to adopt and that was how we

wanted to bring children into our lives.

The couple were initially spurred to make the application to the Northern City

Council because they saw posters in a local advertising campaign for adopters

and foster carers. Clare told me, *"...when we saw that, we thought, 'well maybe*

this is the time to do it,' especially as it said on the poster, 'You don't have to be

married. You don't have to be...', you know, so it seemed like that was a door

they'd opened, it seemed like now was a good time to do it..." Their application

was made two and a half years after the start of their relationship.

Nita and Clare approached the Northern City Council because they knew that no

'out' lesbians had yet been approved as carers. Nita said that they felt they ought

to look locally, and that the Council owed it to them to consider them seriously

given their stated policy of equality of opportunity. They also wanted to go through the process as an out lesbian couple in order to 'pave the way' for lesbians in the future. Clare explained:

> *We thought we'd got a better chance than most people because*
> *we're both middle class, we're both trained teachers, we knew*
> *there was a dearth of resources for black families because that's*
> *what they were advertising for, and we thought all that had to*
> *stand in our favour. So maybe if we got through, then somebody*
> *who wasn't middle class who came along might get through...*

Nita and Clare had decided that they wanted to offer themselves as a resource for black[11] children specifically needing adoption. Northern City Council was looking to recruit black adopters, and so the couple felt that, as Nita is an Asian woman, they wanted to offer a home to an Asian, or Asian mixed race, child:

> **Nita:** *One of the first decisions that we'd made around this was*
> *that we wanted to adopt, or wanted in our lives, a black child or*
> *children...I didn't want to be in the position, and Clare didn't want*
> *me to be in the position, where the whole family was white apart*
> *from me. One of the messages we were getting, both from the*

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[11] Here I am using the term 'black' inclusively to mean people of Asian as well as African descent, though the term is problematic and contested (see Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993:32). But see footnote 2.

advertising campaign and generally, was that Northern City

Council were particularly looking for black adopters,...so it just

seemed to be so obvious, and also that we knew all the things

that we could offer in terms of awareness of issues of identity...

Clare: *We would be happy to bring up a child in one of the*

religions of the Indian sub-continent, though we don't practise

ourselves...We feel we've got enough knowledge about it to be

able to do it, and we've got friends in our network...We

specifically said that we felt confident, and would be prepared, to

bring up a child as a Sikh, Muslim or Hindu, didn't we?...

Nita: *...Yes and we've got support for that. We would know*

where to take the child, and we have friends who actually

practise those religions themselves who could involve us in all of

their festivals...I think for a lot of black people in this country, their

religion is a real refuge and source of hope and positive feelings

about themselves.

The couple also wanted to offer a home to girls specifically, and Clare explained

to me that this was because they felt what they had to offer as carers would be

most relevant to girls. The couple felt that girls in the care system would have

experienced a lot of negative messages about themselves, and so they wanted

to work with girls and to provide them with a positive living environment. Clare

told me that they also felt like they would be a limited resource, and so this

should be offered to those whose needs would be best met by the couple. Nita also explained that they felt that boys require a lot of work and energy in order to counter the messages that they get from society, and that the couple wanted to spend their energies on girls:

> **Clare:** *It was quite hard to explain really, because we haven't got any problem with boys...we've got loads of boys in our lives, that was a boy on the phone just now!...and I work with boys and it's not that I dislike boys, but to try and explain to someone that we want to have girls rather than boys...*

The couple wanted to have younger children, preferably under fives, because they felt it was easier to start off with younger ones, and they also wanted to have some time at home with them before they started at school. They were advised to push this up to seven years old, because the Authority thought this would be more realistic for considering the placement of sibling groups of up to three children.

Nita made the initial contact with Northern City Council adoption unit. After having seen the advertising campaign, she telephoned the section and explained that she was interested in adoption, and that she was a black woman. Nita asked about the Authority's statement of equality of opportunity, and was told that any applicant would be given equal consideration on the basis of their parenting skills

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and whether they could provide a home for a child. At this stage, Nita was making an anonymous enquiry only and said she would call again.

The next step was to contact the unit again, but at this stage Nita and Clare had to make a decision about when to come out as lesbians. As they didn't know of any lesbian workers in adoption, and were unsure of the response they would get, they decided not to come out at the initial point of contact. This was a complex decision, and Nita explained:

We decided that we wouldn't be out on the initial contact

because we wouldn't know who we were talking to and we didn't

want everybody to know. I was actually an employee of Social

Services then...I wasn't actually working in the Department as I

was outposted to the Asian Women's Refuge, and I was a

section eleven worker[12] so I didn't have a lot to do with the

Department. Nevertheless I was paid by them and there were

files on me in personnel and I was known to quite a lot of people

in Social Services through the work that I'd done with Asian

women and around domestic violence, so we decided it was too

risky to just go bouncing in there and say, "We're lesbians and

we want to adopt..." So I contacted them and said that I was a

black woman and that I was single and that I was interested in

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[12] A worker employed under section 11 of the 1966 Local Government Act to work specifically with particular ethnic minority populations (Gordon, 1992:25).

adoption, and so I went to see the manager of the section and

she was very helpful, but I knew this manager was quite a strong

Christian so I didn't really want to come out to her because I

didn't trust how she'd deal with it...

The next stage was for Nita to attend the preparation course, a course which all applicants are asked to attend, and at which they do training on issues relating to adoption of children. Such courses are common practice in local authority fostering and adoption units (Triseliotis *et al.* 1995, 1997), and are a part of the assessment as people's attitudes and values are noted. Nita knew of another Asian lesbian who had been on such a course in which all the other participants were white heterosexual people, and the woman had found this very difficult. Nita therefore said that she was worried about the course, and that she thought it might be difficult for her being single and being black. The adoption unit manager agreed and said that they had other single black adopters coming forward at the same time and so they would hold a training course for black applicants only.

Nita had a very positive experience of the preparation course, but, *"...as far as they were concerned I lived on my own, and I hadn't come out."* At the end of the course, applicants were asked to think about whether they still wanted to progress, and then Nita phoned the next day to say she was still interested. The Council then wrote back saying that she would be allocated a social worker.

It was at this point that Nita and Clare decided that they needed to come out as lesbians, as they wanted to be open throughout the home study part of the assessment. Nita felt, from contact on the training course and from what she had heard, that Barbara would be able to handle lesbian issues and would treat their application fairly. Therefore she decided to write to the Adoption Unit requesting Barbara as her social worker, an unusual move. Nita said in her letter that she wanted a black social worker because she would feel more confident in handling the issues of race, and Barbara was the only black worker in the adoption team. Whilst Nita feels that this was partly true, in actual fact she was more concerned to get a social worker who would be able to handle their coming out as lesbians. Barbara was allocated to the case, and arranged to visit Nita at home:

> **Nita:** *Barbara came to see me at home, and actually Clare wasn't there because we didn't want her to just walk in and be confronted with us. So before we got into anything else, I said, "Look, there's something that I haven't told you...I'm not single...", and I told her about Clare, and she sort of took a deep breath and said, "Right Ok!" She was a bit taken aback, but she took it in her stride and said, "Well obviously we're going to have to rethink this," and then we went ahead and talked about things and she said she needed to meet Clare. We did it that way because we really wanted to know who we were coming out to first...*

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The Assessment:

I asked the couple how they were assessed, and Clare explained that Barbara

"...didn't know at the beginning whether to take us as a single adopter plus

person living with her, or as a couple...she didn't really know." Although in law

only one person in a lesbian or gay couple can be the named adopter,

assessments should nevertheless take account of all adults in the household

(DoH/Welsh Office 1992). In this case, the social worker started off the

assessment as though Nita were a single adopter with Clare living in her house,

but then later abandoned this approach in favour of assessing them as a couple.

Barbara saw the couple together at first, then separately, and then together

again. They thought that the assessment itself had taken about four months to

complete, but the process of taking their report to panel delayed things further.

Nita and Clare explained to me that they produced a lot of written material for the

purposes of their assessment. Barbara asked the couple to fill in the personal

history parts of Form F about half way through the assessment as a whole, and

then used these to question them and to clarify issues with them. Clare noted

that Barbara had said that they had written far more than most people she had

assessed.

Nita and Clare commented on how they felt their assessment was handled:

Nita: *The assessment as a whole, I think she handled it well, and we felt quite enthusiastic about her as our social worker, and about the whole process...There were delays and that felt a bit frustrating, but of course it helped with getting through panel and being approved.*

The couple produced two referees for the purposes of the assessment in line with usual practice, but exceptionally were asked to give three in all. All of the referees were interviewed, but this was normal practice for Northern City Council.

Post-Assessment Issues:

Nita and Clare's assessment report went through the adoption panel very smoothly according to Barbara. The panel was happy with the assessment report and approved the couple for adoption. However, Nita and Clare experienced a delay after their approval as adopters, and they became very frustrated with waiting for any serious consideration of their assessment report form by a placing agency. Nita feels that this was partly to do with the specifics of their case:

Nita: *Maybe it was understandable...Maybe the social worker didn't anticipate all the issues to do with the combination of looking for an Asian child with all the issues about language and religion, and with having a mixed couple and a lesbian couple.*

There are lots of different things really compounding it which she hadn't anticipated being such a problem, with hindsight...But the thing is if we had talked about those issues along the way, then we might have been more prepared and she might have been more prepared...

Clare said that their report had also been referred to the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (B.A.A.F.), and that they had been led to believe that there was a specific matching service considering the placement of black children with black adopters. They therefore expected that they would hear from a placing agency, but the delay continued. Nita explained that this puzzled them as they had the impression that there were large numbers of Asian, or Asian mixed race, children in care and needing adoptive homes[13] :

> **Nita:** *We were still, at this stage, under the impression that there were actually quite a lot of Asian babies and toddlers around.*
> **Clare:** *Well there are...I saw a programme* [this was BBC 'East' 1995] *where, in Bradford alone, there were something like eighty-eight Asian children in care, of which fifty-five are Asian mixed race, so that's a lot of children...so that's only Bradford, and you've only got to duplicate that by Birmingham, Leicester, London...*

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[13] In fact there is evidence to support this (see Ravinder Barn (1993:76); BBC 'East' 1995).

> **Nita:** *The other statistic that they gave was that Asian children,*
>
> *on average, take six times longer to be placed...*
>
> **Clare:** *...and we thought, "Yes we know that!"*

After waiting some time, Nita and Clare decided to start looking for possible children in fortnightly adoption newsletters. Nita explained, *"We phoned a lot of those up and most of them came back and said they were looking for a Muslim family or a Sikh family, or sometimes they just came back and said they'd had enough enquiries."*

Their Application to Care for Children:

It was at this point that they noticed an advertisement in a November edition of a national adoption newsletter[14]. It had been written by the Midlands Council, who were seeking a permanent placement for a sibling group of seven Asian girls. The advert described the girls as nominally Hindu, from a Punjabi speaking home, and needing a permanent placement, as they had been in foster care for two years. Nita and Clare discussed this at length and decided that they felt able to meet the needs of these children, and so they telephoned their social worker, Barbara. Clare explained to Barbara that they had thought about it very seriously and that they wanted to be considered, and so Barbara said she would contact the Midlands Council.

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[14] It was the P.P.I.A.S. newsletter ('Parent to Parent Information on Adoption Service'), now called 'Adoption U.K.'

Initially, Barbara was not too happy with the response:

> **Nita:** *She thought that they were openly negative about us. The woman that she contacted was in the Homefinder team, and she said that she didn't approve of lesbians adopting, and that if the case was taken up by the Department then she would have nothing to do with it because she didn't agree with it. So that was Barbara's first encounter with this Authority!*
>
> **Clare:** *But she was not put off totally because the woman said that her views weren't necessarily departmental policy and also she wasn't the manager, and then I think Barbara did speak to the team manager who said it wasn't a problem and they would consider us.*

Barbara was then asked to attend a linking meeting[15] at the Midlands Council in order that they make a decision whether to proceed with Nita and Clare as potential carers for the girls. It emerged at this stage that the girls were being placed for long-term fostering, rather than adoption, and so Nita and Clare had to agree to be reassessed with the view to long-term fostering. Nita and Clare were very keen for social workers from the Midlands Council to come and meet them

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[15]   A linking meeting takes place to consider whether carers are appropriate to the needs of particular children. If carers are recommended at a linking meeting, then the placing Authority will look at them in more detail with the view to matching them with the children at a later 'matching' panel.

and asked Barbara to convey this. Unfortunately, at the time of the linking meeting, Barbara was unwell and so another social worker, Jane, who had acted as the 'second opinion'[16] in Nita and Clare's original assessment, had to attend. Clare explained what happened at the linking meeting:

> **Clare:** *Jane went to the linking meeting in the Midlands, and the social workers told her that they were also considering a single woman carer for the girls. They said they couldn't decide between us and the single woman because they didn't have enough information, and so they sent Jane back with a series of questions they wanted answered. These were: 'How would we explain our sexuality?', 'How would we provide for the children's religious and cultural needs?', 'How would we provide for their linguistic needs?'. They also said they wanted to meet us, but Jane specifically asked in the linking meeting, "Is my family* [i.e. Nita and Clare] *being seriously considered for these children?" and she was told yes, so when she came back she was positive in a way that she hadn't been previously. She also found out why it was long-term fostering, and that was basically because these children would be such a financial responsibility that foster care was the only way the Authority could tie in payment which they couldn't do with adoption. There was no way that the girls were*

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[16] A 'second opinion' social worker comes in at the end of a Form F assessment to look over the work, to ask questions, and to give another independent opinion on the carers' suitability.

ever going back home to their parents because of the

horrendous abuse they'd suffered...I mean the father had been to

prison for it...the girls were also subject to Care Orders and the

Authority were also going to apply for a Residence Order so that

the placement would be secure, it would be a permanent

placement but by long-term fostering...

