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Jumping through hoops to become a parent:
consumer experiences of adoption

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Abstract

While there is ongoing debate about access to adoption, there has been little empirical research on the views of people with firsthand experiences of the adoption process. We interviewed 36 people with experience of the process of applying to adopt in Victoria, Australia. Participants commented on their experiences of different stages.

They were critical of the 'one size fits all' approach and suggested that the assessment process lacked transparency and consistency and was not evidence based. We argue that adoption eligibility criteria should be reviewed and that adoption policy and practice should be informed by the experiences of adoption applicants.

**Jumping through hoops to become a parent:
consumer experiences of adoption**

Applying to adopt a child in Australia can be a very long and emotionally difficult process. Australia has one of lowest rates of adoption and the longest waiting lists in the developed world. A recent senate inquiry attributes this low rate of overseas adoption, in part, to long wait times (ranging from two to eight years) and high cost (up to A$40,000) (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2005).

In addition to the long wait and significant cost, people who apply to adopt a child can expect considerable scrutiny and intrusion into their lives. While there is general agreement that screening of prospective parents is necessary to identify and mimimise unacceptable risk of harm to children and protect their welfare, there is much less agreement on what is in the best interests of children and precisely how these interests should be protected.

While there is an obligation to protect vulnerable children, there is ongoing public and academic debate about which factors pose risks of harm to children. Some scholars argue that current adoption processes 'set the bar too high' (Bartholet 1993, 2006; Tobin and McNair 2009). They suggest that an obligation to protect the welfare of children requires that we expand current eligibility criteria to include all prospective parents, except in cases where reliable evidence indicates serious risk of harm to children.

Recent government reports have reviewed and criticized current adoption policies and practices. They describe some aspects of the adoption process as subjective, discriminatory and lacking transparency (Victorian Law Reform Commission 2007; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2005).

A senate inquiry into adoption of children from overseas found a general attitude of opposition to adoption in most Australian jurisdictions (House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2005). It has been suggested that the controversial history of adoption in Australia has led to the current overly cautious attitudes towards adoption (Murphy et al. 2010). This history includes the removal of children from their families under the Child Migrants Program (the 'forgotten generation'), and the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families (the 'stolen generation') (Senate Community Affairs References Committee Secretariat 2001; National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their families 1997). The senate inquiry, and the Victorian Law Reform Commission, called for both federal and state reviews to address adoption practices and discrepancies between states (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2005; Victorian Law Reform Commission 2007).

Although there are many academic publications about adoption, including analyses of past adoption practices, case studies, expert opinions, parliamentary inquiries and also numerous media stories about' celebrity adoptions', the views of people with firsthand experience is largely absent from the literature. There is a dearth of empirical research on the views of people who have applied to adopt a child and little is known about their experience of the adoption assessment process (Higgins 2010). The Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Statement on Consumer and Community Participation in Health and Medical Research reminds us that 'those most affected and intimately acquainted with the issues' provide important insights into research (NHMRC 2002). The Statement on Participation was developed in recognition of the contribution that consumers can make to research and their right to participate in research. There is a precedent for evidenced based policy development based on research with consumers (Russell and Browne 2005; Wadsworth 1998).

The views of adoption consumers have to date been largely absent from policy development and academic research into adoption. Our project analyses the experiences and views of adoption applicants with the aim that this research will contribute to and inform future legal, academic, professional practice and policy discussions.

Our project explored firsthand experiences of the process of applying to adopt in Victoria, Australia, including both local and inter-country adoption. We spoke with people whose application for adoption had been successful, and with those who had been unsuccessful. Participants were asked to reflect on both positive and negative aspects of the process. They made comments about the different stages in the process and how they experienced each stage. Participants were also invited to comment on adoption policies and how both process and policies could be improved. Our findings are presented in two parts. In our analysis we make a distinction between practice (i.e. how things were done) and policy (i.e. why things were done). This paper presents Part 1 of our analysis of the data. It describes participants' views about the practice or process of applying to adopt a child. Their views about adoption policies are the subject of a forthcoming publication.

Ethics

The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee approved this study. The researchers have no affiliation with any adoption or government agency and no conflicts of interest.

