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# Lesbian and Gay Adoptive Parents and Their Children

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Many lesbian and gay adults have adopted children in the USA and in other parts of the world (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007; Patterson & Tornello, 2011). According to data from national surveys, lesbian and gay adults are raising 4% of all adopted children in the USA (Gates et al., 2007), and many other lesbian and gay adults express a desire to become parents (Gates et al., 2007; Riskind & Patterson, 2010). Despite the fact that adoptive families headed by lesbian and gay parents exist, there is continued controversy surrounding the adoption of children by lesbian and gay adults (Patterson, 2009). Adoption of children by lesbian and gay adults is regulated by a complex array of laws and policies, and these often vary from one jurisdiction to another. The resulting patchwork of law and policy creates challenges for adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents and for all those who work with them. Until recently, there has been little empirical research that can specifically

inform decision making on this topic. Within the last decade, a growing body of research on the adoption of children by lesbian and gay parents has begun to address questions that have been at the center of public controversies.

In this chapter, we review research on lesbian and gay adoptive parents and their children in the context of an interdisciplinary framework. Studies of lesbian and gay adoptive parenting have emerged primarily from the fields of developmental and clinical psychology, but research from social work, family studies, demography, sociology, public policy, law, and economics is also relevant. In the context of research on adoption, and controversies about lesbian and gay adoptive parents, we provide an overview of recent research in this area. We consider work describing the pathways to adoption for lesbian and gay adults, and we summarize findings on their experiences in the adoption process. We also review research on psychosocial and adjustment outcomes for children, parents, and families when lesbian and gay parents adopt children. Throughout the chapter, similarities among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parent families are discussed, such as those regarding outcomes for children adopted by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents. Ways in which lesbian and gay adoptive parents may differ from heterosexual adoptive parents are also noted, such as their reasons for adopting children. Finally, we offer recommendations for future research and practice.

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## Research on Adoptive Families

One context for understanding issues facing lesbian and gay adoptive parents and their children is the body of research on adoption. A large literature explores adoptive family dynamics and psychosocial outcomes of adopted children, with samples predominantly comprising heterosexual couples and parents and their adopted children (Brodzinsky & Palacios, 2005; Javier, Baden, Biafora, & Comacho-Gingerich, 2007; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010; Wrobel, Hendrickson, & Grotevant, 2006; Wrobel & Neil, 2009). From the late 1950s through the 1990s, much of the research on adoption focused on outcomes for adopted children (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Over the last two decades, however, research has also expanded to include consideration of many different adoption-related issues, such as openness in adoption (Grotevant et al., 2007) outcomes for members of birth families (Henny, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy & Grotevant, 2007), transracial adoption (Burrow & Finley, 2004), and communication within families about adoption issues (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003).

Research regarding outcomes of children who have been adopted has indicated that, relative to their non-adopted peers (i.e., children remaining with their biological families), adopted children are at risk for some negative outcomes (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010), prominent among which are behavior problems. Children who experience institutionalization before being adopted appear to be particularly at risk for later problems. For example, Gunnar, Van Dulmen, and The International Adoption Project Team (2007) assessed child behavioral adjustment using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) with 1,948 internationally adopted children. Those children who had experienced institutionalization for longer periods ( $n=899$ ) had greater behavior problems than those who had experienced shorter or no periods of institutionalization ( $n=1,038$ ). Other research has indicated that children adopted through foster care often fare worse in terms of behavioral and adjustment outcomes than do children adopted through private domestic

agencies or international agencies (Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; Vandivere & McKlindon, 2010). Simmel, Barth, and Brooks (2007) found that youth adopted from foster care ( $n=293$ ) exhibited higher rates of behavior problems than did adopted nonfoster care youth ( $n=312$ ), as reported by adoptive parents on the Behavioral Problems Index. Both groups, however, had greater behavioral difficulties than those in the general population.

Negative outcomes do not, however, characterize adoptive children across the board. For instance, Juffer and Van IJzendoorn's (2007) meta-analysis of 88 studies comparing 10,997 children who were adopted internationally, domestically, and/or transracially with 33,862 children who were not adopted revealed no significant differences in children's self-esteem as a function of adoption. In addition, adopted children had higher self-esteem than their non-adopted, institutionalized peers. In a meta-analysis of studies examining the IQ and school performance of 17,767 adopted children, van IJzendoorn, Juffer, and Poelhuis (2005) found no significant differences in IQ between adopted and non-adopted children. School performance and language of adopted children, however, lagged behind the performances of their non-adopted peers. In contrast, adopted children scored higher on IQ tests and performed better in school than did children who remained in institutional care. Overall, adoption appears to be an effective intervention for children who face certain kinds of adversity early in life.

In an effort to reconcile differences in results among studies of children's outcomes, researchers have examined the role of a number of mediating factors, such as pre-adoptive life circumstances (Grotevant et al., 2006), adoptive family environments (Whitten & Weaver, 2010), the interaction of pre-adoptive factors and adoptive family environments (Ji, Brooks, Barth, & Kim, 2010), family relationships and interactions (Rueter, Keyes, Iacono, & McGue, 2009), communication about adoption (Grotevant, Rueter, Von Korff, & Gonzalez, 2012), awareness of adoption and adoptive identity (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2007; Juffer, 2006), the

role of open adoption (Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006), and the role of appraisal in adoption (Storsbergen, Juffer, van Son, & van Hart, 2010). As in other types of families, the quality of family relationships, parenting, and interactions have been found to be significantly associated with child outcomes and family functioning (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001; Rueter et al., 2009).

