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“When You’re Sitting on the Fence, Hope’s the Hardest Part”: Challenges and Experiences of Heterosexual and Same-Sex Couples Adopting Through the Child Welfare System

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This study of 84 foster-to-adopt parents (42 lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples) examined the challenges that parents faced as they navigated multiple systems during the post-placement period. Some participants described the legal insecurity associated with their role as foster-to-adopt parents as impacting their well-being and attachment. Lack of support services, disorganization within social service agencies, and strained relationships with birth parents were also identified as stressors. Lesbian and gay participants faced additional concerns regarding the security of their placement due to the possibility for discrimination. Participants as a whole identified positive aspects of their experiences within various systems (e.g., supportive social workers).

KEYWORDS *adoption, child welfare, discrimination, foster care, gay, lesbian, public adoption*

Foster-to-adopt parents interact with multiple systems during the foster-to-adopt process, including the legal system, the social service agency, and the birth family system, all of which may be experienced as stressful and as interfering with placement stability and success. Yet little research has

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examined the types of challenges and stressors that foster-to-adopt parents encounter in these contexts, particularly in the immediate post-placement period. Furthermore, the existing research on this topic has largely examined the experiences of heterosexual parents. This study aims to address these gaps in the literature by examining members of 42 lesbian, gay, and heterosexual foster-to-adopt couples in the immediate post-placement period. In the following sections, we (a) briefly discuss the challenges associated with the transition to parenthood for foster-to-adopters; (b) introduce the current study; and (c) highlight the types of challenges and stressors that foster-to-adopters generally—and sexual minority foster-to-adopters specifically—may encounter in the legal, agency, and birth family contexts in the post-placement period.

BECOMING FOSTER-TO-ADOPT PARENTS: UNIQUE ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Becoming a parent is a stressful life transition (Lawrence, Nylén, & Cobb, 2007). Becoming an *adoptive* parent is additionally complicated by issues unique to adoption (Goldberg, 2010). Adoptive parents often experience a long, uncertain wait for a child (Sandelowski, Harris, & Holditch-Davis, 1991), making the timing of the transition to parenthood unpredictable, which can cause stress. Adoptive parents must also navigate the symbolic or physical presence of the child's birth family during the transition and throughout the child's life (Neil, Beek, & Schofield, 2003).

In the case of child welfare adoptions, the transition is even more complex. Children who are adopted via the child welfare (i.e., foster care) system tend to be older than children adopted via private domestic or international adoption (Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). These children are typically available for adoption because of their parents' inability to care for them (e.g., due to poverty, drug use, or mental illness) and/or because of parental abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Thus, their early lives have often been marked by instability and chaos. Such experiences of adversity help to explain why they often manifest emotional, behavioral, and attachment issues (Nalavany, Glidden, & Ryan, 2009; Rosenthal, Groza, & Morgan, 1996); indeed, children who are adopted via the child welfare system tend to have more behavioral problems than children adopted via private domestic or international adoption (Howard et al., 2004). The placement of children who have difficult histories can add stress to the family system. For example, an older age at placement, a history of abuse/neglect, attachment difficulties, and behavioral problems have all been linked to lower parenting satisfaction and higher chance of adoption disruption (McGlone, Santos, Kazama, Fong,

& Mueller, 2002; Rosenthal & Groza, 1990; Schmidt, Rosenthal, & Bombeck, 1988).

Parents who seek to adopt children through the welfare system but who must foster their children for a period of time before they can legally adopt them are called foster-to-adopt parents. Foster-to-adopt programs place children with prospective adoptive parents, on a foster care basis, before the children are legally free to adopt (Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2002). Foster-to-adopters are expected to assist the children in navigating the foster care process, which may include birth parent visits, and they agree to adopt the children if and when the birth parents' rights are terminated. Thus, foster-to-adopt placements are foster care "with the potential for, but not the certainty of, adoption" (Edelstein et al., 2002, p. 103). Although foster-to-adopters may have a strong sense of emotional responsibility for the children in their care, they are not their legal parents. Rather, legal responsibility is held by the social service agency, and decision-making responsibility is shared between the agency and birth parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Lack of legal or decision-making authority can undermine parental entitlement and attachment on the part of foster-to-adopters; but these dynamics have been subject to little formal investigation (Neil et al., 2003).

LIMITATIONS OF THE LITERATURE ON FOSTER-TO-ADOPT PARENTS

The research on child welfare adoptions has tended to focus on the types of challenges associated with fostering and adopting such children (Vandivere & McKlindon, 2010) as well as challenges accessing social services (Rosenthal et al., 1996). This literature has been limited in several ways. First, it tends to examine the experiences of foster parents who are not actively seeking to adopt (Downs & James, 2006; Rindfleisch, Bean, & Denby, 1998) or parents who have already adopted (Malm & Welti, 2010; Vandivere & McKlindon, 2010). Second, few studies have examined the immediate post-placement period among couples adopting via child welfare (Kramer & Houston, 1998; McGlone et al., 2002), although there is a modest literature focusing on the post-adoption placement period (and post-placement services) more generally (Dhami, Mandel, & Sothman, 2007; Ryan, Nelson, & Siebert, 2009; Wind, Brooks, & Barth, 2007). This inattention to the early post-placement period for foster-to-adopters is problematic, given that this is often a time of acute stress and represents a key point of entry for practitioner efforts to prevent disruption. In fact, early post-placement adjustment may be indicative of long-term outcomes. Glidden (1991) studied 87 families who had adopted children with disabilities and found that parents' initial reactions to the placement were related to later adjustment, such that mothers who had

more reservations early on reported less satisfaction with the child and more adjustment problems 5 years later. More attention to the post-placement period can shed insight into the types of stressors that foster-to-adopt parents face: stressors that may increase the likelihood of disruption.

A third limitation of the child welfare adoption literature is its focus on heterosexual parents. We know little about how challenges related to adopting via the child welfare system may be compounded by challenges related to adopting as a sexual minority. A few studies have examined lesbians' and gay men's experiences adopting via foster care (Downs & James, 2006; Matthews & Cramer, 2006), but they did not also examine heterosexual adopters, thus precluding examination of both commonalities and divergences in heterosexual and sexual minority adopters' experiences.

THE CURRENT STUDY

To address these gaps in the literature, the current study focuses on 84 individuals in 42 couples (17 lesbian, 13 gay, 12 heterosexual) who were interviewed 3 to 4 months after they were placed with a child whom they intended to adopt. We draw from ecological (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1988, 1994) and family stress theories (e.g., McCubbin & Patterson, 1983) in our study. Bronfenbrenner emphasized the role of context in development and argued for an interactionist approach that integrates person and context variables in predicting adjustment. According to his ecological framework, parents' adjustment during the post-placement period will be shaped by multiple interacting contexts, with influences ranging from distal to more proximal settings. Influential contexts in this case would be the legal system at the most distal level, the adoption agency and the birth family at a more proximal level, and the child at the most immediate level. We posit that stressors may occur at any of these levels, which may in turn have implications for family functioning. Furthermore, in that these systems are linked, we attend to the ways in which relationships between systems (e.g., between the birth parents and the child) may cause stress.

