Envisaging the Adoption Process to Strengthen Gay- and Lesbian-Headed Families: Recommendations for Adoption Professionals

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Although a growing number of child placement agencies are serving lesbians and gay men, a dearth of literature exists for adoption agency policies and practices related to working with this population. This article explores the unique characteristics and strengths of prospective gay and lesbian adoptive parents throughout each of the three phases of the adoption process—preplacement, placement, and postplacement—as well as provides suggestions for adoption professionals working with gays and lesbians. Data from a recent qualitative study of single, gay adoptive fathers are used to illustrate examples and expose areas of potential strengths of adoptive parents not generally explored in the preplacement or preparatory stage. Special attention also is given to the continuing needs of adoptive families headed by gays and lesbians after adoptive placement. Specifically explored are the needs for developing linkages with similar families, as well as providing resources designed to promote successful outcomes of adopted children raised by gays and lesbians.
Estimates of the number of men and women in the United States identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual vary considerably. This variation makes determining the exact number of gay men and lesbians who also are parents virtually impossible. Several researchers and organizations, however, have offered estimates. In their recent study, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) estimate that 1-9 million gay and lesbian parents are in the United States. Additionally, Patterson (1995) estimates that 1-3 million gay men in the United States are fathers (about 20%-25% of self-identified gay males) (Bigner, 1996). Finally, according to data extracted from the 2000 U.S. Census, 594,391 self-identified same-sex households are in the United States. Of these families, 21.8% of male same-sex households have their own minor children (defined as sons and daughters of householders) living in the household, and 22.3% have their own and/or unrelated children living with them (defined as sons and daughters of householders, and other nonrelated minors). The numbers are even higher for female same-sex households: Approximately 33% report having their own minor children living in the household, while 34.3% had their own and/or unrelated children living with them (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003).

The 2000 U.S. Census collected data on adopted children for the first time, and it now provides the most comprehensive national database on adoptive families. About 2.1 million adopted children were reported, including almost 1.6 million under age 18. Nearly 29,000 adopted children under 18 lived with a male householder who has an unmarried partner, while another 29,000 adopted minors lived with a female householder and her unmarried partner (Kreider, 2003). Data for adopted children living in households with unmarried partners are included in the previous numbers; however, the data were not broken down into opposite-sex and same-sex unmarried partners. The percentage of the adopted children that live in households with same-sex unmarried partners is unknown. Single gays and lesbians with adopted children are included in data on adopted children under 18 living
with “male householders, no spouse present,” which was 78,698 children, and those living with “female householders, no spouse present,” which was 269,522 children (Kreider, 2003).

Additionally, a recent study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2001) collected data from a representative, random sample of households located in 15 major U.S. metropolitan areas. Each responder was asked a series of questions, including whether there was any adult living in the home who was gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The results of the study are based on the responses of 405 self-identified gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults. Researchers found that 8% of the participants were parents or legal guardians of a child under 18 who lived in the home. While this study does not provide concrete evidence of the numbers of gay and lesbian parents, the results do suggest an appreciable population of gay men and lesbians are parenting minor children. This survey also measured the extent to which gay men and lesbians reported an interest in becoming parents. Among the 92% of respondents who reported they were not parents at the time of the interview, approximately half (49%) said they would like to become parents one day. These results suggest that as shifts in social thought continue in America, gays and lesbians may assert their right to parent in even greater numbers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001).

Although gay and lesbian parents lead many different types of families, some similarities occur among the diversity of experiences. According to Martin (1993):

As gay and lesbian parents, we are all under the stress of knowing that some people harbor violently negative feelings about our families. It is an awareness that may remain a mere whisper in the dim recesses of our consciousness or move to the foreground with frightening clarity, but it is an ongoing part of our lives...Each time we address the issue of our visibility, we balance our ideals, our politics, our hopes for support, and our parenting goals against our caution, our need for privacy, and our fatigue (p. 308–309).
Routes to Adoptions

Gay and lesbian Americans wishing to adopt a child as an openly homosexual person are limited to domestic adoptions, as no country outside of the United States knowingly will place a child with gay or lesbian persons as adoptive parents (Lev, 2000). Some gays and lesbians, however, do choose to build adoptive families through international adoption, including several participants in the qualitative study described in this article. Given the obstacles that international adoption presents to openly gay and lesbian people, the following description of primary routes to adoptive parenthood for gays and lesbians focuses exclusively on gay men and lesbians residing in the United States who choose to adopt domestically.