Recruitment

Individuals who had applied in Victoria for either local or overseas adoption were eligible for participation. Methods for recruitment included circulating flyers through adoption support groups. A Snowball technique (i.e. participants told other 'potential participants' about the project and invited them to contact the researchers if they were interested in participating in the research) was also used. Both couples and individuals were invited to participate.

Sample

We received 72 enquiries about the research project. All those who enquired were sent information about the project.

A total of 36 individuals were interviewed. The sample included 11 men and 25 women. Thirty-two participants were married, one participant was in a de

facto relationship and three participants were single.

In total there were 35 individual interview transcripts. One couple was interviewed together and five couples were interviewed individually.

The sample included participants who had applied for both local and inter-country adoption from six different countries. Thirty-five participants had been assessed as eligible in at least one of their applications for adoption (only one of our participants was deemed ineligible) Thirty applicants had been allocated one or more children; five participants were waiting for allocation at the time of their interview.

The sample included 16 participants who had used IVF services prior to their application for adoption and one participant who had attempted surrogacy. Seven participants had children prior to their application for adoption.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted between February and May 2010. Each individual interview was approximately 1-hour duration. The interview schedule was semi- structured with open-ended questions. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Interview Questions:
1. Tell us about your experiences of trying to adopt. Did you complete the process?
2. Explain some of the steps you went through in applying to adopt and how you felt about these.

Interviewer prompts:

a. Did you complete any written applications? What did you think of these?

b. Did you go through a personal interview? What sort of things were you asked about? What did you think about the questions that you were asked?

c. Have you experienced a home visit? What were your experiences of this?

d. Have you experienced a financial assessment? What did this entail? What are your views about the need for financial assessment of adoptive parents?

e. Have you experienced a police check? What are your views about this check?

f. What do you think about the policy regarding fertility treatments whilst seeking adoption?

g. Do you think people who already have children should be treated differently to other people who are applying to adopt?

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were critically analysed using thematic analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This method of analysis is a qualitative research method that is used to generate common themes. Briefly, the methods of thematic analysis involve coding and organizing 'chunks' of data and identifying and developing themes. Participants' responses were compared and grouped according to similarities and differences.   After the initial categories or codes were developed, the next stage involved interpreting meanings and common themes in relation to the question of interest. The data from the interview transcripts were organised into codes, these are presented below in the research findings. Five themes emerging from the coded data are presented in the discussion section.   To ensure methodological rigour, both authors analysed the interview transcripts and compared findings. The aim was to produce themes that were solidly grounded in the data.

Limitations of the Research

A limitation of the study is that participants volunteered themselves for the research. Self-selected samples may be biased toward people with strong opinions, either positive or negative. A sample size of 36 allows some confidence that a wide range of views is captured or represented. However, the results of the research are not intended to be generalisable, nor was the sample representative in the standard scientific sense. Also, the data may hold some bias because most participants in our study had a successful outcome. However, this is a limitation of all research undertaken with participants that volunteer to participate (Lavrakas).

Research Findings

Participants were asked to reflect on their firsthand experiences of the process of applying to adopt a child in Victoria. They made comments about the different stages in the process and how they experienced each stage. Participants

described the process as a series of sequential steps. These steps included:

- Introductory information session
- Written application
- Education sessions
- Home visits
- Assessment Report
- Approval
- Allocation
- Post placement visit
- Legalisation

The findings are presented in 3 sections:

1. Positive comments about the process
2. Comments critical of the overall process
3. Comments critical of specific steps in the process

1.   Positive comments about the process

All participants acknowledged that the process of applying to adopt is long and demanding. However, there were many positive comments about the process – some participants described it as enjoyable.

In terms of what we are embarking on – particularly when you are talking about another human being, removing them from their country and their culture – you certainly need to understand the implications and ensure it is something that you are fit to do… We are grateful that the process takes you down that path, and discusses a lot of those things. (Participant 25)

One participant described the time between each step as helping her and her partner to reflect on new information and to decide whether or not to take the next step.

Each stage is some sort of filtering process – perhaps not in them approving you, but in you deciding that you want to go forward…Each time you find out a bit more, and you decide whether or not it is for us. And you decide whether or not to take the next step. I think that is a really good thing. (Participant 3)

Some participants described enjoying the introductory information sessions and found them informative. They enjoyed the personal accounts presented from the perspective of both the adoptive parent and adopted children.

