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Choices, Challenges, and Tensions: Perspectives of Lesbian Prospective Adoptive Parents

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ABSTRACT. No research has examined the challenges faced by lesbian women seeking to adopt from the perspective of lesbian couples themselves. The current qualitative study utilized data from 70 women (from 35 same-sex couples) who were in the process of adopting to explore how lesbian women experience and navigate the challenges they encounter during this critical life transition. Ecological, minority stress, and feminist perspectives informed our analysis. Results indicated that many women experienced tensions between their desire to be “out” in the adoption process and the legal and social realities of adoption. Based on their reports, women in this sample faced numerous barriers to adopting but engaged in multiple forms of resistance to legal and social inequities. Women also identified supportive practices by agencies that facilitated the adoption process. Findings suggest the importance of considering lesbian women’s experiences as a starting point in understand-

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the barriers they face, lesbians and gay men have been adopting for decades (Mallon, 2000; Ryan, Pearlmutter, & Groza, 2004). They have adopted as single parents through public child welfare agencies, private sources, and international organizations (Ryan et al., 2004). While being an invisible minority is associated with legal, financial, and social disadvantages, it is sometimes advantageous to gay men and lesbians in their efforts to adopt (Ricketts & Achtenberg, 1989). Many adoption agencies and workers have followed a “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy when it comes to adoption by gay/lesbian individuals: They presume heterosexuality unless told otherwise (Matthews & Cramer, 2006). In turn, many gay men and lesbians have silently accepted these terms and conditions and have successfully adopted as single parents.

Currently, there is a trend towards greater openness on the part of lesbians and gay men (Sullivan & Baques, 1999). However, this greater openness and visibility has its price, as men and women must constantly weight their values and ideals against their desire for safety, privacy, and fair treatment (Matthews & Cramer, 2006). Thus, even in states where it is legal to adopt, some couples choose silence, fearing that their chances of success will be diminished should they disclose their relationship (Mallon, 2000). Many couples, of course, live in states where they cannot legally adopt together, forcing one partner to adopt as a single parent. Such lying and secrecy can have negative effects on the couple’s relationship (James, 2002) and may undermine the supportiveness of couples’ networks, which may view only one partner as the “real” parent.

Nevertheless, more same-sex couples are adopting now than ever before. While no exact estimates of the number of gay adopters exist,

data from the U.S. Census suggests that (a) these numbers are increasing, and (b) gay/lesbian adoptive parents represent a sizeable minority of adoptive parents in the US. First, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, an estimated 1 in 20 male same-sex couples and 1 in 5 female same-sex couples were raising children in 1990. In 2000 those figures had risen to 1 in 5 for male couples and 1 in 3 for female couples (Gates & Ost, 2004). Second, of the 1.6 million adopted children under age 18 in the US, at least 65,000 of them live with gay/lesbian parents (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007). This is likely a conservative estimate, and it does not include foster children.

Some scholars and adoption advocates view the growing trend to adopt by gay men and lesbians as inherently positive, arguing that there are more children than homes and that gay men and lesbians can help reduce the number of children in foster care (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001). However, many adoption agencies, professionals, and politicians believe that same-sex couples are less fit than heterosexual couples to be parents (Hicks, 2000). Common (unfounded) stereotypes of gay men and lesbians include the notion that they are not child centered (Crawford, McLeod, Zamboni, & Jordan, 1999), they abuse their children (Crawford et al., 1999), and they exclude members of the other sex from their lives (Hicks, 2000). These stereotypes fuel ignorance and discrimination by agencies and social workers. Such discrimination continues despite a growing literature that demonstrates that children who are raised by sexual minorities are not disadvantaged with regard to emotional, social, and developmental outcomes (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Gay men and lesbians must contend with the decisions of policymakers, court officials, and adoption agency personnel who dismiss them as unfit, despite research data that suggest that sexual orientation is irrelevant to one's ability to parent (although such studies have not included lesbian and gay *adoptive* parents) (Tye, 2003). Some professionals (e.g., judges, social workers) do concede that lesbian and gay parents may be similar to heterosexual parents in terms of their parenting abilities; however, they express concern about the effects of societal discrimination on children and hesitate to place children in their homes (Appell, 2003). While adoption policies have become more inclusive of sexual minorities, judicial policies and agency practices vary widely among states, jurisdictions, and from judge to judge (Elze, 2006). Currently, eleven states have demonstrated (via judicial rulings) openness to adoption by sexual minorities, and 9 states and Washington

DC have demonstrated openness to adoption by same-sex couples (HRC, 2002).

Barriers in the Adoption Process

The barriers that gay men and lesbians face in adopting have been recognized and discussed by scholars in social work (Elze, 2006; Hicks, 2000; Ryan et al., 2004), psychology (Brodzinsky, Patterson, & Vaziri, 2002), and legal studies (Appell, 2003). However, only a few empirical studies have investigated such barriers. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute conducted a nationwide analysis to assess the attitudes and practices of private and public adoption agencies with respect to gay and lesbian adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, 2003). They found that 65% of agencies accept applications from gay men and lesbians and that about 39% of agencies had actually made at least one placement with gay men/lesbians in the past year. Approximately 20% of agency representatives reported that their agencies had rejected applications from gay/lesbian individuals or couples on at least one occasion. Among the reasons cited for rejecting applications were: placement with homosexual persons violates agency policy (23.2%), placement with homosexual persons is prohibited by country of origin (20.3%), sexual orientation of applicant is incompatible with adoption (14.5%), and placement with homosexual persons is prohibited by state law (13.1%). Religion and disapproval of homosexuality prevented many agencies from working with sexual minorities. An additional barrier to adoption by gay men/lesbians concerns the attitudes of birthparents. About 24% of agencies indicated that birthparents have objected to placing their child with gay parents, although of note is that about 15% of agencies represented birthparents who requested gay adoptive parents for their child.

Brooks and Goldberg (2001) also investigated perceived barriers to adoption by gay/lesbian persons by interviewing adoption professionals and conducting focus groups with a small group of current and prospective adoptive and foster parents ($n = 11$). They found that the obstacles encountered by sexual minorities in adopting typically involved agency attitudes and informal practices, lack of formal policies about placement with gay men/lesbians, and beliefs about the parenting abilities of gay men/lesbians. They suggested that negative beliefs about homosexuality may lead adoption workers to question gay applicants' parenting capacities, to leak information to birthparents, and to ignore gay men and lesbians in recruitment efforts.