A central tenet of most family stress models is that a lack of control over life events and situational conditions is associated with greater stress to the individual and family system (Kazak, 1992). Thus, we posit that foster-to-adopt parents are especially vulnerable to stressors within each context (i.e., legal system, social service agency, birth family), as they have no choice but to interact with these systems (Groza, 1996). Further, sexual minority participants may encounter added stressors at each of these levels. For instance, in many states, partners in same-sex couples cannot jointly adopt a child (Appell, 2012). Also, some social workers possess homophobic biases, which can affect child placement decisions (Sullivan & Harrington, 2009). Thus, we examine the challenges that foster-to-adopters faced in multiple contexts,

with attention to how such challenges may be exacerbated by sexual minority status. We also attend to instances in which these contexts may be experienced as supportive and as potentially buffering the effects of stress that participants encounter in other contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Kazak, 1992; Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

We next describe what we know about the challenges and stressors that foster-to-adopters face in each context. We also highlight how this study may enhance knowledge of the experiences of both heterosexual and sexual minority foster-to-adopters during the post-placement period.

LEGAL

Foster parents have a unique role in the system charged with children's care (Rhodes, Orme, & McSurdy, 2003). At the same time that they have no legal responsibility for the child in their home, they are expected to care for the child on a daily basis and may in turn experience "role conflict and ambiguity" (Rhodes et al., 2003, p. 936). Their lack of a legal relationship to the child can create a variety of daily stressors, such as limited choices about health care providers and extended travel time to receive needed services (McDonald, Propp, & Murphy, 2001).

Some studies have explored the ways in which the legal system is experienced as a stressor by parents adopting children through the child welfare system. Such studies find that parents often describe dissatisfaction with and stress surrounding the *bureaucracy and "red tape"* involved in becoming the legal parents (McCarty, Waterman, Burge, & Edelstein, 1999; Rindfleisch et al., 1998). For example, in a rare study that captured the pre-adoptive, post-placement period, McCarty et al. (1999) interviewed 20 parents who pursued child welfare adoptions, 4 months post-placement and at least 1 year later, and found that one-quarter of parents cited "legal complications and bureaucratic complexities" as a stressor (p. 570). *Delays in the legal finalization process* have also been described as a source of frustration in prior studies (e.g., Kramer & Houston, 1998; McDonald et al., 2001). For example, McDonald et al. (2001) interviewed 159 parents 18 to 24 months after they adopted via the child welfare system and found that parents often expressed dissatisfaction with the speed of the adoption process.

Same-sex foster-to-adopt couples may encounter unique legal challenges. In some states, only one partner can legally adopt the child (Appell, 2012), which can create stress for the non-legal parent (Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2007). Even if they live in states that permit joint adoption by same-sex partners, couples may experience legal anxieties because legal decisions are often made on a case-by-case basis and are rumored to be influenced by judges' own biases or the community climate of the jurisdiction in which

couples reside (Kinkler & Goldberg, 2011). Indeed, in their study of adoptive parents, Brooks, Kim, and Wind (2012) reported that a higher proportion of gay and lesbian parents expressed the need for legal advice during the adoption process compared to heterosexual parents. Although there were fewer gay and lesbian parents ($n = 82$) than heterosexual parents ($n = 1071$) in this sample, these findings shed light on the added legal complexities and stressors that same-sex couples may experience during the adoption process.

Because of the paucity of research on foster-to-adopt parents whose adoptions are not yet finalized (Kramer & Houston, 1998; McCarty et al., 1999; McGlone et al., 2002), we know little about how the legal insecurity of their parental status functions as a stressor in their lives. Foster-to-adopters are, from the outset, interested in adopting the children who are placed with them. Their commitment to the children, in the absence of legal recognition, may create problems such as difficulty feeling “entitled” to parent and fear of attaching to the children (Edelstein et al., 2002). Concerns about legal insecurity may be compounded for same-sex couples, who may feel especially undermined by the legal system.

SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES/SOCIAL WORKERS

Foster-to-adopt parents are posed with the challenge of caring for children without the authority to make important caretaking decisions. The position of the foster parents in a “field of tension between social agencies and the child’s natural family” (Sprey-Wessing & Portz, 1982, p. 232) can contribute to frustration and tension. Negative relationships between foster parents and agency staff are associated with parental dissatisfaction and placement disruption, whereas positive relationships are linked to placement success (Brown, 2008).

Some research has helped to identify the types of agency practices that contribute to parental stress. At a broad level, *inadequate or inaccessible supports/services* have been identified as a key stressor in the adoption process (Brown, 2008; Kramer & Houston, 1998; Rosenthal et al., 1996). Post-adoption services in particular (e.g., ongoing contact with caseworkers, support groups) have been identified as important to post-placement success and parent satisfaction (Brown, 2008; Reilly & Platz, 2003; Wind et al., 2007). For example, in a rare study of the post-placement period, McDonald et al. (2001) found that foster-to-adopt parents frequently voiced dissatisfaction with the availability and accessibility of community supports and services.

Insufficient or inaccurate information provided by workers about children has also been identified as an area of stress for foster and adoptive parents (Brown, 2008; Rodriguez & Meyer, 1990). In a study of 25 pre-adoptive couples, McGlone et al. (2002) found that some participants identified inadequate information about the child as a stressor, feeling that a

more thorough initial evaluation of the child would have helped them to avoid being placed with a child who was not a good fit. The problem of insufficient information may be heightened among child welfare adopters: Berry, Barth, and Needell (1996) found that child welfare adopters were less likely than private adopters to report receiving accurate information from the agency and to feel well-prepared for the adoption. Inaccurate information about the child has been linked to negative adoption outcomes, including less parental satisfaction (Reilly & Platz, 2003) and a greater likelihood of disruption (Schmidt et al., 1988).

Another agency-related challenge that researchers have identified is *poor communication* (Rindfleisch et al., 1998), such as difficulties in contacting or accessing agency staff (Kramer & Houston, 1998). Similarly, staff shortages, staff turnover, and other administrative setbacks have been identified as challenges (Kramer & Houston, 1998). Brown's (2008) study of 63 foster parents, for example, found that many parents identified good communication and consistency among workers as instrumental in promoting stable placements.

Same-sex couples may experience additional agency-related challenges. Social workers may possess homophobic beliefs that affect their treatment of sexual minority applicants (Mallon, 2011; Ryan & Whitlock, 2008). Feeling singled out by social workers or under scrutiny because of one's sexuality can contribute to stress during the adoption process (Goldberg et al., 2007).