Nita explained that Jane left them with the series of questions to work on, and

that they prepared their answers and were confident that they had lots to say

about how they would meet the girls' needs. In fact, they wrote it all down on

paper. Then there was a delay in waiting for the social workers from the Midlands

Council to visit them. The visits were cancelled a number of times, first because

the Authority had discovered a 'legal complication' as the birth father was

challenging the Care Orders, and second due to illness. Nita told me that the two

social workers from the placing Authority, one Asian woman and one African

Caribbean woman, eventually came to see them only two weeks before the

matching panel[17] was due to meet:

Nita: *Their visit was awful, they just didn't want to be here and*

they were really uncomfortable. They asked us questions but just

things that were covered in our assessment Form F. We thought

they'd want to focus on the questions they had given Jane to give

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[17] A matching panel meets to agree to place children with carers or not.

us but they hardly touched on these, and we ended up actually

having to force our bits of paper with our answers on them and

say, "Would you like to take these away with you? We've

answered these questions which we understood you wanted to

know about and maybe you'd like to take them to help at the

matching panel."

Clare said that one of the social workers from the placing Authority said, as they were leaving, *"Oh I must make it clear that us coming here today doesn't necessarily mean that the children will be placed with you, and in fact they may not be placed with you or the single woman."* The social workers also said that they would not be attending the matching panel as that was the job of their manager. Nita and Clare felt very pessimistic at this stage, but Barbara was more optimistic: *"They've got seven girls to place and they're really lucky that anyone wants them, they've got to seriously consider you."*

Shortly after this, the Midlands Council matching panel met. Barbara attended, and was accompanied by Usha, an Asian Hindu social worker with whom she worked. Barbara said that, as soon as they arrived, they were greeted with, *"Oh didn't you get our message? We sent a message telling you not to bother to come."* Barbara said the matching panel was a shambles. The single woman carer hadn't even been approved as a foster carer, and Barbara recalled that there were issues in this woman's life that meant it was very unlikely that she

would ever be approved by a fostering assessment panel.

Barbara said that when the matching panel came to discuss Nita and Clare, they announced that their Legal Department had something to say. The legal representative said that there was no way that Nita and Clare could be considered because they were a lesbian couple and it would never stand up in Court. They felt that this would endanger the placement, and might give a reason for the Care Orders to be revoked. They then went on to say that the children were nominally Hindu and that, *"because the Hindu religion does not recognize lesbianism,"* the children could not be placed in a lesbian household.

Barbara recalled that this was over very quickly indeed, in *"about five or ten minutes,"* she said. Usha tried to engage them in debate about what she felt to be an outrageously discriminatory statement, but they would say nothing more. Barbara said that it was only really the Chair of the panel, who was the Assistant Director, and the solicitor for the Authority, both white men, who were allowed to speak. Barbara asked the Authority to write to Nita and Clare explaining why they had been rejected, as she was very upset by what had been said.

Nita and Clare believe that they were rejected on the basis of their sexuality alone, and that the reasons given by the Midlands Council were a cover for this. They therefore decided to make a formal written complaint to the Authority[18].

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[18] The substance of the complaint will be discussed later.

Their complaint was then formally investigated by an Officer of the Midlands Council, along with an independent person, a representative of a voluntary organization that represents the interests of children in care. The report of the investigating officer concluded as follows:

> *Para. 3.14* [of Volume 3 of Children Act 1989 Guidance; DoH 1991] *reads as follows: "Authorities and those interested in becoming foster parents must understand that an authority's duty is, unequivocally and unambiguously, to find and approve the most suitable foster parents for children who need family placement. It would be wrong arbitrarily to exclude any particular groups of people from consideration. But the chosen way of life of some adults may mean that they would not be able to provide a suitable environment for the care and nurture of a child. No one has a 'right' to be a foster parent. Fostering decisions must centre exclusively on the interests of the child."*
> *My conclusion is that the ....SSD[19] has operated both the spirit and the letter of this paragraph and has not arbitrarily excluded any particular group.*

Nita and Clare were very upset by this decision. They were keen to emphasize that the investigating officer's report did state that he could not find conclusive

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[19] Social Services Department.

evidence to suggest that the Hindu faith was necessarily either sympathetic or antagonistic to lesbianism. Barbara was also very angry about the placing Authority's actions, and she called the whole thing a *"waste of time and energy."*

I have known Nita and Clare for some time now, and I know that they have since gone on to successfully adopt[20], but for the purposes of this case study, I am interested only to analyze the process of their assessment by the Northern City Council, which I do in the following section, and their subsequent rejection as carers by the Midlands Council, which forms section three.

Section Two: The Dynamics of Race, Sexuality and Gender in Assessment

> **Nita:** *I don't think the social worker handled the issues to do with*
>
> *our sexuality well...She wanted to be so non-discriminating that*
>
> *she just treated us like she would a heterosexual couple, and on*
>
> *one level that was good because she focused on child care, but*
>
> *we also needed to talk about the specifics of being **lesbian***
>
> *adopters, and there are many issues we all needed to think*

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[20] I will not be discussing the circumstances of this adoption in this case study. However, since I completed this research, Nita and Clare have gone on to successfully adopt, first, a ten-year-old Asian girl (where they were granted an adoption order and a joint residence order in the High Court), and, later, a two-year-old Asian mixed race, hearing-impaired girl.
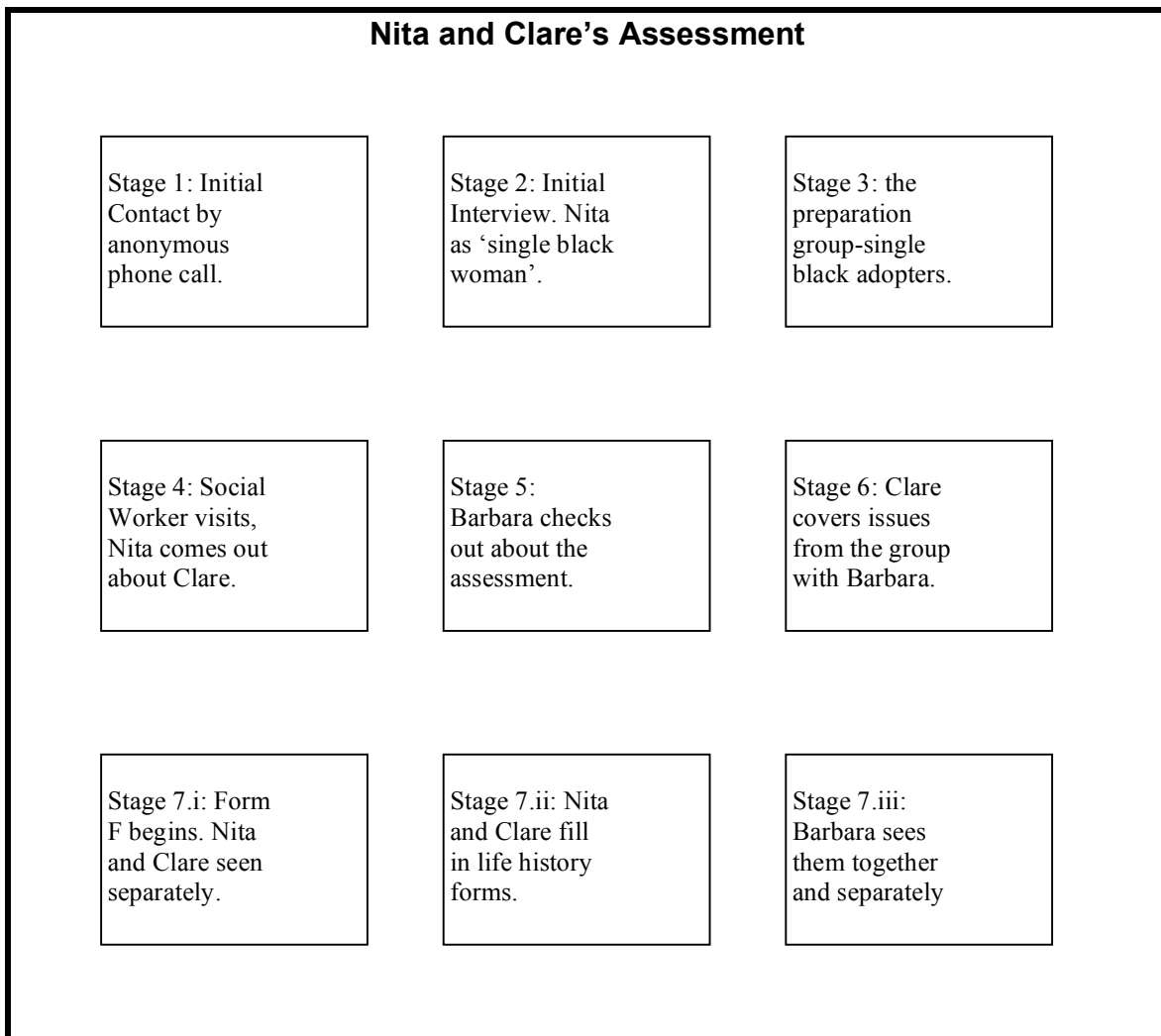
through...

In this section, I analyse the Northern City Council's assessment approach and also how issues of sexuality and gender were handled. In section three I focus on sexuality and race. All of these are intersecting dynamics which cannot be so neatly disentangled (Afshar & Maynard 1994; Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992; Brah 1996; Mercer 1994), but I have separated them here for ease of analysis, and because I want to focus in detail upon each aspect. The assessment did not focus on lesbian sexuality alone, but incorporated issues of gender and race, not least because the couple in question are 'mixed race', one being white and the other Indian. Indeed, as I have already argued, no assessment ever focuses on sexuality alone.

But it is not simply the case that gender and race were also key to this assessment because the couple were both women and of different racial backgrounds. I shall, in fact, be arguing that concerns around gender and race were actually central to the construction of the notion 'lesbian' in this case. More importantly, 'whiteness' and heterosexuality were also central dynamics here, for when an assessment deals with lesbians, one of whom is Indian, then what is challenged is social work's traditional view of an adoptive carer. Adopters are traditionally both heterosexual and white (Triseliotis *et al.* 1997), and therefore social work assessments of adoptive applicants construct 'whiteness' and heterosexuality as norms, albeit implicit, unspoken ones. Therefore it is important

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to recognize that 'whiteness' and heterosexuality are just as much active

constructions in social work assessments as lesbianism or 'Asian-ness', though

far less visible of course.

The Assessment Approach:

It is important to be clear about the word 'assessment' here, as it can be applied

to many stages of the application process. I have represented this process, as

Nita and Clare experienced it, in diagrammatic form (Fig 6.1):

Nita and Clare's Assessment

Stage 1: Initial Contact by anonymous phone call.	Stage 2: Initial Interview. Nita as 'single black woman'.	Stage 3: the preparation group-single black adopters.
Stage 4: Social Worker visits, Nita comes out about Clare.	Stage 5: Barbara checks out about the assessment.	Stage 6: Clare covers issues from the group with Barbara.
Stage 7.i: Form F begins. Nita and Clare seen separately.	Stage 7.ii: Nita and Clare fill in life history forms.	Stage 7.iii: Barbara sees them together and separately

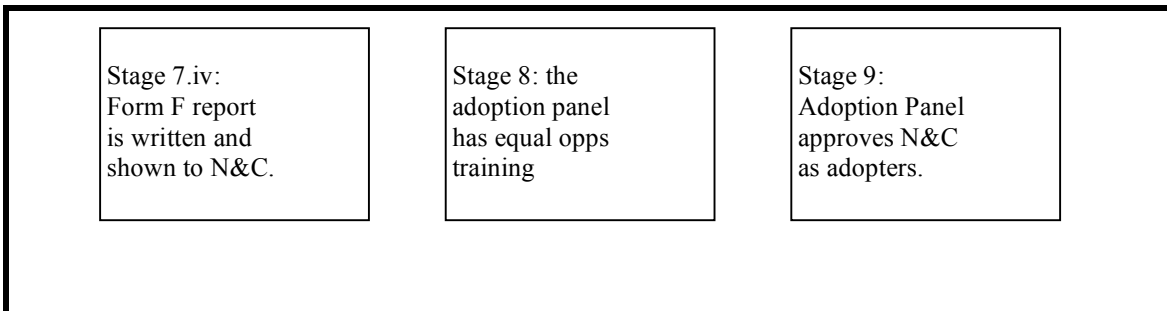|		
Stage 7.iv: Form F report is written and shown to N&C.	Stage 8: the adoption panel has equal opps training	Stage 9: Adoption Panel approves N&C as adopters.

Figure 6.1

The 'Form F', or home study, part of the assessment consisted of a series of interviews carried out with the couple by the social worker, Barbara. This home study was then written up as a Form F report and presented to the adoption panel. This discrete part of the process is represented in Fig. 6.1 as the 'Form F assessment' (stages 7.i to 7.iv), and it is this that I analyse here.

I argued in chapter four for understanding the practices of social workers assessing lesbians and gay men as constituting a continuum of responses. I think the assessment in this case used the 'on merit prioritizing child care' approach, and by this I mean that the Northern City Council Social Services Department's public stance regarding all adoption applicants was to look at the merits of their child care skills and parenting abilities, 'regardless of' the applicants' race, sexuality, gender etc. In this case, for example, Barbara told me that her Department would not reject lesbian or gay applicants *a priori*, but would consider all applications 'on merit' initially. Similarly, when Nita telephoned the Adoption Unit anonymously and asked about sexuality, she was told that all

applicants would be assessed on their parenting skills and their ability to provide a home for a child, regardless of sexuality:

> **Nita:** *I asked them about their Equal Opportunities policy and I wanted to know whether that included sexuality. They said they would give everybody equal consideration on their parenting skills and whether they could provide a home for a child, and that's what they said they would base it on regardless of any other factors.*

What does the *'on merit'* approach mean for lesbians and gay men? Certainly this approach does not discriminate against lesbians and gay men at the point of application, as it rests on the premise that it is their child care abilities that will be assessed. For example, Barbara was keen to emphasize that she looked upon the couple's caring qualities as being the most important aspect of the assessment. I have argued, however, that this approach actually disadvantages lesbians and gay men because it employs a model of assessment usually applied to heterosexual applicants. It therefore uses a sameness equality approach. Nita and Clare, for example, were pleased that Barbara focused on their child care abilities, but they also felt that this was at the expense of considering the issues of their being lesbian adopters specifically.

