

Adoption Agency Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Prospective Parents: A National Study

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ABSTRACT. A nationwide survey of adoption agencies was conducted to examine their policies, practices, and attitudes with regard to lesbian and gay prospective adoptive parents. A total of 214 questionnaires were received, representing a return rate of 26 percent. Sixty-three percent of respondents indicated that their agency accepted applications from lesbian and gay individuals, and nearly 38 percent indicated that their agency had made at least one adoption placement with a lesbian or gay adult during the two-year period under study. Attitudes and practices regarding adoption by lesbian and gay individuals varied as a function of the religious

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affiliation (if any) of the agency, the type of children the agency predominantly placed for adoption, and the gender of the respondent. Overall, the results reveal that, while policies, practices, and attitudes vary across agencies, many adoption professionals are willing to work with lesbian and gay prospective parents, and, in fact, a substantial number have experience in doing so. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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To what degree do adoptions of children by lesbian and gay adults actually occur in the United States today, and to what extent do they serve the best interests of children? Considerable controversy has surrounded these issues in recent years (Patterson, 1995; Patterson, Fulcher & Wainright, in press; Patterson & Redding, 1996), and the laws governing adoption by lesbian and gay individuals vary from state to state within the United States (Appell, 2001). Florida and Mississippi, for example, currently have statutory bans on adoption of children by homosexual individuals. In addition, although not directly prohibiting adoption by lesbians and gay men, Utah recently amended its adoption statute so that adults who are living together in a nonmarital, sexual relationship are prevented from adopting children. In other states such as New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Vermont, the law is more favorable for prospective adoptive parents who self-identify as gay or lesbian, with statewide legal precedents that allow adoption by these individuals.

Although popular stereotypes suggest that lesbian and gay adults do not bear or raise children, many do in fact have children, and many others wish to become parents (Patterson, 1994, 1997). There are now substantial numbers of children living with lesbian or gay parents in the United States (Patterson & Friel, 2000), most of whom were born during periods in which the parents were involved in heterosexual marriages. In studies of gay men who were not parents, both Sbordone (1993) and Beers (1996) found that at least half the men reported that they would like to become fathers. Similarly, in a recent study by Morris, Balsam and Rothblum (2000), the authors noted that, of a large sample of lesbian women between the ages of 20 and 29 who did not have children, most reported that

they would like to become mothers. Thus, like their heterosexual counterparts, many lesbian and gay adults seek to become parents.

Adoption is a major pathway to parenthood among lesbian and gay adults (Martin, 1993), but little is known about the barriers to achieving adoptive parenthood for these individuals. Although there has been considerable discussion in lesbian and gay communities about policies and practices of both public and private adoption agencies, as well as about the legal standards that govern adoption in different jurisdictions (e.g., Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, 1996), there are few sources of definitive information about these and related issues. For instance, prospective lesbian and gay adoptive parents may experience difficulty in identifying adoption agencies that do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, and may be unaware of the policies and practices that are most common at different types of agencies. In addition, although most adoption agencies have eliminated the majority of restrictive criteria that prevented many adults from adopting children in the past (Brodzinsky, Lang & Smith, 1995; Brodzinsky, Smith & Brodzinsky, 1998), it is unclear how many agencies accept adoption applications from lesbians and gay men and actually make placements of children with these individuals. In short, there is a dearth of reliable information about the policies and practices of adoption agencies with regard to the sexual orientation of prospective adoptive parents.

The work we report here was conducted in an effort to provide systematic information about the policies, practices and attitudes of adoption agencies throughout the United States with regard to the sexual orientation of prospective adoptive parents. Working with a large, nationwide sample of agencies, we asked adoption program directors to respond to a brief written survey. We asked whether the agency accepts adoption applications from lesbians and gay men; whether any such adoptions had actually been completed during the two-year period under study; and if so, how many; and whether the agency conducts any outreach activities that are directly targeted to the lesbian and gay communities. We also included questions about the respondents attitudes toward lesbian and gay parenting, as well as about knowledge of applicable adoption laws in each state.