The parents who told their stories were most helpful. You got a sense that they were successful and that there was some light at the end of the tunnel. That was the most positive thing that we took away. (Participant 20)

Participants also benefitted from the information provided by the support groups early in the process.

Following the information session applicants were required to complete an extensive written application. This included questions about health, financial status and life histories (including family background). Applicants were required to complete a project about the country culture and history of the country from which they were seeking to adopt. Many participants enjoyed undertaking the research and found the task informative.

The country project was a little bit gimmicky but it made you sit down and think a lot more about the country you are choosing to adopt from.
(Participant 25)

After completing the written application, people were required to attend education sessions. Participants described spending a few weekends learning about aspects of parenting adopted children. Many participants made positive comments about the content of these education sessions. In addition, participants valued the opportunity to meet other adoptive parents, with whom some made lasting friendships.

Following the education sessions, a social worker visited the applicant's home. For many, the overall experience of the adoption process was largely determined by their relationship with the social worker assigned to them. Some participants described the home visits as positive because they felt comfortable with the social worker and they developed a good rapport. According to these participants feeling comfortable enabled couples to engage with the social workers' questions.

I think I was really nervous about the home visits. In fact we had a wonderful social

worker. She did a lot to put us at ease and she was really warm and I had a very good rapport with her...the social worker can really make things really difficult for you or be nice and ours was fantastic. (Participant 5)

Although not part of the formal process, some participants spoke favourably about the ongoing support and information provided by voluntary groups and resource networks. Some participants had also attended seminars and information sessions that were organised by the post placement support service.

2. Comments critical of the overall process

As outlined in the previous section, many of the research participants described the process of applying to adopt as appropriate and necessary, and some described it as informative and enjoyable. However, many participants also expressed frustration and disapproval, and some felt disrespected by the process. They described the process as bureaucratic, and felt that the process failed to acknowledge their sincerity and good intentions. Some expressed frustration about timelines, lack of resources, communication and access to information.

Bureaucratic nature of process

Some participants stated that they fully supported the steps involved in the current process (e.g. police checks, education sessions, home visits), but had concerns about the way in which the process was implemented. They described the process itself as appropriate but the implementation of the process as bureaucratic. Some participants likened the adoption process to other formal processes like taking exams or applying for a mortgage. They accepted that while not particularly enjoyable, there was a need for a formal process.

Participants described the number of different steps in the process of applying to adopt, and the long period of time between each step, as *"obstacles"*. They referred to *"road blocks",* "hoops" and *"hurdles"* and suggested that determination and perseverance were required to complete the *"arduous"* process.

There's just roadblocks every step of the way. It's quite arduous. The process is

certainly designed in such a way that if you weren't committed you would give up because it's just so hard, so intrusive that most people that aren't dedicated and committed to going through the program would probably give up. You've got to push over the walls, work through it, jump through the hoops like a performing seal to get to the end and we went through – and absolutely I'm glad we went through it obviously because we've got beautiful kids, but could it have been a lot easier? Yes absolutely it could have been a lot easier. Could there have been less heartache? Absolutely. (Participant 15)

Time-lines

A recurring concern expressed by many participants was the length of time required to complete an application to adopt. Participants referred to long delays and suggested that these delays were due in part to a shortage of government resources. For example, some participants had difficulties accessing information about adoption; some had to wait months for a place to become available for information and education sessions. They also described delays in the processing of their paperwork and responding to telephone enquiries. Participants expressed frustration at process, describing it as *"inefficient"*.

Every step took months longer than necessary. It would be nice if it all happened more efficiently and more openly and you were kept in the loop better. It seemed to be a manpower issue - there must be a shortage of people working there. (Participant 27)

Shortage of resources

Participants described other problems related to the lack of resources. These included a shortage of staff, lack of staff continuity and poor communication between staff. Many described not being able to talk to the same person twice. Participants also talked about difficulties finding up-to-date knowledge and the expertise to answer questions.

Quality and cost of service

Participants described adoption as very expensive and speculated that this may deter people on low incomes.

