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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 917293512]

Publisher Routledge

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Adoption Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792303958>

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Online publication date: 20 November 2009

To cite this Article Downing, Jordan, Richardson, Hanna, Kinkler, Lori and Goldberg, Abbie(2009) 'Making the Decision: Factors Influencing Gay Men's Choice of an Adoption Path', *Adoption Quarterly*, 12: 3, 247 – 271

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10926750903313310

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10926750903313310>

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Making the Decision: Factors Influencing Gay Men's Choice of an Adoption Path

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No research has examined the factors influencing gay male couples' decision-making processes in choosing a particular type of adoption. The current qualitative study of 32 prospective adoptive male same-sex couples illuminates that, similar to many heterosexual couples seeking to adopt, gay men identify a variety of factors (e.g., race, age, health of their adoptive child) as impacting what type of adoption is most appealing to them. However, this study demonstrates that they also hold unique concerns that are specifically related to their relational status as male same-sex couples. Given their sexual minority status, their decision making is often situated within the context of societal discrimination, which directly impacts the kinds of choices gay men have in choosing an adoption path.

KEYWORDS *adoption, decision making, discrimination, gay men, public adoption, private adoption, prospective parents*

Gay men are increasingly becoming parents in the context of same-sex relationships (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007). An estimated 1 in 20 male same-sex couples were raising children in 1990; in 2000 this figure had risen to 1 in 5 (Gates & Ost, 2004). Gay men who pursue parenthood in the context of same-sex committed relationships often choose to adopt, but limited research has been conducted on gay men who adopt (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Erich, Leung, & Kindle, 2005; Mallon, 2004). The limited research on gay adoptive fathers has tended to focus on their experiences as fathers (Mallon, 2004; Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005) and their mental health and adjustment (Erich et al., 2005). To date, no research has

Received 1 April 2009; revised 8 May 2009; accepted 10 August 2009.

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prospectively examined gay men's experiences *becoming* adoptive fathers. Moreover, no research has examined gay men's decision-making process in choosing a particular type of adoption (e.g., public domestic adoption, private open domestic adoption, international adoption).

Indeed, only recently has research begun to explore the factors that impact gay men's perceptions of adoptive parenthood. Facing reproductive limitations within the context of societal and legal discrimination, gay men who seek to adopt contend with fewer family-building options than heterosexual and even lesbian couples (Stacey, 2006). In fact, there are a variety of contextual factors at the agency, state, and international level that limit gay men's options and may thereby shape their decision-making processes (Ryan & Cash, 2004). Knowledge of the unique and common factors that impact gay men's decision making in choosing an adoption path can inform adoption practitioners who wish to support same-sex couples in their quest to adopt.

The current study examines the narratives of 32 gay male couples ($n = 64$ individuals) who were currently pursuing adoption, in order to better understand the factors that impact gay men's decision making regarding what type of adoption to pursue. Of particular interest is the potential role of discrimination (e.g., by adoption workers, agencies, or domestic and international legalities) in gay men's decision-making processes.

To contextualize our research focus, we first discuss our theoretical perspective. We then review the existing research on heterosexual couples' decision-making processes since gay men may consider many of the same factors in choosing which type of adoption to pursue (e.g., desired age or race of child). Last, we present the relevant research on gay adoptive fathers.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

An ecological systems perspective informs our analysis of gay men's decision making in choosing an adoption type. An ecological framework emphasizes the bidirectionality of effects between the individual and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). That is, individuals are shaped by, and also shape, their family, social, community, and occupational networks. Thus, at the individual level, gay men's choice of an adoption type is shaped by their personal preferences, such as the desired age or race/ethnicity of the child. Broader systems, such as adoption agencies and state, national, and international laws and regulations regarding gay adoption, may also influence decision making. For example, the fact that most sending countries in international adoption are closed to gay men may impact gay men's decision making, inasmuch as they must be willing to closet their relationship in order to adopt internationally. Finally, at the broadest level, and influencing all other systems, are societal norms and ideologies. For instance, gay men's decision making may reflect their awareness of

heterosexism and racism in society. Some gay men, for example, may appreciate the philosophy of open adoption because they have had to navigate their own openness around sexuality. Other gay men might purposefully seek to avoid adopting transracially (and, specifically, to avoid public adoption where racial minority children are disproportionately represented) because of their awareness that such a child may be subjected to both heterosexism *and* racism in society.

FACTORS INFLUENCING HETEROSEXUAL COUPLES' CHOICE OF A TYPE OF ADOPTION

Prospective adopters have three main adoption avenues available to them: international adoption, public domestic adoption (i.e., through the child welfare system), and private domestic open adoption. Indeed, private domestic adoptions are increasingly likely to be “open” as opposed to “closed” (Pertman, 2000). Open adoption typically entails some form of ongoing contact with birth family members (although the level of contact varies; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). Many adopters perceive potential benefits and challenges associated with each of these routes.

Desire for an Infant

Many heterosexual couples choose adoption subsequent to extensive efforts to have a child biologically (Cudmore, 2005). Daniels (1994) found that a desire for a healthy same-race child and a desire for an infant often led couples to favor donor insemination over adoption. Research also suggests that heterosexual couples who adopt after infertility often emphasize their desire for an infant, couching this preference in terms of their wish to shape their child's development from birth (e.g., Brind, 2008; Dorow, 2006). This desire for an infant may lead them to choose private domestic open adoption, where adopting an infant is more likely compared to public adoptions.

