

Heterosexual, Lesbian, and Gay Preadoptive Parents' Preferences About Child Gender

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Abstract Little research has explored the child gender preferences of preadoptive parents. This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to explore child gender preferences (and individuals' reasons for such preferences) in a geographically diverse, US sample of 93 heterosexual, 61 lesbian, and 48 gay male preadoptive couples. Heterosexual men were the least likely to demonstrate a gender preference and gay men were the most likely. Individuals in heterosexual relationships were more likely to prefer girls than individuals in same-gender relationships. In explaining their preferences, sexual minorities often emphasized gender socialization considerations (e.g., their perceived inability to socialize a child of the opposite gender) and concerns about heterosexism (e.g., some gay men preferred girls because they felt a boy would encounter more harassment).

Keywords Adoption · Child gender · Gay · Lesbian · Preferences

Introduction

The purpose of the current study is to examine the child gender preferences of preadoptive parents, using quantitative and qualitative data from a geographically diverse, US sample of 93 heterosexual, 61 lesbian, and 48 gay male couples who were awaiting adoptive placement of their first child. The research on child gender preferences is limited in

that it has largely examined the preferences of biological parents and nonparents; little research has examined the preferences of preadoptive parents, whose ideas about the gender of their future child may be shaped by their unique route to parenthood. Further, research focuses largely on heterosexual men and women; the child gender preferences of lesbians and gay men, who are becoming parents at increasing rates (Gates and Ost 2004) have rarely been studied. It is expected that the unique contexts of adoption and sexual orientation may have distinct implications for men's and women's gender preferences. Specifically, it is expected that (a) preadoptive parents' gender preferences may differ in unique ways from those of biological parents as reported in the literature; (b) the gender preferences of lesbian/gay preadoptive parents might differ in key ways from those of heterosexual preadoptive parents; and (c) the *reasons* cited by lesbian/gay preadoptive parents for their gender preferences might differ in meaningful ways from those mentioned by heterosexual preadoptive parents.

Next, the literature on biological parents' and nonparents' gender preferences is discussed, followed by the limited research on the preferences of adoptive parents and lesbian/gay parents.

The Child Gender Preferences of Biological Parents and Nonparents

A moderately large body of research has examined parents' and nonparents' child gender preferences. This research has often been motivated by interest in how such preferences may influence reproductive decision-making and fertility patterns (e.g., parents with a strong son preference may be motivated to have more children if they bear only daughters; Arnold 1997). Some of the research in this area has been motivated by concerns that antenatal technology

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such as amniocentesis is increasingly being used for sex determination or sex selection purposes, which could, theoretically, result in an unbalanced sex ratio favoring boys (Oomman and Ganatra 2002). The research on child gender preferences suggests that both men and women often prefer boys (Hortacsu et al. 2001) with fathers demonstrating a stronger preference (Coombs and Fernandez 1978; Steinbacher and Gilroy 1990). Sons are continually preferred as first children (McDougall et al. 1999; Williamson 1976) and once parents have obtained one or more sons, they are less likely to have subsequent children (Hank and Kohler 2003).

Many studies suggest that in Western societies, a son preference tends to persist, although it is not as pronounced as in developing countries (McDougall et al. 1999). Further, many prospective parents do not demonstrate any gender preferences (Steinbacher and Gilroy 1985; Hank and Kohler 2003; Swetkis et al. 2002; Walker and Conner 1993) and a few studies have found evidence for a girl preference, particularly among women pregnant with their first child (Marleau and Saucier 2002). Illustrating these two points, Steinbacher and Gilroy (1985) studied American women during their first pregnancy and found that 82 (58%) expressed no gender preferences. Of the remaining 58, 33 (24%) desired girls and 25 (18%) desired boys. The authors argue that their findings may be evidence of a gradual move from boy preference to no preference and a gradual weakening of societal bias against females. Walker and Conner (1993) studied the gender preferences of 243 pregnant women and found that 81% had a gender preference; of these, 52% wanted a girl. Hank and Kohler (2003) studied German residents and found that childless persons tended to have no gender preferences (35%) or to favor a balanced gender mix (47%). An equal proportion (9%) preferred girls and boys. When respondent gender was taken into account, however, this revealed that women were more likely to have a preference, and to favor girls.

Some studies suggest that “one or more of each” is increasingly the ideal in the USA and other developed countries, such that many parents wish for an even distribution of boys and girls (Arnold 1997; Hank and Kohler 2003). This, Okun (1996) argues, “may be a feature of a more modern society in which couples reproduce primarily for purposes of deriving satisfaction from children, rather than for traditional purposes such as investment or old-age support” (p. 470).

Of interest is *why* gender preferences exist. In explaining gender preferences, scholars have often emphasized the societal “gender system”: the socially constructed set of expectations for the differential behaviors and capabilities of men and women, which has shaped a societal discourse that privileges men over women (Katzev et al. 1994). In turn, boys and girls are seen as having different traits,

strengths, and interests (Williamson 1976) which may inform parents’ gender preferences. Indeed, parents participate in a range of activities with their children, some of which are traditionally gendered (e.g., sports; discussing feelings; Pollard and Morgan 2002). It follows, then, that if a parent values some of these activities in particular, s/he might have a greater preference for a male or female child (although, as Pollard and Morgan point out, increasing structural opportunities for women and the weakening of gender stratification in society should help to reduce the relevance of a child’s gender to the activities of that child and its parents).

Other factors, in addition to enjoyment of gender-typed activities, may also motivate gender preferences. Boys are often valued because they will carry on the family name, particularly in traditional societies (Arnold and Kuo 1984; Callan and Kee 1981). Sons are also valued for their ability to assist with male tasks around the house, and for more psychologically oriented reasons such as their capacity to provide companionship (Callan and Kee 1981) particularly to fathers (Arnold and Kuo 1984). Girls are sometimes preferred because they are presumed to embody characteristics such as neatness, cuteness, and helpfulness (Arnold and Kuo 1984; Williamson 1976); girls are also expected to provide companionship (Callan and Kee 1981). As Hank and Kohler (2003) argue, since in industrialized societies children no longer provide economic utility but have become a source of time and monetary investment, they are increasingly valued for social-psychological reasons such as expansion of the self, affiliation, and accomplishment.

Men’s and women’s motivations for preferring boys (and girls) may differ. Williamson (1976) suggests that men’s preference for boys (e.g., Steinbacher and Gilroy 1990) may arise from their greater concern with the continuity of the family name or their feeling that having sons is a signifier of masculinity. Consistent with this, Hammer and McFerran (1988) found that men who desired boys seemed to be motivated by a desire to vicariously gratify their need for achievement through their male child. Men may also prefer sons because they believe sons will provide more opportunities for joint activities; indeed, fathers tend to spend more time with their sons than their daughters (Raley and Bianchi 2006). Women who prefer boys sometimes explain that they want sons to please their husbands (Williamson 1976). Because men tend to be more involved with their sons than their daughters, some women may prefer sons out of a desire to draw their husbands into the parenting process and to ensure security in their marriage (Swetkis et al. 2002).

Women who prefer daughters may be motivated by a desire for companionship (Warren 1985) and a need for mutual identification (Notman 2006). They may also see girls as easier to raise or as more rewarding companions,

perhaps because of their gender similarity (Marleau and Saucier 2002) and, thus, their perception of girls as easier to relate to (Hammer and McFerran 1988). Men who prefer daughters may be motivated by a yearning to gratify “relationship needs”: that is, Hammer and McFerran (1988) found that men who wanted daughters often highlighted their desire to have a close relationship with their child, and felt that females tended to be more oriented toward relationships and were more capable of showing affection than males.

The Child Gender Preferences of Heterosexual Adoptive Parents

Unlike biological parents, adoptive parents can, theoretically, choose their child’s gender. Interestingly, though, little research has explicitly examined adoptive parents’ preferences about child gender. One exception is the National Survey of Family Growth (2002), which surveyed women only and found that among women who were seeking to adopt, 36.5% had no preference about child gender, 34.6% preferred a girl, and 28.9% preferred a boy (Jones 2008). Notably, census data show that girls are overrepresented among adopted children in the USA (Kreider 2003). This is likely in part due to the fact that girls are more likely than boys to be relinquished for adoption, both domestically and abroad (Bachrach et al. 1992). However, the fact that women who have a gender preference tend to prefer girls may also be a factor. Adam Pertman, the executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, has stated that “the extent to which women are the driving force in most adoptions is probably a factor....It is usually true that the women are filling out the paperwork, going to the conferences, the support groups” (Gravois 2004). This notion is consistent with research indicating that in couples who experience infertility, women are typically the “driving force” in seeking out and making decisions about fertility treatments (Greil et al. 1988). In turn, wives may also be the more assertive partners in the adoption process, and may have greater influence over the child that couples adopt.

