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“It Was the Cadillac of Adoption Agencies”: Intersections of Social Class, Race, and Sexuality in Gay Men’s Adoption Narratives

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Understanding how gay men construct and negotiate family bonds through adoptive fatherhood draws attention to how those marginalized from traditional family pathways navigate an institution embedded with heteronormative, racialized, and biolegal prescriptions. The current study predominantly draws on in-depth interviews with 12 adoptive gay fathers to detail how these men traverse the potential challenges in the transition to adoption. This article explores how a select group of privileged gay men navigate a system structured by race and class hierarchies, unpacking the social and symbolic meanings participants attribute to themselves and their prospective children during this transition. Although gay men’s pathway to parenthood is impeded by their sexual identities, their social location as white economically privileged men has as much to do with their adoption experience as their gay identity. Using an integrated theoretical lens, I argue that the ways by which these men are able to imagine and navigate their reproductive choices cannot be understood in isolation from any of their intersecting identities. Future research must begin to explore how persons of more marginalized class and racial identities manage and interpret this transition.

KEYWORDS *adoptive gay fathers, transition to adoption, transition to parenthood, alternative family, reproductive choice*

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INTRODUCTION

The heterogeneity of families constructed through adoption and fostering mirrors the kinds of diversity that characterizes contemporary American families. Gay adoptive families represent one segment of these diverse family constellations. Increasingly, adoption is becoming a major pathway for parenthood among gay men, yet they are still the minority of adopters when compared with lesbians or heterosexuals (Hicks, 2006). As such, very little is known about how these men traverse legal and social barriers to achieving adoptive fatherhood.

Understanding how gay men construct and negotiate family bonds through adoptive fatherhood draws attention to how those marginalized from traditional family pathways navigate an institution embedded with heteronormative, racialized, and biolegal prescriptions. The purpose of this study is twofold: First, to generate knowledge on the ways by which gay men negotiate the potential challenges faced in the transition to adoption. Second, to unpack the social and symbolic meanings gay men attach to themselves and their children during this transition. My analysis draws upon in-depth interviews to generate theoretical and practical insights about how institutionalized structures and (hetero) norms shape the social psychological processes by which gay men imagine and experience adoptive fatherhood. My research advances knowledge on the extent to which gay men's transition to adoption occurs within a complex system layered with heterosexism, racial hierarchies, and socioeconomic politics.

THE POLITICS OF ADOPTION

The politics of the adoption and foster care system in the United States provide a window into our nation's broader race and class inequalities. Recent data estimate that roughly 500,000 children live in foster care in the United States and more than 100,000 children currently await adoption (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001; Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007). The most desired adoptees among children awaiting adoption are healthy white infants, and the least desirable, who are often referred to as hard to place, include African-American children, older children, and ill or disabled children (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001; Lewin, 2006). What this means then is that there is a short supply of healthy white babies, and the circumstances of African-American children and other hard-to-place children are dismal (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001). Although it is a truism that white prospective adopters prefer to adopt white children (Lewin, 2006), the limited pool of these babies means that many must settle for a child of color—and often adoptive parents are willing to accept an Asian, Latin American, or even biracial child (Maldonado, 2006; Quiroz, 2007). However, although many

Americans might be willing to adopt a non-white child, most prefer that these children are not black (Maldonado, 2006; Quiroz, 2007). In fact, white Americans who adopt transracially are five times more likely to adopt a non-African-American child than an African-American child (Maldonado, 2006).

The facts that African-American children in foster care wait significantly longer to be adopted and that many adoption agencies and facilitators charge lower fees for placing African-American children exposes the racial hierarchy of adoption (Maldonado, 2006). Adoption in the United States (and globally) has become a business—one that is guided by the laws of supply and demand. Agencies charge lower fees for African-American children, higher fees for children who are half African American or Latino, Asian, or Native American, and the highest fees for white children (Maldonado, 2006). The business is also based upon a ranking and matching system wherein available children are rated and paired with available parents in terms of their desirability (Lewin, 2006). Historically, social workers and adoption agencies viewed sexual minorities as their least desirable applicants (Goldberg, 2009; Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2007). Thus, in an attempt to match the least desirable applicants with the least desirable children, gay men (and lesbian women) were often matched with hard-to-place and special-needs children (Lewin, 2006; Mallon, 2004). Today, however, more affluent gay men can circumvent this ranking and matching process by spending relatively large amounts of money to work with private agencies or facilitators (Goldberg, 2009; Lewin, 2006). Nonetheless, many still perceive the increasing numbers of non-heterosexual adopters to be a productive solution to the growing number of children needing to be adopted. However, others insist that gay men and lesbians are unsuitable parents, and agencies continue to subtly or explicitly privilege heterosexual applicants (Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, 2009).

Gay Men and Adoption

Although no exact statistics of gay adopters exist, recent data from the United States Census reveals that of the 1.6 million adopted children in the United States at least 65,000 are currently residing with lesbian or gay parents (Gates et al., 2007). Of the quarter-million children living in United States households headed by same-sex couples, 4.2% were either adopted or foster children, a figure that is almost double that of heterosexual couples (Gates & Ost, 2004). Scholars assert that this is likely a conservative estimate and does not account for foster children (Goldberg et al., 2007). Although gay adoptive families are diverse, certain patterns differentiate them from both heterosexual and lesbian adoptive families. For example, statistics indicate that the adopted children of gay male couples are older than those of their female counterparts; more than 1 in 5 children of male couples are age 13 and older

compared to only 1 in 10 among the children of female couples (Gates et al., 2007). In addition, some evidence shows that same-sex couples as a whole are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to adopt transracially (Goldberg, 2009). Among adopted children of gay and lesbian couples, 14% are foreign born, a number twice the rate among adopted children by heterosexual couples (Gates et al., 2007). Finally, among same-sex couples, gay men are more than three times more likely than their lesbian counterparts to be raising an adopted child with a disability (Gates et al., 2007).