Most of the research on adoptive families to date has focused on families with heterosexual parents. More recently, research including lesbian and gay adoptive parents (and lesbian and gay prospective adoptive parents) has been conducted. Outcomes of children adopted by lesbian and gay parents have been considered, as well as a number of other facets of adoptive family dynamics in adoptive families headed by lesbian and gay parents. In this chapter, research findings about lesbian and gay adoptive parents and their children are compared with the broader literature about adoptive families wherever possible. We use a developmental and family systems perspective as well as an ecological systems approach to consider the experiences of lesbian- and gay-parent adoptive families in the context of broader social structure issues. The emergence of studies about adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents seems to have been motivated, in part, by controversy surrounding the adoption of children by lesbian and gay parents, and it is to this topic that we turn next.

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### **Controversy Surrounding Lesbian and Gay Parent Adoption**

The adoption of children by lesbian and gay adults has been a controversial issue in the USA and in many places around the world. Questions have been raised about the suitability of lesbian and gay parents as role models for children. Critics contend that a heterosexual mother and father are necessary for children's optimal development. Such questions and concerns have impacted policy and law regarding adoption by lesbian and gay adults. Indeed, adoptions of minor children by openly lesbian and gay

individuals and couples are permitted by law in some places and not in others. For example, in the USA, some jurisdictions (e.g., Mississippi and Utah) ban adoption by same-sex couples (Patterson, 2009). For many years, Florida law barred lesbian and gay individuals or couples from becoming adoptive parents. In 2010, however, the courts ruled that this law was unconstitutional, and overturned the ban (Miller, 2010). Many states (e.g., California, Massachusetts, Connecticut) prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in matters of adoption and have laws that expressly permit the adoption of children by same-sex couples (Kaye & Kuvalanka, 2006). As a result, lesbian and gay adults have completed stranger adoptions<sup>1</sup> in a number of states, including California, Maryland, Ohio, and the District of Columbia (Patterson, 2009). Second-parent adoptions have been permitted in 26 states and the District of Columbia. Four states (Colorado, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin), however, have rejected second-parent adoptions by lesbian and gay adults (Patterson, 2009). Around the world, there is also considerable variation in law and policy in this regard. In Spain, Sweden, Canada, the Netherlands, and the UK, lesbian and gay adults are permitted to adopt children, but in Italy, Germany, and France, this is not permitted (LaRenzie, 2010). In the USA and in other countries, religious and political leaders have clashed repeatedly about whether the law should allow openly lesbian and gay adults to adopt minor children (LaRenzie, 2010; Miller, 2010). Controversy surrounding the adoption of children by lesbian and gay persons has contributed, in part, to research addressing questions about outcomes for children adopted

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<sup>1</sup> Stranger adoptions describe situations in which biological parents are unwilling or unable to take care of a child. A stranger adoption is completed when a court dissolves the legal bonds between the child and his/her biological parents and establishes new legal ties between the child and his/her adoptive parents. In second-parent adoptions, legal parenting status is created for a second parent without terminating the rights or responsibilities of the first legal parent. In families headed by same-sex couples, second-parent adoptions create for the child the possibility of having two legally recognized parents (Patterson, 2009).

by lesbian and gay parents, the capabilities of lesbian and gay adults as parents, and overall family processes and dynamics in adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents. We next turn to discussing this research.

## Research on Lesbian- and Gay-Parent Adoptive Families

In this section, we discuss the research on how lesbian and gay adults become adoptive parents, their strengths and challenges, their transition to adoptive parenthood, and outcomes of such adoptions for children, parents, and parenting couples. As will become clear, many lesbian and gay adults are becoming adoptive parents today. In some respects, they have experiences that are very like those of other adoptive parents, but lesbian and gay adoptive parents also face some issues that are specific to their circumstances.

### Adoption as a Pathway to Parenthood

National survey data, together with findings from other research, suggest that lesbian and gay adoptive parents share a number of demographic characteristics with heterosexual adoptive parents (Gates et al., 2007). Like heterosexual adoptive parents, lesbian and gay adoptive parents are often older, well educated, affluent, and predominantly White (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Erich, Leung, & Kindle, 2005; Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010a; Gates et al., 2007; Goldberg, 2009a; Ryan, Pearlmutter, & Groza, 2004). It is important to note that these demographic factors are generally characteristic of known cases of legally recognized adoption. The demographic profile of families formed through more informal methods, such as kinship adoption, may be different.

Lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adults who adopt children may be motivated to do so for many similar reasons, but lesbian and gay adults may also adopt children for reasons that are distinct from those of heterosexual adults (Mallon, 2000). For example, in Farr and Patterson's (2009)

study of 106 adoptive families (29 lesbian, 27 gay, and 50 heterosexual couples), virtually all couples reported that they "wanted to have children" as a reason for pursuing adoption, regardless of parental sexual orientation. On the other hand, there were differences in expressed motivations for adoption as a function of family type. The vast majority of heterosexual couples reported "challenges with infertility" as a motivation for adopting children, but fewer than half of same-sex couples reported this as a reason for choosing to adopt. Many more same-sex than opposite-sex couples reported that they "did not have a strong desire for biological children." Similarly, Goldberg, Downing, and Richardson (2009) found that among a sample of 30 lesbian and 30 heterosexual adoptive couples, lesbian couples were less likely than heterosexual couples to report a commitment to biological parenthood. Goldberg and Smith (2008) reported that compared with heterosexual couples ( $n=39$ ), lesbian couples ( $n=36$ ) were less likely to try to conceive and also less likely to pursue fertility treatments. Many investigators have reported that heterosexual adoptive parents often described adoption as a "second choice" pathway to parenthood, chosen only after struggles with infertility convinced them that biological parenthood was not a realistic option (e.g., Mallon, 2007; Turner, 1999). Thus, unlike heterosexual couples, lesbian and gay adoptive parents may be more likely to have chosen adoption as their first choice as a route to parenthood. Indeed, Tyebjee (2003) found that lesbian and gay adults demonstrated greater openness to adopting children than did heterosexual adults. As such, lesbian and gay adults have sometimes been described as "preferential adopters" (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002).

Another way that lesbian and gay adoptive parents may differ from heterosexual adoptive parents is in their willingness to adopt across racial lines, that is, to adopt a child from a racial or ethnic background different than their own. Among pre-adoptive couples, lesbian couples have been found to be more open than heterosexual couples to transracial adoption (Goldberg, 2009a; Goldberg & Smith, 2009a). Lesbian and

gay adoptive couples have also been found to be more likely than heterosexual adoptive couples to have completed a transracial adoption (Farr & Patterson, 2009). Indeed, some heterosexual couples have been found to prefer same-race adoptions (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002).

One reason that lesbian and gay couples may be more willing to adopt transracially is that same-sex couples are more likely than heterosexual couples to be interracial (Rosenfeld & Kim, 2005), and, in turn, interracial couples are more willing than same-race couples to complete transracial adoptions (Farr & Patterson, 2009). Also, some researchers have described racial integration as a characteristic of urban lesbian and gay communities (e.g., Stacey, 2006). For lesbian and gay parents in these communities, greater contact with racial minority groups may increase levels of comfort in interracial interactions (Emerson, Kimbro, & Yancey, 2002), and this could be a factor in their greater openness to transracial adoption. Because they are often less committed than heterosexual couples to achieving biological parenthood, same-sex couples may also be more open than heterosexual couples to transracial adoptions (Farr & Patterson, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2009).

Another way that lesbian and gay adoptive couples may be different than heterosexual adoptive couples is in terms of gender preferences in adoption. Goldberg (2009b) studied 47 lesbian, 31 gay, and 56 heterosexual couples who were actively seeking to adopt, and reported that, while heterosexual men were unlikely to express a gender preference, gay men often preferred to adopt boys. Lesbian participants who expressed a preference, generally preferred to adopt girls, as did the heterosexual women in the sample. Thus, only about half of participants overall expressed gender preferences, but among those who expressed preferences, all except the gay male participants preferred to adopt girls. These findings are consistent with earlier research regarding the preferences for child gender of both heterosexual adoptive couples and lesbian couples using donor insemination (Gartrell et al., 1996; Herrmann-Green & Gehring, 2007; Jones, 2008).

Why were these gender preferences observed? Lesbian and gay adoptive parents in Goldberg's (2009b) study often explained their preferences for child gender by reference to concerns about gender socialization and heterosexism. For example, some participants felt uncertain about parenting a child of a gender different than their own. It is possible that lesbian and gay couples, being made up of two parents of the same gender, may feel inadequate to parent a child of a different gender. Heterosexual couples, on the other hand, may feel equally "equipped" to parent a child of either gender since one parent of each gender is represented in the parenting couple. In this case, at least one partner in the couple may feel prepared for and knowledgeable about gender-specific socialization. Aside from this study, however, little is known about why lesbian and gay pre-adoptive parents expressed this feeling more often than did heterosexual pre-adoptive parents.

In choosing adoption as a route to parenthood, the child's race and gender are two concerns, but there are many other issues to consider as well. Indeed, gay men have been found to consider children's likely age, race, health, and a host of other factors in selecting their particular route to adoption (Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, & Goldberg, 2009). As adoptions may be domestic or international, may be accomplished through public or private agencies, may involve adoption of infants or children, and may involve open as well as closed arrangements, much remains to be learned about varied pathways to adoptive parenthood among lesbian and gay adults, and about factors related to these variations. Each variation comes with its own challenges, and research is only beginning to examine the relevant issues (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Howard et al., 2004).