Thus, these data suggest that (a) most women who are seeking to adopt do not have a preference for their child’s gender, but, when they do, they are somewhat more likely to prefer girls, and (b) girls tend to be adopted into families at higher rates than boys, due to a variety of factors. Little is known about the gender preferences of heterosexual men who are seeking to adopt. Additionally, the *reasons* for adoptive parents’ gender preferences (or lack of preferences) are not well understood. It is quite possible that adoptive mothers-to-be may be particularly desiring of daughters for similar reasons as biological mothers-to-be: i.e., for companionship and to fulfill affiliative needs

(Warren 1985). Likewise, it is possible that, like biological fathers-to-be, adoptive fathers-to-be tend to prefer boys out of a desire to fulfill both affiliative and status needs (Coombs and Fernandez 1978). However, it is also possible that, in the absence of a biological connection between parent and child, sons are less likely to be regarded as vehicles of status by adoptive parents, particularly fathers. That is, a son’s accomplishments do not carry the same “pride reinforcing qualities” as they would if they could be attributed to some heritable set of characteristics, and, thus, the possibility of a male progenitor might be less important to fathers. In other words, the inability to continue on the male genealogical lineage may diminish adoptive fathers’ investment in having a son, and men may therefore demonstrate few gender preferences; or, they may tend to prefer girls, if they perceive their wives as strongly desiring of daughters.

Many heterosexual couples who seek to adopt, however, may not espouse any preferences for their child’s gender, in light of their unique route to parenthood. Heterosexual couples that seek to adopt typically do so because they have been unsuccessful in conceiving (Daniluk 2001), and prior to pursuing adoption have often spent months or years trying to conceive, often with the assistance of fertility treatments. Upon arriving at adoption after years of longing for a child, heterosexual couples may feel that “beggars can’t be choosers” or feel that “any child will do.” In this way, failed conception efforts may create a context in which couples come to downplay the significance of their child’s gender. Specifically, their urgent desire to parent may have quashed any fantasies regarding their child’s gender. Alternatively, they may simply feel less strongly about gender than about other characteristics of their child, such as health, age, and race. Indeed, research on heterosexual parents suggests that they typically prefer to adopt inracially (Brodzinsky and Pinderhughes 2002) and prefer infants and toddlers over older children (Kreider 2003). In the context of other valued characteristics, then, adopters may view gender as relatively insignificant.

The Child Gender Preferences of Lesbians and Gay Men

Unlike individuals in heterosexual relationships, persons in same-gender relationships confront the reality that only one gender is represented in the parental unit, which may have implications for their gender preferences. Several studies have examined the gender preferences of lesbians who became parents via insemination. Gartrell et al. (1996) studied 154 lesbians during the insemination or pregnancy stage and found that 38% had no preference about their child’s gender; 55% of those with a preference, and 88% of those with a strong preference, wanted a girl. Herrmann-Green and Gehring (2007) studied 105 lesbian mothers in

Germany and found that among those who planned to have a second child, most had no gender preference (62%); most of those with a preference desired a girl (32% of the sample). Although no data are available on lesbian/gay adoptive parents' preferences, analysis of US census data indicates that among female same-gender couples with adopted children, 56% of children are female, and among male same-gender couples with adopted children, 54% of children are male (G. Gates, personal communication, October 29, 2008).

These data suggest that (a) many lesbians who become parents via insemination do not have a gender preference, and (b) when they do have a preference, they prefer girls. There is also some evidence that lesbian adopters may tend to prefer girls and gay male adopters may tend to prefer boys, although the extent to which actual adoption rates mirror parents' preferences is unknown. The tendency for lesbians to prefer girls may reflect same-gender couples' awareness that, as a parental unit, they lack representation of both genders (Goldberg and Allen 2007). Lesbians (and gay men) inevitably confront the societal belief that the presence of a same-gender parent in the household is essential to children's gender identity development (Juni et al. 1985) and they are likely aware of societal concerns that the different-gender children of sexual minorities will lack same-gender role models with whom to identify. Lesbians and gay men may internalize such concerns about gender socialization and, in turn, espouse a preference for a same-gender child. Alternatively, lesbians might be more likely to prefer girls (and gay men to prefer boys) simply as a function of their own gender socialization: like heterosexual women, they may imagine that a same-gender child might be easier to raise based on their shared experiences as females. It is also possible that the strong stigma against male homosexuality in particular (Hicks 2006) may cause some gay men to ponder whether it is easier for a *girl* to be raised by two men than a boy. Indeed, adoption workers sometimes question the motives of gay male adopters, reflecting pervasive stereotypes of gay men as child abusers and pedophiles (Hicks 2006).

Presumably, not all sexual minorities will espouse gender preferences; and, in fact, some research suggests that prospective lesbian/gay adopters may be particularly non-restrictive with respect to their future child's gender. Specifically, there is evidence that lesbian/gay adopters are open to a broader range of children than heterosexual adopters. For example, census data suggest that same-gender couples are significantly more likely to have adopted internationally than heterosexual couples (Gates et al. 2007), suggesting that they may be more open to adopting transracially. Census data also suggest that same-gender couples are more likely to be fostering a child with a disability than heterosexual couples (Gates et al. 2007),

suggesting that they may be more open to adopting children with special needs. Sexual minorities' apparent flexibility with respect to their future child's characteristics may reflect their status as "family outlaws" (Calhoun 1997). That is, their existence outside of traditional definitions of "the family" may lead them to experience fewer pressures and expectations regarding how they build their families (and, in turn, to embrace the possibility of parenting a wide range of children); whereas heterosexual couples, in contrast, may tend to be more influenced by traditional definitions of "family" as heterosexual, biologically related, and physically similar (Parry 2005). Alternatively, sexual minorities' family outlaw status may sensitize them to the reality that they are seen as less optimal parents by adoption professionals, agencies, and birth mothers (Matthews and Cramer 2006) which may lead them to express openness to a broad range of children.

In sum, heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male couples arrive at adoptive parenthood with distinct sets of experiences and expectations that may differ from one another and from those of expectant biological parents, which may have implications for their gender preferences. For example, heterosexual couples' infertility experiences and lack of biological connection to their child clearly distinguish them from expectant biological parents, and may have implications for how they consider their future child's gender. Lesbians and gay couples are uniquely shaped by their marginalized status as sexual minorities and their status as a two-woman/two-man parental unit, both of which may affect their gender preferences. Finally, all adopters are shaped by their own gender identities and socialization, which may have implications for their gender preferences.

Research Questions

In light of the existing literature, the following questions and hypotheses were posed:

1. What are the gender preferences of preadoptive parents? Does either respondent's sexual orientation (gay/heterosexual) or gender (male/female) impact preferences? *Hypothesis*: I expect that a large proportion of persons in both heterosexual and same-gender couples will report no gender preference. Among those with a preference, I expect that women will tend to prefer girls, and men will tend to prefer boys. In other words, I expect that similar proportions of persons in heterosexual and same-gender couples will report no gender preferences (i.e., there will be no significant main effects or interactions between sexual orientation and gender). Among those with a preference, I expect a main effect of gender, such that women are more likely to prefer girls.

2. To what extent do partners agree in their gender preferences? Does sexual orientation or gender impact agreement? *Hypothesis:* I expect that partners in same-gender couples will be more likely to agree in their preferences than heterosexual couples. That is, because of their shared gender and shared status as stigmatized minorities, partners in same-gender couples may have many of the same concerns and beliefs about parenting a same- or opposite-gender child and will show higher agreement. Thus, I expect a significant main effect of sexual orientation on agreement.
3. What are individuals' explanations for their preferences? Does sexual orientation or gender impact their explanations? *Hypothesis:* This question will be explored qualitatively; thus, it is not appropriate to specify formal predictions regarding themes and patterns. However, in light of existing theory and research, I cautiously posit that sexual minorities will explicitly and uniquely consider their own sexual orientation and marginalized status in explaining their preferences.