Because attitudes toward homosexuality vary as a function of both gender and religious affiliation (Herek, 1995), we expected some variation in responses as a function of the gender of respondents and the religious affiliation (if any) of their agencies. Specifically, we hypothesized that female respondents would be more favorable than male respondents about lesbian and gay prospective adoptive parents. We also hypothe-

sized that agencies that were either public (and hence not religiously affiliated) or affiliated with religious traditions that generally have supported a more liberal to moderate view of homosexuality (e.g., reform Judaism) would be more favorable regarding adoption by lesbian and gay individuals than agencies that were affiliated with religious groups that generally have condemned homosexuality (e.g., Catholicism and fundamentalist Christianity).

METHODS

Survey Respondents

Questionnaires were mailed to adoption program directors from 891 public and private adoption agencies throughout the United States. Agencies were identified from a national database of private adoption agencies provided by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in New York City, as well as from other published listings of public and private adoption agencies.

A total of 214 usable questionnaires were returned, 194 from private adoption agencies in 45 states, plus Washington, D.C., and 20 from public adoption agencies in 13 states. The only states not represented by at least one agency were Arkansas, Idaho, Montana, South Dakota, and West Virginia. Forty-one additional questionnaires were returned that were not included in the data analyses—17 from program directors who indicated that they did not have time to fill out the survey, 6 from directors who refused to fill out the survey because of moral and/or religious objections to homosexuality, 5 from directors who only partially filled out the survey, and 13 from individuals who indicated that their agency no longer made adoption placements. Finally, 38 questionnaires were undeliverable because the adoption agency either had changed its address or no longer existed. Excluding the latter 38 agencies, as well as the 13 agencies whose adoption programs had closed, the return rate for our survey was approximately 26 percent. Because of funding and staffing limitations associated with the project, we were unable to send out reminders to adoption agency directors who did not respond to the original mailed survey. Thus, our response rate, while lower than expected or desired, should be understood to represent the rate of return without the customary follow-up prompt that is used in mailed survey research.

The respondents, 165 women and 28 men (with 21 individuals choosing not to identify their gender), had a mean age of 46.5 years (range from

23 to 74 years) and a mean of 13.8 years of experience in the adoption field (range from 1 to 40 years).

Procedures and Survey Format

As noted above, questionnaires were sent to adoption program directors who were asked to respond anonymously and return the survey in a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The questionnaire was designed to identify current adoption agency policies and practices, as well as social casework attitudes, regarding adoption of children by lesbians and gay men. Consequently, the questionnaires were filled out regarding agency placement activities for the preceding two-year period: 1995-1996. The survey consisted of 13 questions addressing the following issues: (1) agency type (public or private); (2) agency religious affiliation, if any; (3) number of adoption placements made in 1995 and 1996; (4) percentage of placements involving domestic infants and toddlers, older and special needs children, and children from foreign countries; (5) awareness of state law on adoption by lesbians and gay men; (6) agency policy regarding adoption by lesbian and gay individuals and couples; (7) agency involvement in international adoption and the policy of placing countries regarding adoption by lesbians and gay men; (8) number of adoption placements in 1995 and 1996 with individuals who self-identified as lesbian or gay (estimated, if necessary); (9) estimated number of placements made during this period with individuals who, though not openly identified as lesbian or gay, were *probably* (in the respondent's view) homosexual; (10) willingness of the agency to accept adoption applications by openly identified lesbian and gay individuals and couples; (11) agency practice regarding reaching out to the lesbian and gay communities as potential parenting resources; (12) whether the agency had rejected adoption applications by lesbian or gay individuals, and if so, for what reason; and (13) whether the agency, as a matter of policy or routine practice, informs birthparents when the adoption plan involves placement of the child with a lesbian or gay individual.