### **Challenges and Strengths of Adoptive Lesbian and Gay Parents**

Although all prospective adoptive parents progress through a series of steps in adopting their child—including an application process, training

and workshops for prospective parents, and a home study<sup>2</sup> (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002)—lesbian and gay parents often face additional challenges. As mentioned earlier, lesbian and gay adults are not permitted to adopt children in all jurisdictions in the USA or elsewhere (Kaye & Kuvalanka, 2006; Ryan et al., 2004). Moreover, not all adoption agencies and/or adoption workers are open to working with lesbian and gay prospective parents. Brodzinsky, Patterson, and Vaziri (2002) found that among a sample of 369 public and private adoption agencies throughout the USA (i.e., in 45 states and the District of Columbia), 63% of reporting agencies had accepted applications from openly lesbian and gay prospective adoptive parents and 37% had placed children with openly lesbian and gay parents. A majority of public agencies and Jewish-affiliated private adoption agencies reported placing children with lesbian and gay parents, while only a minority of Catholic- and Protestant-affiliated agencies reported having done this. Among adoption social workers, Ryan (2000) found that homophobic attitudes were related to lesser likelihood of placing a child with lesbian and gay parents. Also, 14% of the 80 social workers in this study reported that their state prohibited adoptions by lesbian and gay adults, even when this was not the case. Thus, lesbian and gay adults face a number of institutional and attitudinal barriers in the adoption process.

In reports of the adoption journeys of lesbian and gay adults, the experience of discrimination from adoption agencies and workers is a recurring theme (Downs & James, 2006; Mallon, 2007; Matthews & Cramer, 2006). For example, Brooks and Goldberg (2001) conducted focus groups with 11 current and prospective lesbian and gay adoptive parents. The researchers found that lesbian and gay parents reported encounter-

ing more obstacles than did heterosexual foster and adoptive parents. Such obstacles included mistaken or harmful beliefs about lesbian and gay parenting, heterosexist attitudes, and a lack of formal policies and practices in working with sexual minority clients. Downs and James (2006) also reported that among a sample of 60 lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults, a majority faced discrimination in working with the child welfare system. Since more studies have included lesbian adoptive mothers than gay adoptive fathers, several studies have indicated that lesbian adoptive mothers have experienced various barriers and forms of bias in the adoption process (Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2007; Ryan & Whitlock, 2007).

In a study of gay men seeking to adopt ( $n=32$ ), Downing et al. (2009) found that some men reported experiencing discrimination on the basis of gender as well as sexual orientation. Indeed, gay men seeking to adopt may face many barriers as a result of being both male and gay; for example, men may be seen by some adoption workers as not competent to parent infants or very young children (see also Gianino, 2008; Lobaugh, Clements, Averill, & Olguin, 2006; Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005). In addition to facing discrimination during all phases of the adoption process, Brown, Smalling, Groza, and Ryan (2009) found that lesbian and gay adoptive parents ( $n=182$ ) also reported feeling that they had few role models to guide them through this process. Also, some lesbian, gay, and bisexual foster and adoptive parents have noted the lack of acceptance they felt from other foster parents (Downs & James, 2006). Societal resistance to lesbian and gay parenting is commonplace in the form of homophobia, stereotyping, and discrimination (Downs & James, 2006). Lesbian and gay parents have reported experiencing discrimination and significant barriers to becoming adoptive parents not only in the USA but also in Canada (Ross et al., 2008; Ross, Epstein, Anderson, & Eady, 2009), Australia (Riggs, 2006), and the UK (Hicks, 2006).

At the same time, lesbian and gay individuals and couples may offer special strengths as adoptive parents. Farr and Patterson (*in press*)

<sup>2</sup> A home study is the in-depth evaluation that any prospective adoptive parent must complete in the USA as a requirement of the adoption process. It is intended as a way to educate and support parents throughout the adoption process and also to evaluate their fitness as potential parents (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002).

found that, among 104 adoptive couples from a larger study (i.e., Farr et al., 2010a), lesbian and gay couples were more likely than heterosexual couples to report sharing the duties of parenthood in an equal fashion. Moreover, among same-sex couples, this shared parenting was associated with greater couple relationship adjustment and greater perceived parenting competence (Farr 2011). With regard to family interaction, lesbian mothers were more supportive of one another in observations of triadic (i.e., parent/parent/child) interaction than were heterosexual or gay parents. Among all family types, more supportive interaction was associated with positive adjustment for young adopted children in this sample (Farr & Patterson, *in press*).

Goldberg, Kinkler, and Hines (2011) reported that among couples who had recently adopted a child, lesbian ( $n=45$ ) and gay adoptive couples ( $n=30$ ) were less likely to internalize adoption stigma (e.g., feeling that being an adoptive parent is inferior to being a biological parent) than were heterosexual adoptive couples ( $n=51$ ). Those parents who reported lower internalization of stigma also reported fewer depressive symptoms. Thus, it appears that lesbian and gay adoptive parents may be less likely than heterosexual adoptive parents to suffer from depressive symptoms related to the internalization of adoption stigma. Overall, lesbian and gay adoptive parents have been found to display some positive characteristics that may benefit their children.

Many adoptive and foster parents report satisfaction in being parents (Downs & James, 2006; Goldberg et al., 2007; Ryan & Whitlock, 2007). For example, in Schacher et al.'s (2005) qualitative study of 21 gay adoptive fathers, many participants described how they had grown closer with members of their families of origin as a result of becoming parents, and others expressed pride in their roles as fathers. In other studies, many adoptive parents have reported that they enjoyed being a role model for other lesbian, gay, and/or adoptive parents, that they received more support than they had expected from members of their families of origin after adopting, and that they felt satisfied with their experience of adoption (Brown et al., 2009; Ryan & Whitlock, 2007).