Method

A total of 93 heterosexual couples (93 women, 93 men), 61 lesbian couples (122 women), and 48 gay male couples (96 men) were included in the current study. All couples were adopting for the first time, and no couples had prior biological children.

Participant Recruitment

Inclusion criteria were: (a) couples must be adopting their first child; and (b) both partners must be becoming parents for the first time. Adoption agencies throughout the USA were asked to provide study information to clients who had not yet adopted. Census data were utilized to identify states with a high percentage of lesbians and gay men (Gates and Ost 2004) and effort was made to contact agencies in those states. Over 30 agencies provided information to their clients, typically in the form of a brochure that invited them to participate in a study of the transition to adoptive parenthood; clients were asked to contact the researcher for study details. Both heterosexual and same-gender couples were targeted through agencies to facilitate similarity on geographical location and income. Because some same-gender couples may not be "out" to agencies about their sexual orientation, gay/lesbian organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign, a national gay political organization, also assisted in disseminating study information. For example, the HRC posted study information on their Family-Net listserv, which is sent to 15,000 people per month.

Participation entailed an individual telephone interview and completion of a questionnaire packet within 1–2 weeks of the interview, to be completed before couples were placed with a child. Couples were mailed two packets, consent forms, and postage-paid envelopes, and partners were asked to return their consent form with their packet. They then completed individual interviews.

Description of the Sample

Heterosexual, lesbian, and gay couples did not differ in geographical region. Thirty-four percent of the sample resided on the West Coast, 44% lived on the East Coast, 8% lived in the Midwest, and 14% lived in the South. Heterosexual couples' average relationship duration was longer than lesbians', but not gay men's, $F(2,199)=3.81, p<.05$. Heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male couples had been in their current relationships for an average of 9.40 years ($SD=4.86$), 7.55 years ($SD=3.63$) and 8.16 years ($SD=3.27$) respectively. There were no differences in age among heterosexual women, men, lesbians, and gay men; the average age of participants was 38.07 years old ($SD=6.10$). The majority of participants were Caucasian: namely, 92% of heterosexual women, 91% of heterosexual men, 88% of lesbians, and 86% of gay men were Caucasian. These data are comparable to national estimates, which indicate that approximately 76% of married heterosexual couples and 73% of same-gender couples with adopted children are Caucasian (Gates et al. 2007).

Heterosexual women, heterosexual men, lesbians, and gay men had similar educational levels. Eight percent of the sample had a high school education or less, 12% had an associate's degree/some college, 36% graduated college, 33% had a master's degree, and 11% had a PhD/JD/MD. Significant differences in personal income emerged, $F(3,400)=8.95, p<.001$. Post-hoc tests revealed that gay men earned a higher annual salary than lesbians ($M=\$86,693, SD=\$75,468$ vs. $M=\$60,201, SD=\$58,088$) and heterosexual women ($M=\$46,736, SD=\$39,736$); heterosexual men also earned a higher salary than heterosexual women ($M=\$75,404, SD=\$51,616$). This sample is more financially affluent compared to national estimates, which indicate that the average household incomes for same-gender couples and heterosexual married couples with adopted children are \$102,474 and \$81,900, respectively (Gates et al. 2007).

Heterosexual couples were more likely to have tried to conceive than lesbian couples, $\chi^2(1,154)=15.80, p<.001$. A total of 77 of 93 heterosexual couples (83%) had tried, compared to 28 of 61 lesbian couples (46%) in which at least one partner had tried to conceive. Among gay men, 14 couples (29%) had considered but not pursued surrogacy, typically because of cost; and two couples (4%) had

pursued surrogacy, but stopped after multiple failed attempts. There were no differences among the three types of couples in the length of time they had been waiting for a child placement: At the time of the study, couples had been waiting for an average of 7.59 months ($SD=9.17$). A total of 48 heterosexual (52%), 30 lesbian (49%), and 32 gay couples (67%) were pursuing private domestic open adoptions; 11 heterosexual (12%), 19 lesbian (31%), and 11 gay couples (23%) were pursuing public adoptions; and 34 heterosexual (36%), 12 lesbian (20%), and five gay couples (10%) were pursuing international adoptions.

Open-Ended Questions

Participants were interviewed by the principal investigator and graduate student research assistants during the years 2005–2008. Interviews were later transcribed, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect confidentiality. The data are derived from the following open-ended questions:

1. Do you have any preference at all regarding the sex of the child that you hope to adopt? (*Probe: Do you have a preference for a boy or a girl?*)
2. (*If yes*) What sex do you prefer?
 - a. Why? (*Probe: Why are you drawn toward a boy/girl?*)
3. (*If no*) Why don't you have a preference, do you think?

Data Analysis

First, the relationships of sexual orientation and gender to gender preferences were examined using logistic regression. Second, participants' reasons for their gender preference (or lack thereof) were examined through qualitative analysis. This mixed-methods approach was appropriate given my goal of generating a comprehensive portrait of an understudied phenomenon (Bryman 2006). I utilized a modified grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998) in analyzing the open-ended data. After reading transcripts of each person's data multiple times (i.e., 404 participant narratives) I initiated the coding process with open coding, which involves examining each line of narrative and defining events or actions within it. This led me to generate initial categories, which I reviewed and then often subsumed under more abstract categories. For example, persons who highlighted their interests in "cooking," "crafts," and "shopping" as reasons for wanting girls were assigned the more general code of "enjoyment of female-typed activities."

Next, I pursued focused coding, which uses initial themes that frequently reappear in order to sort the data (e.g., concern about lack of opposite-gender role models as a reason for wanting a same-gender child). This coding is

more conceptual in nature than initial coding (Charmaz 2006), and the categories that emerge are those that best synthesize the data. Codes were examined across gender and sexual orientation, to identify similarities and contrasts in the nature and meaning of coding categories. At this stage, I enlisted a research assistant to independently code a random selection of transcripts (one fourth of the narratives generated by heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male participants), in an effort to verify the soundness of the emerging scheme (Patton 2002). This process of check coding (Miles and Huberman 1994) is useful in helping to clarify categories and definitions and to provide a reliability check. Initial intercoder agreement ranged from 70–85% across coding categories ($\text{reliability} = \frac{\text{\#agreements}}{\text{\#agreements} + \text{\#disagreements}}$). Disagreements were discussed and led to several refinements in the scheme and clarification of the coding definitions. I applied the revised scheme to all narratives, and the secondary coder independently coded a random selection of transcripts (again, one-fourth of the narratives). Intercoder agreement of our final scheme ranged from 90–95%, providing evidence of the utility of the scheme for describing the data. The final coding scheme is represented in Table 3. Counts of all categories are provided for the purpose of communicating the most frequently endorsed themes. This approach (i.e., quantifying qualitative data) can enhance the validity of the data, if it is carefully carried out and is clearly linked to the respondents' own way of ordering the world (Hesse-Biber 1995).

Results

Question 1: Preferences Regarding Child Gender

To test my prediction that neither sexual orientation nor gender would affect gender preferences, I conducted a logistic regression with sexual orientation, gender, and the interaction of sexual orientation by gender as the independent variables, and gender preference (yes, no) as the dependent variable. The logistic regression was significant, $\chi^2(3,404)=11.60$, $p<.01$, with sexual orientation ($B=.95$, $SE=.30$, $\text{Wald}=9.90$, $p<.01$), gender ($B=.72$, $SE=.30$, $\text{Wald}=5.63$, $p<.05$), and the interaction ($B=-.93$, $SE=.41$, $\text{Wald}=5.17$, $p<.05$) all significantly contributing to whether there was a gender preference (Table 1). Examination of the significant interaction effect was done by a series of simple chi-square analyses, as per Meyers et al. (2006). These simple comparisons showed that gay men (55.2%) were significantly more likely than heterosexual men (32.3%) to express a preference, $\chi^2(1,189)=10.10$, $p<.001$; and, among heterosexuals, females (49.5%) were significantly

Table 1 Summary of logistic regression analyses.

| Variable | <i>B</i> | SE | Wald statistic |
|---|----------|-----|----------------|
| Predicting Gender Preferences (Yes/No; <i>n</i> =404) | | | |
| Sexual orientation | .95 | .30 | 9.90** |
| Gender | .72 | .30 | 5.63* |
| Sexual orientation × gender | -.93 | .41 | 5.17* |
| Predicting Actual Gender Preference (Boy/Girl; <i>n</i> =190) | | | |
| Sexual orientation | -1.04 | .49 | 4.57* |
| Gender | .08 | .52 | .03 |
| Sexual orientation × gender | .61 | .64 | .90 |

For sexual orientation, 1=gay/lesbian, 2=heterosexual; for gender, 1=female, 2=male. For whether or not they had a gender preference, 1=yes, 2=no; for the actual gender preference, 1=boy, 2=girl

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

more likely than males (32.3%) to express a preference, $\chi^2(1,186)=5.67$, $p < .05$ (Table 2). Thus, contrary to expectation, gay men were the most likely to demonstrate a preference, and heterosexual men were the least likely.