Despite the fact that multiple organizational bodies have endorsed adoption by gays and lesbians and advocate for second-parent adoption (see for example, American Psychological Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, among others), some states continue to prohibit the recognition of adoption by same-sex parents. Because adoption is primarily a matter of state law and is usually left to the discretion of county family court judges, there is much diversity among how individual states and jurisdictions regulate same-gender adoption (Pawelski et al., 2006). Florida has an explicit statute barring adoption by anyone who is gay or lesbian,¹ Mississippi prohibits adoption by couples of the same gender, and Arkansas and Utah prohibit anyone cohabiting in a non-marital sexual relationship from adopting (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2009). In other states, however, such as New York, California, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, the law is more favorable for lesbian and gay prospective adopters, with these states having legal precedents that allow adoption by same-gender parents and permit second-parent adoption (Appell, 2003; Human Rights Campaign, 2010). Currently, 9 states (and Washington, DC) have laws that guarantee gay and lesbian couples access to second-parent adoptions statewide, while perhaps as many as 18 other states have allowed second-parent adoptions by gay or lesbian parents in some jurisdictions (Human Rights Campaign, 2010). However, in many states there is little legal resolution regarding expanding the definitions of family to include lesbian and gay adopters, their partners, and their children (Appell, 2003).

The absence of explicit policies can mean that a potential adopter's sexuality is taken into account by adoption agencies and individual adoption personnel in nuanced ways. Many adoption agencies and practitioners follow a "don't ask, don't tell" policy when it comes to adoption by non-heterosexuals by presuming the heterosexuality of their potential adoptive parents unless told otherwise (Goldberg et al., 2007; Matthews & Cramer, 2006). As such, particularly in the initial stages of the adoption process, one partner alone is most often the primary adoptive parent. Hence, the non-legal parent can become peripheral to the adoption process itself (Gianino, 2008). Even in the midst of a growing openness on the part of lesbian and gay potential parents and in states where it is legal for non-heterosexuals to adopt, some couples still opt for silence—afraid that their openness will hinder their chance of success (Mallon, 2004).

The legal and interpersonal barriers that gay men and lesbians face in adopting have been well-documented by scholars (Appell, 2003; Brodzinsky, Patterson, & Vaziri, 2002). Arguably, the most empirical and systematic analysis to date is the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute's national study of adoption agencies' attitudes, practices, and policies with gay and lesbian adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, 2003). Findings of their nationwide analysis revealed that while 65% of agencies had accepted applications from non-heterosexuals, only 39% had actually placed a child in the care of a gay or lesbian adopter. Moreover, close to 20% reported rejecting applications from lesbian or gay individuals or couples on at least one occasion either because of the agency's religious beliefs, prohibitive state laws, or a policy of placing children only with married couples. In another study integrating conversations with child welfare workers and focus groups with a small number of current and prospective gay and lesbian adoptive and foster parents, Brooks and Goldberg (2001) found that negative perceptions about lesbians' and gay men's parenting abilities provoked adoption agents to question applicants' ability to be suitable parents and to dismiss and ignore gay and lesbian potential parents in recruitment efforts. Goldberg, Downing, and Sauck's (2007) study of lesbian couples' transitions to adoption indicated that women in their sample encountered numerous legal, social, and interpersonal barriers to adoption. Matthews and Cramer's (2006) research on gay adopters highlighted the extent to which some agencies used heteronormative application forms, discouraged openness about sexual orientation, and pressured potential adopters to consider parenting "hard-to-place" children. Not surprisingly, many gay and lesbian adopters report a sense of powerlessness when decisions so important to their future seem so far out of their control (Gianino, 2008; Matthews & Cramer, 2006). Beyond becoming experts on adoption and child welfare bureaucracies, gay and lesbian prospective adopters also must become proficient in consorting with birth mothers, policymakers, judges, and social workers who may perceive them to be unfit parents, despite an abundance of research that shows sexual orientation is irrelevant to one's parental ability (Patterson, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Gay and lesbian adoptive family formation is dependent on others; on birth mothers who may have homophobic beliefs or on adoption agents whose chief job is governed by the economics of placing and matching children in a hierarchal system that positions both lesbian and gay parents and hard-to-place children at the very bottom (Gianino, 2008).

Some researchers have documented how gay men are more likely than their lesbian counterparts to encounter resistance from adoption professionals because parenting continues to remain the alleged natural domain of women (Johnson & Connor, 2002). However, a lacuna of data attends specifically to how gay men traverse the legal and social barriers associated with adoption (see Gianino, 2008; Lewin, 2006; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009, for exceptions). Furthermore, there is a paucity of research that investigates the

social psychological processes involved in gay men's thoughts about constructing their families through adoption (see Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007, for an exception). The aim of this study is to enrich the literature on GLBT families by exploring the experiences of gay adoptive parents with particular emphasis on answering the following research questions:

1. What challenges do prospective gay adopters experience in the adoption process, and how do they navigate these challenges? Related, to what extent does social class influence how some gay men are able to negotiate these challenges?
2. What does it mean for gay men to envision and define themselves as potential or active adopters?
3. How do men envision and plan for their future children? How are these meanings constructed through socioeconomic and racialized hierarchies?