Fees act as a barrier maybe to some people. You don't have those sorts of fees if you're having a biological child. Each step there's another request for money. I felt slightly uncomfortable about that from a moral point of view. You know you're not paying for a child but the fees made me uncomfortable. It would be good if there were no fees or the fees were less. (Participant 4)

A few participants referred to themselves as clients or customers and suggested that the department was not providing good *"customer service".* They questioned whether the fees were commensurate with the services provided. Some participants described some aspects of the process as *"demeaning", "inhumane", "traumatic"* and *"disrespectful".* Some felt that the process lacked the common courtesies that one would expect in any service provision. Some participants felt that their motives were being questioned. One participant suggested that the process was so difficult that he may not reapply.

The interaction you have with people in the department can be very demoralizing – they are very dismissive. The Department treats people as a number, as a process, not as a person. (Participant 28)

Communication
Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the infrequency of communication. They said that long periods of time passed without any communication from the department. They said that this lack of communication caused them *"stress"* and *"despair".* Participants expressed frustration about not knowing whether or not the department had received all the required paperwork and how their application was proceeding. Some participants expressed frustration at the lack of communication about outcomes and decisions relating to their application.
At a very critical time we were put down the queue, and there was no explanation. I asked trying to be as calm as possible. But I was just brushed off. I found that extremely upsetting. (Participant 32)

Participants expressed frustration about the time taken to respond to their queries and process paperwork. Some participants took issue with the manner of

communication. One participant explained that her partner was told via his mobile telephone that they were not eligible to adopt. However she was never formally advised of the outcome of their application.

Information

Some participants described information from the department as inaccurate and contradictory. Participants also described information being withheld. Participants said that they lacked information about the process, including how long the process would take. Some participants described a lack of trust in the information that they were given and the way in which their information was managed. They described cases in which files had been lost.

3. Comments critical of specific steps in the process

This section focuses on specific comments that were made about different stages of the process, including the introductory session, application form, various checks (health, police etc.), the education session and home visits.

Introductory information session

Several participants found the information session overwhelming, due to the number of people attending and were disheartened by negative stories of their chance of success. Some participants described the information sessions as deliberately discouraging people and suggested that the aim was to cull the number of applicants. The format and content of the information session was also criticised. Some participants said that much of the information presented was repetitive and already available on the department's web site. Some participants were disappointed that their questions were not answered during the information session. Some participants said that the large number of people at the information session made it difficult to ask questions, particularly person questions about eligibility.

The information session is not a forum where it's comfortable to ask: "My husband's been hospitalised for mental health issues, is that going to be problematic?" If I'd known upfront, if we'd had an opportunity to talk the issues through with someone, then wouldn't have proceeded. I could have said that we'd like to talk with somebody about the application process before putting it in because we've got some questions,

but that's also not openly invited…we had to do all that paperwork before we found out. (Participant 9)

Written application form

The written application was described as long, repetitive and difficult for some people. Many participants wondered about the relevance of some questions, particularly questions about their sexual relationship with their partner. Some participants raised doubts about the relevance of questions about their parents and their own childhood experiences.

A few participants described withholding information from their life stories because they did not want to be examined too closely. They suggested that full disclosure in their life stories would negatively impact on their applications and regretted the amount of information that they disclosed.

We just told the truth. I would now tell people to just tell them what they want to hear. Telling the truth caused us quite a bit of grief. After we'd handed in our life stories, they called us in for a meeting. They grilled us over why we were adopting. (Participant 24)

Health checks

Most participants accepted the need for health checks and health status as eligibility criteria. However, some participants explained that they were deemed ineligible even though they were successfully managing their health conditions.

We'd put down his medical condition. We'd been open about it in the forms. They came back asking for further information. His psychiatrist wrote a letter and supported the application. His psychiatrist saw no reason that we wouldn't be fit parents…They called him on his mobile and said: "because you're on medication you're not acceptable. But when you're off medication then you could be considered". This is medication for mental health – but if somebody was a diabetic and they're on medication, are they are going to be rejected because they're on medication? (Participant 9)

Pregnancy test

Many participants had made the decision to apply for adoption following years of infertility and in some cases following years of unsuccessful fertility treatment. Some of these participants described the need to undergo pregnancy testing as unnecessary and insensitive.

Financial checks

While participants generally accepted the need to access their financial eligibility to raise a child, some participants questioned the level of detail that was required.

Education session

A number of participants were critical of the level, content, focus and timing of the education sessions. A few participants said that the education sessions were pitched too low and questioned the quality and relevance of the information. They described the education sessions as having a negative focus. Rather than use the many positive stories about the adoption experience, participants said that the education sessions focused on the difficulties of adopting a child. One participant suggested that the purpose of the negative stories might have been to discourage potential applicants. Another participant suggested that the focus of the education session was on assessment rather than education.