Respondents also were asked to fill out a 12-item questionnaire, with questions rated on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1), focusing on their attitudes and beliefs related to adoption and parenting by lesbians and gay men. Three questions dealt with psychological outcomes for children raised by homosexuals (e.g., Are children raised by lesbian and gay parents more likely to have psychological problems than children raised by heterosexual parents?); 4 questions dealt with whether lesbians and gay men should be allowed to

adopt children (e.g., Should lesbian women who are not in a committed relationship be allowed to adopt children?); 2 questions addressed the adequacy of parenting by lesbian and gay individuals (e.g., Do gay and lesbian individuals have the same capacity for being sensitive and caring parents as heterosexual individuals?); and 3 questions dealt with agency practice in relation to lesbian and gay adoption (e.g., Is a parent's sexual orientation a relevant factor that should be considered when deciding whether or not to place a child for adoption?).

RESULTS

Agency Characteristics

As noted previously, of the 214 agencies responding to the survey, 194 were private agencies and 20 were public agencies. Agencies were highly variable in the size of their adoption programs. For the two-year period examined, the mean number of adoption placements made by public agencies per year was 171.4 (sd = 305.9; range from 9 to 2,600), whereas the mean number of placements for private agencies per year was 41.2 (sd = 51.8; range from 1 to 481). The nature of adoption programs also was quite different for public and private agencies. Public agencies generally were involved with the placement of older and special needs children (81.9%), although they also placed some infants and toddlers in adoptive homes (18.1%). Private agencies, in contrast, were involved with all three forms of adoption: domestic infant and toddler placements (48.3%), international placements (23.1%), and special needs placements (28.6%). In many cases, private agencies had highly varied adoption programs, including both domestic (infants and special needs children) and international placements. Private agencies also differed regarding whether they were affiliated with an organized religion. Although 127 private agencies had no religious affiliation, 12 were affiliated with Judaism, 22 with the Catholic church, 24 with various mainstream Protestant denominations (e.g., Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Baptist), and 9 with more fundamentalist branches of Christianity.

Agency Policies and Practices

At the time during which assessments were completed, only New Hampshire and Florida law prohibited adoption by lesbian and gay individuals.¹ However, when asked whether adoption by lesbians and gay

men was allowed in their respective states, seven respondents, from six states other than New Hampshire and Florida, incorrectly reported that these individuals were prohibited by law from adopting children. In addition, another 29 agency personnel (13.6% of the respondents) were unsure of the legal status of adoption by lesbian and gay adults in their state.

Respondents were asked whether their agency accepted applications from single lesbians and gay men, as well as homosexual couples. On average, approximately 63 percent of respondents indicated that their agency did accept such applications. [This statistic, and others below, when appropriate, include the six agencies whose adoption directors refused to fill out the survey because of moral or religious objections to homosexuality.] In many instances, however, respondents noted that because state law did not allow adoption by unmarried couples, only one individual in the gay or lesbian relationship would be allowed to legally adopt the child. There was virtually no difference in agency willingness to accept applications from single lesbian women (64.5%), single gay men (61.8%), lesbian couples (63.2%), or gay male couples (60.9%).

A chi-square test indicated significant differences in acceptance of adoption applications from single lesbian women as a function of religious affiliation of the agency, $\chi^2(5) = 71.92, p < .001$. Inspection of Table 1 indicates that agencies affiliated with fundamentalist Christian beliefs were never willing to accept adoption applications from lesbian women and those associated with the Catholic church were usually unwilling to do so. In contrast, a sizable minority of agencies affiliated with more moderate Protestant beliefs and the vast majority of Jewish affiliated agencies and nonreligious affiliated agencies, as well as all public agencies, reported that they did accept adoption applications from these individuals. Virtually identical patterns were found for willingness to accept adoption applications from lesbian couples, single gay men, and gay male couples as a function of agency religious affiliation, and consequently, the data are not reported separately.