Theoretical Sensitivity

A theoretical perspective that integrates symbolic interactionism (SI), feminism, and intersectionality informs and guides my research on how gay men imagine and experience adoption. SI assumes that human beings possess the ability to think and imbue their world with meaning. When situated in the current study, the SI perspective emphasizes how gay men develop their self-images within the context of their interactions with others (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Similarly, this perspective emphasizes how gay men develop their prospective selves as adoptive fathers, and how meanings of self and family emerge from gay men's interactions with others specifically through exchanges with birth mothers, adoption agencies, attorneys, and social workers (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). SI illuminates how the meanings gay men associate with aspects of the adoptive arena emerge out of a social, interpretive process. I attend to the social processes by which participants assign meaning to situations, events, others, and themselves as they encounter facets of the adoption process. The meanings gay men construct are critical in understanding how these men conceptualize their sense of self as a prospective or active adoptive gay father.

Feminists have long challenged the ideology of the monolithic family. A feminist analysis unpacks how families are embedded within wider systems of economic, historical, and political structures and highlights how family is experienced differently by men and women, and by people of different social classes, sexualities, and racial groups (Baca Zinn, 1994). Feminists are increasingly noting the importance of race, class, and sexuality in family scholarship. However, intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality are typically only included in analyses of marginalization, and scholars often overlook how privilege and subordination can intersect in families (Baca

Zinn, 1994). For example, the majority of research on lesbian and gay families, while contributing immensely to our understanding of sexuality and kinship, has been far less successful in integrating analyses of race and social class. However, heterosexism, racism, and classism intersect in these family constellations in complex ways. When situated in the current study, an intersectional lens (Collins, 1990) illuminates how gay adoptive fathers and their children occupy specific locations with varying social, cultural, and economic resources that shape how their family is constructed and experienced. Moreover, recent research has documented how constructions of race, family, and socio-political power are all compounded within the institution of adoption (Quiroz, 2007). Of interest for my research is how sexuality becomes intertwined with race, class, and gender to shape how a specific sample of gay men imagine and experience the adoption process.

METHOD

This paper is part of my dissertation research that uses in-depth interviews with 19 childless men and 22 fathers to explore the procreative consciousness and fathering experiences of gay men. One of the major themes that emerged in my findings concerned gay men's challenges in their transition to fatherhood (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009). In this paper, I explore this theme further, specifically attending to how gay men imagined and traversed challenges in the transition to adoptive fatherhood. As such, my analysis in this paper predominantly draws from my conversations with the 12 adoptive fathers in my sample. However, at times I interweave the narrative fragments of some of the 19 childless men I interviewed through my analysis to illustrate how childless gay men perceive, imagine, and plan for adoption.

Recruitment and Participants

The group of childless gay men differed substantially from the subsample of fathers. The demographic data are artifacts of my recruitment strategies and should not be regarded as substantive findings of my research. The childless gay participants were more racially, ethnically, and economically diverse than the fathers. A detailed description of the childless subsample and the men who became fathers in ways other than adoption can be found elsewhere (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007).

The participants were recruited through flyers, LISTSERVs, volunteer efforts in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) centers, word-of-mouth, and snowball sampling from 2004 to 2006. Recruitment began in Florida with two separate adoptive fathers, Parker and Brian, residing

in Miami. Each of these men was interviewed at their respective homes. Because Florida prohibits adoption by gay men, it was difficult for me to persuade adoptive fathers to participate in my research. Recruitment for the remainder of participants took place in New York City and its surrounding areas from June 2004 through August 2004. Art and Rick are one of the two couples in my sample. These men chose to be interviewed together in their suburban house an hour from Manhattan. Andrew, Craig, Lawrence, Tommy, and Ethan are each part of an adoptive couple that lived in Manhattan and its surrounding suburbs. I interviewed each of these men in their homes, offices, or in coffee shops without their partners because of time constraints, busy work schedules, or simply because they were more eager to participate in my project than were their partners. Randy is a single gay father who lives about an hour away from Manhattan with whom I spent hours in his local coffee shop. Simon and Theo, an adoptive couple living in Los Angeles, were recruited through a gay fathering organization and chose to be interviewed together in their home. Finally, Spencer is a single father living in suburban Massachusetts whom I interviewed over the telephone. Except for those residing in Florida, gay adoptive fathers were recruited in states that currently have legal precedents that allow adoption by gays and lesbians and permit second-parent adoption (New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, California). Although all of these states now have favorable policies, many of the older fathers in my sample pursued adoption before these statutes were in place. Thus, participants' adoption experiences varied depending on both their state of residence and the sociohistorical context.

The fathers participating in my research were white, and most were financially well off. In the analysis that follows, I show how participants' negotiations with the adoption system are not only products of their gay identities, but also their social location as white, economically privileged men. Although all fathers were white, 6 (2 couples and 2 single men) out of the 12 men were raising children of color. All except two fathers had completed college, with five holding an advanced graduate degree. All except for two of these men earned more than \$75,000 annually, and the remaining two earned between \$30,000 and \$60,000. Fathers' ages ranged from 36 to 55.