To investigate my hypothesis that respondent gender would affect gender preferences, I conducted a logistic regression among persons who had a preference regarding the gender of their child ($n=190$) using sexual orientation, gender, and their interaction as the independent variables, and actual gender preference (boy, girl) as the dependent variable. The logistic regression was significant, $\chi^2(3,190)=8.77$, $p < .05$, with only sexual orientation ($B=-1.04$, $SE=.49$, $Wald=4.57$, $p < .05$) significantly contributing to gender preference; neither gender nor the interaction term contributed to gender preferences (Table 1). Contrary to prediction, persons in heterosexual relationships (29%) were less likely to prefer boys than persons in same-gender relationships (46%; see Table 2 for breakdowns of preferences by sexual orientation and gender).

Question 2: Agreement within Couples

Of interest is how much agreement exists between partners regarding their preferences, and whether there are differences in agreement as a function of sexual orientation and gender. To examine this, couples were categorized as in agreement if they both did not have a preference; or, if they both had a preference for the same gender. Couples were

categorized as not in agreement if one partner had a preference and one did not; or, if they both had a preference but for different genders. To test my prediction that same-gender couples would show higher agreement than heterosexuals, I conducted a logistic regression with sexual orientation, gender, and the interaction as the independent variables, and in agreement (yes, no) as the dependent variable. Contrary to expectation, the logistic regression was not significant: agreement did not differ as a function of sexual orientation or gender. A total of 63% of heterosexual couples agreed in their preferences, 56% of lesbian partners agreed, and 51% of gay male partners agreed.

Next, a logistic regression was performed only on couples who were not in agreement. Disagreeing couples were placed into two groups: those in which one partner had a preference and one did not; and those with divergent preferences (i.e., one wanted a girl and one wanted a boy). Sexual orientation, gender, and their interaction were the independent variables, and divergent/not divergent was the outcome. The logistic regression was not significant.

Question 3: Explanations for Preferences Regarding Child Gender

Participants provided a range of reasons to explain their preferences for girls or boys, and their lack of preference (Table 3). Of note is that some individuals reported more than one reason.

Preferences for Girls

Participants who preferred to adopt girls cited a number of reasons for this preference (Table 3). These reasons tended to fall into several broad categories. Some categories were unique to same-gender couples; most, though, were cited by all types of couples.

Many participants expressed that they simply had an *inexplicable desire* to adopt a girl. Of the 39 reasons cited by the 33 heterosexual women who preferred girls, 17 (43% of the 39 reasons) concerned an inexplicable desire for girls. Similarly, five of the 21 reasons cited by the 21 heterosexual men who preferred girls (24%), seven of the 33 reasons cited by the 24 gay men who desired girls (21%), and nine of the 47 reasons cited by the 38 lesbians

Table 2 Percentage of parents who expressed gender preferences, by sexual orientation and gender.

| | Gay male | Heterosexual male | Lesbian female | Heterosexual female |
|---|-------------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| % with preference for gender of the child ($n=404$) | 55.2 _a | 32.3 _{a,b} | 50.0 | 49.5 _b |
| % who preferred girls ($n=190$) | 45.3 | 70.0 | 62.3 | 71.1 |

Percentages sharing subscripts are significantly different from each other, $p < .05$

Table 3 Reasons for preferring girls, boys, and no gender preferences.

| | Type of couple | | | |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| | Heterosexual women (n, %) | Heterosexual men (n, %) | Lesbians (n, %) | Gay men (n, %) |
| Reasons for preferring girls | | | | |
| Inexplicable desire | 17 (43%) | 5 (24%) | 9 (20%) | 7 (21%) |
| Gender identity considerations | 4 (10%) | 1 (5%) | 3 (6%) | 2 (6%) |
| Perceived characteristics of girls | 3 (8%) | 5 (24%) | 3 (6%) | 2 (6%) |
| Perceived characteristics of relationship | 2 (5%) | 4 (19%) | 1 (2%) | 1 (3%) |
| Gender socialization considerations | 3 (8%) | 2 (10%) | 22 (47%) | 6 (18%) |
| Societal heterosexism considerations | | | 2 (4%) | 14 (43%) |
| Miscellaneous | 10 (26%) | 4 (18%) | 7 (15%) | 1 (3%) |
| Total # reasons | 39 | 21 | 47 | 33 |
| Total # participants who preferred girls | 33 | 21 | 38 | 24 |
| Reasons for preferring boys | | | | |
| Inexplicable desire | 3 (24%) | 2 (14%) | 6 (21%) | 8 (18%) |
| Gender identity considerations | | 4 (29%) | 12 (41%) | 2 (4.5%) |
| Perceived characteristics of boys | 2 (17%) | 2 (14%) | 1 (3%) | 2 (4.5%) |
| Perceived characteristics of relationship | 2 (17%) | | | 4 (9%) |
| Gender socialization considerations | 2 (17%) | 1 (7%) | 4 (14%) | 24 (55%) |
| Societal heterosexism considerations | | | 2 (7%) | |
| Internalization of patriarchal norms | 1 (8%) | 5 (36%) | | 2 (4.5%) |
| Miscellaneous | 2 (17%) | | 4 (14%) | 2 (4.5%) |
| Total # reasons | 12 ^a | 14 | 29 | 44 |
| Total # participants who preferred boys | 13 | 9 | 23 | 29 |
| Reasons for no gender preferences | | | | |
| Child gender not that important | 32 (68%) | 48 (74%) | 40 (60%) | 24 (43%) |
| Health of child more important | 4 (9%) | 1 (2%) | 4 (7%) | 6 (10%) |
| Leaving it up to fate | 1 (2%) | 4 (6%) | | 3 (6%) |
| Not stereotypically male | | 3 (4%) | | 1 (2%) |
| Positives/negatives of both boys and girls | 3 (6%) | 2 (3%) | 11 (16%) | 6 (11%) |
| Initial preference; now don't care | 3 (6%) | 5 (8%) | 5 (7%) | 8 (15%) |
| Eventually want one of each | 4 (9%) | 2 (3%) | 7 (10%) | 7 (13%) |
| Total # reasons | 47 | 65 | 67 | 55 |
| Total # participants with no gender prefs | 47 | 63 | 61 | 43 |

^a There was missing data for one heterosexual woman

who preferred girls (20%) emphasized an inexplicable desire. These individuals could not cite any specific reasons except to say that they had a strong “leaning” or “inclination” towards girls; a daughter was something that they intuitively wanted but “couldn’t explain.” Explained Roy, a gay man, “I cannot tell you [why]. It is just some very visceral desire I have and I cannot articulate it beyond that.” Said Ben, a heterosexual man, “I don’t know why, I just kind of always wanted a daughter.” Notably, heterosexual women were particularly likely to say that they had always “imagined” raising a daughter (five of 17 women): “When I imagine my child, I just usually imagine a girl.”

Gender identity considerations were cited by several members of all three types of couples in explaining their preference for girls. These individuals emphasized that their interests and the activities that they enjoyed were feminine (or at least not traditionally masculine), and, thus, they felt that they might experience greater enjoyment parenting a female child. Indeed, both lesbians ($n=3$; 6%) and heterosexual women ($n=4$; 10%) emphasized their own feminine interests and “girly-ness” in explaining their preference for daughters. For example, Alicia, a heterosexual woman, said, “I would like a girl only because when I sort of imagined the things that we would do—I like to do

crafts, and cook, and that kind of stuff I could do with a girl.” Two gay men (6%) and one heterosexual man (5%) specifically noted their lack of interest in sports in explaining why they might enjoy parenting a boy less than a girl. Stated Damian, a gay man: “I think our fear is, if we had a boy and he ended up being a jock, what would we do? (*laughs*). How would we teach him how to play football and all? Our interests are just more on the bookish side.”

