

The Use of a Strength-Based Approach in Addressing Discrimination Against Gays and Lesbians

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ABSTRACT. Gay parenting is a salient issue in American culture today and will continue to be a pressing issue in the near future. Just as society's definition of family has evolved over time, the meaning of family remains an important component within the gay community as well. This paper explores the topic of gay parenting and child rearing through an empirically based literature review. An overview of variables that tend to predict homophobia in heterosexuals is provided. Research is reviewed that explores social workers' and other helping professionals' feelings toward homophobia, and how these feelings can influence practice approaches in the area of adoptive services. In closing, an application of a strengths perspective to combating discrimination against gays and lesbians by social workers in adoptive services is proposed and analyzed. doi:10.1300/J137v14n03_01 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Laws prohibiting gays and lesbians from adopting children exist in Florida and New Hampshire, and legal rulings that state gays and lesbians are unfit parents have been rendered in Arkansas, Missouri, North Dakota, and Virginia. To complicate this prohibition further discrimination against gays and lesbians by adoptive services personnel continues to be pervasive in several states. With the opposite view, laws permitting gays and lesbians to adopt have been passed in California, New York, Minnesota, and New Jersey. Furthermore, there are no laws or regulations forbidding or permitting gays and lesbians to adopt children in 40 states and the District of Columbia (Focus on the Family as cited in Robinson, 2002).

While these legal viewpoints differ, one thing remains clear and that is while laws that prohibit gay and lesbian marriage continue to be passed the number of gay and lesbian couples that are also parents continue to increase. Tasker (2002) discusses the increase in the prevalence of children with gay and lesbian parents observing that an increasing number of lesbians and gay men are choosing to become parents. Brooks and Goldberg (2001) reported that there are approximately 3 million gay fathers and 5 million lesbian mothers in the United States who are parents of an estimated 14 million children. With the increasing numbers of gays and lesbians trying to adopt it is important to explore the opinions of adoption agency personnel. This makes recognition of the circumstances related to discrimination against lesbians and gays by public and private adoption agencies an issue that can no longer be avoided.

INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

Despite the positive findings in the majority of studies of gay and lesbian parenting and homosexual adoption/foster care, the issue remains controversial with several etiologic sources serving as the root of the controversy (Ryan, 2000). Homophobic and heterosexist opinions are pervasive in American society leading to institutional discrimination against gays and lesbians (Herek, 2002a). The involvement of various religious organizations in the political debate about gay and lesbian marriage has impacted the issue of gay and lesbian adoption. Religious intolerance of gays and lesbians spans across many religious traditions

including Christian, Islam, and others. For instance, a statement approved by Pope John Paul II (2003) through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith states that “allowing children to be adopted by persons living in such [homosexual] unions would actually mean doing violence to these children, in the sense that their condition of dependency would be used to place them in an environment that is not conducive to their full human development” (para. 7). In the same document Pope John Paul II orders all Roman Catholic politicians to oppose passage of laws that would allow for gay and lesbian unions or adoption for to do so would be gravely immoral (para.10).

Studies exploring gay and lesbian families indicate internalized fear among gay and lesbian parents resulting from a dominant heterosexist and homophobic American culture (Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004; O’Dell, 2003). In addition, multiple studies have been conducted with findings that support heterosexist ideologies being integrated into American policy. For example, Patterson and Redding (1996) found correlations between discrimination against gay parents and their children and moral disapproval and criminalization of private sexual activities.

To understand some of the causal processes involved in homophobic and heterosexist attitudes among social workers, it is essential to gain a comprehension of the perceptions that lead to these attitudes among heterosexuals in society as a whole. Factors such as age, education level, gender, race/ethnicity, and religion clearly appear to have some degree of causal affect in the feelings people have in the area and the decisions they make based on these feelings and beliefs.

First, homophobia is positively correlated with an increasing age level with the assumption that as age increases, so do these types of negative beliefs and stereotypes (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Battle & Lewelle, 2002; Ellis, Kitzinger, & Wilkinson, 2002; Herek, 2000a, 2002a; Landen & Innala, 2002; Hoffmann & Bakken, 2001; Wilson & Huff, 2001; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997).

