Adoption or fostering as parenting options for trans and non-binary people

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My research:
Exploring trans and non-binary people’s experiences of adoption and fostering in the UK.

Aims
• Explore what enablers and barriers exist for trans non-binary people who want to adopt and foster in the UK.
• Produce good practice guidance.

Why?
• One aspect of equality and justice for trans people is reproductive choice (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2019).
• Many trans people wish to have children; some want to do so via birth methods, some hope to adopt or foster (Riggs & Power, 2016).
• Barriers can exist that disadvantage both the children needing families and prospective parents/carers (Brown, 2017; Brown & Rogers, in press).

How?
• Narrative inquiry, in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Who?
• People self-identifying as trans, non-binary or associated term who have fostered/adopted or wish to.

‘the way that, the changes your body goes through during pregnancy, I think would be really dysphoric for me’ Jamie, prospective adopter/carer
Challenges that trans and non-binary people may face in trying to adopt or foster a child

- Lack of understanding and support for trans and non-binary people can create barriers to adoption and fostering.

- Cisgenderism (ideology that delegitimises peoples own designations of their genders and bodies, Ansara & Hegarty, 2014) is rife in society and service provision (LGBTF, 2017).

- In adoption and fostering there exist rigid cisgender norms that people are expected to conform to. Where people don’t conform, they can be excluded and discriminated against, from assessment to matching and support.
Marginalisation, outing, discrimination, erasure

- Only non-binary P who has successfully adopted reports being only out one so far.
- They experienced covert and overt discrimination due to gender identity.
- Non-binary people can feel a need to hide their identity for adoption and fostering processes.
- Outing and transphobia has been reported.
- But there are also examples of growing knowledge and support.

‘I found a couple of people who presented themselves as a binary gender to get through the adoption process... And they’ve since come out to their kids.’ Celyn, adopter

‘Transgender people have always suffered from violence and abuse...I lived life in turmoil and had chosen to keep myself single. I was 37 when Sophia and I got together we thought it was too late to try and have children, so we decided to adopt and further decided we could make good foster carers...But my transgender past was still well hidden [Until social workers received information in a medical report and insisted Andie tell Sophia]. There was the strong chance it would end our marriage; I could have ended up homeless.’ Andie, adopter and foster carer.
Exclusion and othering of non-binary people

• Participants believed or reported from experience that being non-binary is a disadvantage as compared to being a binary trans person.

• Misgendering is rife.

• SWs lack understanding of non-binary identities.

‘general dealings with bureaucracy...they don’t know what box to put me in, or they don’t have any, you know, I get mis-gendered...constantly’ Jamie

‘Because I’m non-binary, because I use a non-binary pronoun, because I have two current names, it’s confusing, and it scares people that aren’t from that world, because it’s all new.’ Ash, neutrois prospective adopter

‘Can you imagine someone has a sort of more queered presentation?...they would have a, a more tougher time than me.’ Celyn, non-binary adopter
Meeting children’s needs

• Trans parents may be more resilient.
• Adoption/fostering could be a first choice.
• Carers may be more open/accepting.
• Could be better placed to help adopted and fostered children with their identity.
• Contrary to adult views expressed, children seem to readily accept a range of genders without confusion.

‘that’s something that we really value...giving a home to a child who needs it, who’s already around’ Jamie

‘...because they’re kids and everything they’re learning, they’re learning, they’re not sort of having to re-learn, so they just incorporate it into their worldview in a way that grown-ups don’t...

Grandma asked ‘is Celyn’ a boy or a girl? And he went ‘neither, they’re just normal’.
Issues with social work practice

Similar to findings by Hudson-Sharp (2018): pockets of good practice among gaps in knowledge.

• Some adoption and fostering staff across UK agencies acted in overtly discriminatory ways, but proving it and complaining was hard.

‘a couple of years ago...my manager said that they’d had a transgender adopter, and they took it to a match at panel...and the panel just dismissed it, they didn’t accept it. They thought it would be too confusing for the child.’ Amy, SW.
Covert discrimination

‘when we went to panel and they got approved, I actually felt so confident about Charlie. I just thought, they’re amazing, they’re fantastic...they’re gona get snapped up...It didn’t happen...once we got into family finding it was almost like we were back in time, when, when...lesbian and gay adopters were seen as n-, as just, as not good as heterosexual.’ Amy, SW

‘some... trying to hide behind other things...... agencies would come up with lots of different reasons, none of which really made sense... That was easier than to say, ‘we’re struggling with this’. Melanie, SW

‘being a queer family...if we were a cis gay couple, I’d be like, it’s pretty mainstream now, I think we’re fine...am I gona have to pretend to be... could I even do that? Are we gona have to pretend to be a straight couple?...are they gona be like, whoa, there’s this, not even this trans person, there’s this non-binary person, what even is that? Or like, there’s this weird couple... we don’t know what they’re about...is that gona be a problem?’ Jamie

‘there are some agencies that are really active in looking for LGBT parents, but the T is kind of contentious for a lot of them.’ Ash

‘unfortunately at this point in time we wouldn’t be able to place you with a child’....they wanted me to have finished my transition.’ Alice, prospective adopter
Implications

• Embedded gender norms in society have resulted in the dominant discourse of gender normativity being internalised by individuals (Foucault, 1969; 1988).

• Overt and covert discrimination exists in numerous adoption and fostering organisations across the UK.

• Discrimination is most often covert, which can be more pervasive and difficult to address (Ely, 1995).

• Gender barriers need removing in the interests of children needing homes and adults whose preference or fertility needs bring them to adoption and fostering.

• Limitations: findings of small-scale study = tentative.

• Highlights need for further research.
How can challenges be addressed?

1. Change agency policies & procedures:
   - Update forms, preparation groups etc to inclusive language that avoids gender-specific nouns and titles.
   - Ensure facilities are inclusive.
   - Visibly show you value trans parents.

2. Reduce cisgenderism and gender normativity by increasing staff and societal knowledge:
   - Encourage all social care staff to have training and keep informed about gender diversity.
   - Continue the conversation: talk, share ideas and practice that promotes inclusivity.

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References