BIRTH FAMILY

Many children who are placed in foster care have previously established, and sometimes ongoing, relationships with birth family members. Yet the birth family is rarely examined as a relevant context or stressor that foster-to-adopters may contend with during the post-placement period. Kramer and Houston (1998) found that more than a third of the pre-adoptive families they studied identified birth family dynamics as a stressor: namely, they reported that the children missed the birth family or that they showed behavior problems after visiting the birth family. In a qualitative study of 15 families whose adoptions had disrupted, Schmidt et al. (1988) noted that the children's struggle with the loss of their birth family had often interfered with the bonding process between the adoptive family and the children. The authors also described child behaviors, such as increased behavioral problems after visits, as stressors that contributed to placement dissolution.

Foster parents have often reported feeling disconnected from the decision-making process surrounding children's visits with birth family (Neil et al., 2003). They have also described unpleasant interactions with birth parents (e.g., birth parent aggressiveness toward them or the child; Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000). Foster parents who desire positive relationships with birth parents sometimes find that such relationships can be challenging to

establish. For instance, the foster parents that Monck, Reynolds, and Wigfall (2005) studied often voiced a desire for a "rapport" with the birth mother, but noted that because of the birth mother's aggression or lifestyle issues, "that just never happened" (p. 25). In other cases, foster parents blamed their lack of rapport with the birth mother on her indifference: "she wasn't interested in what I had to report" (p. 25).

Same-sex couples who adopt via the child welfare system may encounter unique challenges with respect to birth parents. Ryan and Whitlock (2008) studied 96 lesbian adoptive parents and found that 15% of those who had adopted via the child welfare system identified birth families as a source of bias or discrimination (compared to 5% for private domestic adopters and none for international adopters), although the authors did not provide details as to the exact nature of this bias.

In sum, utilizing the frameworks of ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1988) and family stress theories (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), we aim to explore the challenges described by heterosexual, lesbian, and gay individuals ($n = 84$) during the immediate post-placement phase of the foster-to-adopt process. We specifically attend to the perceived challenges that participants encounter within the legal system, social service agency, and birth family contexts.

METHOD

To address the above-described gaps in the literature, data from 84 individuals (34 women in 17 lesbian couples; 26 men in 13 gay male couples; 12 women and 12 men in 12 heterosexual couples) were analyzed. This sample was selected from a larger study of couples who had recently adopted via child welfare, domestic private, or international adoption. These couples were chosen for the current study because they had been placed with children via the child welfare system.

Recruitment and Procedures

Inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) couples must be adopting their first child and (b) both partners must be becoming parents for the first time. We recruited participants during the pre-adoptive period by asking adoption agencies throughout the United States to provide study information to clients who had not yet adopted. We utilized U.S. census data to identify states with a high percentage of same-sex couples (Gates & Ost, 2004), and we made an effort to contact agencies in those states. More than 30 agencies provided information to their clients and interested clients were asked to contact the principal investigator for details regarding participation. Both heterosexual and same-sex couples were targeted through these agencies to facilitate

similarity on geographical location and income. Because some same-sex couples may not be “out” to agencies about their sexual orientation, national gay/lesbian organizations also assisted with recruitment.

Participation entailed completion of a questionnaire packet and participation in a semistructured telephone interview 3 to 4 months after they were placed with a child. Participants were interviewed separately from their partners. On average, interviews lasted 1 to 1.5 hours.

Description of the Sample

Participant demographic data, broken down by sexual orientation group, appear in Table 1. Participants were 38.58 years old, on average ($SD = 6.20$), and had been in their relationships for a mean of 7.87 years ($SD = 3.80$). Eighty-eight percent of the sample was White; the remainder was Latino ($n = 3$), African American ($n = 2$), Asian ($n = 2$), and multiracial ($n = 1$). Participants' mean annual salary was \$53,595 ($Mdn = \$52,000$, $SD = \$31,340$) and couples' mean combined income was \$107,220 ($Mdn = \$96,750$, $SD = \$46,957$). Twenty-one couples (50%) lived in the Northeast, 12 (28%) on the West Coast, four (10%) in the Midwest, four (10%) in the South, and one (2%) in Canada. Couples waited a mean of 16.8 months for a placement ($SD = 16.66$). At the time of the interview (3 to 4 months post-placement), 95% of the sample was in the pre-finalization stage; that is, all but two couples were parenting children whose adoptions had not been legally finalized.

Fifty-two percent of couples were placed with a boy, 41% with a girl, and 7% with a boy-girl sibling set. The mean age of the children was 4.63 years old ($Mdn = 2.5$ years, $SD = 6.00$ years, range: 1 day old to 16 years old). Twenty couples (8 lesbian, 6 gay, 6 heterosexual) adopted infants or

TABLE 1 Demographic Data by Group

	Lesbian (<i>M, SD</i>)	Gay (<i>M, SD</i>)	Heterosexual (<i>M, SD</i>)
Age (years)	36.00 (6.19)	38.00 (5.08)	39.25 (6.91)
Relationship length (years)	7.13 (3.78)	8.52 (4.02)	8.00 (4.13)
Personal income (\$)	\$38,850 (\$22,771)	\$61,733 (\$35,024)	\$70,666 (\$27,238)
Family income (\$)	\$77,704 (\$19,926)	\$123,480 (\$51,644)	\$141,501 (\$43,093)
Wait time for child (months)	12.48 (8.79)	13.08 (10.94)	18.29 (9.60)
Age of child (months)	63.68 (92.76)	63.10 (53.74)	25.50 (35.87)
Prior placements	7.00 (16.22)	5.50 (9.02)	1.67 (1.15)
	Lesbian (%)	Gay (%)	Heterosexual (%)
% White (adults)	86%	90%	92%
% White (children)	24%	67%	50%
% Boys	32%	60%	67%
% Girls	50%	40%	25%
% Siblings	18%	0%	8%

toddlers; 17 couples (6 lesbian, 7 gay, 4 heterosexual) adopted school-aged children (aged 4 to 12); and five couples (3 lesbian, 2 heterosexual) adopted teenagers. Fifty percent of the children were White, 29% were multiracial, 10% were Latino, and 10% were African American. Participants cited the following reasons that child was placed in state custody (most named multiple reasons; thus, percentages add up to more than 100%): birth parents' drug use (40%), abuse/neglect (35%), poverty (25%), birth parents' mental illness (14%), domestic violence (13%), homelessness (10%), and birth parents' incarceration (10%). Forty percent of the children had one prior placement, 35% had 2 to 4 prior placements, 10% had 5 to 10 prior placements, 10% had 11 to 30 prior placements, and 5% of children had no prior placements. Three of the 42 placements examined in the study (2 lesbian couples, 1 gay male couple) eventually disrupted.

