
A Literature Review: Same-sex Parenting

Task

You are a social worker in a community family counselling agency. At a recent staff meeting, you and your colleagues reflected on the range of family types using the agency and how you felt underprepared for your work with some groups, particularly same-sex couples with children. You volunteered to do some research in this area and to prepare a review of the literature concerning the potential needs and risks of same-sex couples, the protective factors and the roles that services such as your own might best play to support these families.

This literature review explored the topic of same-sex parenting in the context of a family counselling agency. Firstly, this review begins by introducing the subject of same-sex parenting, and provides an explanation of the importance for social workers to understand the social issues for this minority group in their practice. Secondly, definitions of important key terms were provided in addition to a description of the research methods used for this literature review. Thirdly, the main findings of the research were separated into four key themes. Key themes included the potential needs, protective and risk factors, debates, and the implications for practice. Furthermore, gaps in the literature were also identified.

Keywords: same-sex couples, informal supports, formal supports, risk factors, protective factors, and evidence-based practice.

Same-Sex Parenting

The society norm for parenting has long been perceived as consisting of having one father and one mother, however that construct is evolving. Today, family structures come in many different forms of diversity, which is becoming more socially accepted (Hayman, 2013). However, the mainstream social structures may not be keeping up with changing family forms, as some social workers feel that they do not have the skill or compacity to cater for the variety of family types, more specifically same-sex couples with children. Social workers fulfil an important role in supporting families and this literature review was completed the aim to gain new insight and knowledge that may benefit professionals and improve the existence of social work at a family counselling agency.

Importance & Relevance to Social Work Practice

Social workers have encounters with many diverse clients and minority groups including individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender within many aspects of their practice (Inch, 2016). As a part of their professional requirements, social workers are required to have and obtain current knowledge of concepts and evidence-based theories required for effective practice (AASW, 2014). The AAWS Practice Standards indicates that social workers should recognise the diversity in which can be seen in family structures based on ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, and relationships that differ beyond the traditional family structures, such as same-sex relationships (AASW, 2014).

Definitions

Same sex couples most commonly defined by as two individuals of the same gender, who self-identify their relationship as romantic or sexual (Peplau, L.A., & Cochran, S.D. 1990). Risk factor refers to any influence that has the capacity or potential to cause or contribute to a harmful or detrimental outcome (Martin, 2014). A protective factor is any influence that can lessen or diminish the effects of the risk factor and helps to influence a positive outcome (Martin, 2014). Formal supports are often government-funded or private agency's which are designed to assist people, this includes doctors, teachers or therapist (Rawsthorne, 2009). Informal supports can be describes as, the couple's personal social network this can include, family's members, or friends (Rawsthorne, 2009). Evidence-based practice is the pursuit of positive outcomes in social work by using research evidence from studies (Martin, 2014).

Methodology

The process of collecting the literature for the review was accomplished by a Boolean search of the Latrobe library. All databases were searched including, Informit Health and Proquest Psychological databases. The terms "Same-sex parenting", "Gay parenting", "LGBT", "Debates", "Child Development", "Social work practice" and "Evidence-based practice" were used. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles, with full online text available and being published in the last ten years. The references of sourced articles were searched for more relevant articles. In order for articles to be selected, they needed to cover one or more of the themes identified. The themes used risk factors and protective factors, attitudes towards same-sex parenting, options or recommendations for working with same-sex families and staff training needs. In total ten articles were selected.

Identifying Potential Needs for Same-Sex Parents as Clients

Results found that assumptions of heterosexuality are due to lack of lesbian-speci?c knowledge, along with a failure to recognize and understand the social setting of lesbian couples (McNair et al. 2008). It was identified that there is a need for services to be more inclusive with their policies and procedures, meaning services celebrate and value diversity in all family forms (Rawsthorne, 2009). The hetero-normative assumptions that were experienced indicate that services are lacking inclusive policies along with relevant training that could improve professional practice, avoid discrimination and bring awareness to heteronormative behaviours. Furthermore, past research on LGBT parents in the New Zealand setting has indicated that there is a need for specific protective policies to be developed that not only focus on the parents but include their children, regardless of their children's own sexual orientation (Pack & Brown, 2017). The research indicates many ways that social workers can best support this minority group including the use of anti-oppressive approaches. The research indicates that same-sex parents report more positive experiences with services when they feel the professional focus on their reasons for seeking professional care or support rather than their sexual orientation (Perales, Simpson Reeves, Plage & Baxter, 2019). It was also discovered that couples felt more positive about the service when they felt included; this can be seen when professionals acknowledge both parents in a same-sex relationship as having equal responsibility of the child (Perales, Simpson Reeves, Plage & Baxter, 2019). Additionally, even when there was no direct discrimination experienced with the parent's engagement with formal supports such as childcare, schools or healthcare; it was found that same-sex parents felt that service's