The major consequence of the 'on merit' approach is that the social worker does

not think through how to assess a lesbian couple in advance, but may actually 'just see how it goes' (see chapter four). Barbara was unsure how to handle the assessment when she started, and did not know whether she should assess Nita and Clare as a couple or as two individuals. In fact, she changed her mind about this part way through the work. Barbara told me that she had to go back to her team for guidance on how to assess the couple, but she noted that other team members did not have experience of assessing lesbians, and indeed she suggested that some of them would not have supported applications by lesbians:

Barbara: *Some of my team wouldn't have done the assessment anyway....there is discrimination in my team.*

This meant that Barbara received very little guidance on the assessment:

Nita: *She did quite a lot of running round the Department saying, "What am I going to do with this one?" I think she must have gone back and said, "What do I do about this and how do I assess them?"*
Clare: *And I think that's where all the confusion entered into it because nobody had any answers really. My impression is that when she went back to the Department and said all this, they weren't any help at all whatsoever. I think they were either completely without a clue, or said, "Oh this will never work, you'll*

never get anywhere."

The 'just see how it goes' approach had two consequences for this assessment in my view. First, it led the social worker to become driven by the adoption panel, or more specifically what she anticipated would be the panel's concerns, which are therefore heteronormative ones. Second, the focus of the assessment was on child care over sexuality.

Being panel-driven is evidenced a number of times within my data. In fact I found eighteen references to it. Barbara told me that she had to gear the assessment in order to cover the kinds of questions she felt that the panel were likely to raise, in particular about a lesbian couple. Barbara felt she was always trying to anticipate what panel would expect her to cover, and this also meant that she felt the Form F report needed to be extremely detailed, thorough and faultless, far more so than usual. One particularly significant example of this panel-driven approach was that Barbara asked the couple to provide a third named referee for the assessment. The usual practice is for two referees, and the couple had named a single heterosexual Asian woman with children, and a white heterosexual woman whose partner was an African Caribbean man (with mixed race children):

> **Nita:** *Barbara said that they weren't enough basically....*
> **Clare:** *...and that she wanted a third referee, and would it be*
> *possible to have another heterosexual couple, preferably with*

children too!

These extra referees are named on the Form F report, but additional space had to be added on the form for this. Barbara told me that she felt the additional reference made the couple's case better in the eyes of the panel, but again I believe that this indicates the ways in which lesbians and gay men are disadvantaged within an assessment process used to dealing with heterosexual carers. They were asked to provide additional evidence of suitability over and above what is required of heterosexual applicants, an example of the 'extra hoop.'

Nita and Clare also felt that Barbara was very driven by the panel in her assessment:

> **Clare:** *The way that our sexuality came up for her was more to*
> *do with the panel. She would say, "I have to ask you this*
> *because this is going to be an issue for the panel," or "I think*
> *panel will want to know this," or "I think they'll ask me more about*
> *this." So it was always 'panel-this' and 'panel-that'...*
> **Nita:** *She was uncertain about how she was going to approach*
> *the panel and quite worried about it.*

I am arguing that an assessment that is panel-driven actually disadvantages

lesbian, or gay, applicants, however. First, this practice points to the fact that the adoption panel itself is representative of another layer of potential discrimination against lesbians or gay men. The panel has the power to reject any applicant on the grounds of their unsuitability, and as we shall see this can be on the basis of anti-lesbian or anti-gay discrimination alone, that is rejecting an applicant *a priori* because of their sexuality. Second, a panel-driven approach is more likely to represent the lesbian couple in ways that the panel will find acceptable. Panels are far more used to looking at, and approving, heterosexual couples and it is my argument that the more that a lesbian couple are represented as resembling this 'norm', then the greater are their chances of approval. Third, being panel-driven leads to defensive assessment practices, responding to the risk-based arguments, which tends to leave out space for discussing the specificity of lesbian adoption. Fourth, the panel-driven approach points to a dilemma for the assessing social worker, as can be seen a number of times in Barbara's comments. This is that her prime motivation was to get Nita and Clare through the panel, to get them an approval outcome, and therefore she geared her assessment, her report, and the way that she represented the couple, to do just this. If this meant compromising on certain principles - specifically their attitudes towards boy children, whether they had male role models, and how 'heterosexual' they were, as we shall see - then she was prepared to do so in order to get them approved. Fifth, the panel-driven approach also points to other examples of how the assessment process is disadvantageous to lesbians and gay men. Barbara felt the report had to be more detailed than usual, she had to

include an extra referee, and she felt she had to cover far more with the couple than she normally would[21].

I want to suggest that the second consequence of the 'just see how it goes' approach is that the specifics of lesbian adoption became the lacunae of this assessment:

> **Nita:** *She was much more interested, all the way through, in how we would cope as a couple with children in our lives, not in the fact that we were lesbians or what our sexual relationship was all about.*
>
> **Clare:** *...And actually, to be honest, I think she should have asked us more about, you know, the things that were going to come up because of us being lesbian parents.*
>
> **Nita:** *...There are issues that we needed to talk about with her about being lesbian adopters which we didn't really explore.*

Barbara told me quite clearly that she felt that sexuality should be considered, but that this would normally be done at the Form F stage, not at any earlier point. She also told me that she thought through the specifics of lesbian adoption in advance, and then asked the couple a series of questions based on this:

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[21] "It was as if we could only adopt if we were better than any heterosexual couple who'd gone before us, like it is for black people. If there's a white person and a black person of equal merit being considered, then the white person will be preferred. The black person would have to be 'perfect' or exceptional to succeed." (Clare's comment).

> **Barbara:** *Yes I did think about the particular issues that would*
> *face lesbian adopters and I asked them about these during the*
> *assessment...I asked about how they'd explain their sexuality to*
> *a child, how they'd explain to a child why it has two mums, how*
> *they'd explain why they slept in the same bed, and also how*
> *would they cope if the child were teased at school?...*

This is a point of contradictory evidence in my interview data since, when I asked Nita and Clare about this, they told me that the assessment had only covered such issues because they brought them up. They said that Barbara did not raise such points with them. They felt it was their responsibility to raise lesbian specifics, and were very clear that Barbara should have asked them more about their sexuality, and how this would impact upon their care of a child:

> **Clare:** *I don't think she made us think enough about what it was*
> *going to be like being lesbian parents...I think she should have*
> *made us think a lot more about that.*

I am not arguing that sexuality *per se* was absent from the assessment; Barbara did focus on, and represent, Nita and Clare's individual histories of coming out as lesbians in the assessment and on the Form F. She also felt that the adoption panel were pleased that the women had been so open about their sexuality from

the start. In the assessment report, Barbara describes the process of the couple meeting and forming a relationship that she characterizes as *"strong, secure and stable."*

However, Barbara did not discuss the specifics of being lesbian **adopters** with the couple, and Nita and Clare raised this seven times with me during interviews. They wanted to discuss the specific impact of their lesbianism upon adoption and child care issues, and they made several attempts to raise these during the assessment. They felt that Barbara continued to focus on child care issues over and above sexuality, and they told me that she should have asked them more about lesbian issues: how would they get support as lesbian adopters? did they know any other lesbian carers? what issues would be raised for a child having lesbian parents? how might some birth parents react to them?[22] These were crucial absences, and my view is that this was because the assessment model was one usually applied to heterosexual couples.

Before going to the panel, Barbara insisted that some changes be made to its makeup. Specifically, she knew that one of the panel members held homophobic views and was unlikely to approve a lesbian couple. Barbara therefore insisted that the panel be given training on policies of equal opportunity as they applied to carer applicants. When the panel member in question still refused to consider

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[22] "Barbara was in fact unrealistic about this when we raised it. Whilst we weren't opposed to the idea of open adoption, it is an issue that needs to be discussed with lesbians concerning possible homophobic birth parents." (Clare's comment).

lesbians or gay men as potential carers, she was asked to leave the panel as this was in contravention of the Northern City Council's policy of equal opportunity.

This was an important factor in this case, and indicates willingness on the part of the Social Services Department to address discrimination in the assessment process for lesbian or gay applicants. After all, what is the point of assessing and recommending a lesbian couple to an adoption panel, when it is impossible for them to be approved due to the views of one member? If such approval is organizationally impossible, then that is a definition of discrimination. Nita and Clare said that there was some delay in their report going to panel while this aspect was resolved, but that when their report was considered they were approved positively. Indeed the approval for up to three children is an unusually high number.

Barbara said that the panel did raise some questions that can be linked to the risk-based arguments around gender and teasing raised in chapter four:

> **Barbara:** *They asked what Nita and Clare would want the child*
> *to call them[23], how they would tell the child about their*
> *lesbianism, how they would deal with any teasing of the child in*
> *school or in the community, how their families had responded to*
> *the news that they wanted to adopt, what male role models they*

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[23] "...Something that Barbara never discussed with us and should have." (Clare). "It's an issue for us with children and does need to be addressed." (Nita).

> *could provide, what men they knew[24], and what further hurdles*
>
> *the couple would have to face after approval.*

She also said that the panel was satisfied that she had addressed these points, and felt that the Form F was very detailed.

The Assessment of Sexuality: Heterosexual/ising Lesbians?

In this section I focus on how lesbian sexuality was represented, and it is my argument that this actually involved a process that I have called heterosexualisation. Tamsin Wilton has argued that the 'heterosexual imperative' structuring modern narratives of sexuality relies upon naive functionalist accounts which assume the polarity of sex difference by gender (Wilton 1996b, 1996c). A normative account of sexuality, therefore, privileges heterosex and its attendant division into things male and female (Wilton 1996b:104). Where this heterosexual imperative is upset by things 'queer' (the supposedly deviant sexual relations of lesbians or gay men), then a form of policing occurs, usually around gender identities. For example, the 'straight mind' (Wittig 1992) cannot conceive of gay or lesbian relations without inserting 'gender difference', so that lesbians and gay men are either assumed to have deviant gender identities or their relationships are thought to be structured according to the "heteropolar model" (Wilton

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[24] "This was all shown on our support network map, or what is called an ecomap on Form F" (Nita).

1996c:127). Lesbian or gay relationships are therefore accounted for by constructing them as essentially 'heterosexual', with one person being the 'man' (a 'butch' lesbian, a 'macho' gay man) and the other the 'woman' (a 'femme' lesbian, an 'effeminate' gay man)[25].

In the case of the representation of Nita and Clare as a lesbian couple, I think that there were processes of heterosexualisation at work. Whilst I do not think that they were represented as 'butch and femme', the adoption panel's question to Barbara about what a child would call them may be indicative of this kind of anxiety; if they are not 'Daddy' and 'Mummy', then what are they? or, 'which one's the man?' (Wilton 1996c). However, I think that the processes of heterosexualisation in this case were slightly different.

Let me start with what I believe to be a key example of the processes of heterosexualisation in action; notions of infertility, childlessness and alternative/self-insemination (see, for example, Saffron 1994). Many applicants to adoption are childless heterosexual couples, often due to infertility (Triseliotis *et al.* 1997:151), and it is my view that social workers in adoption have become used to applying this kind of model in their assessments, a version of 'sameness'. This 'childlessness' model is one which sees adoption as a second-best alternative to having a birth child, and much work is done by social workers with

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[25] There are also some interesting discussions of the notions of 'butch/femme' within, and by, the lesbian and gay communities. See, for example, Jeffreys (1989), Kennedy & Davis (1993), Nestle (1992), or Wilton (1996a).

heterosexual couples looking at the issues of loss for them in coming to terms with their childlessness. Further, couples are frequently asked to produce certificated evidence of infertility (see footnote 18). Whilst there are some lesbians who come to fostering or adoption after being unable to conceive a child through alternative or self-insemination (Saffron 1994), this does not apply to all lesbian adoption applicants, and perhaps even less so to gay men.

Nita and Clare were quite clear that they never wanted to have birth or biological children, for many reasons, and came to adoption as their first choice:

> **Nita:** *They were relying on a deficit model of adoption where people come to it because they can't have their own children.*
> **Clare:** *They kept trying to push it like that as a negative thing, but we kept saying, "But we must be even better than people who normally come for adoption because we're not coming to it as second-best, we're coming to it as our first choice." In the assessment there were all these questions about, "Are you infertile? When did you find out whether you're fertile or not?", and we were saying, "Well we don't know!"*
> **Nita:** *..."And we're not interested in whether we are or not."*
> **Clare:** *...But they kept coming back to it. The second opinion social worker kept saying, "Well why aren't you interested?" ...So we said, "You've just explained to us all about how difficult it is*

for an adopted child not knowing who their parents are, so what

do you think it's like for a child who has an unknown donor for a

father?"

Nita: *And we think that there are even more issues about that for*

black children...all that stuff about roots, histories and how far

back you can go wanting to know the stories that come from your

family...

It is my view, and one that is shared by Nita and Clare, that this kind of model is one that comes from assessments of heterosexual couples and yet it has been applied here[26]. When Nita and Clare said that they did not know whether they were fertile or not, the second opinion social worker, Jane, asked them at great length about why they hadn't pursued alternative insemination as an option. Again Nita and Clare explained that adoption was their first choice and that they didn't want to consider a birth child. This was directly addressed, for the panel's benefit, in the Form F report which reads:

> *As lesbians, they could have chosen artificial insemination, but*
>
> *they see adoption as a more sensible and valuable way of*
>
> *providing a home for a child who has already been born and*

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[26] "On the health information sheet for the adoption panel, there is a section called 'Reason for Infertility'. This was filled in for both of us as 'Miss _____ is unmarried.' In fact, neither of us knew whether we were infertile or not!" (Clare).

needs a happy, secure home. They feel that AID[27] has so many

problems. For instance, if the donor is known, then the father's

involvement can be unclear or change over time causing

problems, and if the donor is unknown, there are problems of

what to tell the child. They would feel uncomfortable with the

involvement of a person in them having a child who is not part of

their loving relationship (sic)*. Neither feels the need to*

experience pregnancy in order to become a parent, which they

know that some women do. [Nita and Clare] have not specifically

investigated the possibilities for themselves as it is not what they

want to do.

Barbara told me that the adoption panel also asked whether Nita and Clare had

considered having birth children. Thus I think that the Form F represents Nita and

Clare as having been assessed regarding their 'childlessness and infertility', even

though this doesn't fit because they are lesbians and because they do not know

whether they are fertile or not.