Interviews and Analysis

All participants provided informed consent. Prior to the initiation of each interview, I explained the nature of the project to each participant, conveyed the importance of the study, and requested permission to audiotape the interview. Each participant was informed of his right to refuse to answer any question or terminate the interview if he felt it was too personal, inappropriate, or uncomfortable. Semi-structured interviews were conducted that lasted from 45 to 120 minutes. These took place in a variety of settings

(e.g., participants' households or work offices, coffee shops, eating and drinking establishments, and over the telephone). Although it was my intention to conduct all interviews individually, men who were coupled (Simon and Theo and Art and Rick) asked to be interviewed together. The qualitative interviews were preceded by a brief socio-demographic background survey. Interviews were open-ended and designed to generate rich, detailed information. Participants were encouraged to discuss their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and personal narratives regarding their fantasies about and experiences with fatherhood. Analysis for this paper is based on the following interview questions:

- What are or were your thoughts on being a biological father? What about adoption?
- Can you tell me about how you became a father? What were some of the challenges you faced?
- What were some of the thoughts you had before and during the adoption process?
- Can you tell me about the conversations you had with your partner or others about adoption?

I employed a constructivist framework in my analysis (Charmaz, 2006), underscoring the mutual construction of knowledge by the researcher and participant. My conceptual framework and theoretical orientation shaped analysis in terms of research questions, interview questions, sample and recruitment, and analytic codes and categories. I analyzed narratives with the intention of developing themes that could best capture the data and transcend participants' specific experiences. As ideas surfaced in multiple interviews, they were coded and given tentative labels during the initial phase of the coding process. As similarities in experience, patterns, and emergent themes appeared, I labeled categories of phenomena and entered them into a code list. I then embarked on the process of focused coding using what I found to be the most significant theme, *the intersections of homophobia, racial hierarchies, and socioeconomic power* to sift through the narratives of adoptive fathers (Charmaz, 2006). The story that emerged and that I share with readers here is how a select group of privileged gay men managed to traverse a system replete with heteronormative, raced, and classed ideologies.

FINDINGS

Becoming and Being a Gay Adoptive Father

I separate my analysis and findings into two main sections. First, I detail how adoptive fathers navigated legal, structural, and institutional barriers

that oftentimes plagued their pathway to adoptive fatherhood, paying specific attention to how class privilege shaped their transition to adoption. I then explore the question of what it means to be a gay adoptive father. I consider the meanings gay fathers attach to themselves and to their prospective children and unpack how these meanings are created within a multilayered system wherein genetic privilege, heteronormativity, socioeconomic power, and racial hierarchies coexist.

NEGOTIATING OBSTACLES/OVERCOMING CHALLENGE

Research documents that the experience of coming out as a gay man was once synonymous with the realization that one would be eternally childless (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Mallon, 2004). Consistent with this finding, the fathers I spoke with all assumed that they would never have children unless they chose to reproduce within a heterosexual relationship. Usually some particular event, identity transition, or turning point transformed how they were able to envision their future as one that could integrate gayness with fatherhood. Randy, a single gay father who adopted two boys in the mid-1980s, told me about the day that changed his life. One afternoon a woman came into his natural foods shop inquiring about baby formulas. Randy replied that the healthiest and most natural option was to breastfeed. She retorted that this was not an option because she was adopting. When he replied, "But I thought you were single," she explained that she was a single woman adopting. Randy immediately followed with, "Do they let single gay men adopt?" She lowered her voice and said, "Well, there are two guys in our group, New York Singles Adopting Children (NYSAC), and I don't know for sure, but they both appear to be gay." Randy was at the very next meeting for NYSAC. He introduced himself to these men, who ultimately guided him through the adoption process. It was this chance encounter with a single woman at his natural foods shop that Randy reflects on as the instrumental moment at which he came to embrace a significantly different perspective on his life. This new perspective enabled him to become exposed to his possible self as a gay adoptive father—an identity that until that day was incomprehensible for him to imagine. This turning point marked the beginning of a complex journey through a labyrinth of social workers, attorneys, and other gatekeepers before he would be able to fulfill his fantasy of becoming an adoptive father.

When men like Randy decide that they want to pursue adoption, they are unsure how to begin, where to turn, and what to do. Because very few agencies actively recruit gay adopters, many men were forced to rely on an informal and unorganized network of referrals. Some men turned to friends who had already adopted for advice, while others looked to more formal sources of information, such as studying adoption pamphlets and actively

attending meetings. Regardless of where they turned, men reported being overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness and confusion. Lawrence, one of the pioneering fathers I spoke with, remembered his experience in New York in the mid-1980s:

So there were all these people at this adoption conference, you know, talking about all the different ways of adopting; you could do domestic adoption, but domestic had two ways, you could do public or private. You could do your own private adoption with a lawyer, you can go to these, also these places like Friend of Adoption or just facilitators; you could do international adoption. There were just all these options, and we came home and we were like exhausted because we had all these things to think about. And it just seemed overwhelming.

Parker, a father who adopted his children nearly a decade after Lawrence did, recalled a similar experience:

There are so many options . . . we took like a good like two years doing just research . . . not every day, like on the weekends we would sit down and talk about it and you know, just try to figure it out.