Finally, Matthews and Cramer (2006) examined barriers to adoption from the perspectives of gay adoptive parents. They interviewed 16 gay adoptive fathers who retrospectively reported on their experiences of the adoption process. Some men reported that the practice by some agencies of discouraging openness about sexual orientation during the pre-placement stage (e.g., through an informal “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy) was confusing and upsetting. Several men also reported feeling insulted by application forms that focused on heterosexual applicants only. With regard to placement, several men felt that social workers often pressured them to consider/take children who were older or had special needs. That is, the less preferred children were targeted to the less preferred applicants. Also, several men reported that support groups were geared towards heterosexual couples in that the agencies presumed grief related to infertility.

The fact that many gay men/lesbians wish to adopt as a means of becoming parents is often discussed in the context of “the best interests of the children”: Gay/lesbian applicants will help to reduce the number of children in foster care (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001). Advocates of adoption by gay men/lesbians often cite research findings that they are as likely as heterosexual parents to provide healthy environments for their children (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995). This focus—on the acceptability and utility of sexual minorities as potential adoptive parents—has somewhat limited the conversation about gay/lesbian parents’ experiences of adoption. Only two studies have explicitly addressed the experiences of sexual minorities during this transition (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001; Matthews & Cramer, 2006), and these studies were retrospective in nature. No research has investigated the experiences of sexual minorities who are in the *process* of adopting. This work is important in that studies of prospective adoptive parents and studies of parents who have already adopted may yield different data. Not all hopeful gay parents go on to adopt, in part because of barriers that they experience in the process. Thus, study of the experiences, perceived barriers, and identified supports (i.e., factors that facilitate the adoption process) of gay prospective adoptive parents will extend and complement the existing research. Further, what is salient during the process of becoming a parent may not be accessible at a later time period. Interviewing couples as they are experiencing the adoption process may allow for greater richness and detail in experiences than if they had been interviewed retrospectively.

The current study explores perceived challenges and obstacles associated with the adoption process in 70 lesbian women from 35 couples.

All women were actively working to adopt, had already completed a home study as part of the adoption process, and were currently “waiting” for placement. Thus, these women’s progress in the adoption process is suggestive of a strong intention to adopt, although potentially, not all of them will go on to adopt.

Research Questions

There has been no focused investigation of lesbian prospective parents’ experiences of the adoption process. Our goal in this study is to contribute to this area, with particular emphasis on understanding what factors are perceived as barriers to adopting and what factors and practices are perceived as supportive and therefore conducive to successful adoption. The following questions are of interest in the current study:

1. What challenges do lesbian women perceive in the adoption process? How do they experience these challenges (on a personal, affective level), and how do they negotiate these challenges (on a practical level)?
2. What adoption agency practices do lesbian women identify as positive or supportive?

Theoretical Perspective

A theoretical framework that integrates ecological, minority stress, and feminist perspectives informs the current project. An ecological perspective views human development from a person-in-environment context, emphasizing the interaction between the individual and a number of overlapping ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). Thus, the experiences of lesbians are influenced, at the most immediate level, by their families, their partner relationships, and their work settings. Upon deciding to adopt, more distant systems become more relevant: namely, community adoption agencies and local adoption services. At a broader level, court decisions regarding adoption by gay men/lesbians at the local, county, and state level come into sharp focus as potentially significant influences (Hunter & Mallon, 1998). And finally, influencing all other systems are the broader societal and cultural values, political realities, and social conditions.

Minority stress is defined as psychosocial stress derived from minority status (Miller & Kaiser, 2001) and can be conceptualized as resulting from the juxtaposition of minority and dominant values, leading to con-

flict with the social environment on the part of minority group members (Meyer, 2003). If the broader social environment is stigmatizing and discriminating, minority group members may ultimately experience incongruence between their own needs, experiences, and values and the constraints imposed by social structures. The power imbalance between sexual minorities and the broader systems with which they interact in the adoption process (adoption agencies, the judicial system) may result in conflict, which may stimulate tension and struggle as individuals seek to balance and negotiate their values with the constraints of broader structures. Alternatively, some women may not experience minority stress related to their sexual orientation, even in the presence of heterosexism. Their sexual orientation may be a less salient aspect of their identity compared to other categories (e.g., race, social class), and stigmatization of homosexuality may not be perceived as threatening to their sense of self. Other forms of stigma and oppression may be more significant in shaping their experience. Still other women may not experience minority stress regardless of the salience of various aspects of their identities. Individual personality factors, social support, and a strong partner relationship may serve as protective factors that prevent some women from experiencing minority stress.

A feminist perspective also acknowledges the importance of power imbalances, but it places particular emphasis on the multiple levels of resistance that lesbian women (purposefully and inadvertently) employ in the face of inequality and discrimination (Macleod, 2006). In pursuing parenthood, lesbians inevitably find themselves caught in the larger web of patriarchy, which regulates parenthood and enforces heterosexuality (Goldberg & Allen, 2007; Hicks, 2000). State and federal laws and adoption agencies regulate societal values about the characteristics of good or ideal parents—namely, married, heterosexual individuals. In response, lesbians may present themselves, at least superficially, as single and heterosexual (a category of motherhood just above “lesbian” on the motherhood hierarchy: DiLapi, 1989). In this way, lesbians who wish to become parents find themselves challenged by, and challenging, assumptions about the interdependency of marriage and child-rearing as well as fundamental notions about family. They are much like heterosexual couples who are unsuccessful in conceiving and who look to adoption as a means of creating a family (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003), but they further push boundaries of family by disrupting heteronormativity on theoretical and practical levels. Far from being a monolithic group, lesbian couples negotiate patriarchal norms and heterosexist policies by alternatively positioning themselves both within

and against dominant discourses and practices of what it means to be a parent. Of interest in the current study is how lesbians resist, accommodate to, and resolve the tensions between broader cultural dictates and their desire to parent.