I would also argue that processes of heterosexualisation are at work in the

representation of Nita and Clare as lesbians 'with heterosexual influences'. This

is not how the couple presented themselves, and I am not suggesting that they

did. They presented as an openly lesbian couple with a range of friends and

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[27] This stands for Alternative (Artificial) Insemination by Donor.

family, and they actively resisted any attempts to 'cover up' their lesbianism.

However I think that their representation by Barbara to the panel is slightly

different, and I want to discuss three examples from my data sources here: their

referees, their past relationships, and their support networks.

I have already discussed the issue of Nita and Clare having to provide a third

referee, but here I also want to suggest that this indicates a representation of a

lesbian couple 'with heterosexual influences', which works at an implicit level.:

> **Clare:** *When it came to referees, she asked for three when they*
>
> *normally get two...*
>
> **Nita:** *One reason was because the two that we put forward were*
>
> *both women, although one was living with a male partner but he*
>
> *wasn't in the picture so we didn't name him...*
>
> **Clare:** *...And she wasn't married to him.*
>
> **Nita:** *So Barbara said, "Could you come up with a heterosexual*
>
> *couple with a child?" That's what she wanted...*[28]

I am also interested in the way that the women's past relationships were

discussed in their Form F, both having had previous relationships with men. The

Form F asks for information on 'marital status' (BAAF 1991:4), which is confusing

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[28] "This was a couple where both the man and the woman were our friends and both could comment on us. It was as if women's names weren't enough" (Clare), "We needed validation from a man as well" (Nita), "We never thought of having lesbians as referees, and I feel sure Barbara would've rejected the idea if we'd suggested it. I'm sure she wouldn't have thought the panel would like it." (Clare).

for the reader in this case. Nita and Clare are both described as 'single', and then the form states that they have been in a relationship for over three years. This confusion arises because the form is designed for heterosexual people, and it is only married couples who are able to jointly adopt in law (Triseliotis *et al.* 1997). Lesbians and gay men are therefore regarded as 'single people' for the purposes of the forms.

Nita is described in the report as not having had *"...a boyfriend until she was in the sixth form"*, and the form goes on to detail her first three significant relationships with men. Clare is described as having *"developed a close and sincere relationship with a girlfriend"* at the age of fifteen, and the form then goes on to report her relationship with a man whilst at University. Both Nita and Clare felt that their early heterosexual experiences were emphasized in the form in order to show that they had not 'always been lesbians' and that they had an 'understanding of heterosexuality':

> **Nita:** *We've both had previous relationships with men before we came out...*
>
> **Clare:** *...And it would be interesting to see how it would have been if we hadn't. I mean if we were lesbians who hadn't ever had any relationships with men, would we have been regarded the same? I think sometimes lesbians who have had relationships with men are regarded somehow as not quite as*

'deviant' as lesbians who have never had relationships with men.

Somehow it's like, "Oh they were normal once, and then they just

happened to meet the right woman." They rewrite it in their

heads as if we were these heterosexual women who just 'fell in

love', and they ignore all the other things you tell them. Are we

something more acceptable than the 'ever-dyke', the lesbian

who's always been a lesbian? With us they might think, "Oh well,

if we place this child with these lesbians, then at least they have

had relationships with men, so at least when their children get to

the age when they're having heterosexual relationships they

know what that's about."

Like the issue of the referees, I believe that this also demonstrates

heterosexualisation processes in operation. Whilst it is important to discuss all

previous relationships, there is an implicit notion of 'heterosexual influence' here

represented in the Form F. Actually this is an interesting example because in

terms of debates around the etiology of homosexuality, it might be argued that

Nita and Clare had made a political choice for lesbianism in opposition to

heterosexuality. Their choice might therefore be understood within the terms of a

social constructionist view of lesbianism (Kitzinger 1987), rather than an

essentialist one which would see them as having 'always been' lesbian (see, for

example, Altman *et al.* 1989; De Cecco & Elia 1993; McIntosh 1968; Stein 1990).

This view of lesbianism as a political choice over heterosexuality is surely more

threatening to the heterosexual 'norm', and so for this reason was not presented in this way in Nita and Clare's assessment.

Nita and Clare also felt that they were represented as an isolated example of a lesbian couple. By this I mean that they were seen in isolation from other lesbians, including other lesbian carers/parents, and the assessment did not discuss whether they knew, or indeed would draw support from, other lesbians:

> **Clare:** *I don't think she even asked us if we knew other lesbians who had children, and she didn't ask us where we were going to get support as lesbian parents.*[29]

Again, whilst Nita and Clare regard the issue of support from other lesbian carers as crucial, both for themselves and for any child placed with them, this was not discussed by the social worker. This is another example of the need to represent them in certain 'heterosexual' ways to the adoption panel, not part of a 'lesbian community' but fitting into a heterosexual one.

There are three other themes, taken from the risk-based arguments in chapter four, which hardly figured at all in this assessment, and these are whether any child placed would be teased because of having lesbian parents, whether there were any concerns about the possibility of sexual abuse of any child by lesbian

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[29] "That would have been the most worrying thing, if a child was placed with 'out' lesbians and surrounded by heterosexuals and no other lesbians" (Clare).

parents, and whether any child placed would be likely to grow up gay. All of these are important theories about the development of children living with lesbian and gay carers which frequently come up in such social work assessments, as I argued earlier, but they figured very peripherally here, if at all. The Form F report did detail the fact that Nita and Clare felt able to deal with any teasing that a child might experience, and noted that they would draw upon their own experiences of prejudice. Nita and Clare told me that Barbara did not raise any concerns about whether lesbians might abuse children with them, nor did she raise notions that a child might 'become' gay if placed with them. They did talk about how they would deal with a child's developing sexuality in adolescence, either heterosexual or homosexual.

The Assessment of Gender:

Theorising about, and representing, gender was as important to the process of assessment in this case as issues of lesbianism. Nita and Clare began their assessment with a stated preference for caring for girls rather than boys:

> **Nita:** *We said girls because we felt we have got so much to offer girls, and that we have done a lot of work with girls about feeling good about themselves. We felt that obviously girls are made to feel worse about themselves, particularly girls in foster care who are coming up for adoption, and they're quite likely to have had*

really negative messages and that we could do lots of work with them and provide a positive environment...

Clare: *And also we felt we are a limited resource, and if we feel that we can only have three children, then we should have girls.*

Nita: *And we also felt that boys take a lot of energy to counter all the messages that they get from society, and we really wanted to spend that energy on girls, not on struggling with boys to try and counter everything that had happened to them...*

Clare: *It was quite hard to explain that because we haven't got any problem with boys, we've got loads of boys in our lives and we work with them...*

Nita: *Yes it was quite difficult because I think there's such a strong ethos that 'children are children' and that if you love children then you should love them all and not be selective, and that if you say you're only interested in girls or boys then there must be some other agenda going on!*

Initially Barbara accepted their stated preference, and indeed it is common practice for adoptive applicants to choose one sex or both (Triseliotis *et al.* 1997:156). There is a specific question on the Form F that allows for this (BAAF 1991:2). Later in the assessment, however, Barbara said that this was a problem, that the adoption panel might not accept it. The second opinion social worker, Jane, also strongly suggested that panel would not accept a preference for girls.

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Nita and Clare eventually gave in[30] and said that they would consider boys in sibling groups for example, and Barbara's comments in the report stated:

> *The couple have made a first preference of a girl child as they*
> *feel they have something extra to offer, to enable a girl to grow*
> *up as a strong individual with self esteem and a good, clear*
> *sense of identity. They also feel that they know more as women*
> *what it is like to be a girl, having had some shared experience,*
> *whereas they wouldn't feel quite the same with a boy. They*
> *emphasized that they have not got a problem with boys and they*
> *know several boys and would consider one as a second*
> *placement if a sibling to the first child placed.*

Nita and Clare questioned whether more was made of this issue because they were lesbians, as heterosexual couples are able to state a preference (Triseliotis *et al.* 1997:156). They argued that some panel members might have concerns to do with sexual abuse if they stated a preference for girls as lesbians, this being a common assumption of 'risk' to do with children placed with such carers (Hicks 1997). Secondly, they also felt that there might be a view of lesbians as 'anti-men' (see, for example, case law in *B v B (Minors) (Custody, Care and Control)* 1

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[30] "She asked us if we'd consider a boy on several occasions. Eventually she said, 'If you had a girl placed with you and then her birth mother had another child, would you consider the placement of that sibling?' 'Yes,' we said. 'If it was a boy, would you consider him?' We felt bullied and looked at each other, 'Yes, we'd consider it.' Afterwards we both agreed that we would consider it in fairness to the first placement, but that the answer would probably be no. The answer we gave was really to keep Barbara happy." (Clare).

FLR 402[31]), and that Barbara used this point to represent them as 'not anti-men' rather than dealing with their child gender preferences. Certainly I would argue that this is a further point of disadvantage within the assessment process for lesbian applicants. If heterosexual applicants are able to state child gender preferences, then why should lesbians be prevented from doing so?

Another way in which gender was assessed relates to notions of male role models. Barbara asked Nita and Clare to discuss what male role models they would be able to provide for a child placed, and the couple felt that she pushed this issue strongly. She asked what men they knew and what gender role balance they could provide for a child. Barbara emphasized that panel would want to know about this, and it is addressed a number of times in the Form F.

It is important to think about what kind of 'theorising gender' is going on here, and the work of Golombok & Fivush (1994) is helpful. Asking a lesbian couple about male role models stems from certain assumptions made about the absence of a primary male carer in the home. Specifically, psychoanalytic theories of gender development were traditionally based upon the assumption that correct gender identity would only be attained via healthy interactions with both a male and female parent (Golombok & Fivush 1994:55). Later classic social learning theories suggested that children acquired gender by imitating roles provided by parents (Golombok & Fivush 1994:75). By implication then, a child living with two

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[31] "B v B (Minors) (Custody, Care and Control), reported in *Family Law Reports* (1991) 1, pp. 402-412.

women will not fully understand a male gender identity.

There are a number of problematic assumptions with such theories of gender 'acquisition' however. First, traditional psychoanalytic theories assume what I term 'compulsory gender', that all children ought to grow up to be stereotypically 'men' and 'women', and that any deviance from this should be punished (Sedgwick 1991). Second, social learning theories assume that children learn gender by copying individual parents alone, when in actual fact they look to a range of individuals and behaviours to think about gender (Golombok & Fivush 1994:84). More importantly, cultural assumptions about correct gender behaviour are just as influential, including gender stereotypes (Golombok & Tasker 1994:77). Third, notions of gender balance and male role models, based upon these theories, make the major assumption that children simply copy the gender identities of their parents, when children's own active formation of views of gender, and issues of cultural roles, understandings, peers or play are just as vital. Gender development *"results from a complex interaction between the individual and the wider social environment, of which parents are just one part."* (Golombok & Fivush 1994:2).

Barbara also told me that she asked the couple whether they had gendered roles at home, and the report reflects Nita and Clare's reply that they did not. Again I think this relates both to notions of social learning theory and to processes of heterosexualisation (Wilton 1996b, 1996c). Assessment practices used in

working with heterosexual carers make assumptions that they will provide balanced gender roles. In actual fact, there is little evidence that men in heterosexual relationships provide much child care (Golombok & Fivush 1994:145-6). Here, the same assumption is applied to lesbians, but the concern that is being addressed is that they will not be able to provide correct gender role modeling, or that their lesbianism will have adverse effects upon the gender identity of a child. This is another common assumption of 'risk' to children placed with lesbian or gay carers (Hicks 1997) but one that is not supported by existing research evidence (Golombok & Fivush 1994:161; Golombok & Tasker 1994; Tasker & Golombok 1997).

Barbara was also keen to represent Nita and Clare as 'not too feminist' in their approach to gender, emphasizing their relationships with, and views of, men. Again this does not bear any simple 'factual' resemblance to the way that they presented themselves. Indeed I think that they are, and do present as, feminists[32]. Rather it related to the need to address concerns for the adoption panel about lesbians being 'anti-men'. Nita and Clare told me that Barbara asked them about men friends in their network, and they also told me that Jane, the second opinion worker, seemed almost 'obsessed' with this point. Barbara confirmed this when she told me that she had asked about men, but she told me that this had been for the sake of the panel and also that she would ask any couple, of any sexuality, about this. When I asked Barbara if lesbians would ever

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[32] "In fact she never asked us if we were feminists. If she had, we would have said we were, as we are." (Clare).

be inappropriate as adopters, she replied, *"Only if they are anti-men."*

The assessment report directly addresses this point, but also links it to an elliptical phrase about their lesbianism:

> *The couple have contact with several males and have commented that they are all positive, healthy figures who would make good role models for a child to look up to and they certainly would not include aggressive, macho figures to be amongst their friends. [Nita and Clare] are not anti-men, and their being lesbian is something that they feel inside is a natural state for them."* (*sic*)

I read this as an attempt to represented 'de-politicized' or 'non-radical' versions of lesbianism, in which notions of sexuality as a form of political choice are removed. Instead the couple are 'natural' lesbians (Altman *et al.* 1989; Stein 1990), and I argue that this is a direct construction of the couple as not 'anti-men', and not likely to cause gender confusion (Brown 1992b:214).

Section Three: Contesting Identities/Constructing Identities: The Meanings of Race, Sexuality and Gender

In this section, I examine how the intersecting dynamics of race, gender and sexuality were interpreted in relation to Nita and Clare's application to be considered as the potential carers for a sibling group of seven Asian girls in the care of the Midlands Council. I argue here, with regard to the eventual decision to reject Nita and Clare, that the contestation of social work meanings attaching to such categories as 'lesbian', 'Hindu' and 'Asian' resulted in a reliance upon fixed and exclusive notions of racial, religious and sexual identities. I believe that this informed a panel decision that was based upon heterosexist, or anti-lesbian, assumptions. The question that I want to ask here is this: does the social work assessment of lesbian carer applicants theorize across the intersecting dynamics of race, gender and sexuality in a way which disrupts commonsense and essentialist notions of fixed racial, ethnic, gender or sexual identities? Or, does it in fact reinforce such categories as 'lesbian', 'Asian', 'Hindu' so that these become single, seamless, unchanging, and more importantly exclusive of each other? To borrow from Judith Butler (1990) here: *"...Is* [social work assessment] *an antifoundationalist inquiry that affirms the kind of sexual complexity that effectively deregulates rigid and hierarchical sexual codes, or does it maintain an unacknowledged set of assumptions about the foundations of identity that work in favour of those very hierarchies?"* (Butler 1990:x).