Perceived characteristics of girls were also cited as a reason for preferring girls. Five heterosexual men (24%), three heterosexual women (8%), three lesbians (6%), and two gay men (6%) espoused particular beliefs or attributions about girls, all of which were positive. Several participants desired daughters because of their perception that girls were “easier” to rear than boys (two heterosexual women, one heterosexual man, one lesbian, one gay man). Additionally, several participants shared their belief that girls were more “interesting” and “complex” than boys in an effort to explain their preference for a daughter (one heterosexual woman, one heterosexual man, one lesbian). A few participants perceived girls as “safer” and “less physically challenging than boys, who tend to break things” (one heterosexual man, one lesbian). Several other positive attributions about girls were named, including the perception that “girls are less likely to have ADHD than boys” (one gay man), “girls are cute” (one heterosexual man), and “there are more opportunities in the world for girls than boys” (one heterosexual man).

Perceived characteristics of the parent–daughter relationship were also cited as a reason for preferring girls. That is, participants expressed beliefs about the nature of the relationship that girls enjoy with their fathers/mothers which led them to experience greater excitement about the possibility of raising a daughter. Four heterosexual men (19%) and one gay man (3%) expressed that they liked the idea of “daddy’s little girl”—that is, they were reassured by the belief that “all girls love their daddies.” Two heterosexual women (5%) described positive relationships with their own mothers, noting that they wished to replicate those relationships with a daughter: “I knew I wanted to have a daughter who would have the same relationship with me that I have with my mom.” One lesbian (2%) noted that “girls hold families together, generation through generation” and felt that a daughter would remain more committed to her parents than a son.

Gender socialization considerations were particularly common among lesbians. Lesbian couples who seek to adopt are inevitably aware of their status as a two-woman parental unit, and thus may be sensitive to the ways in which their

own—and their partners’—socialization as females may represent as an asset, and a limitation, with regard to raising children. Between both partners, they possess extensive knowledge of and sensitivity to the experiences and challenges of being female; by extension, they lack firsthand knowledge of what it is like to be a man in society. Further, unlike heterosexual women, they cannot count on a male coparent to fill this gap. A total of 22 lesbians (47%) emphasized their greater knowledge, comfort, preparation, and confidence in raising girls as compared to boys, based upon their own personal experiences and socialization as females. Four of these women also noted that they had grown up around mostly women (e.g., with all sisters) and thus felt that they knew “next to nothing” about boys. Stated Suzanne: “I prefer a girl. I can relate to a girl more. I’ve been there, I am a girl, and I know what girls go through.”

In some cases, women noted that not only would it be easier for *them* to raise a girl, but that, additionally, it might be easier for a *girl* to be raised by two mothers than a boy, who would lack a same-gender male parent with whom to identify. Emphasized Laurie:

Any kid’s gonna have obstacles having two lesbian mothers. Having a girl, it might be easier for them, in terms of having two parents to identify with. In some ways it’s easier to identify with someone of your own gender than the other. A boy wouldn’t have that.

Furthermore, some women felt downright unprepared to deal with the challenges of raising an opposite-gender child, particularly during adolescence:

I’m a girl, and I have three nieces, and I guess I would know more how to deal with things from a girl’s perspective, if that makes sense. How comfortable is a little boy going to be coming to ask Mom about, um, his first wet dream or something like that, you know? How do we deal with that, other than calling up Uncle Eric and saying, “Talk to him!”

Some gay men ($n=6$; 18%) also emphasized socialization/preparation factors in explaining their preference for a daughter. Namely, several gay men cited good relationships with females (sisters, friends) who could serve as role models as a reason why they felt they could be particularly good parents to girls (three men; 9%), and several men emphasized their significant experience caring for girls (e.g., babysitting younger sisters) (three men; 9%). These factors—the availability of female role models, and their own personal experience caring for young girls—enabled them to feel well-equipped to meet the socialization needs of potential daughters, and to express a high level of comfort with the idea of raising girls. Explained Shawn: “I feel there are enough female role models in our lives, women that will be in

our lives, to help out with talking about periods and all the rest of that stuff.” Likewise, Kevin noted, “I spent most of my babysitting time with girls. I’m a little more comfortable babysitting girls so I kind of want a girl over a boy.”

Three heterosexual women (8%) and two heterosexual men (10%) also emphasized prior experiences babysitting or caring for female relatives in explaining why they felt well-suited to parent girls. Thus, unlike lesbians, heterosexual women did not tend to emphasize their own female socialization as a reason for preferring girls. Heterosexual women (who were married to men) were simply not as concerned about or aware of the ways in which their own gender socialization would both benefit and limit them as parents. Likewise, heterosexual men obviously did not invoke the presence of female role models in explaining their preference for girls; their wives necessarily functioned as “role models” by virtue of their presence as female coparents.

Consideration of societal heterosexism was mentioned mainly by gay men in explaining their preference for a girl. That is, some men considered whether society might be less accepting of a boy with two fathers than a girl with two fathers. Indeed, 14 men (43%) preferred girls because of their belief that a girl with two dads would be less prone to teasing than a boy with two dads. These men understood that “all kids may get teased a little for having gay parents, but for girls it seems like it would be a lot less.” Said Matthew, “I really want a girl. If we get a boy it’ll be ok, but honestly I think a girl would be easier to raise. A boy having two fathers—when he gets to his early teens he is going to get his butt busted. It is going to be harder for him than for a girl.”

Some of these men also noted that they felt that a daughter would be more accepting of and less threatened by her two gay dads than a son. Observed Orson:

I feel that that women, girls, are less critical of gay men. I think that in today’s society, it’s become almost cool to be gay to a girl. I think that a male would be more threatened by it. I just think it would be a better situation for a girl—you know, if you have a boy, and they’re playing sports and things like that...gay dads might not be okay [to them].

Likewise, Greg put it like this:

I sort of feel like the whole idea of sexual fluidity, or comfort around gender identity issues, is more pronounced in women than in men. And I think that’s probably not gender-based but society-based. So I feel like that’s where my feeling that women would be more okay with gay dads comes from. It’s not necessarily that men are innately more discriminatory, but there’s more support for women to be more open-minded.

Two lesbian women (4%) also cited societal heterosexism in explaining why they preferred girls. Specifically, both women described their observation that boys with lesbian mothers seemed to encounter less acceptance and more teasing (e.g., regarding their masculinity) than girls with lesbian mothers, thereby leading them to favor the idea of adopting a girl.

Several other *miscellaneous reasons* were cited by participants in explaining their desire for girls. Six lesbians (13%) and two heterosexual women (5%) emphasized the preponderance of boys in their extended families, and acknowledged a desire to “balance things out” by adopting a daughter. Four heterosexual women (10%) and two heterosexual men (9%) noted that their partners’ desire for a girl had led them to prefer a girl, for their partner’s sake. For three heterosexual women (8%) and one heterosexual man (4.5%), the wish for a daughter was fueled by a sense of duty to rescue “abandoned” girls from China. Similarly, one lesbian (2%) described her perception that male adoptees were more “in demand,” which led her to prefer girls, whom she regarded as “less desired.” One heterosexual woman (3%) revealed that a prior failed adoption had been with a boy; the sting of this experience led her to want something “different.” One heterosexual man (4.5%) stated that he “liked the idea of an older sister” in explaining his desire for a girl. In contrast, one gay man (3%) preferred to adopt a daughter first because he did not want a boy to “buy into the masculine construction” of needing to protect his younger sister.

Thus, to summarize, the most common reason for preferring a girl among heterosexual women was their “inexplicable desire” for a daughter, whereas heterosexual men most frequently invoked their inexplicable desire for a girl, perceived characteristics of girls, and perceived characteristics of the father-daughter relationship. Lesbians, on the other hand, tended to emphasize gender socialization considerations in explaining their desire for a girl, and gay men most frequently cited concerns about societal heterosexism.