Open-Ended Interview Questions

Participants were interviewed and transcribed by the principal investigator and trained graduate student research assistants. Identifying details were removed and pseudonyms were assigned. Data for the study are derived from several open-ended questions, which were designed to probe participants' perceptions pertaining to their foster-to-adopt experiences:

1. What are the circumstances surrounding your child's adoption? What do you know about your child's early life experiences and family?
2. How prepared did you feel for the placement?
3. Did you encounter any problems or surprises with the adoption process?
4. How was the adoption agency helpful or unhelpful?
5. (*For same-sex couples only*) Will you adopt as a couple or is one of you currently identified as the official legal adoptive parent? What has that been like?
6. When do you think the adoption will be finalized?
7. What are your feelings about the birth parents? What level of contact do you have?
8. Tell me about the experience of attaching to your child. Has the process of bonding to your child been different than what you expected? How?

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) of the data by focusing on participants' descriptions of their experiences as foster-to-adopt parents. We paid special attention to how themes might vary among members of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. We approached our analysis from ecological and family stress perspectives, attending to the multiple contexts that parents described as impacting their experiences of the foster-to-adoption process and the types

of challenges they described within each context. To develop themes from the data, we utilized a process of analytic triangulation by which each author independently coded the data and compared findings throughout the coding process to identify similarities and differences in the data. In an effort to continually reevaluate the coding scheme, we cross-checked our codes by returning to the narratives, expanding and collapsing codes where appropriate, and creating new codes based on emerging theoretical constructs. This lengthy, iterative process of coding involved a continual back and forth between the data and our emerging analysis. We discussed the emerging codes and our differences in interpretation at regular coding meetings, ultimately verifying the most substantiated codes as the coding scheme emerged. Once we had developed clearly articulated codes, we applied focused coding, using the most significant codes to sort the data. These focused codes, which can be understood as being more conceptual and selective (Charmaz, 2006), became the basis for what we refer to as the “themes” developed in our analysis. At this stage, we also attended to the issue of couple type (lesbian, gay, heterosexual) to explore whether any themes were more or less salient for sexual minority couples. The final coding scheme was established once we had verified agreement among all the independently coded data.

Since partners within a couple often described unique interpretations of their experiences, we indicate how many individuals endorsed each theme as well as how many of those participants were part of a couple in which both partners endorsed the same theme. This allowed us to analyze individual perceptions while simultaneously highlighting congruent perceptions within couples.

RESULTS

Participants described various systemic stressors associated with the foster-to-adopt process. At the most distal level, they named challenges in the *legal system*: that is, challenges related to their lack of legal recognition and the legal uncertainty of the placement. At a more proximal level, participants named challenges in the *social services system*, including insufficient services, poor communication, disorganization, and inaccurate information, and challenges in the *birth family system*, such as managing feelings about birth parents and problems with contact.

Legal Challenges

Because children often enter foster-to-adopters' homes as foster children with some degree of legal risk to adoption (e.g., their biological parents may still have legal parental rights), it is not surprising that many of the foster-to-adopters in the sample described legal challenges as a stressor.

Some same-sex couples also reported additional legal challenges due to their sexual orientation.

LACK OF LEGAL RECOGNITION: “WE ARE JUST FOSTER PARENTS”

One quarter of the sample ($n = 21$; 9 lesbians, including 3 couples and 3 individuals; 3 gay men, including 1 couple and 1 individual; and 9 heterosexuals, including 3 couples and 3 individuals) described *the lack of legal recognition* associated with their role as foster-to-adopters as a stressor. Despite their intention to legally adopt the children with whom they had been placed, they were forced to contend with the reality that, in the eyes of the law, they were “just foster parents.” Navigating the world as foster parents was unsettling, as this role contrasted with the way they viewed themselves: as hopeful adoptive parents. Ellen, a lesbian woman who was placed with an infant girl, recalled, “When the nurse said to us, ‘Is this your first foster child?’ I was taken aback. It was our first lesson in just not really reading into the system too much, because the system is just the system. She didn’t know we were the potential parents.”

The fact that participants were not recognized as their children’s parents was frustrating not only on a symbolic level but on a practical level as well. The experience of parenting their child on a day-to-day basis yet lacking the power to make the most basic decisions for their child (such as choosing their day care or pediatrician), was described as “aggravating” in that it undermined their sense of autonomy and created hassles on a near-daily basis. Erin, a heterosexual woman who was placed with a 12-year-old girl, asserted, “When you have a biological child, you have legal permission to do what needs to be done—if they need to be hospitalized, if they need a certain kind of treatment. But this is difficult . . . to have to check with all these people.” Warren, a gay man who had been placed with a toddler boy, elaborated, “We can’t quite say [‘he’s my son’], and it’s made painfully clear to us multiple times during the week. We can’t even have his hair cut without permission! We have to get permission from the birth mom through the social worker, so getting his hair cut is a 2-week ordeal.” Thus, caring for children without legal recognition or decision-making power was perceived as creating additional stress during an already challenging transition.

LEGAL INSECURITY: “THE UNKNOWN IS THE HARDEST PART”

Nearly one-third of participants ($n = 26$; 6 individual lesbians; 12 gay men: 4 couples, 4 individuals; and 8 heterosexuals: 2 couples, 4 individuals) described the *legal insecurity* associated with their roles as foster-to-adopt parents as a key stressor. All of them had been placed with children for whom there was some degree of legal risk, meaning that there was still some uncertainty as to whether they would be able to legally adopt their children.

This “in limbo” state contributed to a perpetual sense of helplessness, as they struggled to cope with the lack of control and uncertainty that characterized their own and their children’s future (Kazak, 1992). In several cases, participants described significant distress associated with legal uncertainty and insecurity. Myra, a lesbian woman who was placed with an infant girl, explained:

There’s always that lingering feeling of insecurity and that does take its own toll. Even if you don’t recognize it, even if emotionally you feel present and able and committed and everything, there’s this toll emotionally about not having that security, having it legally bound. It creeps into your psyche, so that you can’t help but take some of that in.

As Myra alludes to, legal insecurity was described by many of these parents as not only contributing to feelings of helplessness but as interfering with their ability to fully bond with their children. Although cautiously optimistic about permanence, they often noted that they were preparing themselves for the worst. Thus, a macrosystemic challenge (legal insecurity) was viewed as shaping their experiences in their more proximal (familial) context (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). Donna, a heterosexual woman who was placed with a toddler girl, observed: “I think we’re sort of bracing ourselves. . . . We don’t know whether we will end up with Amy, so I think we’ve sort of faced that. So we’re sort of guarding ourselves. I think you need to do that . . . you have to be aware, she *could* go back.” Chelsea, a lesbian woman placed with an infant boy, reflected, “I know that I love Jeremy and I show him that I love him . . . but it’s almost like a part of me is holding back.”