Home visits

For many participants, the home visit was the most difficult part of the process. Some described a social worker coming into their home as *"intrusive" "nerve wracking"* and *"grueling"* and like a *"criminal investigation".* They talked about the difficulties of having a stranger come to their home to assess their ability to parent. Many described feeling that their social worker was making value judgments and 'looking for problems'. Some admitted to saying what they thought the social worker wanted to hear. Some participants said that the home visits had been particularly difficult for their children.

The home visits were nerve wracking. You have the feeling that you are putting on a performance the whole time – you are being tested and assessed. That is extremely

nerve wracking. It is not a good feeling to feel that you are being judged to see if you are worthy to become a parent. (Participant 11)

Some participants questioned their social worker's level of training and competency. They felt that some social workers made judgments based on their own opinion rather than on policy. They commented that the social workers did not have guidelines.

Home Safety check

Participants questioned the need for safety checks of their house, particularly when they were carried out years before approval or the placement of any child. Some compared these home checks to preparing a nursery before becoming pregnant and felt superstitious or uncomfortable about this. One participant explained that in some cultures or religions (e.g. Judaism) preparation for a child is not allowed. For some participants, making the house childproof was a painful daily reminder of being childless.

We had to get safety locks on all the draws and then wait 4 years for a child. It is against my religion. In Judaism, you are not allowed to prepare for a child until they come. (Participant 29)

Process post placement

Some participants were critical of the post placement visits. They felt that they were being assessed, rather than being supported. Some felt that seeking advice or assistance from the social worker during a visit might be viewed negatively.

The post placement visit was intrusive. It was almost like they were trying to test you and trip you up…It definitely didn't feel the place where we could ask questions on how she thought we should do this or how she thought we should deal with that (Participant 15)

Discussion of findings

Our findings indicate general agreement that some form of assessment of potential adoptive parents is appropriate and necessary. However, there was significant

disagreement about the level of scrutiny required and the criteria used to ensure adoptive parents are 'fit' to parent.

While there were many positive experiences of the process of applying to adopt a child for both local and international adoption, there was significant critique of current policies and practices. In the interests of informing future policy and practice, our discussion focuses on these critiques.

As reported in our findings section, participants discussed at length their perceptions about the process of applying to adopt a child. We present a discussion of these findings in 5 broad categories. We suggest that participants' comments, concerns and reflections are captured in one or other of these themes.

1. Information
2. Justification
3. Consistency
4. Administration and management
5. On size does not fit all

1. Information

Our participants discussed the need for access to clear information about adoption processes. They sought information and had questions at different times throughout their application, depending on their circumstances. However, our finding suggest that information about adoption is provided by adoption agencies at set times determined by the adoption agency, and that the information provided (e.g. at information nights, education sessions) is not tailored to the needs of the audience.

Some participants described the information at the education sessions as overly simplistic or patronising. Further, some participants described a lack of trust in the accuracy the information provided and frustration in accessing information. Our findings suggest that people applying to adopt would benefit if information was available on request, and not as currently happens, when the agency makes it available or deems it appropriate. Our data indicates that long delays in responding to requests for information, and in answering questions, cause uncertainty and anxiety. Participants suggested that the adoption agency should document all

information about adoption processes on their website. This would ensure transparency and allow all applicants access to consistent information, both before commencing the application process, and during the process. It would also enable applicants to obtain information at a time that best suited them, and appropriate to their stage in the process. Based on participants' comments, we also suggest that information packages for people applying to adopt should be developed by people with expertise in education, who could then adapt this information for the needs of diverse audiences.

2. Justification

Many participants' comments about applying to adopt a child indicate a lack of clarity or conflicting views about practice. Their responses and critiques suggest that the justification for some processes is neither documented, nor available to applicants. For example, concerns and questions were also raised about the invasive nature and number of home visits. One recurring complaint was the need for applicants to ensure that their home was 'child proof' many years (sometimes up to 5 years) before a child was placed with them. Another concern was that applicants were required to document intimate and personal information, often repeatedly, and asked probing questions about their sexual relationships. However, current adoption practices, such as the two we highlight, are not formally justified and documented or reviewed and updated.