In contrast to heteronormative discourses and practices that serve to categorize and simplify the experiences of marginalized individuals, we seek an anti-essentialist framework within which to explore the experiences of lesbian women as they become parents. However, in doing so, we posit a materialist feminist approach that underscores how experiential knowledge is socially embedded within particular social contexts (Brickell, 2006). Lesbians' experiences of identity are closely linked with the social and institutional conditions in which they negotiate adoption proceedings. In this sense, the feminist approach taken in this study is informed by and rooted within an ecological perspective. Women's perceptions of the adoption process are situated within the heteronormative practices that they encounter, as well as within the larger systemic, structural conditions that impact their subjective understandings. Emphasis is therefore placed on connecting micro- and macro- levels of analysis (Macleod, 2006). These theoretical considerations are consistent with our data analytic approach, which uses qualitative data analytic techniques to illuminate women's experiences and perceptions in the adoption process.

METHODS

The data presented here are derived from a larger, ongoing project of the transition to adoptive parenthood among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. Couples (rather than individuals) were sampled given our interest in differences and similarities within and between couples with regard to their experience of the pre-placement adoption process. For the current project, data from 70 women (in 35 lesbian couples) were analyzed.

Participant Recruitment

Inclusion criteria for the study were: (a) couples must be adopting their first child, and (b) both partners must be becoming parents for the first time. Adoption agencies across the U.S. were contacted and asked to provide information about the study to clients who had not yet adopted. Agencies were initially identified and contacted based on evi-

dence that they were not explicitly unwilling to work with gay couples (e.g., based on their website content). Agencies were also contacted if their websites and materials were explicitly inclusive of a variety of family forms (e.g., single women or men and/or same-sex couples were depicted or mentioned). Also, census data (Gates & Ost, 2004) were utilized to identify states with a high percentage of lesbian/gay individuals and couples, and effort was made to contact agencies in these states. Over 20 adoption agencies agreed to provide information to their clients. Agencies that declined our invitation to assist typically cited the following reasons: (a) staff/time constraints, and/or (b) they worked with very few lesbian clients (e.g., one per year). Several lawyers and social workers that specialize in working with adoptive families were also contacted and asked to provide study information to their clients. Organizations that address issues of interest to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) community were also contacted for support. These organizations included study information in their newsletters and listservs and displayed study information at events.

Study information included the principal investigator's contact information, and interested couples were asked to contact her for details about participation. Couples were told that participation entailed an individual telephone or in-person interview and completion of a questionnaire packet within 1-2 weeks of the interview. Both partners were asked to participate in these activities before they were placed with a child (during the "waiting stage") and (assuming that they were eventually placed with a child) about 3-4 months post-placement. Participants were mailed two pre-adoption packets, two consent forms assuring confidentiality and detailing the conditions of participation, and two postage-paid envelopes. They were asked to return the consent form with the Time 1 packet. Participants then completed individual interviews.

Description of the Sample

Women ranged in age from 28 to 56. The mean age of participants was 39; the median age was 38. On average, couples had been together for 8 years (with a range of 2 years to 18 years). Eighty-eight percent of the sample was Caucasian, 10% was Latina/Hispanic, and 2% was African American. These data are comparable to national estimates (derived from data from the U.S. Census 2000 and the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth), which indicate that 77% of female same-sex couples with adopted children are Caucasian (Gates et al., 2007). In terms of religious identification, participants identified as "non-practicing" (49%),

Christian (23%), “spiritual” (10%), Unitarian Universalist (8%), Jewish (3%), Wiccan (3%), Catholic (3%), and Buddhist (3%). With regard to education, 10% had a high school diploma, 4% had an associate’s degree, 8% had some college, 26% had achieved a bachelor’s degree, 41% had master’s degrees, and 11% had a PhD/JD/MD. Women’s median salary was \$50,000 ($SD = \$31,346$), with a range of \$7,000 to \$200,000. These women possess more education compared to national estimates of female same-sex couples with adopted children (20% high school diploma or less; 20% some college; 21% college; 38% graduate studies) but are no more affluent compared to national estimates (mean household income = \$102,508: Gates et al., 2007).

Twenty-six percent of couples resided on the East Coast, 34% lived on the West Coast, 23% lived in the South, and 17% lived in the Midwest. At the pre-adoption phase, 57% of the participants (20 couples) were pursuing private domestic open adoptions through an agency; 5% (two couples) were pursuing private domestic open adoptions using a lawyer; 3% (one couple) were pursuing a closed adoption through a lawyer; 20% (seven couples) were doing public adoptions; and 15% (five couples) were adopting internationally. On average, couples had been waiting for a placement for eight months. In five couples (14%), both partners had attempted to become pregnant (via alternative insemination); in 19 couples (55%), one partner had tried to become pregnant; and in 11 couples (31%) neither partner had attempted insemination.

In this sample, 27% of couples lived in states with good court records for granting coparent adoptions to same-sex couples (HRC, 2002; HRC, 2006). Coparent adoptions allow both partners to adopt their child together, at the same time, ensuring legal recognition of both parents. States with “good court records” are generally considered to be open to adoption by gay parents, although this is not necessarily true in some counties because county judges make the final adoption decisions, and their opinions may vary. Another 48% of couples lived in states with uncertain court records: The evidence is mixed regarding their willingness to adopt to same-sex couples (HRC, 2002; HRC, 2006). Finally, 25% of couples resided in states with poor track records with respect to adoption by gay men/lesbians (HRC, 2002; HRC, 2006).

Couples pursuing international adoption (who must identify one partner as the “legal” adopter) can, in some states, pursue second parent adoptions. These allow the nonlegal parent to adopt their partner’s child *after* the primary parent has adopted. Likewise, couples pursuing domestic adoption who live in states that do not allow coparent adoptions (thus requiring the couple to identify one partner as the legal parent) can

sometimes pursue second parent adoption. In the current sample, 17% of couples lived in states where second parent adoptions have been granted statewide, such that their access is guaranteed by statute or state appellate court rulings (HRC, 2002; Pawelski et al., 2006). Another 61% lived in states in which second parent adoptions have been granted at the lower state or county level (HRC, 2002; Pawelski et al., 2006). The remaining 22% of couples lived in states with histories of unfavorable rulings concerning second parent adoption, leaving them with little hope of ensuring that their child would have two legal parents.

Open-Ended Questions

Participants were interviewed by the principal investigator and graduate student research assistants. Interviews were transcribed to capture participants' thoughts and feelings in their own words. Data for the study are derived from several open-ended questions. Questions 1a, 1b, and 1c were asked to explore women's experience of the adoption process, including both its negative and positive aspects. Given our interest in the barriers that women perceive, we specifically probed for difficulties. Question 2 was asked to explore what factors were important in women's decision-making process regarding adoption.