TABLE 1. Percentage of Agencies Willing to Accept Adoption Applications from Single Lesbian Women as a Function of Agency Religious Affiliation

	Public	Private Nonaffiliated	Jewish	Catholic	Protestant Mainstream	Christian Fundamentalist
Yes	100	77.2	91.7	13.6	41.7	0
No	0	22.8	8.3	86.4	58.3	100

Willingness to accept adoption applications from lesbian and gay individuals also was examined as a function of the type of adoption program run by the agency. Adoption program was defined in terms of the percentage of the agency's placements that involved a particular type of child. For example, an agency was designated as domestic infant and toddler focused if more than 50 percent of its placements involved this group of youngsters. Similarly, agencies were designated as either special needs focused or internationally focused if more than 50 percent of the placements involved these types of children, respectively. If no single category of children represented a majority of the agency's placements, the agency was said to have a mixed adoption program. An examination of placement patterns among the agencies indicated that 39 percent of the agencies predominantly made placements of domestically born infants and toddlers, 33 percent focused on domestically born special needs children, 20 percent were primarily involved in international adoptions, and 8 percent had mixed adoption programs. A chi-square test indicated that special needs adoption agencies were much more likely to accept applications from single lesbian women than all other agency types, and that agencies focusing on infants and toddlers were the least likely to accept such applications, $\chi^2(3) = 26.65, p < .001$ (see Table 2). Similar findings were noted for willingness to accept adoption applications from lesbian couples, single gay men, and gay male couples as a function of the type of adoption program run by the agency.

Respondents were asked whether their agency had any official or unofficial policy regarding adoption by lesbians and gay men. Agencies with religious affiliations that did not accept adoption applications from these individuals unanimously cited a policy based upon religious beliefs for their exclusionary practice. Many of the respondents from these same agencies, as well as from other private agencies, noted that their policy was to place children only with married couples (24%). Since lesbians and gay men cannot legally marry, they were precluded from the pool of acceptable adoption applicants in these agencies. Some respondents also reported that their policy was to allow birthparents to choose the family for

TABLE 2. Percentage of Agencies Willing to Accept Adoption Applications from Single Lesbian Women as a Function of Adoption Program Focus

	Infant/Toddler	Special Needs	International	Mixed
Yes	47.6	87.0	69.0	66.5
No	52.4	13.0	31.0	33.5

their child (22%). In such cases, placement of the youngster with a lesbian or gay individual or couple would be the decision of the birthparent. In addition, respondents from agencies involved in international adoption noted that the decision to place a child with a particular type of family is often regulated by policy guidelines set by the child's country of origin. Respondents noted that many countries prohibit adoption by lesbians and gay men, with China cited most frequently, and that some countries restrict placements to married couples, thereby eliminating adoption by these individuals, without a formal policy prohibiting such placements. Interestingly, despite the prohibition against adoption by lesbians and gay men by most countries, the majority of respondents (65.5%) whose agencies were involved in international adoption also noted that they were willing to accept applications from these individuals. Comments by respondents suggested that in some cases the agency adopts a "don't ask, don't tell" practice. In other words, adoption caseworkers often do not ask questions about the applicant's sexual orientation, even when there is reason to believe that the client is lesbian or gay, so as to avoid being in noncompliance with regulations set by the child's country of origin.

Only 16 percent of the agencies reported reaching out to the lesbian and gay communities as a parenting resource for children needing adoptive homes. As would be expected, this pattern was clearly influenced by the religious affiliation of the adoption agency. A chi-square test indicated that public agencies were much more likely to make efforts to reach out to lesbian and gay individuals as prospective adoptive parents than all other types of agencies, with private, nonreligiously affiliated agencies, Jewish agencies, and mainstream Protestant agencies making at least some effort in this area, and Catholic agencies and fundamentalist Christian agencies displaying no interest in reaching out to lesbians and gay men, $\chi^2(5) = 18.13, p < .01$ (see Table 3).