## The Transition to Adoptive Parenthood

Regardless of parental sexual orientation, the transition to parenthood brings both joys and challenges. After the arrival of a first child, which can be marked by stress and compromised mental and physical health as well as by happiness and excitement, parents experience a period of adjustment (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1988). For those adopting children, the transition to parenthood involves a rigorous screening process by adoption professionals and a variable waiting time for placement of a child (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002). In a systematic review of the literature, McKay, Ross, and Goldberg (2010) reported that rates of distress appear to be lower among adoptive parents as compared with biological parents, but post-adoption depressive symptoms are not uncommon. Post-adoption services appear to be helpful for some families (McKay et al. 2010). In one of the few studies comparing 52 biological parenting couples and 52 adoptive parenting couples across the transition to parenthood, adoptive parents demonstrated levels of psychological adjustment that were similar to those of biological parents (Levy-Shiff, Bar & Har-Even, 1990).

The transition to adoptive parenthood has been studied most carefully among heterosexual couples, but several studies have also examined this life transition among lesbian and gay adoptive couples. Consistent with the general literature on the transition to parenthood, Goldberg, Smith, and Kashy (2010) found that, among 44 lesbian, 30 gay, and 51 heterosexual adoptive couples, relationship quality declined across the transition to parenthood for all couple types. Women reported the greatest declines in love, and those in relationships with women (i.e., both heterosexual and lesbian partners) reported the greatest ambivalence. In another study of the same sample, Goldberg and Smith (2009b) found that all parents reported increases in perceived parenting skill across the transition to parenthood. Relational conflict and expectations of completing more childcare were related to smaller increases in perceived parenting skill.

In a study examining factors affecting lesbian and gay adoptive couples across the transition to parenthood, Goldberg and Smith (2011) found that greater perceived social support and better relationship quality were associated with more favorable mental health, as would be expected on the basis of findings from the general adoption literature. Sexual minority parents who had higher levels of internalized homophobia and who lived in areas with unfavorable legal climates with regard to adoption by lesbian and gay parents experienced the greatest increases in anxiety and depression across the transition to parenthood. In another study that retrospectively examined the transition to parenthood for gay male adoptive couples, Gianino (2008) conducted qualitative analyses of interviews with eight gay male couples. Participants discussed reactions of extended family and friends, coping with feelings of isolation, and the difficulties of dealing with (in)visibility, disclosure, and discrimination. The adoptive gay fathers in this sample also noted the pride they felt in their families, the ways in which they had taken on nontraditional parenting roles, and the greater feelings of intimacy and relationship permanence they experienced.

## Child Outcomes

In controversies surrounding the adoption of children by lesbian and gay parents, debate has often centered on children's development. Questions have been raised by opponents of lesbian and gay adoptions about whether lesbian and gay adults can provide children with adequate parenting, appropriate role models, and effective socialization, particularly in the areas of gender development and sexual identity. The overall research on sexual orientation and parenting has been informative here (Patterson, 2009); children of lesbian and gay parents in general appear to be developing in ways that are very like their peers with heterosexual parents (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Goldberg, 2010; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Until recently, however, little of this research focused specifically on outcomes among adoptive families.

There have, however, been some studies examining child development specifically in adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents, and the findings are consistent with those of the broader literature. We review research on children's outcomes in families with adoptive lesbian and gay parents in three areas: child behavior and conduct, parent-child relationships, and gender development. We also review research on outcomes in transracial adoption. Next, we summarize results of research on parenting and outcomes for adoptive parents and for the whole adoptive family system. Finally, we provide an overview of research on factors beyond parental sexual orientation that affect parenting, family functioning, and children's outcomes. Considered as a group, the results of these studies show that parental sexual orientation is not a strong predictor of children's outcomes. Rather, other factors, such as prevailing laws and policies in a family's environment, may be quite important.

Behavioral adjustment has been a topic of great interest in studies of child outcomes in adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents. Erich et al. (2005) found no significant differences in child outcomes as a function of parental sexual orientation among a sample of 47 lesbian and gay-parent adoptive families and 25 heterosexual-parent adoptive families with children ranging in age from infancy to adolescence. In Ryan's (2007) study of 94 adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents, children's scores on measures assessing socioemotional development were normative or above population averages. In a study of 155 adoptive families with lesbian or gay parents, and 1,004 adoptive families with heterosexual parents that included a wide age range of children (1.5–18 years old), Averett, Nalavany, and Ryan (2009) found that assessments of adopted children's behavior problems were unrelated to parental sexual orientation, even after controlling for child age, child sex, and family income. In a sample of 93 girls (averaging five and a half years old) adopted from China by single heterosexual mothers, lesbian couples, or heterosexual couples, Tan and Baggerly (2009) reported no significant differences in behavioral adjustment as a function of family type. Farr et al.

(2010a) studied behavioral adjustment among preschool-aged children adopted at birth by lesbian, gay, or heterosexual couples in 106 adoptive families. Both parents and teachers described these children as having relatively few behavior problems; there were no significant differences in this regard among children in the three groups. Thus, it appears that children adopted by lesbian and gay parents are developing well, with behavioral adjustment on par with that of children adopted by heterosexual parents.