Racial Similarity

Heterosexual couples who seek to adopt an infant also may emphasize the importance of a child that will “look like” them, that is, a racially similar child (Goldberg, 2009). Prospective parents who strongly desire a racially similar child may be less likely to pursue international adoption compared to other types of adoption. Indeed, couples who adopt internationally are often adopting both transculturally and transracially (Dorow, 2006). However, some White prospective parents may strongly want to adopt a child of

the same race and also have a strong desire to adopt from abroad (for a variety of reasons, such as the lack of birth family involvement in international adoptions). These two desires may conflict as they weigh their preferences concerning race and adoption type. For example, after learning that adoptable children from China and South Korea tend to be healthier than those from Russia and other European countries, they may relinquish their concerns around race in favor of adopting a healthy child (Ishizawa, Kenney, Kubo, & Stevens, 2006).

In contrast, White heterosexual international adopters who strongly desire a same-race child may not be deterred by the greater possibility of health problems in children from Russia and other European countries. That is, for some prospective adopters, racial preferences may supersede concerns related to health and age. Of course, racial preferences may be altered by the reality that White, healthy infants are in high demand and short supply in the United States (Jennings, 2006). Thus, adopters who initially desire a White child may be prompted to consider transracial adoptive placements as well as special needs placements (i.e., children who have or are at risk for developmental disabilities; Zamostny, O'Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003).

White couples who prioritize racial similarity in the adoption process may also be less likely to pursue public adoption. Given that children who are available for adoption through the foster care system are disproportionately Black, some White adopters may steer away from public adoption to avoid a transracial placement (Brooks & James, 2003). Couples who decide to pursue public domestic adoption often do so because they have few concerns about transracial adoption (Brooks & James, 2003).

Helping a Child in Need

Heterosexual couples who seek public adoption often appear to be motivated by a desire to help children in the United States who need homes or by religious or humanitarian concerns (Brooks & James, 2003; Tyebjee, 2003). Couples who seek to adopt internationally may also perceive this choice as rooted in altruistic desires. Dorow (2006) interviewed heterosexual couples who had adopted from China and found that they often presented a discourse of "rescue" whereby they described wanting to "save" a child in need. In this way, China adoptions were viewed as a way to help children who are in particular need of homes.

Practical Concerns

Beyond personal preferences related to child race, age, and health, other reasons for pursuing international adoption include having an interest in

another country's culture and a perceived shorter wait time to adopt compared to domestic adoptions (Hollingsworth & Ruffin, 2002). Financial concerns may also impact couples' decision making regarding what type of adoption to pursue. Some couples seek to adopt through the child welfare system because public adoption is less costly than private adoption (Hansen & Hansen, 2006). Financial concerns may thereby supersede other desires concerning the characteristics of their prospective child.

Thus, it is clear from the existing research that a variety of factors impact how heterosexual prospective adoptive parents choose an adoption path. At the individual level, personal preferences (such as those regarding child characteristics) impact how couples decide on an adoption path. These concerns are balanced against financial resources, such that couples may have to compromise preferences concerning the "type" of child that they adopt as a result of practical and financial concerns. At the broader level, the availability of children of specific races, ages, and health statuses differs greatly depending on which type of adoption couples pursue.

FACTORS INFLUENCING GAY MEN'S DECISIONS TO ADOPT

Legal Discrimination

Because same-sex couples are not afforded the right to federal (and in most cases, state-recognized) marriage—an institution that has significant health, social, and psychological benefits for families (Herek, 2006)—legal difficulties arise for same-sex couples when they wish to adopt a child since most states require couples to be married in order to jointly adopt (Appell, 2003). Thus, same-sex couples are often burdened with decisions regarding which partner will be the primary adoptive parent and whether the parent without legal rights will remain "closeted" (Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2007).

The legal regulations that restrict the kinds of personal choices that gay male couples have in adopting are continually shifting and depend on a variety of larger societal contexts (e.g., whether the couple is adopting within their home state, pursuing an interstate adoption, or adopting internationally). As same-sex couples consider which type of adoption they wish to pursue, they must contend with the reality that different types of adoptions may be more or less "gay-friendly." For example, international adoption by single men or gay male couples is increasingly restricted (Mallon, 2004). Although adoption by both female and male same-sex couples is banned in most international adoptions, lesbian couples who disguise their relationship and have one partner present as a single prospective parent are usually able to adopt successfully, because single women are considered less "suspect" than single men. In fact, many countries, including China, no longer accept applications by single men (Poncz, 2007).

In negotiating personal preferences around race, gay couples have fewer options than heterosexual couples, given the broad restrictions on international adoption. Whereas heterosexual couples can turn to international adoption because of concerns around race (e.g., they are most comfortable adopting an Asian, rather than Black, child; Dorow, 2006), gay male couples cannot (openly) pursue international adoptions, thus limiting the options for those that desire a child of a specific race. Thus, it is within the context of societal and legal discrimination that gay men consider their preferences and priorities as they decide which type of adoption is most appealing.

Same-Sex Couples Targeted for Public Adoptions

The desire to help local children in need has been documented as an important motivator for heterosexual couples to adopt through the public sector, and this may be a similar motivator for gay couples (Tyebjee, 2003). Further, public agencies that seek to recruit same-sex couples often highlight that many children need loving homes and may emphasize that gay parents can provide such homes (Ryan & Cash, 2004). Gay prospective parents may be particularly likely to internalize the message that they “should” meet the needs of children in foster care, which may in turn increase the appeal of public adoption. Thus, given that international adoption is highly restricted, that public adoption agencies often recruit same-sex couples as a way to help meet the needs of waiting children, and that public adoption is much less expensive than other adoption types, public adoption would seem to be an attractive or practical option to many gay male couples (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001).