Recruitment of prospective lesbian and gay adoptive parents also was examined as a function of the type of adoption program run by the agency. A chi-square test found that those agencies focusing primarily on special needs adoptions were much more likely to take a proactive approach in working with lesbians and gay men than all other types of agencies, $\chi^2(3) = 29.28, p < .001$ (see Table 4).

Finally, approximately 45 percent of agencies that reported a willingness to accept adoption applications from lesbian and gay individuals also indicated that they would inform the birthparent of such a placement. However, public agencies (10%) were significantly less likely to adhere to this practice than private agencies (50.1%).

TABLE 3. Percentage of Adoption Agencies Making Outreach Efforts to Lesbians and Gay Men as a Function of Agency Religious Affiliation

	Public	Private Nonaffiliated	Jewish	Catholic	Protestant Mainstream	Christian Fundamentalist
Yes	40.0	18.9	16.7	0	12.5	0
No	60.0	81.1	83.3	100	87.5	100

TABLE 4. Percentage of Adoption Agencies Making Outreach Efforts to Lesbians and Gay Men as a Function of Adoption Program Focus

	Infant/Toddler	Special Needs	International	Mixed
Yes	7.1	37.7	7.1	11.8
No	91.9	62.3	92.9	88.2

Adoption Placements with Lesbians and Gay Men

Over the two-year period studied, adoption agencies reported making a total of 22,584 adoption placements, 371 of which involved children placed with self-identified lesbian and gay individuals and couples. This figure constitutes approximately 1.6 percent of all placements reported by the responding agencies during the target period. More than a third of all agencies (37.7%) reported making at least one adoption placement with a lesbian or gay individual. Because many individuals are unlikely to openly identify themselves as lesbian or gay at the time when they submit an adoption application, these figures are likely to underestimate the number of adoption placements with lesbian and gay adults. In fact, when the number of placements with lesbian and gay parents is combined with the respondents' estimate of the number of individuals who did not self-identify, but were thought to be lesbian or gay by the agency, the figure reaches 658, or 2.9 percent of all placements.

Table 5 shows the percentage of adoption agencies, by religious affiliation, that made at least one placement of a child with a lesbian or gay individual or couple in the target period. A chi-square test indicated that public agencies were significantly more likely to place a child with lesbians or gay men, followed by private, nonreligious agencies, Jewish affiliated agencies and mainstream Protestant affiliated agencies. Only agencies affiliated with the Catholic church and more fundamentalist

Christian beliefs made no placements with individuals known to be lesbian or gay, $\chi^2 (5) = 34.30, p < .0001$.

Table 6 shows the percentage of adoption agencies, by program type, that made at least one placement of a child with lesbian or gay individuals. A chi-square test indicated that agencies focusing on special needs adoptions were much more likely to place a child with lesbian or gay parents and those agencies specializing in infant/toddler adoptions were the least likely to make such placements, $\chi^2 (3) = 21.67, p < .001$.

For those agencies reporting that they were willing to accept adoption applications from gay men and lesbians, respondents also were asked whether the agency had ever rejected a gay or lesbian applicant. Only 15 percent of respondents—18 from private, nonreligious agencies and 4 from public agencies—indicated that their organization had rejected a gay or lesbian applicant for prospective adoptive parenthood. When asked the reasons for not accepting the adoption application, the following explanations were noted: unrealistic expectations regarding adoption (50%), questionable motives for adopting (41%), psychological problems in the applicant (36%), lack of social support (32%), gay lifestyle incompatible with adoption (18%), sexual orientation incompatible with adoption (9%), lack of financial resources (9%), and a variety of other reasons (36%). [Note, because respondents could provide

TABLE 5. Percentage of Agencies that Made at Least One Placement of a Child with a Lesbian or Gay Individual or Couple as a Function of Agency Religious Affiliation

	Public	Private Nonaffiliated	Jewish	Catholic	Protestant Mainstream	Christian Fundamentalist
Yes	70.0	46.5	41.7	0	20.8	0
No	30.0	53.5	58.3	100	79.2	100

TABLE 6. Percentage of Agencies that Made at Least One Placement of a Child with a Lesbian or Gay Individual or Couple as a Function of Adoption Program Focus

	Infant/Toddler	Special Needs	International	Mixed
Yes	22.6	59.4	40.5	35.3
No	77.4	40.6	59.5	64.7

more than one reason for rejecting an applicant, the sum of the percentages exceed 100%.]