Notably, in 2 couples in this category (1 gay, 1 lesbian), one partner was mutually viewed as more guarded than the other, and this had been a source of strain and conflict. In both couples, the partner who was more cautious in attaching to the child viewed the other partner as being “too invested” and as not preparing sufficiently for the possibility of disruption. Likewise, the partner who had more fully committed to their child perceived the other partner as holding back unnecessarily, feeling that “if they do take him away, then we have to love him as much as we can now.” These couples’ experiences provide a striking example of how a macrosystemic challenge may affect a micro-level context (the intimate relationship; Bronfenbrenner, 1988).

SAME-SEX COUPLES: “YOU NEVER KNOW HOW A JUDGE IS GOING TO RULE”

For some same-sex couples, the stress of legal non-recognition and/or insecurity was compounded by their status as sexual minorities (Meyer, 2003). Namely, 15 participants (25% of all sexual minorities in the sample; 6 lesbian women: 1 couple, 4 individuals; and 9 gay men: 4 couples, 1

individual) voiced an added sense of legal insecurity—and accompanying anxiety—related to their sexual minority status. Some of them described feeling more vulnerable as foster parents due to their sexual orientation, whereby they anticipated a high level of scrutiny and hassle should they ever come in contact with homophobic authority figures. In this way, their sexual minority status created additional barriers that undermined their sense of control over the process (Kazak, 1992), thereby exacerbating their subjective experience of stress. Jessica, who had been placed with an infant boy, explained, “We’re about to go back to South Carolina, and I’m really nervous and want to make sure that we have all of our documents really clear about who we were and what our relationship is to the baby. Because you never know ... the last thing you want is to get pulled over by some homophobic cop somewhere who demands to see who this baby is.”

Some of these participants were anxious that legal permanence might be undermined by homophobic discrimination on the part of individuals within the legal system. As Karen, who had been placed with an infant boy, noted, “You never know how a judge is going to rule, especially with a same-sex couple.” Several participants were fairly certain that they and their partners would be unable to legally adopt as a couple; thus, one partner would adopt as a single parent, and then they would try to pursue a second-parent adoption, which would allow the other partner to also adopt the child. Sean, who was placed with a 5-year-old boy, explained, “There have been just over 100 second-parent adoptions done in [our county] but there’s still some ambiguity as to the legal validity of them. In fact, one of them is being challenged, and the results of this case will determine what will happen with the rest of them.” Sean and others faced the reality that their relationship to their children might never be legally validated. The state’s legal authority plays a key role in the adoption process for all families, but especially for same-sex couples, in that state laws have the power to determine whether both partners will be able to adopt (Bronfenbrenner, 1988).

Legal Benefits

At the same time that the lack of legal recognition associated with their foster parent status was stressful, 17 participants (20% of the sample) described benefits associated with the fact that their child was “a dependent of the state.” Child care subsidies were named by 7 participants (4 lesbian, 2 gay, 1 heterosexual); health insurance benefits (Medicare) were noted by 4 participants (1 lesbian, 3 gay); and other types of state-provided benefits (e.g., free lunch program) were identified by 6 participants (3 lesbian, 2 gay, 1 heterosexual) as welcome “perks” that reduced the financial burden of caring for children.

Social Service Agency Challenges

In addition to legal challenges, participants also identified problematic experiences (e.g., lack of support, poor communication, general disorganization) within a more proximal context: the social services system. Social service-related challenges are inevitably influenced by challenges experienced in the broader (i.e., legal) context; these overlapping contexts have implications for parents' experiences of stress (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

INSUFFICIENT SUPPORT/SERVICES: "THEY REALLY LEFT US HANGING"

Some participants ($n = 29$; 35% of the sample) identified insufficient support or inaccessible services as a major problem in the adoption process. Namely, 11 participants (2 lesbian women; 4 gay men; and 5 heterosexuals: 1 couple, 3 individuals) felt that the level of pre-placement support that they received was lacking, whereas 18 participants (10 lesbian women: 2 couples, 6 individuals; 3 gay men; and 5 heterosexuals: 1 couple, 3 individuals) identified major gaps in post-placement support. Some participants described feeling very supported pre-placement (e.g., during the licensing process), but once there was a child in the home, "the ball got dropped." Joanne, a lesbian woman placed with an infant girl, asserted: "We needed more transition and post-placement support. During the training, adoption was celebrated, but now that a child was placed with us, we are 'just a foster family.'" Others, like Anna, a heterosexual woman who was placed with a 14-year-old girl, were disappointed with both pre- and post-placement support: "They didn't do any of the work in terms of finding us the children, and when we confronted them they said, 'Well, you're doing it so well; we tend to help parents who can't seem to get it done.'... As far as [Department of Children and Families] is concerned, it has been one disappointment after another."

A common sentiment from these participants was that they were "left hanging" without guidance or advice. In some cases, participants desired but did not receive support in managing problematic child behaviors. Laura, a lesbian woman who had been placed with toddler-aged siblings, shared, "I guess I expected the [agency] to be a little more helpful, especially early on, like, 'Can you help us figure out how to address these problems?'" Similarly, participants' expectations for access to support resources were sometimes unmet. Jacob, a gay man who was placed with a 6-year-old boy, asserted, "I thought they were going to be more of resources for us, for things like counseling and that sort of thing. We had to find all of that stuff out on our own. ... It was just kind of disturbing that they don't have that, like a list of resources." Perceptions of unmet services left participants feeling exasperated with the social service agency, by whom they felt "let down."

INEFFICIENT COMMUNICATION: "THE RIGHT HAND DOESN'T KNOW WHAT THE LEFT HAND IS DOING"

Poor communication from the agency was also identified as a challenge associated with the foster-to-adopt process. Eighteen participants (21% of the sample; 10 lesbian women: 2 couples, 6 individuals; 4 gay men; and 2 heterosexual couples) described frustration with the level or quality of agency communication. Sometimes sympathetic with the fact that their social workers were "underpaid and overworked," they were nevertheless aggravated with "the bureaucracy of trying to get a hold of people." Difficulty getting a response from their workers or their children's workers was experienced as doubly frustrating in that the unreturned calls and e-mails were experienced as "dragging out" the process, which they viewed as unacceptable in light of the agencies' "supposed goal of permanent placement for every child."