In one study specifically targeting adopted adolescents of lesbian and gay parents, adolescents' disclosure practices were examined, with particular attention to issues related to having been adopted by lesbian or gay parents. Using qualitative interview data from 14 racially diverse adopted children ranging in age from 13 to 20 years old, Gianino, Goldberg, and Lewis (2009) explored how adolescents disclose their adoptive status and parental sexual orientation within friendship networks and school environments. With regard to having lesbian and gay parents, the results revealed that adolescents engage in a wide variety of strategies, ranging from not disclosing to anyone to telling others openly. Several participants noted that they had felt "forced" to disclose by virtue of their visibility as a transracial adoptive family with same-sex parents, and many indicated their apprehension in "coming out" about their families. Overall, adolescents indicated that they had received positive reactions and responses from others about their adoptive status. Gianino et al. (2009) suggested that parental preparation for dealing with issues surrounding their child's adoption, racism, and heterosexism and homophobia may have helped children in negotiating the disclosure process.

Two studies have been conducted to date that have examined the qualities of parent-child relationships in adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents. In a qualitative study of 15 lesbian couples who had adopted children, Bennett (2003) found that all parents reported that their children had strong emotional bonds with both of their mothers. However, parents' reports also suggested that children showed a primary bond with one mother in 12 of the 15 families, despite

shared parenting and equal division of childcare between the two mothers. In a study of 210 adopted adolescents with 154 lesbian, gay, or heterosexual parents, Erich, Kanenberg, Case, Allen, and Bogdanos (2009) found that qualities of parent-adolescent relationships were not associated with parental sexual orientation, according to reports from both adoptive parents and adolescents. Thus, available data suggest that the qualities of adolescents' relationships with their adoptive parents have thus far been reported to be unrelated to parental sexual orientation.

Children's gender development in adoptive families with lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents has been assessed in two studies involving the same sample of 106 adoptive families (Farr, Doss & Patterson, 2011; Farr et al., 2010a). Farr et al. (2010a) reported no significant differences in parents' reports of preschoolers' gender development as a function of parental sexual orientation. Boys and girls showed characteristics and preferences for toys and activities typical of their gender, and they did not differ as a function of having two mothers, two fathers, or one mother and one father. The results from observational data on children's play were consistent with those from parents' reports (Farr et al., 2011). Observations revealed that boys preferred to play with "boy-typical" toys and girls preferred to play with "girl-typical" toys. No significant differences as a function of parental sexual orientation were found in the numbers or types of toys that parents offered their children. Lastly, children were rated as appearing gender typical in their dress, regardless of family type (Farr et al., 2011). Thus, adopted children in this sample enacted typical gender role behavior at early ages, regardless of whether they were reared by lesbian, gay, or heterosexual parents.

Outcomes for children adopted transracially by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents were also examined among the sample of 106 adoptive families previously mentioned (Farr & Patterson, 2009). Results showed that children's behavioral adjustment did not vary with transracial adoptive status. Regardless of whether they had been adopted inracially or transracially, children were described by parents and teachers (or outside

caregivers) as being well adjusted and as having relatively few behavior problems. A significant qualification to this finding, however, was the relatively young age of the children in this study. It would be helpful to follow such a sample into adolescence to explore the ways in which transracial adoptions unfold over time.

In short, from the existing literature, children adopted by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents have been found to demonstrate healthy adjustment and typical development in a number of domains. Across different types of adoption, different family structures, and different stages of development, children with adoptive lesbian and gay parents appear to fare as well as do those with adoptive heterosexual parents. Still, much remains to be learned.

### Parent, Couple, and Family Outcomes

A handful of studies of adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents have examined outcomes for parents and for couples, as well as for overall family functioning. Goldberg and Smith (2011) reported relatively few depressive symptoms overall among lesbian and gay adoptive parents. An earlier report based on the same sample had also revealed that, among lesbian and heterosexual couples waiting to adopt children, there were no differences in overall well-being as a function of parental sexual orientation (Goldberg & Smith, 2008). With regard to parenting, Ryan (2007) found that lesbian and gay adoptive parents ( $n=94$ ) scored in the normative or above average range on a measure assessing parenting ability. In a study focusing on the parenting experiences of gay adoptive fathers, Tornello, Farr, and Patterson (2011) found that participants ( $n=231$ ) reported levels of parenting stress that were well within the normative range. Farr et al. (2010a) found that lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents in their sample of 106 adoptive families reported relatively little parenting stress, with no significant differences by family type. Similarly, lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents in this study were found to use effective parenting techniques, with no significant differences as a

function of parental sexual orientation. In observational data on family interaction among families in this same sample, lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents were found to be relatively warm and accepting with their children overall; regardless of sexual orientation, mothers tended to be warmer with their children than did fathers (Farr, 2011).

In terms of couple relationships among lesbian and gay adoptive parents, Goldberg and Smith (2009b) found that lesbian ( $n=47$ ) and gay adoptive couples ( $n=56$ ) in their sample reported relatively low levels of relationship conflict. Farr et al. (2010a) also found that among their sample of 106 adoptive couples, adoptive parents reported high average levels of couple relationship adjustment. There were no significant differences among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents in this regard. A majority of couples reported long-term relationships with their partners or spouses, in which they reported considerable feelings of security and high relationship satisfaction (Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010b). Lesbian and gay adoptive couples in this sample also reported overall satisfaction with current divisions of childcare labor, which participants generally described as being shared by both parents in the couple (Farr & Patterson, *in press*).