processes and forms were designed with the assumption that all households are heterosexual (Power et al., 2010). The findings also found that LGBT clients and same-sex families may struggle to ask for and accept help if the physical environment is not affirmative (Crisp & McCave, 2007). This indicates that this group needs an affirmative space, this means the organisation needs to be open about their inclusiveness and cultural sensitivity (Crisp & McCave, 2007). The findings suggest that when creating an affirmative space, it is important to remember that this space should extend beyond a social workers office and include the entire organisation (Crisp & McCave, 2007). One way that social workers and professionals can create an affirmative space is by using pictures, magazines or newsletters, or other sources of media that are inclusive of all family structures (Crisp & McCave, 2007). As well as written statements about the organisation's commitment to providing inclusive and equal services (Crisp & McCave, 2007). When the agency or organisation takes these actions, it sends a message to the community and ensures families feel valued and encouraged to attend (Crisp & McCave, 2007).

Understanding Same-Sex Parents and Families' Risk and Protective Factors

The literature indicated that same-sex parents and families are at risk to various factors, including discrimination within the health, welfare, education and legal systems (Power et al., 2010). It was discovered that discrimination can be seen in many forms such as homophobia, exclusion, inappropriate questioning, refusal of service and heterosexual assumptions (Hayman, 2013). Interestingly it was found that informal supports are only a protective factor when they are supportive towards the decision of the same sex couple entering parenthood. Alternatively, informal supports become possible risk factors when relationships are severed or unsupportive towards the parents (Rawsthorne, 2009). In some cases, same-sex parents reported a lack of support, as well as some cases of outright hostility, within their own extended family network (Power et al., 2010). It was found that in the early months of parenthood most couples struggled with a sense of detachment from the lesbian community once they became parents, although results found a stronger sense of support in regional settings as opposed to metro settings, this is due to the lesbian community not being child friendly as not many of them have children of their own (Rawsthorne, 2009). This indicates a risk factor for isolation thus social workers need to be aware that some individuals do not have any family members to turn to due to damaged relationships (Rawsthorne, 2009). It was also identified that loss of identity for the same-sex parents can impact their mental health (Rawsthorne, 2009). This is where formal supports can become a protective factor by providing protection and tools to prevent loss of identity, feelings of isolation and protecting their mental health. Furthermore, formal supports can also assist with strengthening their relationships with family members (Rawsthorne, 2009). It was also discovered that 'screening' services are a very common tool used by same-sex couples as a protective measure. This is where contact is made to determine if participant would access that service by assessing their attitudes towards same-sex couples (Hayman, 2013). If they were positive, then participants were more likely to use that service. This strategy was used to avoid, exclusions, inappropriate questioning, heterosexual assumptions or refusal of services which had been experienced by participants (Hayman, 2013). Results found when implementing this strategy there was little to no experience with homophobia (Hayman, 2013).

Debates on The Topic of Same-Sex Parents and Families

Current debates and public opinions regarding same-sex couples and families are often influenced by attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes; such beliefs are not always based on evidence and are usually informed by religious or ideological beliefs regarding family forms (Dempsey, 2013). For this reason, social workers should use research and evidence when thinking critically about current debates and arguments. A popular debate and belief is that the wellbeing and development of children raised in same-sex families are negatively impacted in contrary to those children who are raised in heterosexual families. However, the literature indicates that children raised in same-sex parented families develop just as well as their peers despite any prejudice and discrimination that may or may not occur (Biblarz & Stacey 2010). Other research including an Australian study has replicated these findings, with a large sample size of 390 parents who have children aged between 0-17 years (Crouch, Waters, McNair, Power & Davis, 2014). Again, the findings indicated that there is no evidence to support a difference in child health or wellbeing on the bases of same gender parents (Crouch, Waters, McNair, Power & Davis, 2014). It was also discovered that children raised in same-sex families perceive their parents as more accessible and dependable (Dempsey, 2013). Another common argument and belief is that same-sex parents will influence the sexual identity of their children. The findings stated that the sexual identities and gender of parents may have an impact on how their children view gender norms and contribute to their acceptance of diverse sexualities and gender norms (Dempsey, 2013). Numerous studies have investigated to see if there is a direct link between same-sex parenting and the likelihood of their children identifying as LGBT. The literature indicates that there is no significant difference between young adults from lesbian and heterosexual headed families regarding sexual orientation (Golombok & Tasker, 1996). Meaning, the number of young people from same-sex headed families who reported same-sex attraction was not any more significant than those young people from heterosexual families (Golombok & Tasker, 1996). However, it was not uncommon for children raised in same-sex parented families to be more open to the possibility of having a same-sex relationship (Golombok & Tasker, 1996). Lastly, the literature seems to indicate that there is no single factor that determines whether an individual will distinguish as heterosexual or identify as LGBT; instead, the present belief is that there is an assortment of factors which may influence an individual's sexual identity (Golombok & Tasker, 1996).