INACCURATE OR INCOMPLETE INFORMATION: "THEY WERE SO VAGUE . . . AND SOMETIMES INACCURATE"

Related to, but distinct from, poor communication by their agencies was some participants' complaint that the agencies had provided inaccurate or incomplete information about their children, leading to frustration and lack of preparedness. Namely, in 11 cases (13% of the sample; 4 lesbian women: 1 couple, 2 individuals; 1 gay man; and 6 heterosexuals: 2 couples, 2 individuals), participants felt that the agency had minimized the children's problems. In turn, they found their children's behaviors to be far more challenging than they had anticipated based on the agencies' verbal and written descriptions. Adrienne, a lesbian woman whose placement with a 13-year-old girl eventually disrupted, said wryly, "They said she had 'spunk.' All our friends joke about that now." Clay, a heterosexual man placed with a 12-year-old girl, said with frustration, "I don't know if they have the information, [but] I cannot believe that she's never hit anybody. Because I've seen—I mean, she's very strong. Then she's all apologetic after it." Thus, these participants felt ill-prepared to handle the challenges with which their children presented.

Interestingly, 2 women (1 lesbian, 1 heterosexual) said that the agency had, in their eyes, exaggerated the child's problems. Henrietta, a heterosexual woman who was placed with a 5-year-old boy, voiced her resentment regarding the agency's portrayal of her son: "If you read his paperwork, you would think he was a little monster. And when I read it, I had to take it with a grain of salt and I just said straight out loud, 'Isn't some of this developmentally appropriate?' and the social worker said 'Yes.'" In these two cases, participants viewed the agencies as inappropriately characterizing the children in their care as more challenging than they proved to be.

Finally, 7 participants (8% of the sample; 3 lesbian women; 1 gay man; and 3 heterosexuals: 1 couple, 1 individual) voiced irritation that they had received inaccurate information about their children's birth parents or

legal risk. Karen, a lesbian who was placed with an infant boy, was frustrated that the agency had reassured them that the placement was “low-risk” when the birth father was “not exactly out of the picture.” She noted, “If we would have went in on day one knowing those factors, maybe we would have been a little more prepared. But because we went in . . . thinking that nobody will ever come forward for him, it really scared us.”

GENERAL DISORGANIZATION: “HOW CAN YOU MISPLACE PAPERWORK REGARDING A CHILD?”

Sixteen participants (19% of the sample; 6 lesbian women: 1 couple, 3 individuals; 6 gay men: 2 couples, 2 individuals; 4 heterosexuals: 1 couple, 2 individuals) identified the general disorganization of the social service system as a stressor. They described problems with lost or misfiled paperwork, never-ending paper trails, and staff turnover. Claire, a lesbian woman who was placed with an infant boy, recalled: “It was very frustrating to wait on like one piece of paper to make it one place . . . then we’d have to wait for another piece of paper to make it to another place. You know, people not being in the office.” Several of these participants emphasized that it was not only the overall agency but the individual workers who were unreliable and disorganized (e.g., they frequently missed or cancelled meetings). Rita, a lesbian woman placed with an infant boy, recalled, “Here we are thinking, ‘Oh god, we just want to get through this process.’ And so we wait for the court hearing and then she’s like, ‘Oh sorry, I had to cancel.’ Then for the next one she was like, ‘Oh sorry, I had to cancel’ . . . so we lost two and a half months for her personal things.”

These participants often spoke of the negative effect that such disorganization had on their sense of trust in the system. Beyond feeling “frustrated,” some of them felt “disgusted with the process,” such as Matthew, a heterosexual man placed with a 14-year-old girl: “For it to take more than 3 years for us to go from showing an interest in adoption to actually having a child is absurd. Something is wrong with the system.” Thus, some participants clearly located the source of the “problem” in the entire social service system: a distal context over which they had little, if any, control (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). Their inability to confront or directly address these systemic problems left them feeling helpless and undermined their faith in the adoption process.

INSENSITIVITY TO SAME-SEX COUPLES: “THEY CAN SEE THE SAME-SEX COUPLE, AND THEY STILL ARE SAYING ‘MOTHER AND FATHER’”

Some participants felt that the stress incurred by the foster-to-adopt process was exacerbated by their agencies’ insensitivity to them as same-sex couples. Five participants (8% of sexual minorities; 1 lesbian woman, 4 gay

men) noted that their social workers and trainings were not especially gay-friendly in that the language and materials were heteronormative (e.g., the trainings were “geared toward infertile straight couples”; the social workers “can’t stop themselves from saying mother and father”). In some cases, workers’ lack of experience or discomfort with same-sex couples was obvious. Leo, a gay man placed with an infant boy, said, “They don’t want to acknowledge it. . . . 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.”

In one case, Edward, a gay man who was placed with an 8-year-old boy, voiced concern that the agency had not adequately prepared the child for the transition into a gay-parent family: “We do know they were preparing Ben for different *types* of families but we don’t know how much he was prepared for a family with two men.” Thus, some sexual minorities experienced challenges within the agency context that served to impact their perceptions of support and autonomy within their more immediate (familial) context (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Social Service Agency Benefits/Positives

Even among those participants who identified challenges associated with their agency, some described specific workers who provided excellent support and advice and whose positive impact helped to offset the strain of dealing with “a system that is not the greatest.” Namely, 24 participants (29% of the sample; 7 lesbian women: 1 couple, 5 individuals; 7 gay men: 2 couples, 3 individuals; 10 heterosexuals: 3 couples, 4 individuals) described specific social workers in glowing terms, using words like “wonderful” and “awesome.” Paralleling some of the complaints described above, these participants emphasized their appreciation for the high level of communication, attentiveness, and preparation that they had received from their workers: “They’ve given us a lot of information and a lot of opportunities to ask questions and be prepared.”

Some sexual minority participants emphasized that their workers had been “so supportive” of them as same-sex couples. Nine participants (15% of sexual minorities; 4 individual lesbian women, 5 individual gay men) described feeling extremely pleased, and sometimes surprised, by this support. Arthur, a gay man who was placed with an 8-year-old boy, expressed, “They go out of their way to welcome same-sex couples. They’re not in it for the money so I don’t think it’s because of that; I think they probably recognize that same-sex couples are a good adopting resource and there are a lot of waiting kids.” In this way, the support of individuals within the agency context may serve to buffer the challenges that sexual minorities encounter within the broader legal system (Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

Birth Family Challenges

In part due to their unique role as foster-to-adopt parents, some parents experienced their children's birth families as a salient context. Participants with infants/toddlers and school-aged children were especially likely to note that navigating the reality of birth family members—even if only on a symbolic level—was challenging. None of the parents of teens identified birth family challenges, likely because their children had not had a lasting relationship with the birth parents.