Agency Adoptions

Agency adoptions involve the placement of a child with adoptive parents by a public agency or a private one licensed by the state agency charged with administering child welfare programs. Public agencies generally place children who have become wards of the state for reasons such as abandonment or abuse. Many of the children available for adoption are older, are part of a sibling group, or have special needs (NOLO: Law for All, 2003). These children often are eligible for state and federal adoption assistance subsidy programs, such as Title IV-E, which are designed to promote adoption by families who may otherwise not be able to afford the needed specialized services (North American Council on Adoptable Children [NACAC], 2003).

Adoptive families who wish to adopt an infant generally use private agencies, which often are operated by religious or social service organizations. Children placed through private agencies generally are brought by parents that have or are expecting a child and wish to place that child for adoption. Agency placements fall along a continuum from being closed—where the adoptive and birthfamilies have no relationship—to completely open—where the adoptive and birthfamilies agree on a plan for ongoing
contact with the adopted child, which includes phone calls and visits (NOLO: Law for All, 2003).

**Independent Adoptions**

Another option for a domestic adoption is an independent adoption (or private adoption), where a child is placed with adoptive parents without the involvement of an agency. Some independent adoptions involve a direct arrangement between the birthparents and the adoptive parents, while others involve an intermediary such as an attorney, doctor, or adoption facilitator. Although independent adoptions are permitted in most states, some states do bar the use of intermediaries in the adoption process (Adoption Navigators, n.d.).

**Identified Adoptions**

A final option for a domestic adoption is an identified, or designated, adoption. In this type of adoption, the adopting parents locate a birthmother and then contract with an adoption agency to handle the legalities of the adoption process. In this way, identified adoption is a combination of the independent and agency adoption. Prospective parents avoid the waiting lists of agencies by finding the birthparents themselves but have access to the benefits of agencies, such as their expertise with adoption legislation, paperwork required by the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children, and finalization of the adoption. Identified adoptions also provide an alternative for prospective adoptive parents residing in states that ban independent adoptions, and it may increase the confidence of both the birth and adoptive parents by involving a licensed child-placement agency in the process (NOLO: Law for All, 2003).

**Obstacles to Adoption**

The last decade has seen a sharp rise in the number of gay and lesbian individuals and couples using alternative means, such as adoption, to create families (Brodzinsky, Lang, & Smith, 1995; Mallon, 2005; Markowitz, 2000; Savage, 2000; Shapiro, Shapiro, & Paret, 2001; Shernoff, 1996; Wells, 2000). This rise can be attributed
in part to the efforts of gay and lesbian advocacy groups, who have helped shape debates about the definition of family in American society and worked diligently to advance attitudes about gays and lesbians, individually and in family units. One outcome of these efforts has been an increased acceptance of gays and lesbians as adoptive parents by both public and private adoption agencies.

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute recently released findings from a study that investigated the attitudes of adoption agencies toward gays and lesbians as prospective adoptive families. The researchers conducted a systematic, nationwide analysis of whether public and private adoption agencies work with prospective adoptive parents who are lesbian and gay, the extent to which agencies place children with them, and adoption workers' attitudes about adoption by lesbians and gays. Approximately 50% (n = 895) of adoption agencies in the United States were targeted for inclusion in the study, and the response rate was 41.2%. Therefore, the results of this study are based on the input of 369 public and private adoption agencies throughout the United States.

The most notable conclusion is that approximately 60% of adoption agencies accept applications from gays and lesbians, and about two in five (39%) report having placed children with adoptive parents who they know are gay or lesbian in the past year. One important finding is that the majority of these agencies focused on special needs or international adoption. This increased willingness to work with gays and lesbians, however, supports the notion that a steadily increasing number of gays and lesbians are choosing to build families through adoption (Brodzinsky, 2003).