Preferences for Boys

Participants who preferred to adopt boys named a range of reasons for their preferences (Table 3). Like those who preferred girls, many participants who espoused a preference for boys explained this preference in terms of an *inexplicable desire* to raise a son. Of the 12 reasons cited by the 13 heterosexual women who preferred boys, three (24%) focused on an intuitive, inexplicable desire. Similarly, six of the 29 reasons cited by the 23 lesbians who preferred girls (21%), eight of the 44 reasons named by the 29 gay men who preferred boys (18%), and two of the 14 reasons cited by the nine heterosexual men who preferred boys (14%) centered around an inexplicable desire. These

men and women stated that they were “intuitively” drawn towards boys or “leaned towards boys for no particular reason.” Barry, a gay man stated, “I guess my intuitive sense is just wanting a boy but I am not sure why.” Likewise, Moira, a heterosexual woman, mused, “If I could pick, I’d choose a boy. Why is that? I don’t know.”

As with participants who preferred girls, *gender identity considerations* were cited by some participants who preferred to adopt boys. Lesbians in particular were likely to emphasize that their own interests tended to be more masculine and “tomboyish,” not “frilly” or “fru-fru” in explaining their boy preference. Indeed, 12 lesbians (41%) emphasized their personal lack of interest in “girly things,” and, in turn, their interest in stereotypically masculine activities (e.g., sports, outdoor activities, “roughhousing”). Stated Marta: “I was a real tomboy, so I just think there’s a way in which I can imagine very vividly the fun of having a boy child. And, I’m female, but, like, I was always into sports and playing outside compared to like the girly girl type of things.”

Similarly, Edie explained:

I think [I prefer a boy] because I was a tomboy growing up. It’s really hard for me to relate to—all my nieces are very fru-fru and everything has to be pink and glittery and I have no concept of that (*laughs*). They don’t like to get dirty. It is just not who I was or who I am. In some ways I’d rather have the boy that comes home with the frog in his pocket than the girl that says, “Oh my god, I have dirt on my shoes!” and freaks out.

Four heterosexual men (29%) and two gay men (4.5%) noted that their own interests tended to be more masculine (e.g., they enjoyed fishing, sports, and “outdoor stuff”) and therefore looked forward to raising sons. For example, Robert, a gay man, stated, “I’m not, like, macho, but I like all the boy toys. I get more excited thinking about baseball and Tonka trucks than I do about dolls. [So I want a boy] from a selfish perspective.” These men, then, felt that, given their own masculine interests, they would have more fun parenting boys than girls.

Perceived characteristics of boys were also cited by several participants in explaining their preference for sons. Specifically, two heterosexual women (17%), two heterosexual men (14%), two gay men (4.5%), and one lesbian (3%) described gendered attributions in explaining why they preferred boys. A few participants described their perception that boys seemed less “complex and complicated” than girls (one heterosexual woman, one lesbian, one gay man). One heterosexual man and one heterosexual woman felt that “girls are more difficult to relate to around puberty” which led them to prefer boys. One gay man voiced his perception that boys were simply more “fun” than girls. Finally, one heterosexual man felt that a son might be more

“useful” than a daughter (e.g., he imagined that a son might be more capable of cutting the lawn).

Characteristics of the parent–son relationship were also cited by several participants. For example, four gay men (9%) imagined that they would enjoy a particularly special bond with a son. These men all noted that there was something special about the “father–son bond” that they wished to experience; two of them also noted that they wished to have the kind of relationship with a son that their fathers did not have with them. Said Peter, “I feel more of a bond, more of a natural kinship towards the whole father–son atmosphere. And that’s probably, if you want to get all psychological, a reflection of a failed father–son relationship I have with my own father.” Two heterosexual women (17%) also imagined something special about the bond that they would have with a son. For one woman, her strained relationship with her own mother led her to be “terrified” of raising a daughter. She believed that the mother–son dynamic would be more harmonious and less contentious. Another woman similarly explained, “I prefer boys because boys love their mothers, always. When they’re teenagers they still love their moms, whereas girls really don’t.”

Gender socialization considerations were cited by many participants, particularly gay men. Namely, 24 gay men (55%), two heterosexual women (17%), four lesbians (14%), and one heterosexual man (7%) emphasized that they felt more confident about their ability to raise and socialize boys than girls. These individuals perceived themselves as possessing the skills and experiences, as well as the relevant socialization (in the case of male participants) to raise male children. Both heterosexual women and lesbians emphasized their experiences growing up with, and often caring for, brothers and male relatives; thus, males were their “reference point” and they felt comfortable with the idea of raising sons. Gay men and heterosexual men, in contrast, referred to their own personal experiences and socialization, as boys, and now as men, in explaining their greater comfort with raising sons. However, unlike heterosexual men, gay men do not have partners whom they can count on to ensure that a daughter receives proper female socialization. Thus, in addition to considering their own male socialization, they also considered their status as a two-dad, no-mom family, which ultimately led them to conclude that they might be better prepared and more well equipped to raise a son than a daughter. Stated Eugene:

We both get kind of squeamish around girly things, uncomfortable when my niece starts talking about girly things...We’ve never had that same comfort with girly stuff. So we thought we’d be better parents

for a boy. And we thought our interests and experiences are more geared towards, would probably be more helpful for a boy. And also, we are going to be a two dad family. There aren't gonna be any women to help out with the girly stuff. So that was the deciding factor....It's just what we thought we'd be comfortable with.

Thus, as highlighted in Eugene's narrative, many men who preferred boys over girls not only noted their own greater comfort in raising boys (e.g., because of their own socialization as boys, their familiarity with male body parts, and so on), but also emphasized their consideration of the child's perspective. That is, they wondered whether a son might benefit from having two male parents that understood and could relate to their experiences, and, by extension, whether a girl might suffer in the absence of a female parent with whom they could identify, particularly during adolescence. Indeed, some men noted a deficiency in sisters and female friends who could serve as role models to a daughter, which served to magnify their concerns about raising a girl. In their eyes, not only did they lack personal experience as females, and not only would their child grow up without a mother, but they had limited access to women outside the family. Explained Jim:

Because we're both males, I think it would be sort of hard. We don't have many female friends in our lives; we have our sisters but they live out of state. I think of girls as needing their mothers when they reach a certain age so they can understand about their female—you know, when they reach womanhood, they need their mothers to explain it all to them. She wouldn't have a mother and I don't know how I could actually explain it all to a girl.

Thus, Jim and others felt insecure about their ability to meet the socialization needs of a daughter, especially during adolescence. In contrast, they viewed their knowledge of the "mechanics" of both male psychology and anatomy as excellent preparation for raising a son.

Consideration of societal heterosexism was emphasized by lesbians only ($n=2$; 7%). One woman wanted a boy because she did not want to be accused of sexually abusing a girl; the other wanted a son because she did not want to be accused of trying to "make" her daughter a lesbian.

Some participants—namely, five heterosexual men (36%), one heterosexual woman (8%), and two gay men (4.5%)—explained their reasons for preferring a boy in ways that reflected the *internalization of patriarchal norms and ideals*. Specifically, three heterosexual men, one heterosexual woman, and one gay man desired sons in order to "continue on the family name." As Timothy, a

heterosexual man, explained, "My oldest brother has no kids, and, well, he's never gonna have kids. My middle brother has two girls. So there, there's a little bit of pressure to pass on the family name. He'll be the little heir, you know?" An additional two heterosexual men noted that they preferred their *first-born* children, specifically, to be sons, although they could not exactly articulate why (e.g., they noted that "it's a typical guy thing" and "I don't know; it just seems really important"). Finally, when asked why he preferred a boy, one gay man simply acknowledged that "we live in a sexist culture, therefore I guess we tend to prefer boys."

A number of other *miscellaneous reasons* were also cited. Namely, two heterosexual women (17%), four lesbians (14%), and two gay men (4.5%) named other reasons for preferring boys. Three lesbians described their perception that girls were more "in demand" as potential adoptees, leading them to develop a strong inclination towards boys. One gay man and one heterosexual woman noted that they preferred to adopt a boy because of their partner's strong desire for a son. One gay man preferred a boy because he enjoyed a close, special relationship with his niece and felt a relationship with a girl might "compete" with this relationship. Finally, one heterosexual woman preferred a son because a prior failed adoption had been with a boy, and one lesbian woman preferred a son because of the large number of girls in her extended family.