After the men decided on an adoption route, their days became consumed with interacting with social workers, attending classes and workshops, and preparing for home studies. While this phase of the adoption process is experienced by most, if not all, prospective adopters, gay men pursuing adoption face added layers of complexity because of the heteronormative assumptions governing family and gendered norms that view parenting as the alleged natural domain of women. Participants experienced this phase of the adoption process differently, with some reporting overwhelmingly positive memories and others reflecting on this time with disdain. Randy, a single father who adopted in New York in the 1980s, recalled how he was able to convince a social worker to work with him:

The social worker who did the home study—I was open with her. She was from Long Island, and she had a brother that was gay, and she was friendly. But when I first called, then you know I'm applying, she said, "oh I'm not doing any more home studies with gay men. I don't want to get in trouble. You're going to have to wait," because you see, she thought she was going to end up on the cover of *New York Times* like too many gay adoptions. . . . I didn't take no for an answer, so I just went full speed ahead so she had to do the home study.

Other men found it more difficult to secure these necessary allies. Lawrence, who also adopted in New York in the 1980s, remembered how he was constantly dealing with adoption agencies giving him the cold shoulder:

This is what you get, you know when you're gay, it was like the last bastion of a place where people could be prejudiced and biased and not be reprimanded, not be punished for it . . . they were allowed to kind of push you aside . . . if you wanted a child you had to put up with this.

Lawrence did eventually find an agency to work with him—one that was publicly discounting of gay adoption but willing to facilitate the adoption discretely as long as either he or his partner agreed to remain completely invisible. It was Lawrence who agreed to be the invisible one, and he remembered with dismay hiding in the upstairs apartment the day the agency brought his first son home, pressing his ear to the floor so that he could hear the sound of his new baby. Contemporary adoption and foster care agencies serve as a ruling relation wherein underlying homophobic practices regularly surface and shape how gay men experience the transition to fatherhood (Hicks, 2008). On a positive note, the adoption experience for gay men in states with more favorable policies, such as New York, Massachusetts, and California, has improved since Lawrence's experience two decades ago, illuminating how the sociohistorical context and changing legalities in adoption shape how gay men experience this transition. Simon and Theo, the couple living in Los Angeles, told me about their open-adoption experience using a private agency in the late 1990s with nothing other than praise for their social worker, the birth mother, and the agency personnel. Spencer, too, recalled his adoption process as positive, though more labor intensive than Simon and Theo's because of his choice to foster a boy with mental trauma. He elaborated on the months preceding the adoption of his 10-year old son in Massachusetts:

Well the first thing I had to do was to take an eight-week parenting course, and it was specifically for people adopting from DSS (Department of Social Services), and the parenting taught is essentially parenting traumatized kids who have attachment issues and behavior problems and so forth. . . . I do think they design it for people who would just not be able to handle it. But for me . . . it convinced me to go ahead and do it. . . . Then you're committed to the adopting process and you go through a home study. The social worker came to my house I think four times, they look for cleanliness, safety hazards. . . . I had identified a bedroom for him and there was ample play and closet space and a decent bathroom. Then the time came for him to transition into my house. Needless to say, it was a long process.

The transition to fatherhood was remembered as one prolonged by bureaucratic red tape even for those men who did not adopt children with disabilities or trauma. However, gay men who lived in Florida faced the additional stress of having to circumvent explicit legal statues prohibiting them from adopting. The men in Florida who I spoke with shared how

they fulfilled their fantasies of becoming adoptive fathers in a state that categorically prohibits them from doing so. Parker explained that he adopted through a private agency—a process that can cost up to \$20,000. At the time of the adoption, Parker's partner was earning over a six-figure salary while Parker was able to stay home and manage the adoption process. Although their financial resources afforded them the luxury of bypassing the discriminatory policies of the state, their adoption experience was not without its sacrifices. Stated Parker:

My partner is the legal father, and they hold his last name. . . . It's one of those things that if you live in Florida, you, there are sacrifices that you make and there are things that you know, you do to get to where you want to be.

Despite the fact that Parker and his partner possessed supplemental documents identifying both men as fathers, their family remains legally unrecognized by the state, as only one father is listed on the birth certificate. Brian, another adoptive father in Florida, explained that he and his partner managed to dodge state prohibitions on gay adoption by traveling to Vermont where they eventually established residency and adopted a daughter. This way, stated Brian, "We are both on the birth certificate, and Florida is forced to recognize it." Brian continued to detail how he and his partner rented an apartment in Vermont for two years in order to establish residency and were required to make monthly visits to meet face-to-face with the social worker and the adoption agency. However, many prospective adopters do not have the financial wherewithal to finance out-of-state monthly flights and an additional apartment. When I mentioned to Brian that the adoption for him seemed to be rather costly of both his time and money, he replied, "No, it didn't cost too much. We flew JetBlue and rent in Vermont is more reasonable than in South Florida." While Brian's class privilege may have been less salient to his identity than the societal marginalization he experiences as a gay man, his story further highlights the extent to which financial factors shape how potential gay adopters navigate their way through a complex system beset with subtle and explicit discriminatory practices.