CONTACT WITH BIRTH PARENTS: “WE HAD TO DEAL WITH THE AFTERMATH OF [VISITS]”

Eight participants (13% of sexual minorities; 6 lesbians: 2 couples, 2 individuals; 2 heterosexuals) noted challenges related to the frequency and quality of their children's post-placement contact with birth parents. They described stress related to the children's visits with birth parents, observing that the children tended to return to their care “agitated and upset.” In turn, participants experienced anxiety during the days leading up to visits and emotional exhaustion following them. Such visits were a reminder that the children in their care were still not legally theirs and also reminded them of the reasons that they had been removed from the birth parents' care. Alisa, a lesbian woman placed with a 9-year-old girl—a placement that eventually disrupted—observed that the child returned home after every visit “very agitated . . . it's like breaking up with somebody, or somebody breaking up with you, but you still have to go see them.” Donna, a heterosexual woman who was placed with a toddler girl, described a recent visit like this: “Vivi screamed for the whole time she was with her birth mom and when she came back, she didn't eat or sleep or poop or pee and stopped talking.” Such experiences led some parents to feel that the visits, which were beyond their control, “caused more harm than good.” They were sensitive to the ways that contact might be negatively affecting the child, which in turn caused participants stress (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Four participants (5% of the sample; 4 lesbian women: 1 couple, 2 individuals) described stress related to insufficient contact with birth parents. In all four cases, the birth parents had recently terminated their parental rights or were expected to in the near future. These participants had hoped for some degree of openness post-placement (e.g., sending photos, yearly visits) but sensed that the birth parents were resistant to openness. Tonya, a lesbian woman who was placed with an infant boy, shared that the birth mother was “not ready to be open with us yet,” which Tonya viewed as unfortunate, since this would mean a “loss of a relationship with his birth brother, too.”

According to two respondents (a gay man and a heterosexual man), differing perspectives between partners regarding birth family involvement

had caused relational conflict. Damian, a gay man placed with a 5-year-old boy, explained, “I wish we could simplify his life a little bit by putting these people in the past. John feels some compulsion to keep them all engaged in his life to some degree. . . . I’ve made my thoughts pretty clear on that so hopefully he’ll defer to me on that.”

COMPLEX FEELINGS TOWARD BIRTH PARENTS: “IT’S VERY, VERY COMPLICATED”

Five participants (6% of the sample; 2 lesbian women; 2 gay men; and 1 heterosexual) struggled with feeling both angry at and threatened by the birth parents. They acknowledged varying degrees of frustration and anger with the birth parents for the maltreatment of their children. At the same time, they felt threatened by the birth parents, in that *they* were still the legal parents and were therefore viewed as “roadblocks” to their adoption. Yet these participants expressed wanting—and trying—to maintain a positive attitude toward the birth parents. Keith, a gay man whose placement with an infant girl later disrupted, explained: “I physically feel nauseous when I see [birth father] because he is this roadblock, or could be a roadblock going forward. . . . We definitely want to make certain he is completely comfortable with Jenna’s placement and that she is being well taken care of, but we also don’t want to make it any easier [for him to get custody].” Joanne, a lesbian woman placed with an infant girl, was uncomfortable with how threatened she felt by the child’s birth mother:

The social worker called and said, “The mom wants visitation so you get to pick the date and time.” So we were like, “Score, let’s take 8 o’clock on Saturday night,” you know, thinking that the mom wouldn’t show because she’s out, you know, doing her thing. . . . I mean, this is so awful because really Jenny and I are both in the helping professions. [We know there are moms] who have their kids in foster homes. They’re breaking their butts to get their kids back so, I don’t know. It’s very, very complicated.

BIRTH PARENTS NOT ACCEPTING OF SAME-SEX COUPLES: “THIS BABY IS GIVEN TO, OF ALL PEOPLE, WHITE LESBIANS”

A unique birth family–related challenge that sexual minority parents encountered was resistance on the part of birth family members to placing their children with a same-sex couple. Eight participants (10% of the sample; 1 lesbian woman; 7 gay men; 3 couples, 1 individual) described direct or indirect knowledge of the birth parents’ homophobia. In five of these cases, they had been told by their social workers that the birth parents would have resisted a placement with a same-sex couple if they had known about it. Indeed, in all five cases, details about their sexuality had been kept from the birth parents. Warren, a gay man placed with a toddler boy, stated, “We’re

nervous about the birth father finding out he's with a gay couple, so we've been saying to the day care center where we send him, 'We need your support in keeping our identity secret ...' It just sucks that ... we have to be so secretive." Same-sex foster-to-adopt parents who have to hide their sexual identity from the birth family may struggle with feeling forced to misrepresent themselves, but feel that they have no choice but to do so in order to adopt (Goldberg et al., 2007).

In three cases, participants had come face to face with the birth parent(s), who seemed resistant to the fact that their child had been placed with a same-sex couple. As Jessica, a lesbian woman placed with an infant boy, described, "The dad, I get the sense he doesn't like us. ... It's probably of course that his baby was taken away from him. ... But I also think it's because we're lesbian."

Birth Family Benefits/Positives

Only one participant explicitly identified positive aspects of their contact with the child's birth parents. Jenny, a lesbian woman who had adopted an infant boy, felt that the semi-open relationship that she and her partner had established with the birth parents was beneficial to all members of the adoption triad, particularly the child: "I think it's good for Joe to continue to have relationships with his birth [family] ... and that's going to be facilitated by my having a relationship with them."

Thus, participants described a range of challenges in their foster-to-adopt experience within both distal and proximal contexts. Some participants identified stressors uniquely related to their sexual minority status, such as legal vulnerability and homophobia by social workers and birth parents. Notably, some participants mentioned positive aspects of their experience, such as state-provided medical benefits, supportive social workers, and positive birth parent relationships.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined the challenges that foster-to-adopters faced during the post-placement period in the context of multiple overlapping systems (legal, social service agency, birth family). Our findings expand what we know about foster-to-adopters' experiences, in particular how the varied systems with which they interact can both exacerbate and relieve stress.

In particular, our findings capture the stressors associated with legal insecurity: foster-to-adopters are a unique group that desire parental authority and autonomy but lack legal ties to the children they hope will someday be theirs (Edelstein et al., 2002). The absence of legal recognition, although a macro-level challenge, can undermine individual and relational well-being within more proximal contexts, even causing conflicts between

partners as they struggle to balance their desire to bond with their children with their awareness that they might be unable to adopt them. Adoption workers should assist foster-to-adopters in preparing for the possibility that they may be unable to legally adopt the children in their care; at the same time, workers should encourage them to recognize that regardless of the outcome, they have an opportunity to make a positive impact on the children in their care (Denuwelaere & Bracke, 2007). In that commitment to the child is a strong predictor of placement stability (Dozier & Lindhiem, 2006), agencies should facilitate commitment in foster-to-adopters while helping them to be realistic about the possibility that the placement may not be permanent. Because they directly interact with foster-adopters, adoption workers may serve as buffer between broad-level legal challenges and the more proximal family experience.