Thus, to summarize, the most common reason for preferring boys among heterosexual women was an "inexplicable desire" for a son (although there were no notable patterns in women's responses), whereas heterosexual men's desire for a son most frequently reflected patriarchal norms and gender identity considerations. Lesbians most frequently invoked gender identity considerations (i.e., their own atypical gender identities), and gay men most often highlighted gender socialization considerations in explaining their preference for a boy.

No Gender Preference

Many participants did not endorse any preferences regarding child gender: they were equally interested in the prospect of parenting boys and girls. These participants did not always have specific explanations for their lack of preference (Table 3). When probed as to what drove their lack of preference, many simply said that they *just didn't care*: they were "open to either" and "it just doesn't matter." Of the 65 reasons named by the 63 heterosexual men that did not have a preference, 48 (74%) converged around this theme. Likewise, 32 of the 47 reasons named by the 47 heterosexual women who did not have a preference (68%), 40 of the 67 reasons provided by the 61 lesbians who did not have a preference (60%), and 24 of the 55 reasons named by the 43 gay men who did not have a preference

(43%) also fell into this category. For example, Tony, a heterosexual man, exclaimed, “No, not at all. I have no preference. I would just be happy with whatever was given to us. I don’t care.” Sherry, a lesbian, said, “I just don’t care. All I want is a child. Ten fingers, ten toes. I’d be fine with a boy, I’d be fine with a girl. I’m open.” For many, child gender was simply unimportant to them in light of their long-awaited goal of being parents.

Several individuals explicitly noted that the *health* of their future child was most important to them; in this context, they explained, child gender made little difference. Namely, six gay men (10%), four heterosexual women (9%), four lesbians (7%), and one heterosexual man (2%) stated that child gender was insignificant in comparison to child health. Stated Lucy, a heterosexual woman: “Oh, I don’t care. I really couldn’t care. As long as it’s healthy, I *really* couldn’t care.”

Several participants noted that they felt uncomfortable declaring a gender preference when “in nature you don’t get to make those decisions.” They noted that if they were having a biological child they would be unable to choose, and thus preferred to *leave it to fate* to decide their future child’s gender. Four heterosexual men (6%), three gay men (6%), and one heterosexual woman (2%) endorsed this as explanation for why they had no preference. Said Luke, a heterosexual man:

You can’t control that in nature, so, I’m trying to look at this as much as possible as, you know, whatever the natural course of things will be. It’s not like we can breed specifically for a boy or girl so I don’t care if we get a boy or girl. My take on it is, you don’t get to choose when you do it naturally, so we might as well take the same attitude with adoption.

Three heterosexual men (4%) and one gay man (2%) attributed their openness regarding child gender to the fact that, in their estimation, they were *not stereotypically male* (e.g., in their interests, personality, etc.), and therefore they felt equally interested in and open to parenting boys and girls. Said Lars, a heterosexual man, “I’m not a big sports fan, so I don’t have dreams of my kid playing all these sports. A girl would be just as much fun as a boy. I’m not like some guys, who have it in their minds that they want a boy so they can play football and blah blah blah.”

Some participants grounded their lack of gender preferences in their perception that there were *positives and negatives associated with parenting boys and girls*. Eleven lesbians (16%), six gay men (11%), three heterosexual women (6%), and two heterosexual men (3%) noted that boys and girls both “come with advantages and disadvantages” and “have their own challenges and benefits.” In turn, their cost–benefit analysis left them with no strong preferences regarding child gender. A variety of advantages

and disadvantages were named by participants. For example, one gay man acknowledged that having a boy would be something that he would understand more “intimately and immediately,” but noted that his father and his sisters had a “great relationship,” leading him to feel that he would be equally interested in parenting boys and girls. Another gay man noted that “with girls, you have to worry about them dating; with boys you have to worry about them getting into trouble.” Two lesbians mused that boys were supposedly more difficult in childhood, but easier as teenagers, when girls became “scary.” Two heterosexual women felt that while girls seemed “easier,” boys seemed “more fun,” leading them to feel excited about both.

Eight gay men (15%), five heterosexual men (8%), five lesbians (7%), and three heterosexual women (6%) noted that they had had initial gender preferences which had gradually evaporated over time, leaving them feeling as though “either would be fine.” Thus, they experienced *initial gender preferences that eventually disappeared*, as time went on and their desire for a child—any child—grew. For example, several participants (both male and female) noted that early on, they had believed that raising a girl would be easier and more fun; however, as they went through the adoption process, they became more comfortable with the possibility of raising a child of either gender, concluding that “it just doesn’t matter; a child is a child,” as one gay man stated. Similarly, several men (gay and straight) noted that early on they had felt more “comfortable” with the prospect of raising a boy “because we understand boys better,” but had ultimately decided that the gender of their child did not make a difference. Said Mike, a gay man:

At first we both thought of a boy just because we understand boys better. But now we don’t care. I’m not sure why that changed. I guess, as we go through this process, our comfort level just grows; we get more comfortable with whatever. Whatever the race of the child, the gender of the child, it doesn’t really matter.

Similar sentiments were shared by several women, lesbian and heterosexual, who voiced their experience that early on, they had preferred girls, but that as time went on, they came to feel that “the gender thing just doesn’t matter...we’d be excited about either one.”

Finally, seven gay men (13%), seven lesbians (10%), four heterosexual women (9%), and two heterosexual men (3%) noted that they *eventually wanted at least one of each*; thus, it did not matter to them whether a boy or girl came first. Said Erin, a heterosexual woman: “We definitely would like to have or adopt several children, boys and girls, so for the first we don’t care.”

Thus, to summarize, the majority of participants—heterosexual, lesbian, and gay—who did not espouse any

gender preference explained that they “just didn’t care” about their future child’s gender; that is, gender was insignificant in the context of their larger goal of becoming parents.

Discussion

This study represents the first investigation known to date that explores the child gender preferences of both heterosexual and sexual minority preadoptive parents. The data suggest that both the adoption context and the sexual orientation context may have implications for how men and women think about the gender of their future children.

Of note is that many participants did not voice an explicit preference for the gender of their adoptive child. In studies of biological parents and nonparents, the percentage of individuals with “no preference” has ranged from less than 20% (Walker and Conner 1993) to 35% (Gartrell et al. 1996; Hank and Kohler 2003; Jones 2008) to 60% (Herrmann-Green and Gehring 2007; Steinbacher and Gilroy 1985). It is important to note that studies vary considerably in how they query participants about gender preferences, and thus, it is difficult to draw comparisons among studies. That being said, it is notable that the percentages of gay men, lesbians and heterosexual women with no gender preferences fall within this upper range (45%, 50%, and 50%) and the percentage of heterosexual men with no preference exceeds this upper limit (68%).

Elements of the adoption context may help to explain why so many of the men and women in the sample espoused a lack of gender preferences. For individuals that experienced infertility—mainly heterosexual couples—the salience of child gender may pale in comparison to the long-awaited goal of having a child. Similarly, both heterosexual and sexual minority participants may feel that gender is relatively unimportant in comparison to other child characteristics, such as health, race, and age (Brodzinsky and Pinderhughes 2002). Lesbians and gay men in particular may feel that as “less-than-ideal” adoptive parents, they are in no position to set a gender criterion for their future child (Matthews and Cramer 2006); although notably, this explanation was not explicitly mentioned by lesbian and gay participants. Additionally, it is notable that some gay men (and a few lesbians) observed that they had possessed initial gender preferences which gradually diminished over time. Perhaps these individuals—who, for the most part, did not experience fertility problems—experienced during the adoption process what heterosexual couples experienced during infertility: a gradual loosening of their imagined, ideal child, as the wait for a child stretched on and their yearning for a child grew.