1. How has the adoption process gone for you so far? (Probes: How is your agency? What was your home study like?)
 - a. What aspects of the process have been the most challenging?
 - b. Do you feel you have faced certain challenges because you are a same-sex couple?
 - c. Are there things that your agency has done that have been helpful? Unhelpful?

2. What type of adoption are you doing?
 - a. How did you choose this type? (Probe: Can you tell me about your decision-making?)

Data Analysis

Methodological Framework

We assume a constructivist framework in the current analysis (Charmaz, 2000), which implies awareness of the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed. We assume that "data do not

provide a window on reality. Rather, the ‘discovered’ reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts” (Charmaz, p. 524). From this perspective, qualitative data analysis is necessarily subjective, in that not all analysts will utilize the same interpretive lens and see the same categories in the data. We recognize that our theoretical perspective, conceptual framework, and methodological approach necessarily inform our research questions as well as the categories and theory that emerge in our descriptive interpretation of the data. Working from within this theoretical framework, we engaged in careful analysis of the narratives of 70 women, in the interest of generating conceptual categories that best describe the data and whose meaning and relevance transcend the current study.

Feminist, ecological, and minority stress theories guided our exploration of the data. Attention was paid to women’s perceptions of challenges at multiple levels. Tensions between women’s personal ideologies and broader societal constraints as well as the role of heterosexism in shaping women’s experiences of the adoption process were foci of the current study.

Coding

We used grounded theory methods in the current analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In particular, we used comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to establish analytic distinctions by comparing data with data to identify similarities and differences. We began by conducting line-by-line coding, attending to participants’ interpretations and constructions. Such coding assists the researcher in identifying patterns and contrasts (Charmaz, 2006). All three authors, who each read the participant transcripts multiple times, coded the data. We engaged in a process of analytic triangulation, which involves having multiple individuals independently analyze the same data and compare their findings. This process of independent analysis ensures that multiple perspectives and interpretations are considered, and it lends itself to verification of the usefulness and soundness of the emerging descriptive scheme (Patton, 1990). Specifically, all authors independently read and applied initial codes to the first 5 couples. Extensive discussion led to refinement of the emerging scheme. We continued to engage in multiple iterations of analysis, discussion, and refinement of the coding scheme by individually reading the participant transcripts (5 couples at a time), comparing their data to the emerging scheme, and meeting to discuss, refine, and further specify our coding categories. We then ap-

plied focused coding to the data, using the most significant or frequent codes to sort the data, which led us to integrate some codes and to discover new connections among the data. Upon establishing a final coding scheme, all authors independently categorized all women according to the scheme, in order to verify the fit of the data to the scheme (and ensure stability in our ratings). Each rater was able to independently verify the utility of the scheme for describing the data.

The fact that we possessed data from dyads presented opportunities and challenges. We chose to analyze the data from both members of the dyad, out of awareness that individuals in dyadic relationships may have different interpretations of events, based on their values, needs, and personalities (Bernard, 1998). Our coding process revealed that the categories of analysis were often constructed at the individual, rather than dyadic level: Partners often mentioned different experiences and perceptions. In our presentation of the results, we indicate (a) the total number of women that endorsed a response and (b) the total number of couples in the category.

RESULTS

Three main sets of results are presented. First, we examine women's experiences of tension (or lack of tension) between their own values and the macro-level (system-wide) context of adoption—that is, the legal context. Women's values and priorities in the adoption process (i.e., the degree to which they felt compelled to be “out” during the process) varied considerably, as did the legal constraints that they encountered, both of which created varying degrees of intrapersonal tension for women. Second, we discuss the challenges that women experienced at the micro-level (in their immediate social environment), such as working with social workers, and the strategies that some women used to circumvent discrimination. Third, we discuss agency practices that women identified as supportive and facilitative of their transition to parenthood.

Personal Values and Legal Restraints: Navigating Choices and Tensions

An important theme that emerged concerned women's experiences of tension (or lack thereof) between their own personal values and the social and legal context of adoption. In deciding what route to take to adoptive parenthood, women faced the difficult task of balancing their

own values concerning honesty and “out”-ness, their desire to adopt a healthy child in a reasonable amount of time, and the laws and policies of their state and other countries. Adopting internationally and adopting domestically within or from a state that did not recognize coparent adoption meant sacrificing honesty and openness in the service of their goal to become parents. In deciding what type of adoption to pursue, women expressed varying degrees of tension between state laws, their valuing of integrity and honesty, and their goal of successfully adopting.

Integrity Is Our First Priority: “I Refuse to Compromise Honesty in Order to Adopt”

Thirty-one women (12 couples and 7 individuals) emphasized the importance of being “out” in the adoption process. They valued “honesty and integrity” and felt that closeting their relationship in the adoption process would compromise this fundamental valuing. They had made choices and given up options in order to be “out.” For example, 16 women (seven couples, two women) noted that they were not pursuing international adoption because of this strong valuing, despite the fact that in several cases, they had initially been drawn to international adoption: “I thought international would be a great option but . . . the openness was probably one of the most important factors to us: We wanted to do it together.” One couple had moved and another couple was planning to move to states where coparent adoptions were regularly granted to same-sex couples. In this way, their desire to co-adopt and to be out during the process set the stage for major plans and life decisions. One woman, who lived in a state in which neither coparent nor second parent adoption seemed likely, noted that she and her partner planned to adopt a sibling group so that each partner could officially adopt a sibling. By adopting siblings, she and her partner were, in her eyes, conscientiously challenging and subverting discriminatory laws, policies, and practices. Additionally, 10 women explicitly noted that they were pursuing domestic open adoption because of their belief that adoption should not start with secrecy and deception, about sexual orientation or anything else. Open adoption allows couples to represent themselves truthfully to birthmothers. In this way, women’s desire to be “out” fit well within the larger philosophy of open adoption. This was expressed by Corinne, aged 42:

We looked at international and they were starting to require affidavits of heterosexuality and . . . it was deplorable and we couldn't do it. We couldn't deal with it. It's repulsive to me that it's okay for babies to grow up on the streets, to have garbage bags for diapers but it's not okay to go home with a gay family. So we sort of went "screw you, forget it." And open adoption really appeals to us. Even though it's taking forever, it really appeals to us.