Financial Resources and Concerns About Wait Time

Compared to female same-sex couples, financial concerns may be less of a concern for gay male couples, given the higher wage-earning power of two men in a relationship (Badgett, 1998). These concerns, coupled with concerns about wait time (i.e., how long until they are placed with a child), may affect couples’ choice of an adoption type (Hollingsworth & Ruffin, 2002). If couples choose public adoption, they may avoid the uncertain waiting period entailed in private domestic open adoption, whereby couples must wait for a birth mother to choose them. Waiting for a placement may be particularly daunting for same-sex couples given that they typically wait longer compared to heterosexual couples (Goldberg et al., 2007).

Thus, it is clear that at the individual and societal level gay men negotiate many of the same factors as heterosexual and lesbian couples in deciding upon an adoption path, and yet their decision-making processes are necessarily impacted by their unique relational context as two men in a society that actively discriminates against them. Given the paucity of research on

gay male prospective adoptive parents, we posed three research questions in order to analyze the decision-making processes of gay men with regard to how they choose a particular adoption path:

1. How do gay men decide on which type of adoption to pursue?
2. What factors influence the type of adoption they choose?
3. What kinds of discriminatory practices do gay men encounter in the process of choosing a particular adoption route?

METHOD

Data from interviews with 64 men (32 gay male couples) were analyzed for the current study. All couples were currently seeking a child placement through private domestic open adoption, public domestic adoption, or international adoption. The current study utilizes data from the pre-adoptive period (i.e., before couples had been placed with their first child).

Participants

The sample was largely (93%) Caucasian; three men identified as Latino. The men's average age was 38 years ($SD = 4.92$). Couples' average relationship duration was 8.51 years ($SD = 3.73$), and 64% of the sample had had a commitment ceremony or were legally married. With regard to religion, 34% identified as "nonreligious," 25% identified as Christian, 15% identified as Jewish, 6% identified as "spiritual," and 4% each identified as Unitarian Universalist, Presbyterian, Quaker, Congregationalist, and Catholic. The sample was well educated: 4% of men had a high school diploma, 12% had an associate's degree or some college, 37% had a bachelor's degree, 33% had a master's degree, and 14% had a PhD/JD/MD. The sample was also financially secure: couples' mean annual family income was \$173,153 (median = \$158,000; $SD = \$109,126$). The men in the study were more educated than national estimates that indicate that 35% of men in male same-sex adoptive couples have a high school diploma or less (Gates et al., 2007). They were also somewhat more affluent compared to national estimates of gay male adoptive couples, whose annual mean income is \$102,000 (Gates et al., 2007). Men were employed in a range of professions, such as teacher, police officer, personal trainer, graphic designer, and physician.

The sample was geographically diverse: 38% resided on the East Coast, 33% lived on the West Coast, 23% lived in the South, and 6% lived in the Midwest. Nineteen couples (60%) were pursuing private domestic open adoption, eight couples (25%) were pursuing public domestic adoption, and five couples (16%) were pursuing international adoption. At the pre-adoptive

interview, couples had been waiting 6.5 months for a child placement, on average ($SD = 7.57$).

Recruitment and Procedures

Inclusion criteria were (1) couples must be adopting their first child and (2) both partners must be becoming parents for the first time. Adoption agencies throughout the United States were asked to provide study information to clients who had not yet adopted. More than 30 agencies provided study information to their clients, and interested clients were asked to contact the principal investigator for details about participating. National gay/lesbian organizations also assisted with recruitment.

Participation entailed completion of a questionnaire packet and participation in a telephone interview, which were both completed before couples were placed with a child. Couples were mailed two packets and two consent forms and were asked to return the consent form with the packet. Participants then completed individual semistructured interviews, separately from their partners. Generally, interviews (which covered a range of topics, including but not limited to those of interest in the present study) lasted 1 to 1.5 hours.

Interview Questions

Participants were interviewed by the principal investigator and graduate student research assistants. Interviews were transcribed, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect confidentiality. The data in the current study are derived from the following open-ended questions:

1. What type of adoption are you pursuing?
2. Why did you choose this type? (*Probe: What helped you make that decision?*)
3. Are you adopting as a couple or is one of you adopting as a single parent? How did you decide who would adopt? What are your feelings about adopting as a single/primary? What has been hard/difficult?
4. What aspects of the adoption process have been the most challenging?
5. Have you faced certain barriers/challenges because you are a same-sex couple?

Data Analysis

Given the lack of research on gay men's decision making in choosing an adoption type, we conducted a thematic analysis of the data by focusing on participants' constructions of why they chose a particular adoption path and

the kinds of discrimination they experienced during the adoption process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). An ecological systems framework influenced our analysis such that throughout the coding process we paid particular attention to how gay men's decision making was impacted by personal preferences, larger societal norms, and legal regulations. Through a process of analytic triangulation, we each independently coded the data, comparing our findings throughout the coding process and identifying similarities and differences in the data. We wrote memos to capture our thoughts about the emerging categories and discussed these memos as a group at regular coding meetings. This allowed us to discuss differences in interpretation, ultimately verifying the most substantiated codes as the coding scheme emerged. Once we had developed clearly articulated codes, we then applied focused coding to the data, utilizing the most significant codes to sort the data, collapse some codes, and differentiate other codes. This allowed us to see new connections in the data and alter our coding scheme accordingly. The final scheme was established once we had verified agreement among all the independently coded data.