Attitudes Regarding Adoption and Parenting by Lesbian and Gay Adults

The 12-item questionnaire measuring respondent attitudes regarding adoption and parenting by gay men and lesbians, as well as perceived outcomes for children of homosexual parents, was subjected to a principle component factor analysis. The analysis yielded a single factor—labeled acceptance of lesbian and gay parenting—accounting for 64.6 percent of the variance.

A 2 (Agency Type: Public versus Private) \times 2 (Respondent Gender) analysis of variance was conducted for acceptance of lesbian and gay parenting—i.e., the average rating across all 12 questionnaire items. Both the main effects of agency type, $F(1, 185) = 4.67, p < .05$ and gender, $F(1, 185) = 4.61, p < .05$, were significant. Adoption program directors from public agencies ($M = 3.98$; $sd = .87$) reported more positive attitudes regarding parenting and adoption by lesbians and gay men, as well as more favorable views regarding the outcomes for children raised by these individuals, than respondents from private agencies ($M = 3.68$; $sd = .65$). In addition, women ($M = 3.79$; $sd = .67$) held more positive views than men ($M = 3.17$; $sd = 1.13$). An additional one-way ANOVA, conducted on the mean scores for acceptance of lesbian and gay parenting as a function of agency religious affiliation, was also significant, $F(5, 208) = 12.17, p < .001$. Post-hoc analyses revealed that program directors from public adoption agencies ($M = 3.98$; $sd = .87$) and Jewish affiliated agencies ($M = 3.90$; $sd = .61$) had significantly more positive attitudes about lesbian and gay parenting and adoption than program directors from mainstream Protestant ($M = 3.31$; $sd = 1.07$), Catholic ($M = 3.25$; $sd = .84$) and fundamentalist Christian affiliated agencies ($M = 1.90$; $sd = .31$), but not directors from private, nonaffiliated agencies ($M = 3.77$; $sd = .72$). Furthermore, program directors from fundamentalist Christian agencies were significantly less accepting of lesbian and gay parenting and adoption than individuals from all other agencies. Finally, a one-way ANOVA indicated that attitudes of adoption program directors regarding lesbian and gay adoptive parenting varied as a function of the type of program run by the agency, $F(3, 183) = 12.32, p < .001$. Post-hoc analyses revealed that respondents whose agencies focused on special needs placements ($M = 4.01$; $sd = .58$) and international placements ($M = 4.00$; $sd = .51$) had more positive attitudes regarding adoption by lesbians and

gay men than respondents whose agencies either had a more varied placement program ($M = 3.43$; $sd = .95$) or focused on the adoption of domestically born infants and toddlers ($M = 3.35$; $sd = .85$).

DISCUSSION

How open are adoption agencies to working with lesbian and gay prospective adoptive parents? In this article, we report the first nationwide survey of adoption agencies in the United States that was designed to address this question. Despite considerable variability among agencies, many respondents described their agency as willing to accept applications from lesbian and gay prospective adoptive parents, and more than a third of respondents indicated that they had completed at least one adoption involving a gay or lesbian adult within the two-year period under study. The results thus confirm that adoptions of children by lesbian and gay adults are occurring across the country, both at public and private adoption agencies (Martin, 1993; Patterson, 1994, 1995).