Although significant shifts in attitudes of adoption agencies toward gays and lesbians as adoptive parents were well-documented in the study, some ideological difficulties accepting this family form persist. For example, religion and its perceived acceptance or disapproval of homosexuality continues to be an obstacle to adoption agencies' acceptance of gays and lesbians as prospective parents. For example, all Jewish-affiliated agencies surveyed reported they were willing to work with gay and lesbian clients, as were the
overwhelming majority of public agencies (90%), private agencies with no religious affiliation (80.2%), and most Lutheran agencies (66.7%). The rest of the agencies with religious affiliations were much less willing to accept applications from gays and lesbians, although a minority of Methodist and Catholic agencies did.

Another identified obstacle to gay and lesbian adoption was related to the attitudes of the birthparents. About one quarter (24%) of agencies responding to the survey indicated that prospective birthparents have objected to placing their child with gays or lesbians, while approximately 15% of all agencies reported that birthparents had requested or chosen lesbian or gay prospective adoptive parents for their child on at least one occasion (Brodzinsky, 2003).

Differences were noted about the way agencies responded to gays and lesbians wishing to adopt. Almost two-thirds of responding agencies had official policies on adoption by gays and lesbians; of those, 33.6% reported that a nondiscrimination policy including sexual orientation guided their work. About one-fifth responded that placement decisions were guided by the regulations of the adopted child’s country of origin, and another fifth said religious beliefs were the basis for rejecting applications from and making placements with gays and lesbians. Finally, approximately 5.2% reported that state legislation, such as sodomy laws (this study was conducted prior to the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that declared these laws unconstitutional) or cohabitation laws, prohibited them from placing children in adoptive homes with gay and lesbian parents (Brodzinsky, 2003).

This conclusion is supported by earlier studies that explored challenges experienced by gay and lesbian adoptive families. Brooks and Goldberg (2001) conducted focus groups with adoption professionals as well as adoptive and foster parents, and concluded that gays and lesbians wishing to adopt encounter more obstacles than heterosexuals to becoming adoptive or foster parents. These difficulties centered on three themes: beliefs about the parenting abilities of gays and lesbians, agency attitudes and informal practices, and lack of formal policies about placement with gays and lesbians.
These findings are similar to those found by Ryan (2000), who surveyed adoption social workers (n = 80) in public child welfare agencies to assess their level of homophobia and its effect on their placement recommendations with gay or lesbian families. The findings of this study indicated that race or ethnic background (e.g., African American), as well as religious upbringing (e.g., Christian), are indicative of higher levels of homophobia and a lower likelihood of recommended placement with gay and lesbian adoptive parents. The results also indicate, however, that these attitudes can change when workers receive training in two areas: gay and lesbian families and child development, and state adoption laws as they pertain to gay and lesbian adoption. This training is warranted, given that 14% of this study’s respondents wrongly indicated that adoption by gays and lesbian was illegal in their state (Ryan).

Despite common misconceptions, only three states currently prohibit adoption by gay men and lesbians: Florida, Utah, and Mississippi. Passed in 1977, the law in Florida is the oldest in the nation. The laws in Utah and Mississippi both were passed in 2000. Mississippi’s law disqualifies gay and lesbian couples, and Utah’s legislation makes it illegal for any unmarried couple to become adoptive parents (thus, Utah’s legislation does not specifically ban adoption by gays and lesbians, but rather adoption by all unmarried couples) (Human Rights Campaign Foundation [HRC], 2002). The involvement of state legislatures in debating the rights of gays and lesbians to serve as adoptive or foster parents continues. In 2004, legislators in Iowa, Kentucky, and Michigan unsuccessfully attempted to pass bills that would have prohibited or restricted the ability of gays or lesbian to adopt children or serve as foster parents (Evans, 2004). However, a bill did pass in Oklahoma that denies recognition to adoption decrees or judgments from other states or foreign jurisdictions that list two individuals of the same sex as parents, meaning same-sex adoptive parents are considered legal strangers to their children under Oklahoma law (Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2004).
While some states are grappling with the issue of gay parenting on a legislative level by introducing bills that would either limit or increase the state’s protections for gay families, others choose to allow the court to decide these matters on an individual basis. The Human Rights Campaign (2002) established criteria for determining each state’s record of case rulings regarding gay and lesbian families and then ranked each state as either having “good court records, unclear court records, poor court records, or state law prohibits” (p. 19).