Our findings suggest that there is a lack of rigorous research data and evidence to support current adoption practices. We speculate that some current adoption practices past practice. This is consistent with a recent review of the research evidence pertaining to current eligibility criteria (Passmore et al. 2009). This review reports a dearth of adoption research and notes that little information (in particular data from Australian studies) is available about causal factors that may impact on adoption processes and outcomes Passmore et al. 2009).

Our findings, suggest the need to provide a strong evidence-base for current practice and a process for reviewing, updating and reporting on the justification for current processes.

Our findings echo the recommendations of senate inquiry (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2005). This senate inquiry called for:

- More general, principle-based criteria in legislation;
- More robust, transparent and documented practices; and
- Standardised assessments across the jurisdictions.

The senate inquiry further recommended that these 'harmonisations' should be developed in consultation with stakeholders such as adoption support groups, adopted children and adopted parents. In response to these recommendations, an inter-governmental working group has been established to achieve best practice in international child adoption.

In addition, our research shows that the insights and suggestions from people who have been through the adoption process would make an important contribution to any review. We argue that insights from people who have been through the adoption process should inform practice.

3. Consistency

Our findings indicate that people's experience of applying to adopt a child were significantly dependent on the staff involved in the process. Many participants summarised their experiences as either positive or negative depending on their interactions with different social workers and other staff members.

Participants described with frustration, inconsistencies and discrepancies in what they were told and what they were asked to do. Our data suggests that staff sometimes provided conflicting advice. In addition, social workers had different understandings, approaches and attitudes to applicants during the home visit. It was the perception of a number of participants that some decisions about applications were made on the basis of individual subjective opinions and without reference to guidelines. In a few cases, it was suggested that staffs' decisions reflected personal prejudices.

Applicants suggested that consistency in the process could be improved by decreased reliance on out-sourced staff (e.g. social workers) and improving staff training. In addition, our findings suggest that inconsistencies could be reduced if policies were less ambiguous, staff roles were clearly defined, and staff turnover was reduced. Consistency would also be improved if decision- making were peer reviewed, documented and evidence-based. Educating staff with up-to-date research findings, including data about participants' experiences, would also promote consistency and effective communication.

4. Administration and management

One of the recurring themes in our findings was about the way in which the process of applying to adopt a child is managed and administered. Participants referred repeatedly to time delays, lack of resources, overly bureaucratic and repetitive processes. In addition, our findings illustrate several instances of mismanagement, for example lost documents, missing or misplaced files, long delays in communicating results or failure to confirm receipt of money or documents.

Our findings suggest that a shortage of government resources contributes to some inefficiency in the process and to significant time delays. However, our research also indicates that high staff turnover and the use of contract staff exacerbate problems. Participants complained that they 'never speak to the same person twice' and that lack of continuity creates information gaps and delays.

We acknowledge that, arguably all administration processes can be improved with additional resources. However, as our findings show, applying to adopt a child is more than merely a bureaucratic process – for people applying to adopt, it is a profoundly emotional experience. Unnecessary delays and bureaucratic mistakes have a significant emotional impact on applicants, causing anxiety and stress. We suggest that there is room to ameliorate the experiences of people applying to adopt by reviewing the current administration and management. A first step in this review would be to create a process for receiving suggestions and acting on the experiences of people who have been, or are going through the process. For example, our participants suggested a number of timesaving and cost-cutting

changes to current process – but, to date, no mechanism for contributing their ideas and suggestion exists. These suggestions include developing on-line education, permission to lodge multiple applications simultaneously, and streamlining assessments for people who already have children.

5. One size does not fit all

One of the key themes emerging from the data is that current adoption processes are inflexible and based on a generic 'one size fits all' approach. A number of participants criticised the process for making them go through steps that were not relevant to their situation, insensitive to their needs or disregarded their prior experience. For example, participants noted that education sessions are pitched at people with low education levels and for those who are first-time applicants or first-time parents. They suggested that information and education sessions needed to be tailored to the experiences of applicants and pointed out that people who had previously parented or been though adoption had different questions and concerns than first-time applicants. Similarly it was suggested that the role of social workers prior to placement should be different post placement. Our findings suggest that adoptive parents would benefit from parenting support from social workers post placement, rather than continued assessment.