In many ways, the types of challenges and stressors that lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples experienced were quite similar, suggesting that to some degree, foster-to-adopt parents face the same types of challenges regardless of sexual orientation. However, the findings do point to some unique stresses that sexual minority foster-to-adopters face, especially within the legal realm. Some participants described concerns that their placements would disrupt because of homophobic judges, as well as fears of persecution by law enforcement officials. Professionals should be aware of these stressors for sexual minority adopters and should assist them in preparing for and ideally circumventing legal and systemic barriers as they work toward the legal adoption of their children. In that sexual minorities are adopting from the foster care system at increasing rates (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001), social service agencies must ensure that their programs serve a diverse population of prospective adopters. The provision of gay-affirmative services (e.g., programming that is inclusive of gay adopters, support groups for sexual minority adopters) can help sexual minorities to feel that despite insecurity in the legal realm, they are supported at the more proximal level (Bronfenbrenner, 1988); such support has the potential to offset stress (Kazak, 1992).

While it is clear that agencies may act as an important resource for foster-to-adopters, they can also be experienced as a source of stress. Of importance, foster-to-adopt parents experience a period in which they are legally considered *foster parents* (Edelstein et al., 2002), which may explain why the participants' emphasis on agency communication and organization parallels prior findings that have identified these as areas of importance, and potential stress, for foster parents (i.e., parents who do *not* intend to adopt; Kramer & Houston, 1998; Rindfleisch et al., 1998). Poor communication between workers and foster-to-adopters can lead to frustration for both parties as well as problems in accessing care for the child (Leslie et al., 2005). Dealing with understaffed and disorganized agencies can undermine foster-to-adopters' confidence and morale (Rodriguez & Meyer, 1990),

especially when coupled with legal uncertainty, all of which may contribute to the perception of an overall lack of control over the immediate family system (Kazak, 1992).

Echoing prior research, many participants emphasized the importance of obtaining accurate information about their children's background (Berry et al., 1996; McGlone et al., 2002). The urgent need to find placements for waiting children might lead some agency staff to minimize details about a child's emotional or behavioral functioning, yet this practice may disservice foster-to-adopters by leaving them unprepared for the needs of the children in their care. Indeed, several studies have attributed adoption disruption in part to adoptive parents' perceptions of insufficient or inaccurate information about the children with whom they were placed (e.g., Schmidt et al., 1988).

Gaps in pre-and post-placement services were also identified as a source of stress by some participants. Particularly of note is some participants' feeling of having been "abandoned" once they were placed with a child. Such findings are concerning in that prior research has identified post-adoption services as especially important to post-placement success and parent satisfaction (Brown, 2008; Wind et al., 2007). It is important for workers to ensure that resources are available and accessible to foster-to-adopters pre-placement, post-placement, and post-finalization, as they have the potential to mitigate the stress that these individuals encounter throughout the process.

This study makes an important contribution in its examination of the birth parent context. Some participants described post-placement contact with birth parents as stressful, and others struggled to manage complex feelings toward birth parents. As Edelstein et al. (2002) note, foster-to-adopt parents face the task of being empathic toward the birth parents, but they may also feel threatened by them. Further, foster-to-adopters must often navigate the possibility of openness with the birth family after the legal adoption, inasmuch as openness is being increasingly encouraged in all types of adoption (Brown, Ryan, & Pushkal, 2007). Indeed, some participants wished for open arrangements but found that birth parents seemed resistant to ongoing contact. Openness can be a source of tension for adoptive parents and birth parents involved in the child welfare system: The former group may worry about how continued contact with the birth parents may interfere with the child's attachment to them, and the latter group may worry that their children will be angry that they did not fight to keep them (Maynard, 2005). Further, birth parents often experience conflicting emotions about relinquishing their parental rights: they may recognize that they cannot care for the child but be wary of the adoptive parents (Monck et al., 2005).

These data raise the question of whether and under what conditions contact with birth parents should continue after termination of parental rights. As Loxterkamp (2009) notes, even if children do not object to post-termination meetings, the adoptive parents may have concerns (e.g., about escalating behavior issues post-meeting). In some cases contact may be maladaptive,

as in cases in which birth parents were abusive of the child. Thus, while the general consensus is that openness is desirable, there is “uncertainty about how this should be achieved and the degree to which this should be a private or public matter” (Jones & Hackett, 2011, p. 8). Indeed, uncertainties over how to navigate relationships with birth family members are exacerbated by broad-scale legal ambiguities regarding who may decide what is in a child’s best interest.

Particular anxieties about birth parents were felt by some sexual minorities, who had to contend with the reality that birth parents might resist their children’s placement with them because of their sexual orientation. Mallon (2011) suggests that social workers can use the home study to educate and alleviate the concerns of the birth family (e.g., it might be noted that “Bill and Sam realize that workers may fear that a child placed with them could be teased because s/he has two dads. Here is how they plan to handle this issue if it arises” (p. 22). Agency staff can also help sexual minority foster-to-adopters to prepare for and cope with homophobic attitudes displayed by birth parents. In this way, support in one context (i.e., the agency) can help to offset the stress incurred in another context (i.e., the birth parent system; Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Meyer, 2003).

Limitations

The current study has several limitations. First, our sample is small, and given the nature of qualitative research, our findings do not generalize to all foster-to-adopters. Second, we limited our study to the immediate post-placement period. Future studies should follow foster-to-adopters for a longer period, to contrast the experiences of those who legally adopted their children and those who did not. Third, this sample of foster-to-adopters is largely White and affluent. Future work should include more foster-to-adopters of color and those who have fewer financial resources. Finally, the voices of birth parents and foster children should be included in future work.

CONCLUSION

Despite these limitations, this study provides insight into the experiences of foster-to-adopters, who are parenting without legal recognition or authority as “parents.” Our findings point to the individual and relational stressors that may develop as a result of a lack of legal recognition. This study also reveals how sexual minority foster-to-adopters may encounter unique stressors as they navigate the foster-to-adopt process. The findings hold practical implications for agencies that wish to better support couples who are adopting via child welfare. Agencies can better prepare foster-to-adopters pre-placement by providing accurate information about children. Also, adoption

professionals should be mindful that partners may differ in their perceptions of challenges to their foster-to-adopt experience, which may add stress to an already stressful process. Indeed, parents may benefit from services aimed to support their relationship (Mooradian, Hock, Jackson, & Timm, 2011). Agency staff should also provide extensive supports for foster-to-adopters in the immediate post-placement period, since it is during this time that birth family contact negotiations and questions of permanency may be most stressful. Finally, agencies may seek to develop gay-affirmative trainings, since sexual minority foster-to-adopters are an increasingly important resource in the child welfare system (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001). Agencies may also seek to connect sexual minority foster-adopters via support groups, since stress related to one's minority status may be buffered by opportunities for support and membership (Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

Overall, foster-to-adopters may experience a variety of stressors within multiple overlapping contexts that may potentially lead to disruption. Agencies and social workers can play an important role in preparing foster-to-adopters for these potential stressors, and providing post-placement services to help cope with any challenges that arise.

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