Consistent with findings from the broader literature, quality of parenting and of parent-child relationships appear to have more influence than parental sexual orientation on outcomes for parents and children. In their study of 106 families headed by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive couples, Farr et al. (2010a) found that qualities of family interactions were more strongly associated with child outcomes than was family structure. Across all family types, positive parenting and more harmonious couple relationships were significantly associated with parents' reports of fewer child behavior problems (Farr et al., 2010a). Using the same sample, Farr and Patterson (*in press*) found that quality of coparenting interaction was significantly related to children's behavioral adjustment, such that more supportive and less undermining behavior between parents was associated with fewer child behavior problems. Among Ryan's (2007) sample of 94 lesbian and gay adoptive parents, results showed that parents'

positive perceptions of their own parenting as well as of the parent–child relationship were significantly associated with parents’ perceptions of their children as having more strengths. Erich et al. (2009), in their study of 210 adopted adolescents and 154 parents, also reported that qualities of adolescents’ relationships with their lesbian, gay, or heterosexual adoptive parents were associated with adolescents’ reported life satisfaction, parents’ reported relationship satisfaction with their child, and with the number of prior placements the adolescent had experienced, but were unrelated to parental sexual orientation.

With regard to family-level variables, Erich et al. (2005) found no significant differences in overall family functioning among adoptive families headed by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents. Rather, they reported that family functioning was associated with demographic variables, such as children’s grade level and parents’ prior experience with fostering children. In Leung, Erich, and Kanenberg’s (2005) study of adoptive families with special needs children, better family functioning was more likely to occur in cases where adoptions involved younger, nondisabled children but was unrelated to parental sexual orientation. Farr (2011) found that, among adoptive families headed by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples with young children, observations of family interaction revealed high levels of family cohesion. Families headed by lesbian mothers were, however, significantly more cohesive than were the other family types. Thus, only one association between parental sexual orientation and overall family functioning has been identified to date, and it favored the families of lesbian mothers. Further study will be needed before firm conclusions can be drawn about associations between parental sexual orientation and family functioning among adoptive families.

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### **Summary, Conclusions, and Future Directions**

In this final section, we first summarize the overall findings of research to date and consider what conclusions may be justified on the basis of current

findings on adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents. We also suggest directions for further research and practice.

### **Summary of the Research Findings**

In sum, research on lesbian and gay adoptive parents and their children has grown markedly in the last several years. In the USA, many lesbian and gay adults are adoptive parents, and many more wish to adopt children. Some of the reasons that lesbian and gay adults adopt children, as well as some of the experiences of lesbian and gay adoptive parents, are similar to, and some are different from, those of heterosexual adoptive parents. In recent studies, lesbian and gay adults have reported experiencing discrimination and facing many obstacles in becoming adoptive parents. At the same time, having overcome obstacles to parenthood, lesbian and gay adoptive parents appear to be as capable and effective as are heterosexual adults in their roles as adoptive parents. Children adopted by lesbian and gay parents have been found to develop in ways that are similar to development among children adopted by heterosexual parents. Regardless of parental sexual orientation, quality of parenting and quality of family relationships are significantly associated with adopted children’s adjustment. Thus, as in other types of families, it is family processes, rather than family structure, that matter more to child outcomes and to overall family functioning among adoptive families.

### **Directions for Research, Policy, and Practice**

While existing research on adoption by lesbian and gay parents is informative, work in this area has only recently begun, and there are many directions for further study. These include exploration of new topic areas of interest and expansion of the kinds of methodological strategies that are used to study adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents. Research in this area can yield information that will further our

understanding of general developmental processes. It may also be useful in informing policy, practice, and law related to adoptions by lesbian and gay adults. In this section, we touch briefly on each of these ideas.

Future research on adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents would benefit from fuller consideration of the contexts of adoptive family life. These might include social, economic, and legal aspects of family environments. Research might consider the importance of characteristics of proximal aspects of family environments (e.g., social contacts that families encounter in their daily lives) as well as characteristics of more distal aspects of family environments (e.g., regional, state, and national laws and policies). Federal, state and local law may affect the choices that adoptive lesbian and gay parents can make for their families, and their daily interactions with neighbors, coworkers, and friends are also likely to exert important influences on their experiences. Inasmuch as laws, policies, and attitudes vary considerably across jurisdictions, both in the USA and in other countries, and inasmuch as change in this area is more the rule than the exception today, the impact of environments on the adoptive families of lesbian and gay parents is a rich and important topic for further study.

Adoption is a complex topic, and different issues arise in public versus private adoptions, domestic versus international adoptions, and in adoptions of infants versus adoptions of children or adolescents. Similarly, transracial adoptions bring with them issues that are not always posed by same-race adoptions, such as considerations of racial and ethnic socialization, identity, and diversity in one's community. The gender of adopted children may also emerge as an issue of special interest, especially for same-sex couples, as some existing research suggests that lesbian and gay adults may have particular preferences about child gender in adopting. Future research in this area could be strengthened by consideration of the variations among different types of adoptions.

Another valuable direction for future research would be to devote more attention to family processes and dynamics, as well as to family outcomes.