Our findings suggest that many steps in the application process could be simplified or modified according to applicants' situation. For example many applicants were required to undergo and pay for additional 'police checks' despite having current and valid police checks for their jobs. Similarly the assessment process and home visits are the same for all applicants, despite the fact that many people applying to adopt already have children and have proven their 'fitness' to parent and to create a safe and child-friendly home.

These examples illustrate what appears to be an inflexible rule, rather than a practice based on protecting the best interest of children or respecting applicants. Understandably, a shortage of resources might have given rise to generic approaches. However, we suggest that current adoption processes are a 'blunt instrument' and should be better targeted. We argue that targeting practice to the

circumstances of particular applicants would actually reduce repetition, and wasting resources on unnecessary steps.

Summary

The aim of our research was to investigate the first hand experiences of people applying to adopt a child in Victoria through either local or overseas adoption. While there has been extensive research on the history of adoption and the outcome for adopted children, our study is one of the first to report on the experience of adoption from the perspective of people who have applied to adopt.

Recent government reports have reviewed and criticized current adoption policies and practices and have called for the need for both federal and state reviews (Victorian Law Reform Commission 2007; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2005). Similarly academic literature has addressed the discrepancies between adoption and other parenting choices and suggested that adoption procedures are overly burdensome, discriminatory and lacking a strong evidence base. We were interested to understand how applicants experience the current processes and to include their insights in the debate.

Many participants shared positive experiences and felt supported by adoption agencies and staff to achieve their goal of forming a family. However, there was significant criticism of current practice. These critiques came from both successful and unsuccessful applicants. Interestingly, many of our findings echoed those of the inquiry into adoption of children from overseas (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2005). Some participants remain disappointed that recommendations from this inquiry have not been fully addressed.

For many people, adopting a child is an emotional process. However our study shows that applicants experience the process as one focused almost exclusively on administrative tasks and bureaucratic requirements. This mismatch between applicants' emotional experiences and the department's bureaucratic processes can create tension and anxiety.

A number of recurring themes emerged from our data. Our findings show that current practices are not transparent, consistent or evidence based. We suggest that many of the current processes and policies should be reviewed and updated. Many participants agree that some of the current processes are overly intrusive and not justified. We acknowledge that some processes reflect the requirements of overseas countries. However, rigorous research is needed to review, update and challenge adoption practice. We suggest that this research should include all key stakeholders, including people who apply to adopt a child.

Our findings suggest that participants' experiences of applying to adopt are sometimes dependent on their relationships with social workers, and social workers' skills, knowledge and attitudes. We suggest that the social workers are trained to ensure more consistency across services and jurisdictions. Although core curricula for developed for social workers or agency staff (Inter-country Adoption Harmonisation Working Group 2010).

One of our key findings is that current adoption processes are based on a generic 'one size fits all' approach. Our findings suggest that many of the steps in the application process could be simplified or modified according to applicants' situation. We argue that targeting processes to the circumstances of particular applicants would reduce unnecessary repetition, costs, time delays and applicants' anxiety.

Conclusion

Our findings show that people applying to adopt have many important and useful insights that could make significant contributions to adoption policy and practice. However, there is currently no mechanism for applicants to contribute their views, suggestions or feedback. Our findings suggest that the experiences of people applying to adopt could be ameliorated if processes for feedback, complaints and grievances were developed. We suggest that an independent review panel would ensure that applicants could access these processes without fear of prejudicing their application. Our research findings also suggest the following:

- Up-to-date information about adoption policies and processes should be readily available to applicants
- Information and education of potential adoptive parents should be tailored to the needs of applicants
- Adoption processes should be transparent, consistent, flexible and supported by evidence
- Adoption processes should be regularly reviewed and up-dated
- Social workers and departmental staff should receive ongoing education and training in adoption
- Adoption practice should be informed by research and key stakeholders, including people who have applied to adopt a child

The desire to raise a child is a profoundly human experience as is a child's need to be raised by loving and supportive adults. A joint report from the US Agency for International Development (USAIDS) and UNICEF (2002) estimated that, in 2010, 106 million children under the age of 15 would have lost one or both parents. However the waiting lists in Australia for overseas adoption are up to 8 years. We suggest that both the number of children who need parents, and the number of parents who want children, could be reduced. We suggest that the Australian government could review its current approaches to adoption to achieve this goal.

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