Gaps and Limitations in the Literature

The main focus of research is found to concentrate on the outcomes for children raised in same-sex families, this implies there is only limited number research that focuses on the wellbeing and prosperity of same-sex parents (Power et al., 2010). There is additionally little research done on factors that help and improve versatility in same-sex families (Power et al., 2010). Another factor that has very little research is the effects of separation and divorce in same-sex families (Power et al., 2010). It is also important to note that since the introduction of marriage equality in Australia in 2017, further research is still needed for more accurate research of current trends (Perales, Simpson Reeves, Plage & Baxter, 2019). Additionally, it was not uncommon for the studies and research regarding the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community to involve samples who have higher levels of tertiary education than the greater population. It is not certain if this reflects a more significant level of education among Australians who openly identify as LGBT or whether individuals from lower financial backgrounds are less inclined to take part in research (Power et al., 2010). Furthermore, there was also a low portrayal of individuals from non-English speaking backgrounds throughout the literature (Power et al., 2010).

Implications for Social Work Practice

In relation to the implications of practice, this information can help identify where services are falling short in addition to how same-sex parents feel about engaging with services. These findings have the possibility to promote change and benefits practice in many formal supports including the context of a family counselling setting. This information sourced on the topic of same-sex parenting can provide social workers and staff working in a family counselling setting with some recommendations for practice. Firstly, the social worker undertaking the research for the family counselling agency can improve staff's knowledge on the topic of same-sex families including the specific needs, risk and protective factors. Secondly, it can be suggested that specific training for staff could be provided on the topic of discrimination concentrating on heteronormative assumptions and affirmative practice models. Thirdly, the family counselling agency should analyse current policies and procedures with the intent to change any displays heteronormativity. Furthermore, it is also a possibility that the family counselling agency could provide LGBT clients with some advocacy services by educating and informing them on their rights, as well as what to do if they experience discrimination. Lastly, the organisation can represent diversity in their posters, pamphlets or flyers, as this would show inclusion of all family forms and represent an affirmative space.

Reference List

1. Biblarz, T., & Stacey, J. (2010). How Does the Gender of Parents Matter? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(1), 3-22.
2. Crisp, C., & McCave, E. (2007). Gay Affirmative Practice: A Model for Social Work Practice with Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 24(4), 403-421.
3. Crouch, S., Waters, E., McNair, R., Power, J., & Davis, E. (2014). Parent-reported measures of child health and wellbeing in same-sex parent families: A cross-sectional survey. *BMC Public Health*, 14(1), 635.
4. Dempsey, D. (2013). Same-sex parented families in Australia. Melbourne, Vic.: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
5. Golombok, S., & Tasker, F. (1996). Do Parents Influence the Sexual Orientation of Their Children? Findings From a Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Families. *Developmental Psychology*, 32(1), 3-11
6. Hayman, Brenda. (2013). Marginalised mothers: Lesbian women negotiating heteronormative healthcare services. *Contemporary Nurse : A Journal for the Australian Nursing Profession.*, 44(1), 120
7. Inch, E. (2016). Are you ready? Qualifying social work students' perception of their preparedness to work competently with service users from sexual and gender minority communities. *Social Work Education*, 36(5), 557-574.
8. Martin, I. (2014). Oxford dictionary of social work and social care John Harris and Vicky White. *Journal of Social Work*, 14(5), 543-545.
9. McNair Ruth, Brown Rhonda, Pitts Marian K, Schofield Margot J, Perlesz Amaryll, Power Jennifer J, . . . Bickerdike Andrew. (2010). Understanding resilience in same-sex parented families: The work, love, play study. *BMC Public Health*, 10(1), 115.
10. McNair, R., Brown, R., Perlesz, A., Lindsay, J., De Vaus, D., & Pitts, M. (2008). Lesbian Parents Negotiating the Health Care System in Australia. *Health Care for Women International*, 29(2), 91-114.

-
11. Pack, M., & Brown, P. (2017). Educating on anti-oppressive practice with gender and sexual minority elders: Nursing and social work perspectives. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 29(2), 108-118.
 12. Pennington, J., & Knight, T. (2011). Through the lens of hetero-normative assumptions: Re-thinking attitudes towards gay parenting. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 13(1), 59-72.
 13. Peplau, L. A., & Cochran, S. D. (1990). A relationship perspective on homosexuality. In D. P. McWhirter, S. A. Sanders, & J. M. Reinsch (Eds.), *The Kinsey Institute series, Vol. 2. Homosexuality/heterosexuality: Concepts of sexual orientation* (pp. 321-349). New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press.
 14. Perales, F., Plage, S., & Baxter, J. (2019). The Family Lives of Australian Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People: A Review of the Literature and a Research Agenda. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, 1.
 15. Australian Association of Social Workers. (2013). Practice standards. Retrieved from <http://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/4551>
 16. Rawsthorne, M. (2009). Just Like Other Families? Supporting Lesbian-parented Families. *Australian Social Work*, 62(1), 45-60.