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How does Social Work Theorize Identities? What is a 'Lesbian'?

Brown (1992b) has noted that social work theory regarding lesbians has relied upon psychological and psychoanalytic models which pathologise and individualize sexuality, and that, in relation to the care of children, lesbians have been seen as 'not real women' and therefore unable to 'mother' or 'parent' (Brown 1992b: 202,214). In the case of Nita and Clare, however, their assessment and approval as adopters was a statement of their abilities to parent children, that they were 'good enough carers', and it is this which presented a dilemma for the Midlands Council. I argue that the Midlands Council had to take in good faith an application by a couple who were able to meet the specific care, racial, religious and cultural needs of the children, but that the workers relied upon a pathologising view of lesbianism which meant that Nita and Clare were ultimately rejected.

In being considered as potential carers for the girls in question, Nita and Clare were represented to the Midlands Council as an openly lesbian couple who had been approved for adoption. The Midlands Council had a policy statement of equal opportunities that read *"...the Council will take positive action to ensure that all requests for and recipients of any service are treated equally. Policies and procedures will be designed so as not to discriminate intentionally or unintentionally against any group or individual on any unjustifiable grounds,"* and the policy specifically included *"sexual orientation."* In terms of their consideration

of Nita and Clare as potential carers, then, an 'on merit' approach can be predicted on the basis of the Equal Opportunities statement. This was in fact the approach used by the Midlands Council Fostering/Adoption Unit, but only after some initial disagreement:

> **Nita:** *Initially they were openly negative. The woman that Barbara contacted was a Homefinder social worker, Jo, who said that she didn't approve of lesbians adopting and that if the case was taken up by the Department then she would have nothing to do with it because she didn't agree with it, so that was Barbara's first encounter with the Authority.*
> **Clare:** *She didn't seem to think that this should put us off totally, because the woman who said that said it wasn't Departmental policy, it was only her view, and that she wasn't the manager anyway. I think Barbara then spoke to the Manager who was above Jo, and she said, "No it wasn't a problem," and that they would consider us.*

Here, then, we have two opposing views of the category 'lesbian' with regard to the potential to care for children. The first view, rejection *a priori* on the basis of sexuality alone, and the second, the 'on merit' approach which does not regard 'lesbian' as an automatic disqualifier but is concerned with the assessment of child care skills or the ability to parent. In both cases, lesbianism is made **the**

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issue over and above race, religion, gender and so on. The second approach was also in line with the Midlands Council's statement of equal opportunity, and so a decision was made to progress with consideration of Nita and Clare as potential carers for the girls.

In this case, a linking meeting was held and attended by Jane, the second opinion social worker involved in Nita and Clare's initial assessment, at which she was told that the couple would be 'seriously considered' as potential carers for the girls. However, as I have stated, Nita and Clare were rejected at a subsequent matching panel. Barbara told me that she thought that they were rejected as carers on the basis of their sexuality alone, and there is evidence of this from two other data sources: the letter outlining the reasons for their rejection and the report of the officer who investigated the official complaint later made by the couple. The letter from the Midlands Council giving reasons for the couple's rejection stated:

> *The Panel were clear that you would make various efforts to accommodate the girls' Hindu religious and cultural needs. However, there is a fundamental problem in seeking to do this in the context of **a relationship which the Panel understood is not recognised in the Hindu faith.*** (my emphasis).

The letter also noted that this would not be *"in the best interests of the girls."*

There are also two references which point to versions of the category 'lesbian' in the report of the officer who investigated the complaint. On page six, he noted:

> ...the Assistant Director of Childrens Services has indicated
> that...the continuing national debate and media attention related
> to placement of children with lesbian and gay couples would
> cause children in such placements to feel insecure.

Further, on page seven, he makes reference to an article dealing with case law regarding lesbians in residence and parental responsibility cases (Beresford 1994), which he interprets in such a way that *"even where there is no link to religious upbringing, the Courts are likely to consider lesbianism in a negative way."*

It is my view that all these active constructions of what is a 'lesbian' - that is, as being unsuitable for the care of children *a priori*, as being outside of the categories 'Hindu' or able to meet religious needs, as attracting media attention likely to cause insecurity for children placed, and as being regarded in negative and pathologising ways within law - rely upon fixed notions of the category 'lesbian' as 'the Other' (Kitzinger & Wilkinson 1996), outside of heteronormative understandings of religious belief and who can properly care for children. What, then, do I mean by 'heteronormativity'?

Diane Richardson (1996b) has argued that the ways in which the social is theorized rely upon the centrality of a naturalized heterosexuality. This heterosexuality *"is constructed as a coherent, natural, fixed and stable category; as universal and monolithic."* (Richardson 1996b:2). She points out that it is none of these things, but is actually socially constructed (Maynard & Purvis 1995b) so that it remains naturalized and invisible, but present as a kind of 'blueprint' for social processes (Richardson 1996b:3). Thus I argue that theorizing about parenting, and who makes a good parent, is usually based upon a gendered and racialised heterosexuality. When this is disrupted, in the case of lesbian adoptive applicants, then questions about which one is the 'Mummy' indicate heteronormative values.

It was the early work of Adrienne Rich (1980) that identified heterosexuality as a compulsory and political institution, rather than a naturally occurring majority (Yorke 1997:81). She noted that one of heterosexuality's means of self-reinforcement was to render invisible the lesbian possibility (Rich 1980). Applications to care for children by lesbians, however, disrupt such heteronormative values. One response, as we have seen, is to regard lesbians as so much 'Other' to the heteronorm that they are rejected outright. Another response is to regard them as 'different', but to nevertheless assess their parenting skills, the 'on merit' approach. In the case of Nita and Clare, it is my view that the Midlands Council had to construct versions of the category 'lesbian' which were so 'Other' to heteronormative understandings of a 'good parent' in

order to allow them to reject the couple. This process relied upon fixed constructions of the categories 'heterosexual' and 'lesbian' in order to maintain a hierarchy of sexual codes (Butler 1990) with regard to who makes a good parent[33].

I have tried to reconstruct these crude categorizations of a 'heterosexual carer' and a 'lesbian carer' in Figure 6.2, in order to show how the 'lesbian' was represented as unnatural, unable to parent, and 'other' to the norm:

HETERONORMATIVITY: Who Makes a Good 'Parent'?	
Heterosexual Carer	*Lesbian Carer*
Normative sexuality: de-sexualized	Sexualized beings with abnormal sexuality
Balanced gender roles	Unbalanced gender roles, likely to affect child development, likely to be 'anti-men'
Naturally occurring sexuality, biologically essential	Chosen sexuality, so political and radical
Normal	Abnormal, so stigmatized and stigmatizing (e.g. teasing)
Legally approved, e.g. adoption law, case law	'Outside' of the law
Religious approval	'Outside' of religious tradition

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[33] "Barbara said that, as it was clear that all or most of the girls had been serially sexually abused by at least two men, they'd never be successfully placed with a heterosexual couple, as their only experiences of men had been abusive and they needed space to heal. She therefore thought that, if they'd been in our authority, we'd have been a 'dream come true' as two female carers. She thought a sole female carer for seven girls was a complete non-starter, however good a support network they had." (Clare).

Natural parents, notion that birth would have been possible but for childlessness	Unnatural parents, artificial
Natural provision and socialization of racial, ethnic and cultural factors	Category 'lesbian' seen as white, rarely black or Asian, but if so then seen as 'outside' of cultural 'norms'
Part of a natural parenting community with support	Isolated individuals with little support

Figure 6.2.

Thus a heterosexual carer is seen as possessing a normative sexuality, and indeed the sexuality of heterosexual carers is rarely discussed in social work assessments. Many heterosexual applicants do not disclose their sexuality at any point in the process, and may be constructed as implicitly 'normal'. That is, the explicit mention of heterosexuality is often elided in social work assessments. Heterosexuals are assumed to provide naturally occurring balanced gender roles, either as part of a heterosexual couple or through family and friends if the carer is single. Heterosexuality is assumed to be a biologically essential norm, rather than a choice or political institution, against which lesbians and gay men are tested as 'other'. Since heterosexuality is constructed as the norm, then the children of heterosexuals are not assumed to be likely to experience confusion about gender roles or teasing due to their parents' sexualities.

Heterosexual carers are approved in material or structural terms via law, both in existing fostering and adoption legislation and in case law examples, and they are seen to attract religious approval by most faiths (Thomson 1993). Heterosexual carers are also seen as 'natural' parents, and again this is linked to

notions of biology. The construction of 'the childless couple' as parents for whom a birth child would have been possible but for physiological problems elicits particular sympathies in commonsense understandings, so much so that surrogacy and alternative insemination are widely accepted for 'childless' heterosexuals. So too with carer applicants, who may be constructed as 'naturally able to care' but for their childlessness. Strangely, white heterosexual carers are rarely assessed as, or understood to have, race, culture or ethnicity, but black heterosexual carers are often constructed as the 'natural' providers of racial, ethnic and cultural factors in a way that black lesbians and gay men are not[34] (Irvine 1996:218). Finally, heterosexual carers are seen as having the automatic support of friends, family, neighbours and community, whilst lesbians and gay men are assumed to be 'outcasts' without (heterosexual) support.

In contrast, the 'lesbian carer' is understood as a sexual being, sometimes exclusively, whose sexuality is 'other' to the heteronorm. Lesbians are assumed to be unable to provide balanced gender roles, which is thought to adversely affect child development, and they are seen as 'anti-men'. Lesbian sexuality is seen to be different, and therefore chosen, rather than natural, so lesbians are constructed as political and radical. Lesbians are so 'other' to the heteronorm that they are assumed to carry stigma, and therefore for children this will result in teasing and bullying by peers.

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[34] "Black lesbians and gay men are sometimes considered rejects from the black community." (Clare).

Lesbian carers are largely, though by no means exclusively, outside of legal approval[35], and are also seen as outside of any religious tradition or community. They are constructed as unable to be natural parents, as opposed to the 'childless heterosexual', and so their desire to parent, and the means by which they might do so (which also includes alternative insemination), is regarded as artificial. The category 'lesbian' is usually understood to mean white, and rarely black or Asian. Black lesbians are seen as outside of the 'cultural norms' of their racial heritage, and so are not the 'natural' providers of racial, ethnic or cultural needs of children (Irvine 1996:218). Finally, lesbian carers are seen as isolated individuals with little support, outside of the heterosexual parenting community, but not understood as part of a lesbian community.

Theorizing Racialised Identities: The Categories 'Asian', 'Hindu' and 'Black'

Recent work concerned with the construction of identities according to race and ethnicity has been keen to assert that such dynamics also intersect with, and are interdependent upon, those of class, gender, sexuality, nation and religion (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992; Bhattacharyya 1998; Brah 1996; Dyer 1997; Gilroy 1997; Hall 1996; Lewis 1998; McClintock 1995; Mercer 1994; Woodward 1997b). I have argued in this chapter that social work assessments of lesbians theorize and construct the category 'lesbian' via race and gender as much as sexuality.

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[35] "No-one ever discussed legal stuff with us. We did all that ourselves - wills, residence order giving us both parental responsibility for the girl we eventually adopted. It should have been raised as we had to research it all ourselves." (Nita).

That is, I now believe that the social work assessment of lesbian, and indeed gay, foster or adoptive applicants is never solely based upon understandings of sexuality alone.

With regard to issues of race and ethnicity, however, it is my view that, for the majority of white lesbian or gay applicants, their 'whiteness' is disappeared or absent (Dyer 1988; Frankenberg 1993; Helen 1992, 1993). This has been noted by Richard Dyer, as the *"invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse...Whites are everywhere in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem not to be represented to themselves **as** whites..."* (Dyer 1997:3). 'Whiteness', here then, functions as a dynamic of assessment in much the same way as I have been arguing that 'heterosexuality' does. But where a 'black' lesbian, or gay man, is being assessed then issues of race and ethnicity are brought very much into play.

I was interested to see how issues of race were represented in the original assessment report prepared by Barbara for the Northern City Council. The Form F described Nita as 'Indian' on the front sheet, and goes on to detail her family roots in India. There are several references in the form which, taken together, build up a representation of Nita's 'Asian-ness'; for example, her travels in India and Pakistan, her work in an Asian women's refuge and with Asian women's community projects, her involvement with a national network of Asian women

writers, her regular visits to India. However, nowhere is her own understanding of her racial identity or heritage described[36]. I was also interested to find out how issues of race were assessed with Clare, who told me that the only thing she specifically recalled was Barbara asking her if she was happy to take an Asian child, which is reported in the form: *"The couple are aware of the need for more black prospective adopters and this has motivated Nita in particular. [Clare] says that she feels similarly and said that they are both enthusiastic to be parents and it is not just a question of her going along with [Nita's] wishes."* In fact, the couple commented that the only way that race really came up during the assessment was around Nita's racial background. The focus of race in the original assessment, then, was on the categories 'black' and 'Asian'[37].

I want to argue, however, that later constructions of the categories 'Asian', 'Hindu', and 'able to meet religious and cultural needs', by social workers and managers from the Midlands Council relied upon singular and fixed notions of racialised and religious identities which excluded the category 'lesbian', thereby excluding Nita and Clare[38] (Brah 1996; Mercer 1994; Thadani 1996). My evidence for this comes from the letter of the Assistant Director (Children's

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[36] Indeed there is a mistake on the form - "She wrote that I spoke Urdu at home which is not true." (Nita).

[37] "There was an assumption that I was okay about race because of Nita. It was not pushed. When I was assessed for the fostering panel, the social worker Usha asked me much more searching questions about race, especially about how I saw Nita. I talked about her as Indian and how this was crucial to our relationship and had enriched my life. She commented on how unusual this was because most white partners said race 'wasn't an issue.' It is an issue and will always be." (Clare).

[38] "Especially when the seven girls had been brought up as Hindu, Jehovah's Witnesses, Sikh and Christian at different points. The youngest children were 3, 4 and 6, and had been in care for two years and had really only known the white foster homes where they were placed." (Clare).