Given that partners within a couple often describe varying interpretations to their experience of adopting, we indicate how many men endorsed each code as well as how many of those men were part of a couple. This allowed us to focus on individual perceptions while simultaneously highlighting congruent perceptions between partners.

RESULTS

Couples in this sample described a variety of reasons—involving a variety of overlapping contextual strata—for choosing a particular type of adoption (see Table 1 for counts of both the number of individual men and the number of couples endorsing each reason). We begin by discussing the types of factors that men cited as impacting how they chose a particular type of adoption, differentiating between those men who were pursuing public adoption, private open adoption, and international adoption. We then discuss how men negotiated various discriminatory practices (at the personal, societal, and legal level) in choosing what kind of adoption to pursue.

Factors Influencing Couples' Decision to Choose Open Domestic Adoption

Nineteen couples in the study (60% of the sample) chose to pursue private domestic open adoption. These couples described a variety of reasons for why they felt this was the most appealing type of adoption.

TABLE 1 Counts of Participants' Reasons for Choosing Each Type of Adoption

	Individuals	Couples
Private domestic open adoption	38	19
Desire for an infant	36	17
Insecurity about public adoption	8	0
Philosophically appealing	25	7
Practical reasons	11	2
Desire for a "mother figure"	6	3
No desire (or choice) to adopt internationally	20	7
Public domestic adoption	16	8
Children in need of homes	10	3
No desire for an infant	7	2
Financial reasons	8	2
No desire to pursue (or cannot pursue) another type of adoption	5	0
International adoption	5	10
Preference for a specific type of child	4	1
Practical reasons	3	0
Insecurity about open adoption	4	0
Wanting to raise a child who was from a developing country	3	0

DESIRE FOR AN INFANT

One of the most prominent reasons men chose to pursue private domestic open adoption was a desire for an infant. Thirty-six men (17 couples, indicating high within-couple agreement) stated that this was a primary factor influencing their decision to pursue private domestic open adoption. Similar to desires expressed by many heterosexual couples (Brind, 2008), some men felt that adopting an infant was important so that they would be present "from the beginning" and would therefore have a strong influence on their child's development and personality. For example, Evan stated the following:

We feel really strongly that we would want to be [the child's parents] from birth. We have a friend who adopted a baby in Guatemala and the baby was almost 4 months old by the time she got her, and even at that point—we feel that from the minute the baby is born there's attachment issues that we feel have to be attended to.

Some men felt that raising a child from infancy was important so they could develop "healthy bonding and emotional security" with their child. These men often juxtaposed their desire for an infant with the possibility of adopting an older child, who would possibly not have started their life in "a healthy kind of place." Such narratives are consistent with literature on the importance of early attachment to child development (Bowlby, 1969) and thus reflect the messages that men likely receive (e.g., from family

members, their adoption agencies, and society) regarding the salience of early attachment processes to developmental outcomes.

Several men also felt that having an infant was important since it is the *closest they can get to having a biological* child. As Stewart stated, "Because we both have that interest of having a biological connection . . . we both want to feel like we have as much a role as physically possible in the development of our child, and it's like the older the child is, the less of the role you had in shaping them." Because gay men lack the reproductive means to bear a child (and because surrogacy is both complicated and very expensive), men such as Stewart turned to open adoption in order to feel as close as possible to their child from birth.

Last, four men who emphasized wanting an infant also discussed this desire in terms of *racial preferences*. For example, one man described his perception that if they did not do an open domestic adoption, they would likely be placed with a "3-year-old Black child," which he and his partner did not want. In this way, preferences around age were explicitly connected to preferences around race, and the desire for a White infant was emphasized. Since the number of African American children in foster care is significantly higher than in open adoption (Zamostny et al., 2003), White gay male couples may therefore perceive pursuing a private domestic open adoption as the best way to ensure that they will not be placed with an African American child.

INSECURITY ABOUT PUBLIC ADOPTION

Eight men who chose open adoption in part because they desired an infant also contrasted this decision with what they perceived as the drawbacks to public adoption. Joseph said the following:

The other issue is how we came to decide on [private] adoption and not another [option], you know, not fostering and stuff. We knew we wanted an infant, and we also didn't want the insecurity of "Oh my god we're gonna spend 3 or 4 months with this child and then they're going to want it back and take it away."

Adopting an infant gave Joseph more security about the finality of the placement compared to the perceived insecurity of doing a foster-to-adopt public adoption.¹ To these men, public adoption not only made it harder to adopt an infant, but it was also perceived as a riskier adoption route. Gay men considered both their personal preferences as well as the realities of larger system-level constraints in making their decisions about what type of adoption to pursue.

Additionally, two men were concerned that if they pursued a public adoption, their chance of being placed with "mentally challenged and

physically challenged kids” was higher. Ed stated, “A perfect baby is what everyone wants. If we did foster adopt, we would get an older child and with them the damage is done.” Similar to concerns about wanting an infant, these men emphasized that they wanted a child who met specific criteria such as not having developmental problems, which drove their decision to avoid public adoption.

NO DESIRE (OR CHOICE) TO ADOPT INTERNATIONALLY

In discussing how they decided to pursue a domestic open adoption, 20 men (7 couples) contrasted this path with the option (or lack thereof) of international adoption. They either (1) perceived themselves as being unable to adopt internationally, as a result of legal regulations barring same-sex male couples from adopting, or (2) did not want to adopt internationally since they would have to hide their relationship. As Josh remarked, “Basically, unless you’re part of a straight couple, as a man you’re going to be less able to adopt internationally.” Many of these men thus perceived international adoption as a viable option, but only if they were willing to sacrifice adopting as an openly gay couple.