Second, several studies report a negative correlation between education and homophobia and note that as education increases fears and stereotypes in this area seem to decrease (Lewis, 2003; Battle & Lemelle, 2002; Herek, 2000b, 2002a; Hoffmann & Bakken, 2001; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Herek & Capitanio, 1995). In addition, these researchers contend that heterosexuals with higher levels of education report less homophobia (Lewis, 2003; Battle & Lemelle, 2002; Ellis et al., 2002; Herek, 2000b, 2002a; Hoffmann & Bakken, 2001; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Herek & Capitanio, 1995).

Gender can also play a role in these beliefs and studies support that homophobic sentiments are more likely to be harbored by males than females (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Battle & Lemelle, 2002; Ellis et al., 2002; Herek, 2000a,b, 2002a,b; Landen & Innala, 2002; Lim, 2002; Sakalli, 2002; Hoffmann & Bakken, 2001; Olivero & Murataya, 2001; Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2001; Herek & Capitanio, 1995, 1999; LaMar & Kite, 1998; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997).

Race and ethnicity also play a critical role in homophobia (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Battle & Lemelle, 2002; Ellis et al., 2002; Herek, 2000a,b, 2002a,b; Lim, 2002; Hoffmann & Bakken, 2001; Olivero & Murataya, 2001; Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2001; Herek & Capitanio, 1995, 1999; LaMar & Kite, 1998). African American heterosexuals tend to have statistically higher levels of homophobia while Caucasians tend to have lower levels of homophobia (Lewis, 2003; Herek, 2002a,b). Although research needs to be intensified, there is speculation that some of the etiology behind differences in homophobia between races is related to other variables which tend to predict homophobia (Lewis, 2003). These endogenous variables include stronger religious association, lack of interpersonal contact with gays and lesbians, and a disparate difference in overall education (Lewis, 2003). Finally, greater degrees of religiosity and religious identity have been found to impact societal and professional attitudes regarding homosexuals and homosexual child rearing (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Dennis, 2002; Ellis et al., 2002; Herek, 2000b, 2002a; Hoffmann & Bakken, 2001; Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2001; Wilson & Huff, 2001; Crawford, McLeod, Zamboni, & Jordan, 1999; Petersen & Donnerwerth, 1998; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Herek & Capitanio, 1995). Studies examining religious influence on homophobic belief indicate that individuals who identify as conservative Christians tend to have higher levels of homophobia. In addition, increased frequency of church attendance, belief in an active Satan, and greater religious influence over one's life correlates significantly with homophobia (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Dennis, 2002; Ellis et al., 2002; Herek, 2000b, 2002a; Hoffmann & Bakken, 2001; Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2001; Wilson & Huff, 2001; Crawford, McLeod, Zamboni, & Jordan, 1999; Petersen & Donnerwerth, 1998; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Herek & Capitanio, 1995).

In assessment that includes a strength-based perspective the role that professional helpers can play in the area of discriminatory practices must also be considered. For example, Crawford et al. (2000) explored the attitudes psychologists hold toward gay and lesbian parenting

supported the predictive variables of homophobia. In addition, these authors found that individuals were more likely to show hostility toward homosexuals when his or her friends shared a similar view. Negative beliefs and stereotyping can clearly affect the counseling relationship and identification of these tendencies is crucial to implementation of a strengths-based approach.

Learning more about the culture and actual interpersonal contact with gay people is correlated with more positive attitudes toward homosexuality (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Herek, 2000b, 2002a; Landen & Inalla, 2002; Hoffmann & Bakken, 2001; Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2001; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Herek & Capitano, 1995). Crawford et al. (2000) reminds people that homosexuality is not a lifestyle choice and having this erroneous belief is at least partially responsible for discriminatory practices against gay individuals in society (Rivers, 2001). Therefore, it is no surprise that the myth that homosexuals choose to be gay or lesbian has been a significant predictor of homophobia (Herek, 2000b, 2002b; Landen & Innala, 2002; Sakalli, 2002; Herek & Capitano, 1995).

GAY PARENTING

Along with the inquiry of homo-negativity and homophobic attitudes toward gays and gay parenting, recent studies have included the importance of examining the impact of gay and lesbian families, gay and lesbian stepfamilies, and gay adoption issues on society as a whole. Berger (2000) asserts that researchers, clinicians, and the public have been increasingly interested in stepfamilies; however, lesbian and gay stepfamilies are overlooked in the research. There is a paucity of evidence-based studies with regard to gay and lesbian stepfamilies, and scarce supportive services available to provide for their needs.