The family court systems in 20 states and Washington, D.C., have demonstrated an openness to same-sex parents in their rulings. Eleven of these states, however, have demonstrated an openness to adoption by gay and lesbian individuals, while only nine states and Washington, D.C., have demonstrated an openness to adoption by couples. The majority of the 11 are located either in the northeastern United States or in the Pacific Northwest (the one exception is California). On the opposite end of the spectrum, the family court systems in 10 other states have poor records with respect to adoption, custody, or visitation by same-sex parents. The majority of these states are located in the southeastern United States (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2002).

Regardless of how a state chooses to deal with the issue of adoption by gays and lesbians, this population of adopters clearly is growing. As Brodzinsky (2003) notes, “Even as these discussions [about gay and lesbian adoption] proliferate on the legislative and rhetorical levels, the reality on the ground is outstripping the pace of the debate. That is, a growing number of lesbians and gay men are becoming parents and are living as families every day, irrespective of what the policymakers do or say” (p. 2). While many gays and lesbians are choosing to build families through various methods, including adoption, a dearth of literature remains that would explore how gays and lesbians experience the adoption process and the ways adoption professionals can best prepare themselves to effectively work with lesbian and gay prospective adoptive or adoptive parents.
Reconceptualizing the Adoption Process for Gay- and Lesbian-Headed Families

In this section, the authors describe the three phases of the adoption process (preplacement, placement, and postplacement) in relation to lesbians and gays. Participant quotations from a qualitative study of 16 single, gay adoptive fathers who came to parenting after establishing a homosexual identity are used to illustrate unique considerations in the adoption process. All participants’ and children’s names are pseudonyms. Specific suggestions for adoption professionals who are working with lesbians and gays are included.

The Preparatory Stage

U.S. couples and singles can take several routes to adopt a child, including infant placement, either through parental or agency placements; domestic placement of a “waiting child” (available for adoption) who is in the foster care system; and international adoptive placements through agencies or independent facilitators. These routes have differing procedures, costs, and wait times; however, they all share the requirement of a home study. Following the initial application to adopt, the home study is the first step in the adoption process and certifies the family is approved to adopt a child. The home study has been described as “a mutual educational process during which families learn about the uniqueness of adoptive parenting and we [the adoption agency] learn about how a family’s life experiences have prepared them for adoptive parenting” (Coordinators², Inc., 2005). The home study is conducted by a licensed child-placing agency, which follows state requirements for the home study process. For example, the Commonwealth of Virginia requires a minimum of three face-to-face visits between the social worker and the client (Coordinators², Inc.). Additionally, the agency itself may provide its workers with guidelines for exploring the prospective adoptive individual’s or family’s history, characteristics, and strengths during these visits. Each worker, however, may alter the guidelines
to some degree, as long as the state requirements and agency expectations are met.

Although general components are similar across every home study, each one will look somewhat different because of the uniqueness of prospective adopters. For example, one state child-placing agency includes the following components in all home studies conducted in the state: education and preparation, development of a personal history, home inspection, documentation of family income and employment status, documentation of identity, child protective services and criminal background check, and interviews with personal references (State of Ohio, n.d.). Other agencies may require prospective adopters to attend mandatory workshops on adoption or require their clients to write a birthparent letter, writing as if they were placing their child for adoption (Coordinators\(^2\), Inc., 2005). For those interested in “waiting” children, agencies may request that the clients complete a checklist of physical, emotional, and behavioral disorders and their degree of severity, which would indicate clients’ willingness to consider parenting children with those disorders.

The agency worker and the potential adopter jointly arrive at a decision as to the readiness of the potential adopter and the type of adoption and characteristics of the children most appropriate to the adoptive parent’s skills and strengths. The completed home study approves the family to specifically adopt a child with certain characteristics, and often via a particular route.