By taking a stand against what she perceived as the "deplorable" and discriminatory practices required by international adoption, Corinne solidified her commitment to creating a family in a way that validated the integrity of their relationship. She also acknowledged that by prioritizing their desire to be honest, she and her partner incurred other potential barriers, such as a longer wait. Although all 31 women felt that closeting themselves was antithetical to their basic value system and potentially destructive to their relationships, they also realized that choosing to be out required making sacrifices. In addition to a longer wait, many women reported difficulties in finding an agency that would work with them as a couple *and* respect the integrity of their relationship. Three women recalled resistance by social workers who discouraged them from co-adopting, as it might limit the states that they could adopt from and/or their chances of adopting. All three women concluded that they were not willing to make such accommodations, although they were tempted by the prospect of a quicker match. Stated Avery, aged 37:

We had this potential match. We would have had to rewrite our home study for it, so there was kind of a big compromise with what we wanted to do, though we did consider it.

Current Tension: Integrity and Legal Barriers

Four women (one couple, two individuals) were currently experiencing significant tension between legal barriers and their own strong valuing of integrity. All four women were doing international adoption, and they emphasized the importance of being open, honest, and "out." However, their decision to pursue international adoption created difficult tensions as three of the women had to remain invisible and closeted throughout the process. So of interest, then, is why they pursued international adoption in the first place. One woman lived in a state with a poor history of granting coparent adoptions, which led her and her part-

ner to pursue international adoption. They viewed this option as no more restrictive, and more of a “sure thing” than domestic adoption. One couple and one woman lived in states where the practices surrounding coparent adoption were more promising but nevertheless found themselves more “drawn” to international adoption. One of these women noted that her partner, a lawyer, had expressed concerns about the legalities of open adoption. Another woman, who was Latina, wished to adopt a Latin American child; this, and her perception of international adoption as “more straightforward” than domestic adoption, led her to pursue international adoption.

Ultimately, all four women came to question their decision to pursue international adoption in light of the personal and relationship stress it had caused. Given their emotional and financial investments in the adoption process, they felt “too far in” to quit. Yet they expressed frustration with “society’s phobia” and sadness about their own, or their partner’s, invisibility in the process. Mary Ellen, aged 45, described her sense of invisibility and voicelessness:

It is so hard. It is horrible. It’s just . . . I just get mad. We’ll pursue a second parent adoption. But right now, it’s like, in anything, in any letters that we write to the foster mom, I can’t say anything. I can’t, you know, with my voice. My voice doesn’t exist. The impact of one partner’s voicelessness and invisibility was felt by both partners.

Leeza, aged 32, who was the official legal adoptive parent, stated:

We struggle with the fact that Mary Ellen doesn’t have a direct voice in the process. But we’ve become more intimate because we really recognize that we don’t want that to ever be the case for us, ever again. And actually we’d already decided that in terms of going through the international process again we basically would rule it out, period. We anticipated that it would be tough, but it has been really shocking at different points to just realize the impact on us and not to be equal partners in this.

Leeza experienced their current tension as temporally specific and avoidable since she and her partner planned to seek a more egalitarian means of adopting future children. She also viewed the process of hiding their relationship as facilitating greater intimacy between her and her partner, which points to the potential for lesbians to adaptively re-

spond to heterosexist practices in ways that promote healthy functioning (Hunter & Mallon, 1998).

Integrity Is Secondary: "We Don't Have the Option To Be Out"

Nine women (two couples, five individuals) perceived themselves as having no choice in terms of being "out." All but two women lived in states that did not allow coparent adoption, requiring concealment of their sexual orientation, and several were unsure whether they could do a second-parent adoption, given the unsteady legal landscape. They viewed the fact that they must closet their relationship in order to adopt a child as frustrating. After all, they had entered this process as a couple after much deliberation, with full intentions of parenting equally, and yet their state laws required that they choose one legal parent. These women expressed a preference to adopt as a couple, but they resigned themselves to the status quo, thus differentiating themselves from women who reported experiencing significant tensions between their values and legal restrictions. Their desire to become parents ultimately outweighed their desire to adopt as a couple: "It's what we have to do to become parents." Stated Jenny, aged 33, whose partner was adopting domestically as a single parent:

I'll be honest, I don't think anyone can help but feel like, like with the home study, I'm just the other person. I'm the other adult that lives in the house. It took me like 10 minutes to be like whoa, I am so *not anybody* in this process but you know that's just the way it is. And I'd rather we have this opportunity. We could live in Florida and have no options. So you know, you look at it, you face it, you get your feet under you and you move on. This is the situation so suck up and deal and go with it. We are lucky that legislation isn't being passed right now like it is in Ohio. There are so many things that we're lucky about.

Here, Jenny identified some frustration about her invisibility in the process, but quickly concluded that she and her partner were lucky to be able to adopt at all, given the discriminatory practices that she perceived as more extreme in other states. By comparing her rights to those of less-fortunate same-sex couples (versus those afforded to heterosexual couples), she subjectively framed her experience in a way that protected her from feeling totally helpless and marginalized.

Whereas Jenny made peace with her situation by comparing herself to couples who could not adopt at all, three women sought to manage the discrepancy between their desire to co-adopt and their legal realities by de-emphasizing the legal distinctions in their parental status and underscoring their shared commitment to each other. Vivian, aged 35, stated emphatically:

Basically, we are this couple. Legally only one of us can be the, you know, the legal parent, but socially, culturally, everything else, we are a family.

Two of these nine women were pursuing international adoption despite living in states with relatively favorable rulings towards coparent adoption. And yet, they perceived themselves as *having to hide* their relationship status if they wanted to become parents within a reasonable amount of time. They regarded closeting as a temporary but necessary inconvenience, and they both intended to petition the court for second-parent adoptions upon finalization of the primary adoption. These data highlight the constructed and subjective nature of women's interpretation of the adoption process. These women situated their lack of choice in their inability to be out during the process—they first chose international adoption and then mourned the fact that they could not be out (*they felt as if they had no choice but to be closeted*). This stands in contrast to women who never considered *not* being out, and thus regarded international adoption as off-limits and not an option (*they felt as if they had no choice but to choose domestic*). The language of choice is strikingly different for these women.