The most financially accessible way to become an adoptive parent is through the foster care system. Many children in foster care are considered undesirable as a result of their age and the trauma that oftentimes accompanies time spent in the child welfare system. Spencer was the only father I interviewed who adopted a special-needs child and receives an un-taxable \$606.00 stipend every two weeks from the state for providing his son with a safe, secure, and sanitary environment. However, his son, Joseph, who is a victim of childhood trauma, consumes a great deal of his time and energy because of his behavioral challenges. Spencer, a single father, recently

decided to quit his high-paying job and is now employed as a part-time consultant who works from home. Ironically, even though Spencer receives money from the state, his decision to father a special-needs child has resulted in a substantial decrease in his annual income. Fortunately, Spencer is able to dip into his savings—a luxury that not all adoptive parents possess. Thus, even adoption routes considered to be economically accessible are only possible for those men who either have the financial resources to cut their work hours and dip into their savings, or have the ability to rely on social support from partners, close friends, and family.

The above narratives underscore how sociohistorical context, state legalities, and social location intersect to construct how gay men experience the transition to adoption. Where for many of these men the adoption process was rife with complications and hurdles, the majority looked back on this process as a blessing in disguise. Simon's comment sums up how participants felt following the adoption process: "Unfortunately in the real world any bonehead can make a baby and not be responsible for it, but in the adoption world they make you very responsible, which is a good thing." Simon's concluding statement underscores that although these men's stories are representative of a particular family category constructed through class privilege, gay fathers can reflect on and appreciate the challenges in the adoptive realm as equipping them with a cultural and interpersonal tool kit necessary to handle the unpredictability of parenthood.

I now ask what it really means for these men to be adoptive gay fathers in contemporary United States society. How are these meanings constructed within socioeconomic and race hierarchies? How do these men position themselves and their families in a broader societal context after going through what for many was such a tumultuous process? How do these men plan for and control the kinds of families they are prepared to raise?

Father's Identity/Children's Identity

Hereafter, I explore and unpack the social and symbolic meanings of adoptive gay fatherhood. My conversations with the 12 men in my sample who became fathers through adoption highlight the extent to which their children are perceived as having been destined to complete their families regardless of (or perhaps because of) the absence of a genetic relationship. Ethan is the adoptive father of a 13-year-old girl. He eloquently summed up how many of my participants spoke about their bonds to their adoptive children:

I feel that before you adopt, you ask a question that you never ask after you adopt. The question was, am I going to feel the same about an adopted child as I would about a biological child? ... Once you hold your child, I mean, I couldn't feel more attached to my daughter if I

carried her in my own belly for nine months and there's no, it's like a strange feeling of that there was no question that I am her father, and I was meant to be her father, and she was meant to be my daughter.

A consistent theme among adoptive fathers like Ethan was that genetic ties do not determine family; rather it is the presence and the depth of emotional bonds that establish familial relationships. In their everyday interactions, gay adoptive fathers and their children are challenging hegemonic discourses that assume biology and heterosexuality to be a prerequisite for family. Thus, it should not be surprising that many of the adoptive fathers I spoke with reflected on the political implications of adoption. For many of these men, adoption was more than a personal decision; it was also a political act. For example C.J., a 39-year-old childless man living in Manhattan, vividly remembered what triggered him to want to become an adoptive father. He explained that he had read a story in *People* magazine in 1987 that told the story of a young girl in India who was going to be put to death in her village because she had a discoloration on her face and the villagers thought she was possessed by the devil. The story continued with a heartwarming account of how a gay man in San Francisco adopted her even though the villagers said that God was going to condemn him. Almost 20 years later, at the time of the interview, C.J. still had the article in his possession and referred to this story countless times throughout our conversation as "the most influential thing I had ever read." C.J.'s desire to one day adopt a child was not only a personal decision that would enrich his own life, but was conceptualized as an act with political ramifications that could contribute to global human betterment.

For other men, the political implications of adoption were closer to home. Spencer, the father of a mentally challenged 12-year-old boy, Joseph, explained:

My son was 10, he was 8 when I met him, and he was 10 when he moved in, and 10 is deemed the point of no return because when a boy turns 10 he is not going to be adopted. You know I think it's funny that people who are opposed to gay parenting . . . I say, "Well, who's going to adopt these very-hard-to adopt kids? . . . It's the gay people because you folks certainly are not doing it."

By adopting Joseph, Spencer was not only satiating his fathering desires; he was to some extent doing activism (Broad, Alden, Berkowitz, & Ryan, 2008). Spencer criticizes public and legal discourses that ban gays from adopting, asserting that without gay and lesbian adopters these children would languish endlessly in the foster care system—an assertion validated by reports of gay men fostering and adopting children with health challenges and typically deemed unadoptable by heterosexuals (Mallon, 2004). As Lewin states, "It

is by now a truism that the ‘best’ children are reserved for heterosexual couples . . . the ranking system is well known: most sought after [children] are newborn, healthy white babies” (2006, p. 135). Yet, many gay men are willing and determined to adopt those children considered to be undesirable along such medical, age, or racial criteria. In fact, Spencer continued to tell me how he wants his next child to be African American because “I was one of those people who was oblivious to their own racism 10 years ago until I joined the Unitarian Universalist Church and I have learned so much about racism and what it does. . . . I have developed a passion for being involved in anti-racism work.” He then asserts that he wants to adopt a third, Latino child because of the large Latino population in Boston. Spencer is engaging in and constructing his adoption as an activism of sorts (Broad et al., 2008) that combines anti-racist motives and social responsibility. His fatherhood desires and plans were shaped by the effects of urban poverty, racism, and neglect in the city that was his home.