The experience of the home study for lesbians and gay men will depend on the willingness of adoption agencies to take applications from and place children with lesbians and gays. Agencies affirming of engaging with lesbians and gays in the adoption process allow these clients to be candid during the home study; those who are known to reject applications from lesbians and gays or operate under an informal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy discourage openness in the process. A number of participants in the qualitative study of single, gay adoptive fathers mentioned that the adoption agencies and social workers that are employed by them work
from an informal policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Peter, a 37-year-old Caucasian male who lives in the suburbs of a large metropolitan area in the Midwest, experienced such a policy. Peter is the adoptive father of a 21-month-old son who was adopted internationally. He described how an agency worker handled sexual orientation:

She [agency worker] said, “You will never be asked the question [sexual orientation], and we ask that you don’t give us any information that will put us in the situation where we have to ask.” It was done so that they [the agency] were not put in a position where they had to lie.

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policies encourage errors of omission; they also may create confusion among agency workers about the expectations about their work with prospective adoptive parents who are gay or lesbian. While having a parent who possesses a lesbian or gay sexual orientation does not predict poor psychosocial outcomes among children (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001), lesbians and gays raise unique considerations for children to which adoption workers should attend. When adoption organizations encourage prospective adopters to refrain from disclosing their sexual orientation, they fail to fully investigate the readiness of gays and lesbians to adopt. Ray, a 43-year-old Caucasian man from the Pacific Northwest, noted the effect of this failure to fully explore the possible realities of adoption as a gay man:

When I was thinking about what it would be like to be a parent, I was not thinking about the isolation or being on the margins. I guess I didn’t take the time to think about what the experience would be like in terms of how much work it would be.

Agencies also miss the opportunity to employ the therapeutic use of parallel process (Murphy & Dillon, 2003) to explore the ways in which prospective parents’ experiences as gays or lesbians may help them better comprehend the life experiences and challenges their adopted children may face. The therapeutic use
of parallel process could help prepare lesbians and gays to understand the life course tasks of their adoptive children that might be similar to their own, including negotiating processes of identity development and disclosure and managing difference from the norm (Matthews & Cramer, in press).

In addition to avoiding secrecy when working with lesbians and gay men, adoption professionals could examine how particular agency forms or procedures within their adoption process negatively effect lesbians and gays. Application forms that require applicants to check a box indicating if they are single, married, widowed, or divorced is one example. Agencies that require applicants to provide marriage or divorce certificates operate from heterosexist assumptions. Gays or lesbians formerly in opposite-sex relationships may have been married and divorced; however, focusing on those relationships (which may have occurred years ago) may obfuscate current relationships in which the applicant is engaged and how those relationships would affect the adopted children. Preplacement workshops or support groups that focus on grieving infertility also may not be appropriate for prospective lesbian and gay adopters. Finally, some agencies inquire about support networks and refer specifically to relationships with families of origin, which in itself is "adoptist" in its assumptions that biology will predict closeness. Yet, gays and lesbians can have strained relationships with their own parents; therefore, they create "families of choice," who function as family units and provide emotional and material supports (Weston, 1991).

Adoption agencies can undertake an evaluation of their own policies to ensure they conform to the current interpretations of state and federal policies that effect all types of adoptions. The most common difficulty encountered by study participants was related to their perception that adoption professionals were subjectively interpreting formal agency policies or legislation. Childplacing agencies commonly rely on contract workers, who may use their own interpretation of agency or legislative policy to guide their work or complete preadoptive assessments. Incorrect or ambiguous information by adoption professionals may stop
lesbians and gays from proceeding with the intent to adopt at the time of application. On one occasion, a prospective father was misinformed by an adoption agency that adoption by single men was illegal. Another incident involved the agency’s unclear policy about its ability to place children with gays and lesbians because of its affiliation with a faith-based organization.

In-service trainings can be used as an educative tool to ensure that all adoption agency workers, including contractual ones, are even-handed in applying agency and legislative requirements. These trainings may include dissemination of agency and legislative policy as it relates to approving prospective adoptive parents. One suggestion is to cover the topic of standardized expectations, activities, and documentation required for the successful completion of home studies or postplacement adoptive reports.