Integrity Is Important, But Not a Challenge to Maintain

Seventeen individuals (seven couples, three individuals) also highlighted the importance of being out and honest in the adoption process. Unlike the individuals discussed above, however, they did not report experiencing any conflict between their strong valuing of integrity and the laws of the state in which they resided. They were all pursuing domestic adoption and lived in states in which they would likely be able to co-adopt. Further, several resided in very progressive communities and had a choice between several gay-friendly agencies. Stated Tara, aged 29:

We really haven't had any problems. I mean we happen to live in a place where there happens to be an agency that is gay-friendly, so you know, because of where we live, and because this agency exists, I think our process has been similar to heterosexual couples.

Thus, Tara did not confront discriminatory practices that might serve to challenge the legitimacy of her relationship with her partner.

Integrity is Not a Consideration

For nine women (three couples, three individuals), integrity was not identified as a consideration in the process of adopting. Their decision-making in the process was guided by practical concerns (a desire to adopt quickly and easily; financial reasons) and other factors (e.g., a desire to adopt an infant). They did not seek agencies that were gay-friendly or that would treat them as a couple. Their narratives do not suggest that these nine women *lack* integrity, but rather, that other concerns were more salient in the process. Thus, these women may very well have a strong sense of integrity (personally and as a couple), but they may not feel the need to have their relationship be publicly validated in all contexts in order to maintain that integrity.

Challenges and Barriers in the Adoption Process

In addition to the barriers and tensions that women experienced at the broadest level (e.g., state and country laws), women also identified a number of challenges at the micro-systemic level: in their immediate social context. Specifically, they named ways in which their options with respect to the adoption process had been influenced or restricted by adoption agencies, professionals, and other individuals. In dealing with agencies and agency personnel, women experienced overt discrimination as well as situations in which they suspected that they were being overlooked, underserved, or treated unfairly on the basis of their sexual orientation.

Discrimination by Adoption Agencies and Related Services

Fifteen women (one couple, 13 women) identified discrimination and insensitivity by adoption and home study agencies. All of these women noted that they had encountered agencies that would not work with them. Women often placed several calls before locating an agency

that was even willing to meet with them. The fact that Catholic Charities and other religiously based organizations had reportedly declined to work with them was experienced as upsetting inasmuch as this refusal reflected societal beliefs about their (un)fitness as parents. Women also expressed frustration with the practical consequences of such rejection: These agencies were typically cheaper and local, and women incurred time and financial losses by having to look elsewhere.

In their quest to find an agency that was willing to work with them, women at times faced raised eyebrows, cool dismissal, and suggestions to look elsewhere: "The social worker said, 'This isn't the program for you.'" In a few cases, women reported telephone hang-ups, and even outright hostility. Rachel, 34, expressed her surprise at experiencing such direct discrimination:

It was very early in the process, we had not done anything really other than some paperwork, and the supervisor said, "Under no circumstances will I let you proceed in this program. I don't like people of your kind. Don't even apply to my program." And I went "WHAT!" Literally my jaw hit the floor. I've never been spoken to that way, and for no reason. She implied her decision was final and you know, I didn't know what to do really.

Here, Rachel came face-to-face with institutionalized homophobia and, despite her experience living in a heterosexist society, was shocked and didn't "know what to do." She had no legal recourse, and her only decision was whether to try another agency or give up altogether.

Uncertainties Regarding Discrimination

An additional 21 women (four couples, 13 women) voiced a lack of certainty about whether they were being discriminated against. They had experiences that left them feeling suspicious and uncomfortable, but they were unsure if their difficulties (unreturned phone calls; rude treatment by social workers; being ignored at trainings) were indeed a result of discrimination. Without hard data to confirm or disconfirm the presence of discrimination, women were hesitant to question the person or organization with decision-making authority, leaving them feeling frustrated and relatively powerless.

Overlooked and underserved? Eleven of these women (two couples, nine individuals) reported the suspicion that they might not be receiving the same level of attention and support from their agencies as their het-

erosexual counterparts. They were often aware that they had been waiting for a child placement for longer than the heterosexual couples served by their agencies. This led them to wonder if they were being overlooked, or deprioritized, by their agencies. They acknowledged a lack of direct evidence for this (and considered other explanations) but observed that they were in the unfortunate position of “having to consider the possibility of discrimination” based on societal views of sexual minorities as less-than-optimal parents. Stated Vivian, aged 35:

We asked them, “Are we not being chosen because we are two women? What’s the story?” And she said, “No.” She said, “The reason that you are not being chosen is because of race, or they want another child in the home.” Or something like that.

In several instances, women reported waiting a notable length of time after their home studies were completed before learning if they had been approved or turned down by the agency. When they inquired about their status, they often felt “put off” by agency personnel, who seemed to “pin decisions about approval or disapproval on the social workers.” Stated Meredith, aged 43:

The escape language was, “Well, the social worker makes the decision about what is in the best interest of the child.” And so who knows what sort of decisions get made going through that little machine.

Biased treatment? For five individual women, their uncertainty about possible differential treatment derived not from a *lack* of communication from their agencies, but from questions and requests for information that they suspected might not be asked of heterosexual applicants (e.g., extensive information about sleeping arrangements; reasons for preferring a same-sex child). Two women observed that heterosexual couples were favored in their training group, and two women felt that their social workers persisted in “trying to give us the most damaged kids they know no one will take.” Both questioned whether social workers were attempting to match the least desirable children with the least desirable applicants (Matthews & Cramer, 2006).

Strategies to Avoid Agency Bias and Discrimination

Seventeen women (two couples, 13 women; all of whom strongly valued integrity) noted that they had actively sought out gay-friendly agencies. Eleven of these women (one couple, nine individuals) noted that they had conducted extensive research (e.g., online) in an effort to find an agency that would respect and validate their relationship. They perused agency websites to determine whether or not the agencies worked with same-sex couples, and they read the agencies' mission statements for religious and/or conservative undertones. Three women contacted friends who were in same-sex relationships and acquaintances who previously adopted or who knew couples that had adopted to find out what agency they had used. Three women reported calling agencies to ask whether they had gay/lesbian clients, and in one case, whether they could provide references of lesbian couples who had utilized their services. In this way, women used the power that they had to make informed choices about what agency would best represent them.