While research about gay and lesbian parenting and child rearing is in the process of augmentation, some professional organizations have embraced gay and lesbian parents and have positioned themselves on the forefront of disproving commonly held stereotypes about gay parents and gay people in general. The American Academy of Pediatrics drafted a Policy Statement in February 2002, which defines the organization's support of co-adoption by same-sex parents. Their policy statement emphasizes the need for children to know that their relationships with both of their parents are stable and legally recognized. To support their position statement, the Academy cites a considerable body of

professional literature providing evidence that children with parents who are homosexual can have the same advantages and the same expectations for health, adjustment, and development as can children whose parents are heterosexual. The State of Florida allows for gay and lesbian foster parents; however, it will not allow the couples to adopt their foster children. An example of this was a male couple in Miami who had several children in foster care for a number of years. They were denied the opportunity to adopt the children and were informed that the children could be adopted by heterosexuals (Riggs, 2002).

The American Academy of Pediatrics (2002) recommended the following for practitioners: familiarization with the professional literature in reference to lesbian and gay parents and their children; recognizing the right of families to financial, psychological, and legal security resulting from recognition of commitment of spouse-like companions and their children; and legalizing gay and lesbian adoptions in order to provide for permanency through co-parent or second-parent adoption. The legislative and judicial branches of government can reduce the number of children who are waiting for adoption by allowing gays and lesbians who want to adopt children the opportunity to do so. Due to the history surrounding gay and lesbian adoptions community education is an important component of legislative changes (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002).

The American Psychological Association (2003), National Association of Social Workers (Texas State University School of Social Work, 2004), and the American Civil Liberties Union (2004) have also supported the rights of gays and lesbians to become parents. Yet despite the support given by such national organizations, the legal system has been slow to recognize gay parents through family policy (Crawford, 1999). In fact, many scholars are challenging the courts to alter perceptions and definitions of the term *family* (Cullum, 1993; Crawford, 1999)

The emergence of *second-parent adoption*, *co-parent adoption*, or *same-sex adoption* has increased legal instability for gays and lesbians (Shapiro, 1999). Cullum (1993) describes this kind of adoption as the “desirable legal outcome of the situation that arises when non-marital cohabitants share parenting duties, yet only one of the partners is the child’s legal parent (a non-biological parent becomes a child’s legal parent through adoption)” (pp. 28-35). In such an instance, the legal parent gives consent to the adoption by a co-parent without giving up any of his or her own parental rights. In most cases involving two legal parents, one of the legal parents must give up his or her legal parental rights. However, in some recent cases, courts have allowed the two

biological parents to retain their legal rights while granting rights to a third party (Cullum, 1993). An example of this would be when a member of a lesbian couple wishes to adopt the child of her partner and her partner's ex-husband.

As can be seen from these brief introductory points to the topic of gay parenting, the issue is multi-faceted. And despite the demonstrating of favorable developmental outcomes for children raised by gay parents, heterosexism and homophobia are persistent components of the arguments in opposition to gay parenting. Taking into account this prejudice and discrimination toward homosexuals, mental health professionals have struggled with how to best address homosexuality. For example, it was not until 1973 that homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Coyle & Kitzinger, 2002). Yet even with this, many people still cling to the notions that homosexuality is a conscious choice or mental illness of an individual and cite many pleasure principle based theories to explain the development of a homosexual identity. This is strongly evidenced in *Gay Is Not Good*, a book written in 1979 by antigay author Frank du Mas illustrating the "psychopathology" of homosexuality using the theories of classical conditioning and modeling to explain its etiologic source. Many opponents of gay parenting believe that a child raised by gay parents is more likely to be homosexual in orientation; although, research has supported the fallaciousness of this claim (Huggins, 1989; Golombok et al., 1983; Gottman, 1990; Green, 1978; Bozett, 1982, 1987, 1989; Miller, 1979—as cited in D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995).