**Placement**

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families (2000) recommends social workers ask the following questions of prospective adoptive parents to make sound placement decisions in the best interest of children: “Is this person or couple caring, nurturing, and sensitive to others? Do they have the qualities needed to parent a child? What are their individual strengths and weaknesses? How do their strengths/weaknesses compliment the needs of the child? Do they have the capacity to nurture a child not born to them?”

The questions encourage workers to explore the potential of each prospective adoptive family and the best possible match of children and parents, rather than workers using their personal values about preferable family structures to make placement recommendations. The authors suggest that adoption professionals use the Child Welfare League of America’s Standards of Excellence for Adoption Services (2000), which conclude applicants should be assessed on the basis of their abilities to successfully parent a child or children in need of a permanent family, and not on their race, ethnicity, or culture, income, age, marital status, religion, appearance, differing lifestyles,
or sexual orientation. Further, the Standards of Excellence suggest applicants for adoption should be accepted on the basis of an individual assessment of their capacity to understand and meet the needs of a particular child now and in the future.

Several of the study participants mentioned that workers seemed to only want to place older children with multiple disabilities with them. One participant, Charles, a 46-year-old Caucasian male residing in the Mid-Atlantic region, shared his experiences when he attempted to adopt through the foster care system:

When I worked with the public agency, they were desperately trying to dump a special needs child on me. In the public system, I was given three possible placements and they were all mentally retarded children. It seems that the kids they wanted to place with a single person were the ones who could benefit from being in a two-parent home. When I started working with the private agency, they were much more concerned about making a good match between parents and children.

Another study participant, Tom, a 50-year-old Caucasian man living in a large city on the West Coast, described the acceptance he has received from others because of the type of adoptive placement in which he participated:

I think people are supportive of me because they see my three kids of color and think that their mom could not care for them, that they are drug exposed. So, people tend to think what I am doing is a good thing. I think it would be different if I had adopted a blonde-haired, blue-eyed kid. People might ask why I got that child instead of a "better" situation. I think some people think there are not many people who would have wanted to adopt my kids anyway, so they don’t really care that I did.

Roberta Achtenberg, as cited by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000), confirms the experiences of the current
study’s participants are not an anomaly. She concludes that an unspoken ranking operates within the adoption network. She further notes: “The hierarchy prefers white, married, middle or upper middle class couples, and these couples don’t want the special needs kids. The less preferred children then go to unmarried couples of all kinds, single individuals, and gay people. The children are less preferred, and the recipients are less preferred.”

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000) further notes the irony inherent in this hierarchy by citing Martin (1993), who remarks that the same bureaucracies that believe that lesbians and gays are not suitable parents will place children who require the most highly skilled parenting with them. Additionally, “She [Martin] and others have pointed out that nontraditional families have unique strengths that make them excellent, and in some cases, the best homes for certain children. Among them is an ability to accept differences, to understand what it is like to be in the minority, to demonstrate flexible gender roles, to be open about sexuality with children who have been sexually abused, and to understand the special needs of homosexual children.”

Placement decisions related to lesbians and gays may be further complicated by interactions with various stakeholders in the adoption process, including interstate compact offices, attorneys, and international brokers and organizations, from whom the disclosure of sexual orientation may be withheld. For example, two of the study participants had to adopt from states other than the ones in which they reside. Brent, a 36-year-old Caucasian male from the southwestern United States, stated: “I know that the laws in my home state are not supportive of gays and lesbians adopting. However, I intentionally chose to adopt from a state that allows nonresidents to finalize there, so I never had to worry about it.” This experience was similar to Louis, who resides in Florida, where adoption is illegal for gays and lesbians. He explained: “Since I adopted out of the state of Florida, I never had to deal with the Florida courts. I was able to take care of all of the legal things in the country where I adopted from.”
Even when workers include exploration of a lesbian or gay sexual orientation in the home study interview process, the final document intentionally may exclude mention of the prospective adopter's sexual orientation, and the person often is presented as a prospective single parent with roommate. Lesbians and gays adopting internationally may be advised to bring an opposite-sex friend with them on their overseas visit. These dynamics may reinforce shame and secrecy—feelings common to lesbian and gay persons and adopted children (Matthews & Cramer, in press). Peter, who also was quoted before, described the advice his agency gave him:

My agency asked me to travel with a woman, with a girlfriend, and I did. I actually probably carried that too far, because some of the officials became concerned that she didn’t like the baby and that was why she did not come on the second trip. They suggested early on for me to find a female friend to travel with, and that if we could be affectionate with each other—that would also be good. They don’t ask a single woman to do that...Before the proceeding, the judge asked me if I was of the correct sexual orientation, and I answered yes. My assumption is that the judge asked me that knowing I could answer yes, so that the prosecutor would not oppose the adoption on those grounds.

Gays and lesbians also may have the mistaken belief that heterosexual birthparents would not choose them for infant placements (Savage, 1999). These mistaken beliefs, along with agency pressure to focus on special needs children, may steer gay and lesbian clients away from infant placement. Conversely, because of the strong informal support networks that exist in the gay and lesbian community, adoption agencies known to place infants with gays and lesbians often are inundated by applications, and in the case of one agency, temporarily had to restrict applications from gays and lesbians, so that they would have a balanced list of prospective parents to present to birthparents (C. Kinnaird, personal communication, March 16, 2005).
As they are waiting for an adoptive placement, lesbians and gays may find themselves in workshops or groups with other prospective adopters, most of whom are heterosexual and many of whom may have experienced infertility (Savage, 1999). Because lesbians and gays are often “preferential adopters” (Varon, 2000), they may have different grief issues than infertile heterosexual couples. This difference does not imply that lesbians and gays would not have any grief issues related to their choice to adopt. If they choose to come out to fellow attendees, lesbians and gays may find acceptance and support in such situations, or possibly quiet or vocal disdain. If lesbians and gays decide to hide their sexual orientation, then they are missing opportunities to fully use the group experience. By hiding an important part of who they are, lesbians and gays are not able to use the group to process issues in the adoption process to the same degree as heterosexual adopters.

Waiting for an adoptive placement also may initiate disclosure decisions avoided in the past, such as exploring school options for older children and child care for younger ones. Joe, a 48-year-old Caucasian male who resides in a large urban area of a Mid-Atlantic state, shared an incident that happened with one of his adopted children: “My older daughter asked me if I thought the teacher knew I was gay. I had to tell her it may not be safe to disclose this information in certain settings, such as at school.”

Lesbian and gay prospective adopters who intend to request time off from work to make visits with children during the placement process or to use the Family Leave Act postplacement, also may face decisions about disclosing sexual orientation. One study participant, Mark, 43-year-old African American residing in an urban area in the Mid-Atlantic, described his decision to take paternity leave when his adopted daughter was born:

I work for one of the top research medical universities in the U.S. It is very progressive. We have domestic partner benefits, and sexual orientation is in the EEO statement. They offer paternity leave, so I took 6 weeks off after Ella was born, and certainly that altered my relationship with my
colleagues, because suddenly I was not in the call rotation for six weeks, and I wasn’t seeing my clinic patients, so they had to pick up the slack. You know, I had no control over when Ella was born. It wasn’t a situation where I could postpone it or move it up. I didn’t want to inconvenience anyone, but I wasn’t going to miss out on this very special time.

**Postplacement**

As the transition to parenthood produces changes in social support networks (Belsky & Kelly, 1994), lesbians and gays who have had some degree of involvement in the gay community may find that their type and level of involvement changes once they are raising children. The participants in the study verified that their transition to parenthood has led to less frequent participation in events, which may lead to feelings of marginalization and stigmatization within the gay community. Ray, quoted previously, also noted how gay pride rallies may not be family friendly:

I went once to the pride festival when he was young. He [his son] was still in a backpack. I did not care for it...I just saw everything differently. It was sort of like, would I want to be explaining this [what was going on there] to him. So, we did not go for a few years. We went to the gay pride rally after the parade last year, because I needed to be around gay people for a bit. Well, it is easier to control the environment at the rally. If I saw something I was not comfortable with, I could just steer him away or get him to look the other way. It is really an exhausting environment to be in when people are prancing around and stuff, and I am trying to take care of a small child. So, it does not feel like a family friendly environment.