Birthmother Preferences and Decisions

Birthmother preferences represented a key challenge in the process: Four women said that the greatest barrier they perceived in pursuing open adoption was the reality that birthmothers are less likely to choose same-sex couples as the parents. The likelihood of rejection on the basis of their sexual orientation was painful for these women, who expressed feelings of powerlessness and injustice. And, should a birthmother choose them, there was potential for opposition from birthfathers and the birthmother's family. Two women stated that they pursued international adoption because of fears that birthmothers' families would sabotage placement. Some women ultimately located the source of bias in the broader sociopolitical context. Observed Lisa, 51:

Many birthmothers don't want to adopt to same-sex couples. So the pool of birthparents available to us is smaller than it would be to a heterosexual couple. That's a sad fact, and with all the gay bashing that's gone on, it's gotten worse. I worry that states will close the door to adoption, which is one reason why we're a little anxious to get things going.

Nine women (three couples, three women) reported situations in which they suspected that birthmothers might not be choosing them

based on their sexual orientation. They noted instances in which birthmothers had been shown their profile, or they had met the birthmother, only to have her choose a heterosexual couple. Their uncertainty about why they were not chosen led them to feel “disheartened,” “confused,” and at times to rethink their decision to adopt as a couple.

Positive Agency Practices: What Makes a Supportive Agency?

Most of the women in the sample reported ultimately working with agencies about which they felt very positively (although it often took quite a bit of research to find them). Specifically, about 80% of women were “somewhat satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their agencies.¹ These women chose agencies that actively created environments and procedures that supported the experiences of same-sex couples. Thus, the challenges that they discussed were typically encountered en route to finding the agency they selected. Women identified a number of agency practices that they felt were especially important to them in feeling validated and accepted.

Philosophy of Inclusiveness and Validation

A total of 23 women (three couples, 17 women) noted that the most important thing that their agency had done was to convey an attitude of acceptance and inclusion. Nine women framed this in terms of feeling as if they were treated “the same as everyone else” (namely, heterosexual couples). Being treated “the same” was essential in assuring them that they would not be singled out or discriminated against. In recalling her initial interactions with her agency, Sarah, 37, stated:

The people were very friendly. There were no uncomfortable feelings, nothing. We were not treated any differently. . . you know, with the forms you signed, everything, it was the same. We’ve been very lucky, we have not felt any kind of negative reaction from anyone.

In contrast, 14 of these 23 women noted that their agencies had been unusually welcoming of them *as* same-sex couples. Their status as lesbian couples was not treated as a secret or a problem, but rather, it was openly acknowledged and embraced. Stated Evie, aged 40:

I appreciate them not pretending that we aren't gay. Not pretending that the gay men aren't gay, not pretending that the single woman there isn't a lesbian. They don't pretend, there are no blinders, or like "la la la, there's an elephant in the room."

These women did not necessarily wish to be treated as "the same" as heterosexual couples, but rather, to be respected and welcomed as same-sex couples. Indeed, for Evie, and other women who want their relationships to be outwardly acknowledged by adoption professionals, being treated "the same" might be perceived as possible evidence of ignorance and/or avoidance of the issue of their sexual orientation. Stated Peg, aged 40:

The adoption worker who was there during the orientation was very receptive to us. She did her best to make us feel welcomed. We went to our first class, and she's like, "I remember you guys. I'm glad I saw you 'cause I wanted to make sure I remembered to let you know there's a gay foster family support group that might be really good for you."

Feeling validated and being treated as a couple was important to all 23 women, particularly when their state laws required one of them to identify as the official legal adoptive parent. Geri, aged 31, recited what her social worker had said to her:

She said, "In Colorado, there is no same sex adoption. But *we* will treat you as a family. You will be a family to us; you are a couple, you are the parents. You'll be presented that way in the home study. The social workers will know." I was ready to sign up right then.

In the face of structural forms of discrimination, Geri felt gratified in knowing that, at a more local level, she and her partner could work with an agency that validated their relationship.

Explicit and Specific Practices

Many women highlighted specific, tangible ways in which their agency had demonstrated their inclusiveness of same-sex couples, thus minimizing potential anxieties about the possibility of being treated as "second class citizens" or as less-than-ideal adoption candidates. Six-

teen women (four couples, eight individuals) noted that they chose agencies that explicitly stated their openness to same-sex couples in their materials. Often these were also agencies that had a known track record of working with sexual minorities and were known in the broader community as “gay-friendly.” Four women noted that their agencies’ materials and offices featured images of same-sex couples. Three women noted that same-sex couples were featured on the agencies’ websites, where clients can have their profiles posted in the hopes of attracting birthparents. Such visual representations proved important in attracting the interest and confidence of prospective clients. Mia, aged 45, acknowledged the significance of viewing such inclusive visual images:

They have a really big gay clientele. If you look at the waiting list on the website it is striking how many same-sex couples there are. We pretty much chose them right away.

Four individual women noted that their agencies’ materials were clearly inclusive of same-sex couples (e.g., “adoptive parent 1” and “adoptive parent 2” were used as parent identifiers). Six women (two couples, two individuals) reported that their agencies ran specialized support groups for GLBT clients. Nine women noted that their agencies targeted the GLBT population in their recruitment efforts. Several of these women observed that social service agencies viewed the GLBT community as an “untapped resource” given that, as one woman said, “It’s the gays and lesbians who are adopting foster kids. They need these kids more than anybody else.” Finally, four women noted that their agencies explicitly prepared them for the challenges that they would face adopting as a couple. For example, their agencies prepared them for the possibility that they would need to complete two different home studies: one that treated them as a couple, and one that identified one as single, should they be “matched” to a birthmother in a state where coparent adoption by same-sex couples was not legal.

DISCUSSION

This study represents the first exploration of challenges experienced by lesbian couples during the adoption process from the perspective of lesbian prospective adoptive parents. Our analysis revealed some important and interesting findings.

First, this study highlights the tensions that may emerge for same-sex couples who pursue adoption. The women in this sample had been in their relationships for over seven years, and they shared a firm commitment to becoming parents together. However, to become parents, many women reported feeling forced to deny the validity of their relationship and to align themselves with the position of the state and national government. The act of identifying one partner to adopt as a single parent was experienced by some women as fundamentally inauthentic and misaligned with their belief system. And yet, women strongly desired parenthood and negotiated these tensions in different ways. Most were able to resolve such tensions by constructing their decision-making as subverting the status quo and allowing them to achieve their goal of becoming parents.