What are the special family dynamics, if any, that are associated with same-sex parenting couples, and how do these affect children, for better or for worse? What are the important ways in which lesbian and gay adoptive parents may be similar to and different from one another, and what does this mean for children? How, in short, are changing family configurations related to family interactions and relationships?

The voices of adoptive children themselves also need to be heard. How do children and youth understand the difficulties and the opportunities of their lives as adoptive offspring of lesbian or gay parents? How do children and youth see their experiences as having been linked with (or unaffected by) the contextual factors and varied family configurations discussed above? Greater attention to the views of adoptive children and youth growing up with lesbian and gay parents seems likely to broaden understanding in this area.

Greater integration across fields of adoption study would also be beneficial in providing a more comprehensive understanding of adoptive families with lesbian or gay parents. Scholarship in fields as diverse as law, economics, demography, family science, social work, sociology, and psychology is already contributing to understanding in this area. Further integration of work in these diverse fields might contribute to construction of a more comprehensive understanding of adoptive families with lesbian or gay parents. For example, empirical research is needed to document the social and economic consequences of changing adoption laws and policies.

From a methodological standpoint, use of more diverse research strategies seems likely to be fruitful. Much of the empirical work to date has relied on self-report data. Studies based on observations of actual behavior of both parents and children, as Farr and Patterson (*in press*) and Farr et al. (2011) used, have the potential to make strong contributions to this literature. Similarly, the effort to gather data from sources that are outside the families under study (e.g., from teachers, neighbors, or peers) also seems to be an important methodological direction for scholars to consider. Much existing work has used either

quantitative or qualitative approaches to research, but mixed-methods approaches that embrace both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection could enrich our understanding. Many samples of lesbian and gay adoptive parents in the existing literature are predominantly White and well educated. More diverse samples could make valuable contributions, as the experiences of racial minority adoptive parents likely differ from those of White adoptive parents. Low-income adoptive parents, who may be likely to adopt children through public versus private adoption (or to foster children for long periods of time without legally adopting them), would also be expected to differ in their experiences from the more affluent adoptive parents who have been included in most studies to date. Furthermore, the few existing studies of lesbian and gay adoptive parents have generally not included bisexual or transgender parents. More inclusive samples of sexual and gender minority adoptive parents would contribute to our understanding of the experiences of diverse adoptive family systems. The majority of research to date has been cross-sectional in nature; longitudinal studies of adoptive families could also be pursued and might yield fresh insights about child development, parenting, and family functioning over time.

With regard to policy implications of research on lesbian- and gay-parented adoptive families, a number of directions can be identified. First and foremost, the results of research in this area should be used to inform law, policy, and practice. Many children in the USA alone await placement with permanent families. More than 500,000 children are in the child welfare system and more than 100,000 children are currently waiting to be adopted (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2010). Compounding the challenge of finding permanent families for waiting children is a perceived dearth of prospective adoptive parents (Ryan et al., 2004). If adoption agencies were to recruit more prospective parents from lesbian and gay communities, many additional children might find permanent homes. Based on the findings of research to date, one would expect this to benefit such children in many ways. At the time of this writing, several states in the USA, such as Arizona,

are considering policies that would limit adoption to opposite-sex married couples (Center for Arizona Policy, 2011). If such a policy were to be adopted in Arizona, this would mean that otherwise qualified lesbian or gay prospective adoptive parents would be prohibited from adopting children in that state. Research findings to date clearly do not provide support for any such prohibition. Indeed, the existing evidence suggests that a prohibition of this kind would be detrimental to the welfare of children waiting for placement into permanent homes.

How do prohibitions on the adoption of children by lesbian and gay adults affect the likelihood of placement of children waiting to be adopted? Kaye and Kuvalanka (2006) compared placement rates of children from foster care in states with laws that prohibit adoptions by openly lesbian and gay adults with placement rates in states that permit such adoptions. They found that, in states where adoption laws prohibit adoptions by openly lesbian and gay adults, more children remained in foster care. In contrast, states that permitted lesbian and gay adults to adopt children had proportionately fewer children in foster care. Indeed, if lesbian and gay adults were permitted to adopt children in every jurisdiction within the USA, Gates et al. (2007) estimated that between 9,000 and 14,000 children could be removed from foster care and placed in permanent homes each year. If so, the results of research to date suggest that children would benefit.

To support lesbian and gay adults seeking to adopt children, a number of organizations have begun programs related to adoption issues. For example, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) has implemented the “All Children—All Families” program (Human Rights Campaign, 2011). This initiative seeks to assist adoption agencies and child welfare professionals in their efforts to recruit prospective adoptive parents from lesbian and gay communities, work successfully with them, and in so doing, place more children into permanent homes (Human Rights Campaign, 2011). This initiative also serves as an educational resource for lesbian and gay adults who may be considering adoption as a pathway to parenthood.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the adoption of children by lesbian and gay parents is a growing reality in the USA and in at least some other parts of the world. Empirical research on adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents has begun to address some questions about how children adopted by lesbian and gay parents fare. While lesbian and gay individuals may face a number of challenges in becoming adoptive parents, lesbian- and gay-parent families formed through adoption appear to experience generally positive outcomes. Much remains to be learned, however, especially about the diversity among lesbian and gay adoptive parents and their children, and about the ways in which their lives are shaped by characteristics of the environments in which they live.

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