By simply living their lives and being visible within their community, however, lesbian and gay parents are, in effect, advocating for equality by challenging negative stereotypes about lesbians and gays and parenting. Gay and lesbian organizations could support
lesbian and gay parents in their advocacy efforts through the development of advocacy trainings and educational materials designed to assist these parents in making effective contributions on a grassroots level within their community. Adoption professionals could collaborate with gay or lesbian organizations to support gay and lesbian adoptive parents. Gay or lesbian organizations also could be mindful of whether their events are family friendly. For example, organizers of pride festivals and marches could be cognizant of the placement of parenting groups within the structure of parades and of the content of vendor booths. They also could designate family friendly areas. Additionally, events and activities for the gay and lesbian community, such as support groups and gay-friendly houses of worship, would become more accessible by gay adoptive parents if childcare was offered, as well as by offering these activities and services at times that make attendance by all gays and lesbians possible.

While the gay and lesbian community can pay more attention to the needs of its parenting members, some adoptive parents may feel excluded when gay or lesbian parenting groups are primarily composed of one gender, couples rather than singles, or those parenting a child with a biological connection to at least one of the parents. One participant, Greg—age 45, Caucasian, and living in the Midwest—did not perceive adoptive parenting groups as an option for him:

They do have [support] meetings at the adoption agency, and they have a single parent group as well, but to tell the truth, I will probably forego those just because it is all women, the guys don’t go, and I am not crazy about the idea of being the only guy.

Similarly, these parents may be reluctant to become involved in postadoption groups because of feelings of exclusion and alienation. Study participants expressed hesitancy to become involved with services, such as support groups or counseling, if these services do not provide an outlet for them to share their unique experiences in a place where they feel understood. The hesitancy to
trust adoption professionals also might extend to workers conducting postplacement visits, particularly if the secret of one’s sexual orientation has been maintained.

Finally, adoption professionals could work collaboratively with lesbian and gay organizations to design programmatic initiatives that meet the needs of diverse lesbian and gay adoptive parents and their children; however, these programs do not need to be gay-specific. Some participants in the study indicated that support services do not need to be designed specifically for gays or lesbians to be useful; for some, referral to a gay men’s support group might be of less interest than a support group for parents that is inclusive of all types of families. Additionally, lesbian and gay organizations and adoption professionals could work together to combat policies and laws that prohibit lesbians and gays from adopting or fostering, or that encourage the continued use of informal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policies.

**Conclusion**

As highlighted throughout this article, the context of one’s sexual orientation can influence the adoption experience throughout the three phases (preparatory, placement, and postplacement) of adoption. The authors suggest an open inquiry into the potential effect of parental sexual orientation on the integration of adopted children into the household during the preparatory stage, as well as the therapeutic use of a parallel process to help develop prospective lesbian and gay adopters’ understanding of what their children likely will experience in being adopted (Matthews & Cramer, in press).

During the placement phase, adoption professionals’ decisions should incorporate the strengths and skills of the prospective adoptive parents, rather than target certain (less desirable) children for particular (less desirable) parents. During this phase, adoption professionals also can assist lesbians and gays in weighing disclosure decisions concerning schools, childcare, and workplaces, to name a few.
Once children have been placed in the homes of lesbians and gays, adoption professionals can work with lesbian and gay organizations to design programs and policies that attend to the diversity among lesbian and gay adoptive parents, such as unique programming concerns for single gay and lesbian adopters versus couples. Additionally, adoption agency workers may benefit from training that sensitizes them to the unique challenges faced by gay and lesbian adoptive parents and their children (Mallon, 2004).

By incorporating these suggestions to strengthen lesbian- and gay-headed adoptive families, child-placing agencies and organizations that provide supportive services can ensure they have an environment that encourages fairness on the part of workers, as well as full disclosure by gay and lesbian prospective adopters and adoptive parents.

References


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