When I asked Craig why he and his partner decided to become foster parents in New York, he responded that he and his partner, an interracial couple, wanted to adopt a black child or at the very least a child of color. Craig was well-versed on the racial politics of adoption and explained that he was “very fascinated by institutionalized racism, and [I] believe that the foster care system is almost a precursor to what the prison system is for adults, and how that plays out for black culture.” Perhaps because many of these men were from urban metropolises, such as Manhattan and Boston, where poverty and racism are ubiquitous to anyone who pays attention, the thought of pursuing international adoption was—to be cliché—a foreign, if not ridiculous, option. Craig explained:

Some people go to Guatemala or you know Honduras or whatever to adopt babies and I think it kind of gives them a false sense of security about what kind of treatment the mother may have had or you know, make sure they’re not somehow handicapped in some way or other. But they’re much more reluctant to get an African-American or Latino-American child. I talked to some guys last week about their adoption in Ecuador. It took them six months to get their kid home. Six months. One of them had to live there for three months . . . and I’m thinking, people don’t want to go through the public system because of the bureaucracy, but they’re willing to go get a yellow child in Ecuador, give up six months of their lives.

Both Craig and Barbara Katz Rothman (2005) maintain that the enticement of transnational adoption lies with the availability of almost-white children. The majority of children adopted transnationally are what Rothman terms, “A discreet shade of white, not white perhaps, but assuredly not black” (2005, p. 49). While to some extent all adoptive children are

devalued, transnationally adopted children are at least not racially devalued (Rothman, 2005). Scholars have explored the shifting meaning of race in America, with a three-tiered system emerging—white at the top, black on the bottom, and an intermediary group of honorary whites somewhere in the middle (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). The racial heritage and identity of children from Asia or Latin America confers upon them this “honorary white” status. When there is a shortage of white children to be domestically adopted, as is the case in the United States, prospective parents can turn to these nations to fulfill their parenting dreams (Quiroz, 2007). Another reason international adoption is appealing is its ability to erase the identity of the birth mother, in that the children appear to come from orphanages, not birth mothers. Quite simply, unlike birth mothers, orphanages do not come back to legally reclaim their children (Rothman, 2005). Yet, despite these appeals, none of the men in my sample turned to international adoption to fulfill their parenting dreams. Some men, however, did traverse domestic adoption with specific considerations about skin color and racial hierarchies.

Part of the adoption process is that parents are forced to choose the children they adopt. In fact, Rothman states that, “Adoption becomes an exercise in thoughtful comparative shopping” (2005, p. 52). This idea of choice surfaced as a way for fathers to think about and plan for the kind of child they were prepared to raise. However, men were aware that their choice was constrained by the market forces of the adoption process, wherein white children were differentially valued and almost impossible to adopt (Lewin, 2006; Maldonado, 2006). Brian stated, “We never put on the list that we wanted a white boy or girl, we never thought we would get that because the agency said it is almost impossible, these kids are sought after.”

Participants were aware of the history of gay men adopting or fostering children that were considered undesirable (Mallon, 2004). Men considering adoption were forced to think about what level of undesirable or unadoptable they were prepared to deal with. Art and Rick told me that when they were considering adoption they “were afraid that the only way for us to get a child would be a very special-needs child. . . . We didn’t have the patience, we knew it was something we couldn’t do. . . . It takes a very special person, God bless them, but it is not for us.” The adoption process gives parents the discursive space to decide if they are prepared for the possibility of a disabled child. Parker recalled his conversation with his partner: “We did not want to deal with severe retardation or Down syndrome . . . because we’re talking our first kid, and we were not prepared to deal with that. . . . But you have a choice . . . that’s one of the great things about adoption.” Where most men were eager to father hard-to-place children, their eagerness did not extend to parenting special-needs children. The demands for caring for a child with disability or trauma are extraordinary (Glidden, 2006) and all of the men in my sample could not imagine themselves taking on this challenge—that is, all except for Spencer. Where Spencer claims he “does

not have even the slightest little regret, even though it is a slow process,” the overwhelming majority of men were completely unwilling to even consider adopting a child with disability or trauma. Nevertheless, the ability to have the discursive space to consider the possibility of parenting a child with special needs was viewed by these men as one of the built-in benefits of adoption.

Lawrence, too, remembered the conversations he had with his partner about what kind of child they were prepared to raise:

We also had to think about, you know do I want a child who has disabilities, if so, what kind of disabilities, you know. What about race, you had to be really honest with yourself. Do I want a child who's black? You had to be completely honest about what you wanted. It couldn't be like, oh yes, wouldn't it be nice to adopt a black child and not really mean it, you know. . . . You had to really express to each other what you want, and what you could live with.

America is not a color-blind society. To be frank, race matters. It matters in housing and hiring practices, in life chances, in choices for a life partner, and in adoption. In the private adoption marketplace, there is a discernable pattern in which children are valued according to racial/ethnic heritage (Maldonado, 2006; Quiroz, 2007). Although black children are being adopted in greater numbers than ever before, the demand for children and babies of other racial/ethnic groups is greater (Freundlich, 2000). Given these data it shouldn't come as any surprise that of 12 white gay men, Craig, the only man in my sample in an interracial relationship, was also the only man currently raising a black child. Although five other men were raising children of color, these children were Latino, Asian-American, or mixed race, and thus would be categorized as part of the intermediary group of honorary whites.