Services) for the Midlands Council, and the report of the Officer who investigated the couple's complaint. The decision to reject Nita and Clare was based upon two points, or *"legal difficulties"* as the letter put it, which are worth quoting in full here as they are complex and central to my argument:

> *The specific problems that faced the Panel related to two legal difficulties which arise from the case...[T]hey provide the basis for the Panel's decision not to proceed with the match.*

> *1. Under Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 the Authority is required, before making any decision with respect to a child whom they are looking after, to ascertain the wishes and feelings of the child's parents. In this case, given the parents' professed strong Hindu beliefs[39], it is our understanding that they would object to the placement on religious grounds. Although the Local Authority is not absolutely bound by the parents' wishes and feelings regarding placement[40], these do have to be given due consideration.*

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[39] "The birth mother had been Sikh, Hindu, Jehovah's Witness and Christian. The current man living with the mother was not the birth father of them all and had been convicted and imprisoned for abusing them." (Clare).

[40] This is an important point here - the Authority is not bound by the parents' wishes and feelings in making a placement, since the girls were all subjects of Care Orders under the Children Act 1989 which dictated that they were not to be returned to the parental home under any circumstances due to the abuse that they had suffered. Indeed their birth father had served a period of imprisonment in respect of the criminal offences involved.

2. Under Section 22(5)(c) of the Children Act 1989 the Authority

must give due consideration to the child's religious persuasion,

racial origin and cultural and linguistic background in respect of

children either accommodated or subject to a Care Order. For

children subject to a Care Order, the duties are made even

stronger by Section 33 of the Children Act which states that a

Local Authority shall not cause a child to be brought up in any

religious persuasion other than that in which he/she would have

been brought up if the Care Order had not been made. The

Panel were clear that you would make various efforts to

accommodate the girls' Hindu religious and cultural needs[41].

However, there is a fundamental problem in seeking to do this in

the context of a relationship which the Panel understood is not

recognised in the Hindu faith.

The point being made here, that lesbianism is not compatible with the Hindu

faith, was the main reason given for the rejection of Nita and Clare. What is going

on here then? Were Nita and Clare unable to meet the religious needs of the

girls? In fact, the girls had been described as "nominally Hindu" and Nita and

Clare had provided detailed written material specifying how they would

incorporate the Hindu faith into the girls' everyday lives:

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[41] "...unlike the three separate white foster homes they were in. All the children were described as being 'confused and negative about their racial identity.' Some were involved in self-harm and one had tried to commit suicide." (Clare).

The [Children] Act requires the authority to ascertain "How the applicant would expect to participate in and nurture a child's religious life?" (Guidance to the Act, Volume 3, clause 3.24), not to find an identical religious background. We do not practise any other religion ourselves, and were committed to bringing the children up as Hindus[42]. We explained in great detail how we would give Hinduism a high priority in our daily lives and develop the children's understanding and practice of their religion beyond what the younger ones had experienced up to now, and certainly beyond what we are told they are currently receiving in their foster homes. We were also committed to developing their positive feelings about India and being Asian through our own family and friends and [Nita's] family contacts and roots in India.

The Northern City Council fostering panel also *"considered the couple to be suitable carers from [their] understanding of the children's needs as provided by [the Midlands Council]."* Guidance under the Children Act 1989 is not prescriptive on this issue and has the following to say regarding religion:

"...the social worker should seek to understand the extent to which religion influences the foster parent's family life. What is

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[42] "We made this point because nothing had been done about this for the past two years." (Clare).

the element of familiarity and sympathy with and understanding

of other denominations and faiths with which the foster family

may have links through relatives or friends?...How would the

applicant expect to participate in and nurture a child's religious

life?" (DoH 1991:26; para. 3.24).

Indeed I argue that the Midlands Council panel accepted the couple's ability to

meet the girls' religious needs, but it was Nita and Clare's **lesbianism** that was

problematic for them. In response to this, however, the Midlands Council

suggested that lesbianism is not recognized in the Hindu faith. Here, then, is a

construction of 'Hindu' as an identity exclusive of the category 'lesbian'.

There are two ways of contesting this assertion. First, as was argued by Usha

and also by Nita and Clare themselves, is the argument that Hinduism is far more

liberal on questions of sexual practice than many other religions, certainly

including Christianity or Islam (Kurl 1993). Nita and Clare argued that social

workers had relied upon racist stereotypes of Asian religions as oppressive and

reactionary. Second, the question can be asked, 'what religion does explicitly

recognize lesbian or gay relationships?', to which the answer is none (Thomson

1993). This points to the fruitlessness of trying to establish a single 'Hindu belief'

regarding lesbianism, yet this was attempted in the report of the Complaint

Investigation Officer:

Hindu belief in relation to lesbianism:

*I have sought, by various means and contacts, to establish **what is Hindu belief in this matter.** My conclusion is that a distinction between religion and culture does not exist in this matter, and that Hinduism may be described as a system of practice rather than belief. The test I have therefore put to a range of people describing themselves as Hindu has been what would be the attitude in a temple to attendance by a couple known to be lesbian. This ranged from, "They would not be allowed in" to "In some temples they might be accepted."* (my emphasis)[43].

Nita and Clare had made it quite clear how they thought that they were able to meet the girls' stated religious and cultural needs, writing in their complaint that " *the children are now left with no immediate prospect of being together again in a permanent home with at least one Asian parent, participating in the Hindu religion, all of which [Midlands Council] has been directed to find for them and all of which we could have provided."[44]* Lesbianism, however, was seen here as

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[43] "The assumption made here is that Hindus who attend temples aren't lesbians. What about all the lesbian Hindus in India? There was a high profile case there of two women marrying and it was all over the Indian newspapers [see Thadani 1996:106]. Hinduism is a religion that does not have to be observed in attendance at temple, unlike Christianity where you're expected to attend church. Hindus must have a shrine in their home and that is where most worship." (Clare).
[44] "There was no consideration of 'the best interests of the child'. It was the requirements of the Hindu religion and their parents' views that prevailed. In fact four of the girls were over 8 years but were never consulted, as is prescribed in the Children Act 1989. Those seven girls now think that no-one wanted them. They knew they had been advertised but not that anyone had ever responded." (Clare).

somehow inappropriate in racial and cultural terms, and I think that this is partly

to do with the construction of heterosexual carers as being the 'natural' providers

of racial and religious identities (Irvine 1996; and see my earlier discussion of

Figure 6.2). But it also has to do with the denial of black and Asian lesbianism

and the interpretation of Hindu religion as being exclusive of lesbians[45].

Understandings of the 'black lesbian' are often so other to heteronormative ideas

about who makes a good parent that the category is excluded (Hayfield 1995).

The oppression experienced by black lesbians is rarely addressed in social work

other than in pathologising ways (Swigonski 1995), and lesbianism itself is

sometimes seen as a 'white' only thing, the 'white disease' (Mason-John &

Khambatta 1993:21). Anna Marie Smith has argued that 'the black lesbian' and

'the lesbian parent' were constructed as 'demons' key to New Right discourse on

race and sexuality (Smith 1994:213), and that this discourse placed the figure of

'the black lesbian' *"at the furthest possible distance from the white familial

nation."* (Smith 1994:182).

In reviewing evidence for the place of lesbianism within the Hindu faith, Giti

Thadani's (1996) work is important for the historical evidence that she provides of

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[45] "No-one ever said what as lesbian carers we'd not be able to do or what we'd do that would be so bad. It wasn't about being two women, it was about being lesbian that they objected to. So if Nita had come forward on her own with me as a support, and we hadn't said we were lesbians, we'd maybe have got the kids. The girls were not Hindu anyway. They were advertised as nominally so and the Midlands Council said they wanted any foster parents. They didn't even say Asian carers, they just wanted somewhere the girls could all be together. No-one looked at our parenting skills to see if we could meet the girls' needs. Our commitment to the placement was such that we'd said we'd both give up work to look after them full-time, and we'd move to a bigger house." (Clare).

feminine cosmogonies[46] and woman-to-woman sexual contact in ancient Hindu texts and imagery, both sculptural and painted (Thadani 1996:77). In fact, she argues that 'Hindu-ism' has been reconstructed via colonialism so that it is now often understood as a masculine static single tradition, excluding feminine cosmogonies, and asserting compulsory heterosexuality (Thadani 1996:4-6). Again the 'lesbian' can be excluded from the Hindu faith only if that faith is seen as a static and essential entity. Thadani argues that lesbianism is subject to the same kinds of silencing and 'othering' in India as in other countries, where it may be viewed as 'un-Indian', an influence from the decadent West, the privilege of 'Westernized' women only, or linked to women who are seen as gender non-conformative (Thadani 1996:82/88/92). Instead, she argues that there is evidence of a long and rich tradition of lesbian 'identities' in India and a strong contemporary lesbian movement (Thadani 1996:114; and see also Mason-John & Okorrowa 1995:74).

Cath (1996) echoes these points, noting the silencing of lesbianism in India, partly due to the legacy of colonial rule and law. She also describes the documentation of woman-to-woman bonding in the Hindu traditions of sculpture, texts and miniature paintings (Cath 1996:77/80/85). Arvind Sharma (1993) argues that the evidence for the 'acceptability' of homosexuality in ancient Hindu texts, dealing with *dharma* (righteousness, duty and virtue), *artha* (material gains), *kama* (love or pleasure) and *moksa/tantra* (spiritual or religious practice),

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[46] 'Cosmogony' means origin of the universe.

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is contradictory and inconclusive at best (Sharma 1993:68). Most significantly he argues that we should *"distinguish between Hindu religious attitudes and Hindu cultural attitudes. As a religion, Hinduism is perhaps more tolerant of homosexuality than it is as a culture..."* (Sharma 1993:68).

This is an important point, since the Midlands Council argued quite clearly that lesbianism is not recognized in the Hindu faith. Where was their evidence for this? The Investigating Officer found no evidence to support this claim. If the Midlands Council meant that lesbianism is not culturally acceptable to most Hindus (although that is not what they said), then this is discriminatory on two grounds; first, that of sexuality, since we could also say that most people who participate in white or black Christian cultures do not find homosexuality culturally acceptable (Thomson 1993). Nevertheless this does not justify discrimination on the grounds of sexuality in fostering or adoption, and it also suggests that Asian Hindu culture is 'more homophobic' than others. Second, on the grounds of religion, since it both rejects all lesbian and gay carers *a priori* and positions Hinduism as more 'reactionary' than other faiths, which in this case is an untested assumption.

As an Asian lesbian, Nita was constructed as somehow unable to provide racial, religious and cultural needs, in opposition to the way that black heterosexual carers would have been seen as 'naturally' able to provide these. I think this goes back to Smith's (1994) arguments about the place of 'the black lesbian' in

discourses surrounding 'the family' and 'child care'. In my view it is telling that the Investigating Officer used a paragraph from Children Act 1989 guidance (DoH 1991), which originally contained the infamous paragraph 16 (DoH 1990). He said:

> *Para 3.14* [from DoH 1991] *reads as follows: "Authorities and those interested in becoming foster parents must understand that an authority's duty is, unequivocally and unambiguously, to find and approve the most suitable foster parents for children who need family placement. It would be wrong arbitrarily to exclude any particular groups of people from consideration. But the chosen way of life of some adults may mean that they would not be able to provide a suitable environment for the care and nurture of a child. No one has a 'right' to be a foster parent. Fostering decisions must centre exclusively on the interests of the child."*

> *My conclusion is that the [Midlands Council] has operated both the spirit and the letter of this paragraph and has not arbitrarily excluded any particular group.*

My argument is that two lesbians were arbitrarily excluded, on the basis of sexuality alone, from caring for a group of children for whom they would have

been able to meet the stated needs. In my view the Midlands Council interpreted

lesbianism as a 'way of life' unacceptable to *their version* of 'the Hindu faith' and

therefore as an automatic disqualifier from caring for children.

Conclusion: A Summary of Points

In the second section of this chapter, I argued that the assessment approach

used in this case was 'on merit'. For Nita and Clare the assessment had a

positive outcome in that they were approved as adopters. The 'on merit'

approach here led to a focus on child care issues over and above sexuality, an

absence of discussion or analysis of the specificities of lesbian adoption, and the

assessment being panel-driven in its concerns. This was a key dilemma for the

assessing social worker; how much should she steer her assessment towards

what she felt would be the panel's concerns, and how much more thorough

should the assessment be, given that this was the first openly lesbian couple to

be considered for adoption by the panel in question?

I have argued that processes of heterosexualisation were in operation, and that

Nita and Clare were represented as having 'heterosexual influences' and

understandings. Specifically this involved the use of an extra heterosexual couple

as referees, discussion of past relationships with men, and seeing the couple as

an isolated example of lesbian carers, not part of a 'lesbian community' but fitting

into a heterosexual one. I have also argued that the 'childlessness' model of

adoption was used in this case even though it was inappropriate[47].

With regard to gender issues, I have suggested that concerns about gender and role developments were a key part of the way that lesbianism was assessed. The couple was prevented from making a statement of their preference for girl children, and they were assessed in relation to their attitudes towards men and whether they could provide male role models. Both concerns, I suggest, have more to do with anxieties about what 'lesbians' are, and the need to maintain compulsory gender roles, rather than issues of child development.

In section three, I argued that the social work assessment of lesbian, or indeed gay, carer applicants is not a straightforward transfer of foundational reality to written report (Form F). The categories 'lesbian', 'gay', 'Asian' or 'Hindu' are actively reconstructed via assessment processes, and their meanings are contested by various social actors in the process itself. In this sense, then, there is no such thing as a singular category 'lesbian', 'Asian' or 'Hindu', since both textual and discursive representations of these are active constructions of meanings attached to such categories by social actors.

This is an important point, for it acknowledges that such categories are never singular, seamless identities, but in fact contain a whole range of contested understandings, not least those of the people who inhabit them. This does not

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[47] "It's a deficit model of adoption which sees it as a 'consolation prize' rather than as a first choice, which it was for us." (Nita).

mean to say that categories such as 'lesbian', 'Asian', 'Hindu' or 'black' are non-existent, in fact far from it. They have important oppositional and resistant meanings for those people who claim them when faced with white heteronormative practices.