Consistent with nationally representative data on women considering adoption (Jones 2008), heterosexual women

who had a gender preference tended to prefer girls. Further, heterosexual men also tended to prefer daughters. Perhaps women are the “agents” of adoption, and therefore influence their husbands’ preferences via their own, such that men come to assume their wives’ preferences. Indeed, the absence of a biological connection between father and child may free heterosexual men in particular from valuing and desiring sons as status symbols. Unable to continue on the male genealogical lineage biologically, they may simply not have strong preferences regarding their child’s gender, and may therefore tend to espouse no preference, or, a preference for a girl—if that is what they perceive their wives as preferring (indeed, of note is that, contrary to expectation, heterosexual partners were the most likely to agree in their preferences, a fact that may reflect some men’s tendency to assume their wives’ preferences). Individuals in same-gender relationships were significantly less likely than heterosexuals to prefer girls, although it is notable that the majority of lesbians with a preference (62%) did desire daughters, which is consistent with research on lesbians who became parents via insemination (Gartrell et al. 1996; Herrmann-Green and Gehring 2007). The fact that 55% of gay men desired sons is remarkably consistent with census data showing that 54% of same-gender adoptive male couples are the parents of boys, and suggests the importance of sexual orientation and the couple context (i.e., the presence of two men versus a man and a woman) in dictating gender preferences.

Of interest, of course, is how participants explained their gender preferences. Consistent with prior research, heterosexual men who desired girls often cited their desire for a particular type of relationship with a daughter (Hammer and McFerran 1988) and also described various attributes of daughters (e.g., cute, nondestructive; Arnold and Kuo 1984; Williamson 1976). Also consistent with prior research, men who desired boys often emphasized their own orientation toward masculine activities and interests (Pollard and Morgan 2002; Williamson 1976). Heterosexual men’s most common reason for preferring boys, however, was the desire to carry on the family name (Arnold and Kuo 1984) and their desire for their “first born” to be male, suggesting that, for a minority of men, sons continue to be valued as signifiers of masculinity (Katzev et al. 1994; Williamson 1976). Thus, although most heterosexual men had no gender preferences or desired girls, those men who desired boys were sometimes motivated by very traditional concerns: namely, the extent to which their son would be a symbol of status (Hammer and McFerran 1988).

Heterosexual women who preferred girls typically explained this in terms of an inexplicable desire—that is, they weren’t sure why, but they had always longed for or imagined a girl. It is very likely that what these women were not able to fully articulate was their desire for

companionship (Warren 1985) and mutual identification (Notman 2006) based on their gender similarity. Indeed, only a few women cited gender identity considerations (i.e., I like to cook so I hope for a girl so we can cook together) and gender socialization considerations (i.e., I am a girl so I think I'd be a better parent to a girl) in explaining their preference for a girl. Perhaps those women who cited an "inexplicable desire" or "inclination" were also motivated by these types of considerations but simply could not articulate them, in part because of the difficulty explaining what for many women seems to be a completely intuitive process (i.e., their yearning for a girl). No consistent patterns emerged in women's reasons for preferring boys, which may in part be a function of the small number of heterosexual women who preferred boys (13 women).

In contrast to heterosexual women, lesbians who preferred girls frequently invoked gender socialization considerations; likewise, in contrast to heterosexual men, gay men who preferred boys also tended to highlight concerns about gender socialization. This distinction clearly reflects lesbians' and gay men's awareness of their unique status as a parental unit in which only one gender is represented. Both lesbians and gay men worried about procuring opposite-gender role models for their opposite-gender children, and expressed concern about how to handle delicate subjects such as pubertal changes with an opposite-gender child. Such worries about gender socialization appear to be both child-centered (e.g., they wish to "do right" by their child) and parent-centered (e.g., they worry about their capacity to construct their children's gender identity according to societal norms; Kane 2006). That is, they are aware that they will be held accountable by both their future child *and* society for their (in)ability to provide proper gender socialization (Kane 2006). By extension, many lesbians and gay men felt particularly confident about their ability to parent a child of the same gender, given their own and their partners' "insider knowledge" regarding body parts, gender development, and gender socialization. This confidence, in turn, led them to believe that they might be particularly good parents to a same-gender child.

Gay men who preferred girls were often uniquely motivated by concerns about societal heterosexism and scrutiny. Almost half of the men who desired daughters expressed the belief that a boy raised by two fathers would encounter more stigma and resistance in society than a girl raised by two fathers. Further, some of these men felt that a daughter would be more accepting of her fathers' homosexuality, given females' greater freedom to embrace a diversity of gender and sexual expressions, and thus their tendency to be less homophobic than males (D'Angelo et al. 1998). This sentiment was shared by several lesbians who preferred girls, who voiced their feeling that a boy with two mothers might have a more difficult time than a

girl (which is consistent with data suggesting that sons of lesbians may be more likely to be teased about their sexuality than daughters of lesbians: Tasker and Golombok 1997). These data suggest that sexual minorities, particularly gay men, are highly aware of the ways in which homosexuality continues to represent a threat to masculinity (Kane 2006), such that boys are expected to experience greater attacks on their sexuality than girls as a function of having gay parents.

Interestingly, almost half of the lesbians who preferred to adopt boys explained this desire in terms of their own opposite-gender interests and orientations. Indeed, some research suggests that lesbians and gay men are more likely to demonstrate androgynous or cross-gender interests (Carlson and Steuer 1985); in turn, women's self-perceived nonconformity with the norms associated with their gender led them to wonder whether they might be better parents to (and/or have greater enjoyment raising) an opposite-gender child. Thus, as prior research has shown, a desire to participate in particular (gender-typed) activities may underlie some individuals' gender preferences (Pollard and Morgan 2002; Williamson 1976), although, in this case, it was lesbians' preference for *opposite-gender* activities that led them to prefer an *opposite-gender* child.

Limitations, Conclusions, and Future Directions

The current study is limited in several ways. First, the sample is well-educated, affluent, and mostly White. While these characteristics are typical of many adopters, they do not describe the entire spectrum of preadoptive parents (Gates et al. 2007). Less educated adopters and racial minority adopters may have very different expectations and ideals regarding their child's gender. Second, this study did not include a sample of non-adoptive heterosexual, lesbian, or gay parents-to-be, which significantly limits our ability to draw conclusions regarding the extent to which the adoption context per se is responsible for the observed patterns of gender preference. Third, the preadoptive parents in this sample were all in committed relationships; thus, findings regarding their gender preferences may not generalize to single prospective adoptive parents. Fourth, the current study does not include post-adoptive data. Future research should investigate preadoptive parents' gender preferences longitudinally, in order to determine how impactful these preferences are in determining the actual gender of the child that couples adopt. Finally, this study did not assess the magnitude of individuals' gender preferences. It is likely that for some, these preferences are mild, whereas for others they are intense. The magnitude of such preferences is important, as they might have implications for couples' decision-making during the adoption process

(e.g., whether a couple turns down a potential placement because it is the “wrong” gender). Future research should (a) assess the intensity of adoptive parents’ gender preferences and (b) evaluate the consequences of such preferences for parents’ decision-making.

Despite these limitations, this study provides evidence that both the adoption context and the sexual orientation context may have implications for how individuals think about and imagine their child’s gender, and, in turn, makes several unique contributions. First, many heterosexual and same-gender couples do not appear to have a preference regarding their future child’s gender, which may in part reflect their position as individuals for whom parenthood is long-awaited, and for whom other characteristics, such as child race, may emerge as more important. Research is needed that articulates how preadoptive parents weigh the importance of child gender against other selectable child characteristics. Further, heterosexual men in particular showed a lack of gender preference, and, when they did have a preference, tended to prefer girls. This suggests that men’s preferences regarding their child’s gender may not be as strong when patrimony is not an issue (Gravois 2004), which could have implications for parent–child relationships (perhaps adoptive fathers will be less likely to favor their sons than biological fathers: Raley and Bianchi 2006).

Another important finding that emerges from these data is that lesbian and gay prospective adopters must negotiate a unique set of gender- and sexuality-related concerns when they envision raising a child of the same- or opposite-gender. They must consider societal heterosexism, the availability of male/female role models (Goldberg and Allen 2007), and the implications of their same-gender parental status for gender socialization. Prior research suggests that once sexual minorities become parents, they continue to harbor concerns about socializing their children’s gender identities according to societal norms (Kane 2006) but may address these concerns by enlisting other agents of gender socialization (e.g., opposite-gender friends) (Goldberg and Allen 2007). Of interest is how lesbians and gay men who strongly desire same-gender children cope when they are placed with an opposite-gender child (e.g., to what extent does this motivate efforts to line up male/female friends?) To examine this and other questions, studies should follow sexual minorities from pre-adoption into parenthood to assess how attitudes about gender preferences change over time, and the implications of these preferences for parent and family adjustment.

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