Later in our conversation Lawrence further elaborated on the issue of thinking about and planning for the possibility of fathering a child of color:

You can never transmit to the child that they are anything less than perfect. If you are saying I could love a black child but I would rather have a white child, you know that sense is always going to be transmitted to your children. . . . I felt most comfortable with a Latino child, being Italian, than with a blond-haired, blue-eyed . . . we didn't necessarily want a white child. . . . I am from New York so I felt more connected to Latino cultures.

To be clear, I am not assuming that Lawrence and his partner would not have been perfectly happy if their child was black. In fact, they most likely would have been thrilled. However, I employ this narrative fragment to illustrate how his mental negotiations were constructed within a racial hierarchy that positions white at the top, black at the bottom, and many Asian groups,

light-skinned Latinos, and biracial persons in the middle (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Moreover, arguments such as Lawrence's that emphasize preferences for cultural or physical similarity consistently surface as reasons behind why some families prefer to adopt white (or honorary white) infants, in that adoptive parents suspect these children will blend better into their families, at least phenotypically (Quiroz, 2007; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009).

The fact that adoptive parents with more financial means can try to control the health and the racial and ethnic heritage of their child is consistent with Western values that hinge on our ability to control our present and future experiences (Rothman, 2005). As detailed above, adoption was a realm where these men had limited power. Thus, the ability to choose and plan for their future children was one dimension of the process that they could seemingly control. These men were concerned with their children's futures and with the discrimination their children would likely experience for having a gay father (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). Some of the ways they may have felt they could minimize this discrimination was through forging the burden of caring for a disabled child, eschewing the prejudice that accompanies black-white racism, and wanting to have a family that phenotypically resembles one another. Because the idea of control resonates well with American definitions of responsibility (Rothman, 2005), the ability to plan for—and more frequently—avoid issues of racism and disability was simply discussed as good family planning. Yet, men's conversations about which children are most desired provides considerable insight into the class and race politics of adoption (Lewin, 2006; Maldonado, 2006) and the extent to which consumerism is intertwined with the adoption system.

DISCUSSION

When I began analysis of my interviews with gay adoptive fathers for this paper, my intention was to describe the heteronormative challenges and barriers these men faced in their transition to adoption. However, what emerged instead is a story of how a select group of privileged gay men navigate a system saturated with race and class ideologies and hierarchies. In spite of our best efforts, consumerism dominates everything in American society (Rothman, 2005). Nowhere is this more visible than in the field of adoption. The gay adoptive fathers in my sample did not just experience the transition to fatherhood through their marginalized sexual identities, though this did impede their pathway to parenthood. Their social location as white economically privileged men had as much to do with their adoption experience as their gay identity; and the ways by which these men were able to imagine and navigate their reproductive choices cannot be understood in isolation from any of their intersecting identities.

Although a limitation of my sample is that it relies on the experiences of white financially well-to-do gay fathers, these narratives provide insight into the ways that sexual marginalization intersects with class and race privilege to shape the transition to adoption for a select group of socially advantaged gay men. Too often studies of gay and lesbian parenting have neglected to theorize the extent to which privilege can intersect with subordination in the process of family building. In fact, class privilege shapes the adoption process so much for these men that Ethan referred to his experience with an elite private agency as “the Cadillac of adoption agencies.” Likewise, in every aspect of our lives, race matters. In every existing social institution in the United States, whiteness is privileged. White privilege in adoption is manifested first in the lack of available white children, and, second, that more white persons have the financial capital to pay for the children they most desire (Dalmage, 2006). Socioeconomic power and racial/ethnic identity influence the type of adoption gay men choose, the child they ultimately end up raising, and their interactions with adoption gatekeepers.

Now that we have a more nuanced understanding of how white economically privileged gay men experience and define the adoption process, future research must begin to explore how persons of more marginalized class and racial identities navigate and interpret this transition. Researchers have documented how gay men of color not only face the societal homophobia and heterosexism experienced by all GLBT persons, but also confront estrangement from their own racial and ethnic communities of origin (Green, 2007). Given this added layer of hostility and the fact that men of color have fewer financial resources, it is likely that black and Latino gay men pursuing adoption are unable to exert situational power and control in the same ways as men with more cultural and economic capital. Studies of fostering and adoption must be expanded to include the experiences of how all gay men and lesbians experience this process, critically examining the extent to which heteronormativity intersects with other axes of oppression. Consistent with this is how heteronormativity contributes to limited ideas about what type of gay men are most appropriate to father. Not only do ideas about race and class come into play here, but also issues of gender conformity, the appearance of asexuality, and regular interactions with heterosexuals (Hicks, 2008).

This study advances knowledge on the extent to which the pursuit of adoptive fatherhood for gay men entails a considerable amount of emotional labor and financial resources. Although the adoption process may facilitate the transition to parenthood by requiring prospective gay parents to consciously evaluate their desire and ability to raise a child, these men confront unnecessary barriers at multiple levels. Inclusive adoption agencies are critical for reducing some of the challenges gay men pursuing adoption experience as a result of institutionalized heterosexism (Goldberg, 2009). Just as important are state and federal legislation that protect the rights of gay

fathers and their children (Goldberg et al., 2007). However, these legal victories and increases in social inclusivity for gay fathers and their families will only be truly successful if they occur within a broader family politics that addresses issues of inequality across all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines.

NOTE

1. In 2008, a Miami-Dade circuit court judge ruled that this statute was unconstitutional, thus allowing some adoptions by gay individuals to take place in the state of Florida since the rulings (Almanzar, 2008). This ruling was upheld recently, and the law is no longer being enforced.

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