PHILOSOPHICALLY APPEALING

Twenty-five men (7 couples) described having chosen open domestic adoption because it was the most philosophically appealing to them: they appreciated the “openness” and honesty that is inherent in open adoption, given the ongoing exchange of information among birth parents, adoptive parents, and children. This reasoning appears to reflect several overlapping levels of influence: men attributed their attraction to open adoption to personal beliefs about the importance of honesty, which may stem from their own experiences of living in a society in which their ability to be open about their lives and relationships has been curtailed. Their interest in open adoption may also reflect changing societal norms and increasing acceptance of open adoption. Some of these men emphasized how important it was for their child to know their biological history through open relations with birth family members. Many men felt that having open connections seemed “scary” at times but nevertheless valued openness, for their child’s sake.

At times, appreciation of the philosophy of open adoption was framed in terms of the ability to be completely “honest” with their child about the adoption. For example, Josh stated the following:

It just seemed that having open adoption is open and honest, and there are no options for us to pretend that we are the biological father. And we just, we think that . . . the more information the better and that by

having an open adoption there is more information for the child, and in that way there are no questions about where he or she comes from.

Men were encouraged by the possibility that they would be able to offer their child information about their origins and, in turn, hopefully facilitate their understanding of adoption.

Indeed, some men understood that open adoption would eventually enable adoptive children to gain greater self-understanding. For example, Bill stated, "My friend said, 'Imagine if you didn't know who your mom was.' That's when you need to know why you are good at art or why you don't like to write or why you get so angry all of a sudden. All of the questions that everyone has when they grow up."

Thus, men who emphasized their appreciation for the philosophy of open adoption often framed this appreciation in terms of how open adoption would be beneficial *for their child*. In this way, their responses were notably child-centered as opposed to parent-centered (i.e., they were not drawn to open adoption because it necessarily felt the most comfortable or "natural" to them). In contrast, some men also had parent-centered reasons, such as wanting to pursue an adoption type that was perceived as inclusive and that would be respectful of them as gay prospective parents.

PRACTICAL REASONS

In addition to appreciating the philosophy of open domestic adoption, 11 men (2 couples) emphasized that they in part chose open adoption for practical reasons, such as perceived convenience, location, and finances. Specifically, four men described choosing an open domestic adoption *because they liked a specific agency* that only did open adoption. Carl stated the following:

We called a lot of local agencies [and] found out that most of them were open to the idea but that they hadn't had much success with same-sex couples. Some of them were honest and said, "Look, it's not our base; because of our funding we don't handle these cases." Most of them said we're individually open to it, but we just haven't had much success. So we tried looking around again and we found an open adoption agency.

Carl indicated that agencies refused to work with them because of their "funding," possibly suggesting that these were religiously affiliated agencies that, by church regulation, do not work with same-sex couples. Thus, agencies' clientele selectivity emerged as a salient influence in some couples' decision making.

For other couples, concerns about wait time led them to consider private domestic open adoption, such that this adoption route simply *fit into their*

"time line" of how long they wanted to wait for a child to be placed with them. As Saul explained, "Time wise, neither of us, especially not me, has the luxury of taking a month to 6 weeks off in traveling 2 or 3 times to the foreign country to get the baby." Last, one man emphasized his perception that compared to international adoption, open domestic adoption was simply *more affordable*.

DESIRE FOR A "MOTHER FIGURE"

In some cases, men's decision making was influenced by societal discourses concerning the necessity of women in children's lives. Six men (3 couples) described choosing open adoption because they desired a "mother figure" in their child's life. As Derek stated, in explaining the appeal of open adoption, "We looked into [surrogacy], but we really wanted to have a mother figure and that is why we chose open adoption. We know how kids can be and things like that and we really wanted to have a mother figure—not necessarily involved all of the time, but at least a mother figure that could be referred to in situations." Derek's statement reflects his awareness of the importance of a particular type of female involvement that only the birth mother can uniquely provide. Such a perspective mirrors research on lesbian prospective parents who may similarly desire male involvement in order to ensure a specific type of gender role-modeling that they cannot provide for their child (Goldberg & Allen, 2007). Larry, another prospective father, summed up this sentiment, stating, "There's not going be a mom in the household, so you can always say, this is your birth mom." These men's narratives indicate that the dominant societal discourse concerning the need for a mother figure was internalized at the individual level as a particularly salient variable in choosing which type of adoption to pursue.

Factors Influencing Couples' Decision to Choose Public Adoption

Eight couples (25% of the sample) chose to pursue a public domestic adoption. These men described quite different reasons from those cited by couples who were pursuing private open adoption, such as *not* wanting an infant, wanting a child with special needs, or financial concerns.

CHILDREN IN NEED OF HOMES

One of the most frequently cited reasons (10 men; 3 couples) for why men chose public adoption was their perception that public adoption allowed them to adopt children who were most in need of healthy, loving, and supportive homes. For example, Devon stated, "Luis and I are both loving

people. We knew we had something to give. We just know that there are children out there that need a home, and we have one to offer so why not?" Another man stated that they specifically wanted to give a home to a child whose life up to that point had not "been the greatest." These men did not perceive these children's past experiences as a liability to their family development. Rather, helping children who possibly had negative early life experiences was emphasized as a key reason they were adopting through the child welfare system.