HOMOPHOBIA AND DISCRIMINATION AMONG SOCIAL WORKERS IN ADOPTIVE SERVICES

Discriminatory beliefs do not end with societal perceptions and prejudice. Researchers have also supported the existence of bias toward homosexual partners in adoption- and foster-placement services by helping professionals such as social workers and psychologists (Crawford et al., 1999; Ryan, 2000). Research in the area of discrimination in the area of adoption is scarce, however, there has been some research specifically examining homophobia among social workers within the profession (Wisniewski & Toomey, 1987; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Ryan, 2000). In addition, some research exists linking these negative homophobic attitudes among social work students as well (Black, Oles, & More, 1998).

Furthermore, the profession has also been chided for having a lack of concentration in curriculum content especially when providing social work services to gay and lesbian clients (Dulaney & Kelly, 1982).

When looking specifically at adoption services Brooks and Goldberg (2001) studied homophobia at the organizational level. These authors postulated that homophobia and discrimination by social workers against gays and lesbians in adoptive and foster care services result from commonly held stereotypes about homosexuals and a false belief that gay men and lesbians are non-eficacious parents or that children aren't safe in gay or lesbian homes. When examining the agency attitudes and informal practices toward gay adopting and fostering, the authors found that regardless of the parenting ability and strengths of gay men and lesbians, data derived from the study suggested that the degree to which they are considered, recruited, approved, and supported as adoptive and foster parents may depend greatly on a given agency's attitudes and informal practices (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001).

According to Brooks and Goldberg (2001) agency attitudes have much to do with placement of children with gays and lesbians. The authors cite that the atmosphere in which staff participants in this study worked generally was depicted as "gay friendly" (meaning more openly accepting of homosexuals). This type of setting was believed to be a major contributing factor for study results as the authors state that, "Findings suggest that an agency's attitude toward placements with gay men and lesbians can have profound implications for recruitment and placement practices of individual workers" (p. 152).

The order of preference of placements for the agency in which staff participants worked was in the following hierarchical order: (1) heterosexual, two-parent families; (2) single-parent (3) gay and lesbian families; and (4) gay and lesbian individuals. This study also provided overwhelming support that personal homophobic attitudes and biases held by case workers was impedance to placement in gay and lesbian homes as it was found that most of the staff participants agreed that the views of individual child placement workers are critical when matching children with adoptive and foster families (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001).

Biased workers who share ignorant attitudes about gay and lesbian parents affect the placement of children (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001). The authors cite two of the participants' responses to support this finding: workers leak information to the birth family in a way that can sabotage placement efforts, and in some settings, a homophobic unit supervisor may link gays and lesbians with workers who are homophobic. A final finding of the study was the overall lack of policies regarding

homosexual fostering and adoption and the need for caseworkers to use loopholes to dodge the system's inadequacies (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001). Mallon (2001) also asserts that a number of child welfare agencies in the United States have removed their organizational bias against gays and lesbians and are placing children with them. Few child welfare agencies openly discuss the process of gay and lesbian adoption out of concern that negative attention will be directed at their agency Brodzinsky, Patterson, and Vaziri (2002) reported that only 38% of agencies they studied, over a two-year period, had placed a child in the home of a gay or lesbian parent. In addition, 37% of respondents did not indicate that their agencies accepted applications from gays and lesbians. Corresponding with the independent variables of religious affiliation and gender discussed previously, "Attitudes and practices regarding adoption by lesbian and gay individuals varied as a function of the religious affiliation (if any) of the agency, the type of children the agency predominantly placed for adoption, and the gender of the respondent" (p. 5).

Kenyon, Chong, Enkoff-Sage, Hill, Mays, and Rochelle (2003) found that "a lack of clear policy at a federal or state level and a lack of protection from discrimination made it difficult for gay and lesbian prospective parents to adopt" (p. 571). Kenyon and colleagues also found that homosexual prospective parents are more likely to be offered for adoption "children with disabilities or behavioral problems, children who are older, and children of non-dominant cultural and ethnic backgrounds" (p. 573). The authors conclude that "continued discrimination at this level denies choice and perpetuates the idea that gay and lesbian people cannot form healthy families and stable relationships, even though the literature suggests otherwise" (p. 575).

Management within child welfare agencies has also been found to perpetuate homophobia and heterosexist stereotypes. This has resulted from pressures placed on them from various stakeholders from outside the organization, leading to secretive adoption practices (Ryan, Pearlmutter, & Groza, 2004). By covertly allowing homosexuals the right to adopt, the status quo of worker confusion and gay and lesbian exclusion is continued (Ryan et al., 2004).

STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE APPROACH

The strengths-based perspective is described as an orientation in practice that accentuates the client's personal resources, abilities, social

support network, and drive to face issues and overcome misfortune (Barker, 1999). Van Wormer, Wells, and Boes (2000) define the strengths approach as a way to “reveal the light in the darkness and provide hope in the most seemingly dismal of circumstances” (p. 20). Van Wormer et al. urge the development of five major themes in working with gay and lesbian clients: (1) developing positive coping skills among individuals; (2) listening to personal narratives; (3) validating the pain that is experienced; (4) collaborating with clients; and (5) helping the client move from self-actualization to transformation from an oppressive structure. To reveal the positive coping skills of clients, the worker focuses on an examination of past presenting symptoms and setbacks as well as successes in working through life challenges. Clients are urged to identify their personal strengths that include past successes in dealing with adversity, insights into what the client can do in the present situation, dreams about the future after the current circumstances are resolved, and ways to reinforce a sense of courage that will carry them through the current period (van Wormer, Wells, & Boes, 2000). A function of social workers in the placement of children in adoptive families is screening and evaluation of prospective parents. Using the strengths perspective, the social worker is encouraged to emphasize the positive attributes of homosexual parents.

Ryan et al. (2004) emphasize that the “psychopathologizing” of homosexuality has had drastic negative effects on gays and lesbians seeking to adopt children. While much of the historical concentration on homosexuality has focused on a proposed psychopathology of gay and lesbian individuals (Morrow, 2001), the strength-based perspective offers a more balanced approach since it focuses on positive attributes of homosexual parents and does not get bogged down in questionable judgmental language. Brooks and Goldberg (2001) found supportive data that children raised by lesbians tend to have less psychiatric problems than those children raised by heterosexuals. Scallen (1981) concluded that gay fathers were more likely to endorse paternal nurturance, were less likely to emphasize economics as a central aspect of fathering behavior, and were somewhat less traditional in their overall approach to parenting. Research also suggests that children of gays and lesbians “learn the importance of tolerance and the necessity of respecting individual differences in others” (Bigner, 1999, p. 61).

Perhaps concentration on these positive aspects of homosexual parents could help social workers avoid psychopathologizing homosexuality and potential homosexual adoptive parents. Active listening to clients is another theme found in the strengths perspective (van Wormer

et al., 2000). In relating this concept to decreasing homophobia in adoptive services, social workers could gain insight as to the motivational factors of gays and lesbians seeking adoption and begin to understand their family structures through their own personal narratives. Siegenthaler and Bigner (2000) completed a study regarding the motivational influences of lesbians wishing to become mothers. Although the main findings of their inquiry revealed minor differences in motivational factors between heterosexual and homosexual females, the following differences were found: lesbian mothers have children because they want to be parents, and they are not motivated to have children because of social expectations (Siegenthaler & Bigner, 2000). One resounding commonality among these lesbians was a need to provide evidence to a heterosexist society that homosexual women could indeed rear children as competently as heterosexual male/female couples.

Muzio (1995) also highlights the importance of listening to personal narratives, especially those of oppressed individuals. She postulates that narratives allow alterations in individual and societal perceptions of women's experiences that redefine the generally accepted societal notions of family. The approach applied by Muzio (1995), Siegenthaler and Bigner (2000) in using narratives to gain insight could be applied by placement workers in adoption services to create a database of information about the driving forces of the potential homosexual parents. Encouraging gays and lesbians to discuss family structure, although challenging from the perspective of internalized fears of discrimination, can assist them in recognizing the locus of their fears and lead them to resolution of those fears (O'Dell, 2000). Having assisted gay and lesbian clients in recognizing their fears, the social worker can better understand parental expectations for their possible new familial formations and personal experiences within their own individual families.

Validating the pain of homosexuals in adoptive services concentrates on addressing issues related to oppression, neglect, and domination (van Wormer et al., 2000). Specifically, this strength-based perspective emphasizes the need for social workers to avoid heterosexist models of thinking and encourages clients to openly discuss oppressive issues surrounding the adoption process. Muzio (1995) recounts in her research the influence of a society indoctrinated with heterosexually-perceived normalcy in a lesbian couple adopting a child. The couple had saved for years to pay for an adoption, however, the adoption agency did not approve of gay or lesbian parents so the couple chose to be closeted during the adoption process. As time neared for a home visit by the adoption agency personnel the couple became concerned that they not appear to

be in a lesbian relationship. They purchased clothes to change their look and practiced not exchanging endearing comments with each other so that they would not do so in the presence of adoption agency personnel. They rearranged their bedroom and practiced for weeks in order to appear “appropriate” for the home visit.