For some women, being out in the adoption process played a large role in guiding their decision-making about what type of adoption to pursue and what agency to use. They expressed an unwillingness to “sacrifice” what they perceived as the integrity of their relationship in order to become parents. Closeting was seen as capitulating to legal and social pressures, and thus they chose to be as “out” as possible in the adoption process (thereby refusing to give in, even superficially, to compulsory heterosexuality) (Rich, 1980). Other women also felt strongly about honoring their relationships in the process but were faced with unavoidable macro- and micro-level constraints (e.g., state laws that did not allow them to co-adopt, regardless of how strongly they felt about being out). Thus, they perceived themselves as being forced to put their values aside in the service of getting a child. In turn, these women constructed their decision to conceal their sexual orientation as inherently subversive (they were lying in order to adopt). Importantly, they recognized that not being out in the process, while upsetting, did not undermine the reality and integrity of their relationship. Indeed, concealment or selective disclosure of sexual orientation is viewed as a survival strategy among some sexual minorities, particularly in social contexts that are regulated by hegemonic heterosexual norms (Cameron & Hargreaves, 2005). For other women, their values and desire for openness were simply not challenged by their social or legal context and did not play a crucial role in their decision-making. Finally, for others, concerns about finances and efficiency directed their process. They did not view their adoption decision-making as political in nature, but they accepted the status quo without resistance or struggle.

The results suggest that decisions to be “out” or publicly “closeted” are not diametrically opposed extremes, which imply the presence or

lack of integrity. Rather, the women in this study demonstrate the ongoing and often contradictory processes that many lesbian women experience as they negotiate “the relational border between themselves and society” (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006, p.350). Women who experience severe tensions between their valuing of integrity and socio-legal constraints may be more vulnerable to minority stress than women who live in states that recognize coparent adoption (Meyer, 2003). Legal and social environments that are hospitable to GLBT issues serve to reduce stress and aid lesbians in their quest to adopt: indeed, self-disclosure of one’s true self may lead to better psychological and physical health (Larson & Chastain, 1990). The stress of self-concealment is not the only challenge faced by lesbians who seek to adopt. These women confront many barriers, often at multiple levels, over an extended period of time, an experience that can be stressful at the individual and couple level (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Further, our analysis suggests that the uncertainty that they face (e.g., the changing legal landscape; suspected discrimination) may exacerbate women’s sense of vulnerability in the process. These women’s narratives suggest that sensitive agency practices may empower couples to feel more equipped to deal with challenges on multiple levels, and this study identifies a number of specific practice recommendations for agencies that seek to support same-sex couples.

Inclusive, GLBT-affirming adoption agencies play a key role in minimizing the stress associated with cultural heterosexism. But just as important are legislation and state higher court rulings that protect the rights of both adoptive parents (Elze, 2006). The failure of courts to recognize members of same-sex couples as coparents denies children the symbolic and practical benefits (e.g., access to health insurance) that they deserve (Dalton, 2001). Further, legalizing only one partner’s relationship to their child may encourage others to view the legal parent as the more primary and “real” parent. And yet, these women engage in multiple forms of resistance to legal inequities, striving to protect their families to the extent possible. Of course, in doing so, they expend psychological resources that could be better spent preparing for parenthood.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There are several limitations to this study. First, our study utilized a volunteer sample. People who volunteer for research may be systemati-

cally different from people who choose not to volunteer (Rosenthal & Rosenow, 1975). This study may not include the perspectives of lesbian prospective adopters who are, for example, suspicious of research and its implications. Second, our study did not include single lesbians and gay men and gay couples. Gay men who seek to adopt appear to share similar experiences of discrimination (Matthews & Cramer, 2006), and it is likely that they also face challenges in regard to negotiating their desire for outness with the practical realities of becoming a parent. They may experience additional discrimination based on stereotypes of men as less capable of nurturance (Biernat, 2003). Future research should explore how gender intersects with sexual orientation in terms of the challenges that couples face. Third, social class was not a key focus of the analysis, although the data suggest that financial and social resources do shape women's experiences of the adoption process. Personal resources influence the type of adoption couples choose (public versus private), the agency that they use, and the degree to which they can "honor" their desire to be out (not all couples can afford to move to a state where they can co-adopt). Furthermore, for some women, being out took a backseat to other issues such as finances. Finally, most women in this study are Caucasian. The current study did not address how issues of race may impact lesbians' experiences of the adoption process. Lesbians of color may experience multiple levels of discrimination (homophobia and racism) in the adoption process, and they may experience similar feelings of frustration and powerlessness with regard to confronting suspected yet unconfirmed incidents of discrimination.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to our understanding of the challenges that lesbian couples navigate when they seek to adopt by elucidating how individual values, the social/legal context, and women's priorities in the adoption process intersect to produce varied experiences and perceptions during this key transitional period. This study also underscores the diverse ways in which lesbian prospective adopters subjectively construct the adoption process: Our analysis illustrates that even within couples, partners construct their experience in different ways. The fact that there is only partial overlap in partners' responses suggests that a variety of individual factors impact women's perception and reporting of the process, including personality, values, sensitivities (e.g., threshold for discrimination), and one's role in the process (e.g., a partner with greater contact with agency personnel may be more likely to cite discrimination).

Additionally, this study moves discussion about same-sex adoption beyond the discourse of what is in "the best interest of the child"

(Brooks & Goldberg, 2001). While recognizing that adoption by lesbian couples is indeed beneficial to children who need to be adopted, this study posits lesbian women's perspectives as an important starting point for developing research that promotes egalitarian social practices that support adoption by lesbian couples. Despite the barriers they encounter, these women shed light on what kinds of supportive practices, at the micro- and macro- level of analysis, facilitate adoption by lesbian couples. Adoption personnel and policymakers have much to learn from the experiences of lesbian women who are in the process of adopting. In this way, this research has the potential to move beyond exploratory understanding of lesbians' experiences into the realm of social action (Gergen & Zielke, 2006). While elucidating lesbian women's experiences is important, it is critical that this elucidation guide social change so that institutional and social forms of discrimination can be ameliorated.

NOTE

1. Women were asked to indicate how satisfied they were with their current agency, from 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4 = somewhat satisfied, and 5 = very satisfied

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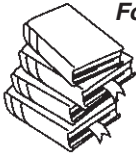
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