NO DESIRE FOR AN INFANT

In contrast to many of the men who were pursuing private domestic adoptions, seven men (2 couples) emphasized that they chose public adoption specifically because they had no desire to raise an infant. Interestingly, these men often framed their desire for an older child as being related to their personal sense that they were not very "maternal." As Anthony stated, "I don't have the strong maternal feelings that a lot of people do. I don't know, I wasn't really excited about changing diapers and picking snot out of children's noses." Peter similarly remarked, "We knew we didn't want an infant, you know, just we don't see ourselves as having that real maternal type of skill and experience." In this way, these men's narratives echo social discourses that regard men as lacking the maternal skills required to raise an infant (Hicks, 2006).

FINANCIAL REASONS

Beyond concerns for the child (e.g., children from the public sector "need homes") and personal preferences (e.g., relating to the age of their child), eight men cited financial reasons as a salient factor influencing their decision to pursue public adoption. Anthony explained, "We have friends that have gone through lawyers. It was very excessive for them and international adoption is the same thing. So, financially it's much easier for us." International adoption was often perceived as both more expensive and simply unnecessary given the desire to "adopt locally."

NO DESIRE TO PURSUE (OR CANNOT PURSUE) ANOTHER TYPE OF ADOPTION

In addition to citing factors that drove couples to choose public adoption, men also described choosing public adoption as a result of *not* wanting (or not being able) to pursue another type. Like some of the men who were pursuing open domestic adoption, five men emphasized that they chose public adoption because they *could not adopt internationally*. Doug stated, "Our first choice would have been . . . adopting internationally at first. We actually

didn't go through with it because at the time that we started our process, there really wasn't any country open to us." Thus, Doug and his partner did not actively choose public adoption because of its appeal but, rather, because of laws and policies restricting them from international adoption.

Four men further explained that they chose public adoption given that they *did not want contact with birth parents*. For example, Kevin stated the following:

I jokingly used the fact that we had seen the Lifetime movies where someone stole [a] baby—and if you adopt from a local agency, what is to prevent this woman from swiping my kid at the grocery store the next day? So we initially thought [to pursue] international [adoption] for that reason because we would have no contact with birth parents.

Compared to couples who were choosing open adoption specifically because birth mother contact was appealing, Kevin viewed birth parent contact as threatening the finality of the placement.

Factors Influencing Couples' Decision to Choose International Adoption

Five couples (16% of the sample) chose to pursue international adoption. These couples represent a minority of the sample, perhaps in part due to how difficult it is for gay men to adopt internationally (Brodzinsky, Patterson, & Vaziri, 2002). Despite the reality of barriers to international adoption, these men explained a variety of factors that led them to choose this type of adoption.

PREFERENCE FOR SPECIFIC TYPE OF CHILD

One couple noted a *preference for a child of Hispanic descent*. They were concerned that if they adopted domestically, they would be placed with an African American child. Chuck stated the following:

My partner, his mother is from Ecuador, but he has a Hispanic background. And we were looking around just at what was available. And in [our city] most of the children they place are African American, and in [the city] there's a lot of racial tension and we didn't think that it would be, well, we weren't prepared for that.

Thus, Chuck's interest in international adoption was rooted in a personal desire to have their child have a similar background as his partner, and he

also juxtaposed this with adopting an African American child, which he thought may be particularly difficult given racial disparities.

Two men stated that in deciding to adopt internationally, they also considered *concerns about the health of their child*. Specifically, they believed that with international adoption they would not be placed with a child who was drug-exposed, whereas “in a lot of domestic adoptions the parents have drug issues.” Contrary to these men’s beliefs, prenatal drug exposure can occur in both international and domestic adoptions. Further, while drug-exposed children may be at risk for health and social problems—particularly when they experience other risk factors such as neglect and malnutrition—there is little conclusive evidence that prenatal drug exposure has long-term effects on children (Davies & Bledsoe, 2005). Thus, these men’s reasons for choosing international adoption suggest that their decisions were, at least to some extent, influenced by stereotypes of birth mothers in the United States as irresponsible and drug-abusing (Dorow, 2006).

PRACTICAL REASONS

Three men reported having chosen international adoption simply because they *liked a particular agency* in their geographical area that specialized in international adoption. Ethan noted that he chose an international adoption agency because “they had enough staff in their office.” Six men (2 couples) stated that they chose international adoption because they perceived this to be the *quickest and most secure route to parenthood*. For example, Benjamin stated the following:

I’m generally a patient person. I don’t mind waiting if I know I need to wait. But when I’m waiting and not having an idea of when things would progress, that just frustrates me. We have friends who the process just—... if we do domestic we’d want to do open adoption, [but] we knew people who did that, and it took them over 2 years for the process.

These men perceived international adoption as guaranteeing them a placement with a child in a reasonable time frame and without the uncertainty of open adoption.

INSECURITY ABOUT OPEN ADOPTION

Four men discussed that one of the primary factors influencing their choice of international adoption was their personal insecurity about domestic open adoption. These men described discomfort with birth parent involvement, fears that the birth parent could “take back” their child, and discomfort with

having to wait for a birth mother to choose them. Mark stated, “We just don’t like the risk. I mean we’ve only heard [about situations] when it worked out, [but] all of a sudden you’re tied for life with someone who, if it didn’t work out, what do you do?” Benjamin further stated, “I think the idea of writing a ‘dear birth mother’ letter and then just kind of sitting and waiting for somebody to pick us is a little unsettling.” John felt similarly, explaining that it felt like a kind of “beauty contest.” Thus, concerns about open adoption being a “popularity contest” whereby gay men might not be chosen because of their “less desirable status” compared to heterosexual couples influenced some men’s decision to seek international adoption.