What I am arguing, here, though, is that social workers in this case relied upon fixed and essentialist notions of 'identities', which reinforced hierarchies concerning who can be a good parent. These heteronormative notions actively construct the 'good parent' in textual, as well as discursive, forms (e.g. Form F). But in the case of the assessment of heterosexual carers, this norm-ing process is invisiblised. As Judith Butler (1990) has noted, compulsory heterosexuality and gender norms actively conceal what is in fact a constant process of their re-construction, or 'performativity' in her words (Butler 1990:141).

In contrast, lesbians are constructed as 'the margin not the centre' in such debates, so that they are outside of the heteronormative understanding of the good carer. The examples from my research positioned lesbians as the source of unwanted media attention, at the centre of damaging court decisions, outside of religious acceptability, as providers of unbalanced gender roles, and as unacceptable carers *a priori* due to their sexuality. But these factors are not due to lesbianism, they are all examples of the heterosexual oppression of lesbians.

Similarly, social workers in this case relied upon fixed racial identities, which

perpetrated the ideas that 'all Asians are the same' and 'they don't recognize lesbianism'. The Hindu faith was seen as a singular entity, again which did not recognize lesbians, but it is my view that this was a reason given to mask discrimination on the grounds of sexuality[48]. As Helen Reece (1995) has noted, the paramountcy principle - what is seen as being 'in the best interests of the child', a key phrase used by the Midlands Council - can be used as the 'ultimate politically correct way' of justifying anti-lesbian decisions (Reece 1995). In this case, it was a supposedly Hindu norm that was constructed as something that had to be respected at all other costs, dressed up by social workers as meeting cultural and religious needs. This argument, however, could equally be applied to white religious 'cultures' (Christianity, Judaism, Roman Catholicism, for example) (Thomson 1993) and it is therefore a way of masking heterosexist social work practice. Certainly this is my view of the decision reached by the Midlands Council in relation to Nita and Clare.

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[48] "What about all our Asian friends who accept us and our sexuality, including Hindus?!" (Clare).

Chapter 7

Conclusions: Familiar Fears?

March 1996: My final 'social worker interview' is over, and I say goodbye and thanks, leaving some chocolates for the social workers and especially for Wendy who helped me so much. She's not there - out 'doing' social work, so I leave her a card. I walk back to the station to get the train back home, and I'm exhausted. Tomorrow I have to go back into work and be a social worker again myself. 'Well,' I think, 'I'm glad that's over, all those interviews done...I wonder if I've really done 'enough' for a PhD?...' But of course it's most definitely not over - for I have a mass of paper, all those interviews to painstakingly transcribe, and I realise that it's just the beginning. Now I have to make some sense of all this talk...

In this thesis I set out to examine how a group of social workers went about assessing the suitability of lesbians or gay men to be foster carers or adopters. I have argued that lesbian and gay adoption and fostering remain currently so 'unusual' that mere mention of the topic provokes strong reactions from all sides. If it were not such an 'unusual' topic, then perhaps this thesis would not even exist. I have further suggested that lesbian and gay carers are the exception not

the rule, and that their numbers are small. This is certainly because current social work practice continues to operate models of outright rejection, tacit acceptance or the last resort. Existing fostering and adoption law and guidance (DoH 1991; DoH et al. 1993) bolster all of these, and I have argued that this means that lesbians and gay men are always held to an existing heterosexual standard.

This 'heterosexual standard' needs uncovering, and I have started to do this in the thesis. It is also being excavated within queer and feminist theories, but there is a long way to go. By this I mean that more work needs to be done on what is constituted by the concept of 'heterosexuality'. Certainly it is a defining 'norm' in my view, but one which is rarely specified since, at its core, heterosexuality is nothing (Butler 1990; Richardson 1996b). Like all other sexuality categories, heterosexuality is only a particular social construction - nothing is inherently 'heterosexual' - and yet it retains dominance as a political and institutional principle. As David Halperin argues, this dominance depends, however, upon the abjection of 'homosexuality':

*...homosexuality and heterosexuality do not represent a true pair, two mutually referential contraries, but a hierarchical opposition in which heterosexuality defines itself implicitly by constituting itself as the negation of homosexuality. Heterosexuality defines itself without problematising itself, it elevates itself as a privileged and unmarked term, by abjecting and problematising homosexuality. Heterosexuality, then, **depends** on*

*homosexuality to lend it substance - and to enable it to acquire **by** default*

*its status **as** a default, as a **lack of difference** or an **absence of***

***abnormality**." (Halperin 1995:44).*

I have argued that this 'absence of abnormality' is constructed via heteronormative ideas about who makes the 'good carer' of children in adoption and fostering. I have also suggested that the 'heterosexual standard' is ever present in the familiar fears raised by the topic of lesbian and gay adoption and fostering, fears that revolve around supposed risks to children, threats to heterosexuality and men's powerful knowledges about the world as defining standards. These familiar fears, I have argued, are to do with current and prevalent discourses about lesbians and gay men, and these are very much present in social work 'discourse' (Rojek *et al.* 1988), including its practices and organisational effects.

I have also made the case that the assessment of lesbian and gay applicants is a key site for the construction of the meanings of 'lesbian', 'gay', and indeed many other concepts, and it is therefore also a key place to research how social workers 'make sense' of such categories. I have specified why some of the claims of postmodernism, queer theory, (postmodern) and (black) feminisms are helpful for analysing this, and I have focused my own investigations upon material practices and representations which socially construct versions of 'lesbian' and 'gay'. Indeed I suggest that these are interlinked within social work

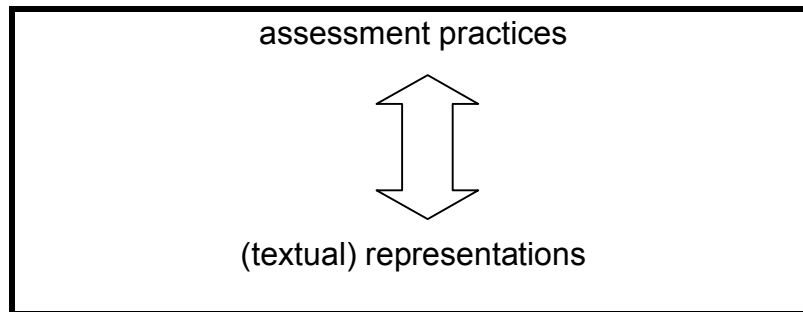assessment in a way that cannot be easily distinguished:

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│           assessment practices           │
│                                          │
│                   ⇕                      │
│                                          │
│          (textual) representations       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
```
Figure 7.1

Thus I have argued that social work assessments are textually mediated versions

of the 'relations of ruling' (Smith 1987, 1990), or the ways that 'the social' is

organised, and therefore 'lesbian', 'gay' and 'the good carer' are all forms of

knowing, ways of carving up and making sense of experience:

> *...in organisations concerned with processing people, characteristic*
>
> *forms of co-ordinating work processes focused on individuals are*
>
> *textual...Individuals are known as 'cases' under the interpretive*
>
> *aegis of their records. When decisions are to be made their 'current*
>
> *status' is located in the textual traces of their past contained*
>
> *therein.* (Smith 1990:220).

A Summary of the Thesis

In chapter two of the thesis I reviewed the few existing studies relating to lesbian and gay fostering and adoption. These argued for the right of entitlement of lesbian and gay applicants to be assessed, yet also noted a range of everyday 'myths' which tended to disadvantage them. These included concerns about gender role models and the possible abuse of children. Lesbians and gay men who were successfully approved were likely to take 'hard to place' children. Existing studies argued for the need for further detailed research, and I suggested that my work would pay attention to the concepts of assessing lesbians and gay men 'on merit', to what constituted 'discrimination' in assessments, to the importance of gender and race in constructions of sexuality, and to social work discourses, or the 'relations of ruling', rather than 'attitudes and values'.

In chapter three I made the case that textual devices are as important as methodological ones in persuading the reader of arguments. I suggested the 'unreliable author' in order to point out that my research interviews and case study were not descriptions of 'fact', but interpretations. I explained why I used interviewing and the case study to generate narrative accounts of practice (Hall 1997). This was so that I could deal with complexities, and investigate 'social work scripts', or 'ways of doing' assessments which constitute practice norms.

In chapter four, I argued that social work assessments are *versions of* 'lesbian' or 'gay' constructed via talk and text, and that these serve regulatory purposes in policing the boundaries of what I have defined as 'the good carer'. Assessment, therefore, follows no standard practice but is a 'making sense' activity, and I proposed a continuum model (Figure 4.4) to show a range of approaches. I then argued that the 'on merit: prioritising child care' model dominated amongst the agencies in which I conducted my research, though quite clearly I am unable to say whether it dominates across all local authorities. I analysed a series of key themes, which I argued influenced the approach taken by agencies, and I then used the work of Dorothy Smith (1987) to examine a series of everyday 'commonsense' arguments about supposed risks to children posed by lesbians and gay men. Here I examined arguments about the 'double burden', teasing, poor gender roles, corruption, and 'gay rights'. Problematising these everyday arguments allowed me to show how they are textually mediated versions of the heterosexual 'relations of ruling' that currently structure adoption and fostering practice.

I went on to examine the notion of 'discriminatory' practices in assessment in two ways; first, I suggested that lesbians and gay men were always disadvantaged within a system that favours heterosexuals and I argued that sameness models of 'equality' and assessment were inadequate. Sameness tended to hold lesbians and gay men to a heterosexual standard, to avoid the specifics of their lives, to position them as the last resort and to locate sexuality as a private

matter. Difference models, however, could be both disadvantageous and advantageous I suggested, depending on whether lesbians and gay men were expected to 'jump through extra hoops' or whether social workers recognised that there were key areas of questioning and needs specific to lesbian and gay experiences. Second, I looked at those social workers that were attempting to be more 'anti-discriminatory' in their practices. Using the examples of, first, the notion of 'matching' social workers with applicants on the basis of sexuality and, second, the Lesbian and Gay Issues Working Party in the North Eastern Council, I showed how attempts at anti-discriminatory measures were merely 'sticking-plasters', whilst movements for wider change can be 'organised out' by an unsupportive management and councillors.

In chapter five, I analysed how 'lesbian' and 'gay' were understood through the dynamics of gender. Lesbians were questioned about attitudes towards men, gender role models, and gender preferences, and more challenging versions of 'the lesbian' had to be organised out of assessments. Lesbians were understood as a 'threat' because they were women without men, yet they were also more palatable as the carers of children than gay men because they were women. Along the axis of sexuality, the lesbian was threatening, but along that of gender she was more acceptable. I proposed a model of 'the good lesbian carer' at Figure 5.1 who was *not too lesbian'* I suggested.

'Gender anxiety' was also present in understandings of 'the gay man', and similar

questions about gender role models were raised. As men, gay men raised a discourse of suspicion for the social workers, but as gay then the construction of 'the maternal man' made him more palatable. Corruption theory, the notion of the risk of sexual abuse, was far more prevalent when considering gay men than lesbians, and I found that the social workers were worried about the potential for allegations against gay carers.

I also found that gay men were far more likely to be assessed for less permanent placements of older children, usually young men, sometimes disabled and sometimes gay. Rarely were gay men considered for adoption. Lesbians were often seen as more appropriate for younger children, more permanent forms of care (including adoption), and sometimes for girls who had survived child sexual abuse. In comparison with 'the good lesbian carer', I argued that the dominant version of 'gay' produced through assessments was one in which gay men were seen to have 'maternal' qualities but were also understood along heterosexually gendered lines.

Here, then, is a key argument made within the thesis; that fostering and adoption assessments currently rest upon an assumed gendered heterosexuality (the idea of the heteronormative) in which it is women (all women) who are expected to protect children from men (all men). Where this way of working is challenged by lesbian and gay applicants, then the category 'lesbian' is understood as at once both unthreatening, because lesbians are seen as women, and also potentially

threatening to that conventionally gendered heterosexuality. Here lesbians are represented in non-threatening terms, I argued; as not too radical, not too lesbian. The category 'gay men' similarly was at once both unthreatening when represented in conventionally 'female' terms (the 'maternal' gay man) or in 'heterosexualised' ways, but was also threatening in gendered terms because gay male households usually contain no women and this was a problem for the social workers.

Chapter six presented my case study of Nita and Clare, and I used it to show how sexuality is also constructed in raced ways. I argued that their assessment as potential adopters relied upon the 'on merit: child care' model, and that this had a number of consequences; ignoring the specifics of lesbian adoption, being panel-driven, and imposing 'extra hoops'. I analysed the processes of 'heterosexualisation' in action, and also concerns around gender, in order to exemplify my earlier arguments about versions of 'lesbian'. Here I showed how lesbian applicants were disadvantaged by the heteronormative expectations of who makes a 'good parent' (Figure 6.2). Nita and Clare were represented as having heterosexual influences, 'not too feminist' and as 'natural' lesbians.

I then went on to argue that they were rejected as the potential carers of a sibling group of Asian girls by the Midlands Council solely because of their lesbianism. However, I showed that this decision was presented as an argument that 'the Hindu faith' did not support lesbianism. Once more I suggested that this was, in

fact, a particular *version* of 'Hindu' (Kumar 1993; Thadani 1996), and one that was and can be contested. Nevertheless I argued that the Midlands Council used fostering guidance (DoH 1991) to justify an anti-lesbian decision 'in the best interests of the children' (Reece 1995).

The thesis has made an original contribution to social work research knowledge for a number of reasons; first, it has investigated a topic little researched and has generated data in an area that has never been examined before. Second, the thesis has questioned some of the existing ways of understanding lesbian and gay adoption and fostering; it has investigated what 'on merit' assessments actually entail for lesbians and gay men, it has questioned the approach which examines agency policies only, and it has looked at what would constitute 'discrimination' in assessments.

Finally, it has adopted an approach to the investigation of the topic that locates social work assessment as a 'making sense' activity, rather than a series of skills. This has entailed, then, an institutional ethnography (Smith 1987), in the sense that the thesis has examined everyday understandings and practices that constitute agency norms in how lesbians and gay men are assessed. This has been realised by paying close analytic attention to the social workers' talk and text, for it is through these that versions of the 'good enough lesbian or gay carer' are situationally achieved.

The research, like all research, suffers from some methodological weaknesses. Further comparison with other local authority practices, including those prepared to make public statements that they would reject all lesbian and gay applicants, would have been enriching of the data. The case study would have benefited from further interviews with social workers and/or managers from the Midlands Council but this was not possible. Relatedly, the social worker cohort would have been supplemented by comments from those who refused to speak with me, since I was and remain interested in what they had to say.

The Need for Further Research

I have already argued that this thesis cannot answer all questions about adoption and fostering by lesbians and gay men, and this is because it exists within a context of social work research which pays little attention to gay and lesbian issues, much less specifics like fostering and adoption. In order to generate a wider picture about this topic, I recommend that research in the following areas is needed:

- studies, including longitudinal ones, of children placed with lesbian and gay adoptive and foster carers,
- studies of the placement 'careers' of lesbian and gay carers, including those who never have children placed with them, and including placement breakdowns where they occur,

- studies of applications to be considered by lesbians and gay men, including those who are rejected by agencies,

- studies of recruitment practices as they affect potential gay and lesbian applicants,

- studies of the decisions made by adoption and fostering panels about lesbian and gay applicants,

- cultural studies of media representations of lesbian and gay adopters and foster carers.

Further research in these areas would contribute to a more sophisticated knowledge-base for debating and considering this topic, and would greatly enhance current understandings of both social work practices concerning, and the day-to-day issues involved in, lesbian and gay adoption and fostering.

Familiar Fears?

In this thesis I have used Dorothy Smith's concept of the 'relations of ruling' (Smith 1987) to argue that fostering and adoption assessments favour the standard of the heterosexual couple via a dominant discourse, and that this includes talk, text and practices. Thus constructions of the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' through verbal and written representations, as well as through particular forms of social working applied to them, have been critiqued herein especially via alternative versions of knowledge provided by queer theory, black

writers and feminisms.

I have argued that there are many versions of 'lesbian' and 'gay' and I have analysed how some are more favourable within fostering and adoption practice: the 'good lesbian' or the 'maternal gay man'. Such versions retain dominance because they are ways of responding to the risks or threats that lesbians and gay men pose for the heterosexual 'relations of ruling'. I have argued that these are constructed as risks or threats to children, to heterosexuality, to traditional forms of gender, to fixed racial categories, and indeed to singular identities as such.

Heterosexuality continues to occupy a key institutional status within social work, and it is rarely questioned although it is panicked and has to be continually performed (Butler 1990). Therefore applications by lesbians or gay men to be considered for fostering or adoption challenge this heterosexuality, raising 'familiar fears', and so I have argued that this heterosexuality has to be defended via discursive strategies including the repetition of certain social work practices for all applicants.

I have also argued that it is impossible to investigate sexuality alone as it is always a raced and gendered concept. Indeed a focus solely on identity politics is dangerous, I argued, because this works with fixed identities ('a Hindu is....', 'a lesbian is....' and so on), rather than with categories of knowledge. Here feminist and queer theories have been important in locating such power/knowledge

dynamics.

Certain versions of the 'assessment' also dominate, I have suggested, with the 'on merit' model occupying a central place within my data. However I have argued that this works against lesbians and gay men in some ways and that it is poorly defined. Hence, for example, panics about whether lesbians and gay men should be asked 'different' questions.

Purely 'anti-discriminatory' measures, such as the idea of 'matching' applicants with social workers, do not address the wider 'anti-oppressive' problem of the heterosexual relations of ruling. Making such small changes, I argue, does not address questions of knowledge and the central place that heteronormative ideas occupy. Thus small changes will not work in favour of lesbians and gay men, and I have argued that one of their consequences has been the ascendancy of certain acceptable, heterosexualised or 'de-politicised' versions of the categories lesbian or gay. Instead I have argued through the thesis for the excavation of the heteronormative within social work and within social relations. This is in favour of expecting lesbians and gay men to accept small changes within an otherwise static and hegemonic set of power dynamics. For as Audre Lorde has argued:

> *What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to*
> *examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the*
> *most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable...For*

the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They

may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will

never enable us to bring about genuine change. (Lorde 1984:111-

112).

I have argued that this thesis is not a "how to guide" to the assessment of lesbians and gay men, and specifying a series of points on 'what to do' would be inappropriate not least because this would fix a standard version of 'lesbian' or 'gay' to be followed by all. Such fixities I have argued against. I also believe that a 'how to' guide would prevent social workers from the active reflexivity about their practices which is needed. I have specified some interim measures in the thesis, such as rejection of sameness models of assessment in favour of those which address the specificity of lesbian and gay experiences, but I have also argued for a total bottom-to-top change of the existing social work discourses of sexuality. This involves shifting the 'relations of ruling', certainly no easy task, but I would like to outline an approach to this here which might be termed 'multiple activisms'.

Multiple activisms work to change knowledges, and in particular to question dominant discourses, but this can only be done on a series of different but linked levels. For example, changing social work assessment practices is necessary but certainly not enough. Where existing law, guidance and indeed panels remain liberal at best and homophobic at worst, then these need to be changed also. My

own approach has involved, or continues to involve:

- working as a gay social worker, making alliances with other lesbian and gay social workers and supportive heterosexual social workers, in order to get lesbian and gay issues on the agenda,
- contributing to a social work education which does address lesbian and gay issues and questions dominant discourses of sexuality,
- arguing that 'lesbian' and 'gay' exist in different versions, and that these must be understood as also raced and gendered,
- providing training on lesbian and gay adoption and fostering,
- public speaking, research and writing about this topic,
- a commitment to the need to support further research,
- lesbian and gay community activism, including activism specifically concerned with adoption and fostering via support groups and campaigning groups,
- arguing that the process of social work assessment should be considered from start to finish, and each stage examined for its implications for lesbians and gay men; equal opportunities statements, policies, recruitment, assessing social workers, panels and supervision of workers,
- challenging homophobic decisions in law and guidance on fostering and adoption.

All of these are interventions into 'knowledge' about lesbians and gay men,

comparable with similar struggles about the relevance of race and ethnicity in decisions about adoption and fostering (Barn 1993; Rhodes 1992). I have argued for an analysis of how such subjectivities are constituted within social work, for it is by such interventions that the power/knowledge nexus can be revealed:

> *...the (gendered) subject is always differentiated within linguistic*
> *practices and institutional norms and [...] such structures represent*
> *hegemonic sites of contestation and are overdetermined by an*
> *unequal distribution of power.* (Ahmed 1996:91).

For it is only through a long-term praxis which aims to question dominant discourses of sexuality that the existing relations of ruling - the 'familiar fears' about lesbians and gay men as adopters and foster carers - can be shifted. Part of such a praxis is the need for research that can uncover the daily forms of social work-ing which constitute regulatory practices, and I hope that this thesis has made a contribution in this respect:

> *The actual practices ordering the daily relations that regulate*
> *contemporary advanced capitalist society, however conceptualized,*
> *can be subject to empirical inquiry, to ethnographic exploration,*
> *once texts are recognized as integral and 'active' constituents.*
> *Uncovering texts as constituents of relations anchors research in*
> *the actual ways in which relations are organised and how they*

operate. The enterprise is indeed grandiose; it is that of

transforming our understanding of the nature of power when power

is textually mediated. (Smith 1990:224).

Appendix 1

Interview Schedule: Prompts

Basic Information

Name
Age
Race/ethnicity/culture
Disability

How long have they been in social work?
What team are they in?
What does their team do?
Full-time/part-time?

'Policy' Issues

Does their Local Authority have a policy on lesbians and gay men as foster or adoptive carers?
Do they have an Equal Opportunities statement?
Does the Local Authority have a 'good' reputation for approving lesbians/gay men?
Does the team discuss lesbian/gay carers policy?
What are the views of local councillors?
Has there been any effect of Section 28?
Do they believe policy has had any effect?
What changes have there been due to policy?

For agencies that participated in Skeates & Jabri (1988) study

Read out the points made by the LA in that study: do the social workers recognise these? Did they ever happen? Do they have experience of them?

Recruitment and Selection of Lesbian and Gay Applicants

Is there any targeted recruitment? Advertising? Re. race as well as sexuality.

What is their step-by-step recruitment and assessment process? i.e. what stages are there? At what stage would sexuality be dealt with? When might they talk to 'out' applicants about sexuality?

Do preparation groups cover sexuality? Would applicants be dismissed for

homophobia or racism?

Social Worker Attitudes

Have they had any training on lesbian/gay issues? What about social work course (CQSW, CSS, DipSW?) or post-qualification training?

Does their unit have any lesbian or gay carers - where are they located? What placements do they have or get?

Ask about the common arguments against lesbian/gay carers:
- double surrogacy
- teasing/peer groups
- gender role models
- sexual abuse
- children will 'become' gay
- birth parent objections

What pressures are there on social workers/dept. about this issue? Is it different for lesbian/gay workers?

How are initial inquiries handled?

Assessing Lesbians and Gay Men

What assessment format is used? (Form F?)

Have they assessed anyone lesbian or gay? Or someone they thought was but didn't come out?

If they have a case example that they have assessed here, then talk about this in detail and find out how they assessed them

Who gets lesbian/gay assts in the team? Is there a team 'expert'? Have they used consultants? Is there 'matching' of gay worker with gay applicant or black with black etc?

How would they prepare for a lesbian/gay asst?
- knowledge/research
- supervision/consultation
- team support
- feelings/support/isolation
- p.c./getting it right or wrong

What do they cover at initial visit?

Would they use specific questions about sexuality? If not, why not? If so, what and why?

- gender role
- coming out
- relations with family
- telling a child
- schools/teasing
- abuse
- community
- allegations

How are gay couples assessed?
Who should bring up sexuality? In all assts? How is it discussed? Has sexuality ever been ignored?

Are lesbian/gay carers ever inappropriate?

How are lesbian/gay carers represented in asst reports? Who gets through panel? Race and disability too.

What is 'different' about assessing lesbians/gay men? c.f. heterosexuals, c.f. each other (i.e. gender differences).

Any themes, stereotypes that emerged?

When do people come out? When is best?

Post-Assessment Issues

Who is told carers are lesbian/gay? When?

Is there conflict between teams, i.e. over placement?

What about birth parents? Who tells the child and when?

What placements have been made?
Any patterns, e.g. disabled children?
Delays?
Which other Local Authorities have placed with them?
Do they have more lesbians than gay men?
Do lesbians get disabled kids, girls, sexually abused children, longer-term?
Do gay man get boys, young gay men, short-term, disabled, no placements?

Are lesbians/gay men more scrutinised?

What comes up at panels? What themes, rejections? What Qs? How do they prepare for panels?

Any issues in supporting a placement with lesbians/gay men:

- who to tell
- allegations
- couples that split
- child becomes anti-gay
- community
- media

Appendix 2.a: Analysis of Social Worker Interview Data

Analysis Within Data Sets (i.e. for each authority studied):

1. Transcribe all interviews. Read each respondent interview and begin to develop key data themes.

2. For each local authority, develop codes for overall data themes, e.g. 'GENDER ROLE MODELS'.

3. Re-read each interview, highlighting and numbering 'chunks' according to codes.

4. Construct charts for each code, and then enter numbered data chunks from each respondent. This builds up evidence under each code. This also shows common codes within each authority, and idiosyncrasies. Scanning the codes also shows areas of most and least significance.

5. Construct diagram of the assessment process stages for each authority (Figs. 4.1 - 4.3 of the thesis, pp. 159-161).

<u>Analysis Across Data Sets (i.e. across all authorities):</u>

1. Develop key themes across the whole data set, e.g. 'TEAM POLICY'. Construct tables for each authority showing themes across the top and respondents down the side. Enter data into these tables (e.g. Fig. 4.5 of the thesis, p. 176). These tables allow analysis of key themes both within data sets (each authority) and across the data as a whole (comparing authorities).

2. Compare the overall data codes developed for each authority across the whole data set, e.g. does 'GENDER ROLE MODELS' figure as a code across all authorities? Build up evidence across the whole data set under each code.

3. Use these 'chains of evidence' under each code to structure writing up of the analysis.

4. Analyse the social worker cohort according to each respondents race, ethnicity, age, class, disability, gender, sexuality, whether in fostering, adoption or management.

Appendix 2.b: Analysis of Case Study Data

1. Transcribe interview tapes, and review documentary sources. This begins to raise data themes.

2. Initial focus on 'the story' - isolate relevant sections of data from all sources and collect these in one file.

3. Construct 'the story' in chronological order. After first attempt, the story is reviewed by respondents and other readers. Revised version produced based on their comments.

4. Decision made about remainder of data to look at two overall areas: (i) the assessment, (ii) race, gender and sexuality.

5. Construct a flow chart showing the assessment in stages (Fig. 6.1 of the thesis, p. 335).

6. Read sources in depth. Highlight 'chunks' relevant to (i) the assessment or (ii) race, gender and sexuality.

7. Develop a series of data codes from these 'chunks'; e.g. 'GENDER: role models'. Re-read data and code each highlighted section.

8. Produce a list of data codes: 'ASSESSMENT APPROACH', 'DEPARTMENT POLICY', 'SEXUALITY:LESBIANISM', 'SEXUALITY:TEASING', 'SEXUALITY:ABUSE', 'SEXUALITY:CHILD DEVELOPMENT', 'GENDER:GIRLS', 'GENDER:ROLE MODELS', 'GENDER:MEN', 'RACE:ASIAN', 'RACE:BLACK', 'RACE:CULTURE, RELIGION AND LANGUAGE'.

9. Construct a chart showing data codes across top and data sources at side.

10. Number the individual data chunks and enter these into the chart under relevant codes. Each number allows accurate retrieval of direct quotations from data.

11. Read down each code column and note recurring sub-themes, e.g. under 'ASSESSMENT APPROACH' "on merit" is a strong sub-theme. Produce list of sub-themes.

12. Construct separate charts for each sub-theme. Enter evidence examples from the first chart under each sub-theme. This groups together evidence for each sub-theme.

13. Use the data codes and their sub-themes to structure the writing up of the analysis.

14. Seek feedback on the analysis from respondents. Make changes based on

their comments or include these as footnotes.

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