Muzio (1995) continues in her discussion by highlighting the point that although this couple had lived in a misogynist, heterosexist, and homophobic culture for many years, “this was an experience without parallel for them” (p. 33). Research conducted by Hicks (2000) examining the screening methods of adoption agencies found heterosexist ideology engrained in evaluation processes of various agencies. His study concluded that a “heteronormative discourse” (p. 157) exists in evaluative tools, which tends to further oppress and label homosexuals as unfit parents and instead favor heterosexual male/female partnerships as ideal for child rearing.

Correcting oppressive screening and evaluation methods, discussing openly with gay and lesbian adoption applicants their personal experiences of discrimination in the adoption process, and having direction and an open-mind about identifying pervasive heterosexist ideologies in the traditional thoughts on child rearing are all ways social workers can apply the theme of pain validation using a strengths perspective approach.

Collaboration and avoidance of dictation is another strengths perspective theme (van Wormer et al., 2000). The implications for this in adoptive services include a “mutual discovery of solutions among helpers, families, and support networks” (p. 21). Traditionally aligned with the social work profession, partnering clients with resources is certainly not a new concept.

However, among many social workers not aligned with the gay community, resource linkage could be a particularly difficult task. Research suggests that gay and lesbian parents form social support networks and relationships with friends and family differently than heterosexuals. For example, lesbians more actively seek male role models for their children than heterosexuals (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001). Another strength mentioned by many focus group participants of the Brooks and Goldberg (2001) study was the extended support network of family and friends that were available to assist in caring for and providing support to their children. One mother affirmed that her child had “so much love and self-confidence because of the care she’s received from all of her aunts” (p. 152).

Besides interpersonal support systems (those support systems developed between two or more persons), an important resource linkage concentration on the social worker in adoptive services could be organi-

zational support. Organizations such as PFLAG—Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (<http://pflag.org>), Proud Parenting (<http://www.proudparenting.com>), specific territorial organizations such as the Houston Gay and Lesbian Parents Organization (<http://hglp.org>), and adoption/social work organizations with experience in issues related to homosexual adoption and foster parents such as the Adoption Education Center's "Working with Gay and Lesbian Adoptive Parents" Site (<http://www.adoptions.com>) all have Internet-based resources for the social worker and prospective adoptive homosexual parents seeking information. Therefore, uniting clients and social workers with professional gay and lesbian organizations can be a positive way social workers can avoid dictating and instead, experience collaboration. This strengths perspective approach meets client and practitioner needs in obtaining information and provides new avenues for the development of support systems.

As social workers look past the issue of sexual orientation of prospective parents and begin to erode the heterosexist barriers to placement, gay and lesbian parents can gain a new self-actualization that extends the boundaries of their sexual identity. More importantly, as the number of placements with gays and lesbians increase and as research regarding the efficacy of these parents augments and perpetuates further placements, the oppressive structure of adoptive services can perhaps change. This change will form the basis of a greater acceptance and a breakdown of stereotypical and homo-negative misperceptions.

The social worker who fosters the best placement for the child approach utilizing a strengths perspective highlights the positive consequences of human development by linking the child with a supportive, nurturing and loving home. But beyond the micro, personal, and interpersonal level of client, child, the social worker and other helping professionals are urged to look beyond to the macro level change that is so desperately needed. Changes at the macro level include viewing and promoting change in the current adoptive services system that allows for non-traditional approaches to child placements. Allowing this non-traditional approach will help to reverse the discriminatory and often oppressive nature of their approach to child placement. In conclusion, acknowledgement of all discriminatory practices while highlighting a strength-based perspective will allow for positive interpersonal interactions at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Whereas, extending this support in all of these areas can lead to practice and systemic changes assisting social work and other helping practitioners to better place all children in optimal settings that all reflect loving, caring, and nurturing homes.

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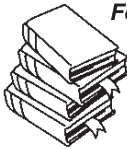
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