Last, some men described their mixed feelings about open adoption in terms of *legal uncertainty*. As Patrick described, “international would be the best thing for us because it gave us the most legal control.” For these men, domestic legal barriers were the most salient reasons for deciding to adopt from a foreign country.

WANTING TO RAISE A CHILD WHO WAS FROM A DEVELOPING COUNTRY

Three men described being drawn to international adoption because they liked the idea that they would be helping a child from a country with fewer resources, thereby echoing concerns iterated by some heterosexual adoptive parents (Dorow, 2006). Tim stated, “After investigating that route we liked that idea of taking some orphan [from] what is considered a third-world country to us, anyway.” For one couple, an interest in “being more connected to the larger world rather than just the United States” was also a central factor in choosing an international adoption.

Discriminatory Factors Impacting Men’s Decision-Making Processes

The men in this study often described how they encountered various types of discriminatory practices in the process of deciding which type of adoption to pursue. Men who had chosen different types of adoption often cited many of the same discriminatory practices (at the agency, state, and international level) as impacting their adoption choice.

REQUIRED TO ADOPT AS A SINGLE OR “PRIMARY” PARENT

Ten men (7 international; 3 open domestic; 2 couples) described confronting discrimination in the form of international or state laws that required only one of the partners to be the legally adoptive parent. With regard to international adoption, specifically, 21 men (3 public; 18 open domestic; 7 couples) described their perception that they either could not adopt internationally

because of legal regulations or that they would have to hide their relationship if they adopted internationally. These men felt strongly that they did not want to pursue parenthood in the context of “deception,” such that, for example, one partner might have to pretend to be his partner’s roommate. Maxwell explained, “We did our research before we contacted anybody and calling around to all of these agencies in our area, we weren’t real comfortable. We were being asked to be a little on the deceitful side and that was not what we were willing to do to start a family.” Josh similarly described the barriers to adopting internationally: “It is increasingly difficult to adopt internationally, especially for men. Single women can adopt internationally. Unless they are part of a straight couple, men can only adopt internationally out of luck.” These men recognized that they faced legal discrimination because it was virtually impossible to adopt as a same-sex male couple internationally. Even if one partner tried to adopt as a single man, they would still often be prohibited by international regulations.

Adopting domestically did not always safeguard men from similar kinds of discrimination in the United States, however. Couples do not always have the right to co-adopt their child, depending on the state in which they live. For example, Jim was forced to adopt as a single parent within his state, and his partner planned on pursuing a second-parent adoption once placed with their child:²

Michigan does not make it easy. There is one county that was well known for doing second-parent adoptions and a high judge kind of took away all of the adoptions from that court and moved them to his own court. So there is one county in Michigan that will do them, but you have to keep it kind of hush hush and secret because we don’t want [that right to be taken away].

Given that Jim and his partner faced discrimination at both the state and international level, they ultimately decided that a private domestic open adoption would be the most feasible way to adopt.

ENCOURAGED TO HIDE RELATIONSHIP (DESPITE CO-ADOPTING)

Men also described agencies explicitly or implicitly encouraging them to hide their relationship throughout the adoption. For example, David remarked as follows:

They don’t want to acknowledge it so much. They don’t want to draw attention to it. So that’s been a little challenging. There’s a lot of pregnant pauses and innuendo, even when we’re having a normal conversation. They might say “in your situation . . . because of your special situation . . .” I mean it’s a little bit of euphemism that can be very frustrating.

Despite being able to co-adopt, couples like David and his partner witnessed the silencing of their relationship throughout the pre-placement period. How “out” to be is an issue gay men often have to consider when adopting, particularly in the context of the adoption home study in which they must choose whether to formalize their relationship as an adoptive couple (Mallon, 2007).

CERTAIN AGENCIES “WON’T WORK WITH US”

In deciding what type of adoption to do, nine men (3 international; 6 open domestic; 1 couple) stated that they had interacted with agencies that either (1) would not work with them because they were a same-sex couple or (2) had discouraged them from adopting at all. Many couples understood that, as Michael stated, “There are some agencies that won’t talk to us. There are people who won’t even consider us.” Indeed, same-sex couples often do not have the option of adopting through their local “faith-based” organizations (e.g., Catholic charities), and men described agencies that explicitly indicated on their Web sites that they would not work with same-sex couples. Todd stated, “A lot of the orphanages and adoption agencies are Christian-based who really don’t want—they will be blatant on their Internet pages saying, ‘We only handle husband-and-wife married couples or single women.’” Thus, men ultimately chose to either pursue a private domestic open adoption, where they could seek out a gay-friendly adoption agency, or adopt internationally.

DISCUSSION

This study represents the first investigation of gay men’s decision making in choosing an adoption path. Although men in the current study chose to pursue several different types of adoption, similarities and differences emerged with regard to their decision-making processes. From an ecological systems perspective, it is clear that their decisions were impacted by both micro- and macro-level forces. On an individual level, men described preferences regarding the characteristics of the child they desired and, by extension, the type of adoption they wished to pursue—echoing many of the concerns expressed by heterosexual adoptive couples (Brind, 2008). For example, men pursuing open adoption generally desired an infant, both because they wanted their child to develop a healthy attachment to them (Bowlby, 1969) and because raising the child from birth would feel similar to having a biological child (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). Such desires for an infant echo the preferences of many heterosexual adopters (Ishizawa et al., 2006).

In contrast, other men highlighted their unique relational context as same-sex male couples: the men who specifically did *not* want an infant described being not interested in “changing diapers” and also did not perceive themselves as having the “maternal” skills necessary to raise an infant. These men purposefully chose public adoption, which they perceived as offering them the opportunity to adopt an older child, as a result of these preferences. Further, gay men may tend to perceive birth mother involvement as more important and ultimately less threatening than heterosexual or lesbian couples, which consist of (at least) one female parent who can take on the maternal role. While in theory, men can of course embody a more traditionally feminine “maternal” role (Schacher et al., 2005), the men in this study give voice to the perceived difficulty of being able to fully and effectively accomplish this in the absence of a female mother figure.

On a practical level, factors such as finances informed men’s decision-making processes. Those pursuing domestic public adoption viewed this route as appealing because it was not as expensive as other types of adoption, particularly international adoption (Hansen & Hansen, 2006). In contrast, those who pursued international adoption felt that although this route was more expensive, it was more of a “sure bet” and provided more legal certainty than domestic adoption of any variety. Thus, in addition to weighing financial concerns—which many heterosexual couples also consider (Hansen & Hansen, 2006)—the men in this study also considered broader legal regulations in their decision making. For instance, since most sending countries were not open to adoption by single men or gay couples, many men chose not to pursue international adoption, as they did not want to begin their family based on lies. Others decided that the benefits of international adoption (e.g., helping a child from a developing country; Dorow, 2006) outweighed the sacrifice of lying and remaining in the closet. In this way, gay men actively negotiated personal preferences, societal pressures, and legal inequities in choosing an adoption type, highlighting the interplay between the personal, societal, and legal networks in shaping developmental processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1988).

Notably, discrimination impacted men’s choice of adoption path from the very beginning of the process: some men were turned away from specific agencies in their community, leading them to pursue a type of adoption that they initially were not interested in. Further, many men noted that their states required them to remain closeted in order to be able to adopt, whereas other men lived in states that prevented one partner from having any legal rights (Appell, 2003). In this way, gay men must contend with many of the same factors that female same-sex couples negotiate in deciding how important remaining open and honest about their relationship is to the process of adopting (Goldberg et al., 2007). However, unlike lesbian couples, gay male couples must contend with greater restrictions with regard to international adoption, given the difficulty of adopting as openly gay couples or single

men. In this way, gay men face discrimination as a result of *both* their sexual orientation and gender.

Unfortunately, the type of adoption that men ultimately pursued was not always in sync with their individual preferences or their values. Men were turned away by local agencies; forced to hide their relationship from social workers, agencies, and the government; and forced to sacrifice their initial preferences (e.g., for international adoption) in favor of adopting openly as a couple. Since gay men are limited in their reproductive options and are constrained by laws and societal pressures when choosing adoption, those who decide to become parents face difficult choices throughout their path to parenthood. Moreover, the extent to which gay men can (and cannot) choose which adoption path to pursue is just one representation of the broader oppression that will impact these parents and their children throughout the life span.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There are several limitations to the current study. First, the sample lacks racial and ethnic diversity. Thus, this study does not capture how concerns about race may be differentially perceived by men of color. Men of certain minority races (e.g., Latino, African American) may be more inclined to pursue public adoption, given the higher proportion of certain minority races available through public adoption. Second, the men in this sample are well educated and financially secure, allowing many of them to pursue private and international adoptions, which are more costly than public adoptions. Thus, gay men with fewer resources may be more likely to emphasize concerns about the cost of adoption as impacting their choice of adoption type.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to our understanding of the diverse factors that influence gay men's decision making in choosing an adoption path. At the intersection of personal desires and societal pressures and constraints (both within the United States and abroad), men in this study give voice to the complex array of factors that uniquely impact their decision making as male same-sex couples who wish to become parents. This study illuminates how many of the concerns described by gay men echo the concerns of heterosexual couples choosing an adoption path (e.g., age, race, and health of their child; Cudmore, 2005; Goldberg, 2009). Yet, unlike heterosexual couples, gay male couples often must navigate these concerns within the context of discriminatory practices at the agency, state, and international level. Further, they may perceive the role of birth mothers as providing a unique female involvement which they cannot offer as a male same-sex couple—a concern which is unlikely to be as salient for heterosexual couples given the presence of the adoptive mother.

Findings from the current study can be of help to the adoption community, particularly adoption professionals who may be unaware of the kinds of factors that gay men consider in choosing an adoption path as well as the types of barriers that they may experience. These findings suggest that an important role for adoption workers lies in providing support to gay men as they make difficult decisions about what type of adoption to pursue within the context of overt and covert types of discrimination. These findings further suggest the importance of gay-friendly agencies in representing themselves as explicitly so (e.g., by including images of same-sex couples on their Web sites and other materials). Finally, while the road to adoption is often difficult for many prospective parents, the current study sheds light on the ways in which this path may be particularly difficult for gay men, as they are restricted by societal and legal constraints as two men living in a heteronormative society that questions their capacities as primary caregivers. Gay men must contend with a variety of personal preferences and discriminatory practices (at the agency, state, and international level), which directly and indirectly impact how they choose a particular adoption path.

NOTES

1. Foster-to-adopt placements are adoptions whereby the prospective adoptive parent(s) first foster their child until all legal rights of the biological parents have been terminated.
2. A second-parent adoption is a legal procedure that allows same-sex couples to adopt their partner's child without having to terminate the rights of the first adoptive parent.

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