Unfortunately, an accurate estimation of the number of children adopted by lesbians and gay men in the United States is difficult to determine. In the current study, 1.6 percent of all adoption placements in the two-year period studied were made with individuals who identified themselves to agency personnel as lesbian or gay. However, there is reason to believe that this figure underestimates the extent of this type of adoption in this country. First, it is likely that many prospective adoptive parents who are lesbian or gay choose to withhold this information from the agency for fear that their adoption application will be rejected. Our results suggest that when the number of placements with gay or lesbian parents is combined with the respondents' estimate of the number of individuals who did not self-identify, but were thought to be gay or lesbian by the agency, the number of adoptions by homosexual individuals rose to 2.9 percent of all placements. Second, our study focused only on adoptions that were facilitated by licensed agencies. In the United States, however, a sizable number of adoptions occur outside of the formal adoption agency system, through private placements between the birthparents and prospective adoptive parents (McDermott, 1993). These so-called independent or private adoptions, which are legal in the vast majority of states, usually involve infants or young children, and typically are facilitated by an attorney. Our own experience in working clinically with lesbian and gay adoptive parents confirms that many of these individuals have chosen to pursue adoption through private placements rather than

through adoption agencies. These types of adoptions are not represented in the data reported here. Third, only a small percentage of public agencies, which focus almost exclusively on special needs adoptions, responded to our survey. Yet our results, as well as our clinical experience, suggest that agencies that place special needs children for adoption have more favorable attitudes about lesbian and gay individuals as prospective adoptive parents, and are more likely to recruit these individuals and make placements of children into their homes. In short, there are several reasons to believe that our data underestimate the extent of interest among adoption placement professionals in working with lesbian and gay adults as prospective adoptive parents.

As expected, the results of our survey also suggest that adoptions of children by lesbian and gay individuals are more likely to occur at some types of agencies than at others. In particular, public agencies and agencies associated with Jewish and traditional Protestant religious beliefs were more likely than those affiliated with Catholicism and fundamentalist Christian beliefs to report that they accept applications from lesbian and gay prospective adoptive parents, as well as to report that they had completed at least one placement of a child with this group of individuals. In addition, female respondents were more likely than male respondents to report positive attitudes toward lesbian and gay adults as adoptive parents. These results are consistent with what is known about the demography of attitudes regarding lesbians and gay men (Herek, 1995). Our findings also confirm the observations of others (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001) who have noted that gay and lesbian individuals are often seen as a viable parenting resource by agencies specializing in the placement of special needs children. On the other hand, the results suggest that agencies focusing on the placement of infants and toddlers are much less likely to recruit and place children with individuals who self-identify as lesbian or gay. Moreover, the attitudes of adoption program directors at these latter agencies are much less favorable regarding adoption and parenting by homosexual individuals. These findings point out some of the potential barriers for lesbians and gay men who wish to pursue adoption. As Brooks and Goldberg (2001) have noted, there continue to be numerous attitudinal and practice barriers faced by lesbian and gay individuals and couples in their efforts to become adoptive parents.

Interestingly, the findings of our study suggest that quite a few respondents were unaware of the law pertaining to adoption by gay and lesbian individuals. In particular, seven respondents—from six states—incorrectly described adoption of children by lesbians and gay men as illegal in their state, whereas another 29 respondents indicated that they were unsure of

their state's legal position on this issue. Considering that the respondents were directors of their agency's adoption program, this lack of knowledge was unexpected. These findings suggest the need for training programs for adoption agency personnel regarding the current legal status of adoption by lesbian and gay adults.

A number of limitations of the present study should be noted. Most importantly, the response rate for our survey was not as high as we had hoped. Although we invited nearly 900 agencies to participate, usable responses were obtained from only 214 respondents. Unfortunately, because of funding and staffing shortages associated with the project, we were unable to re-contact agencies that did not respond to our initial mailing. Had we been able to do so, it is quite likely that the final response rate would have been higher. Moreover, we would have been able to gather more systematic data on the reasons for agency nonparticipation. For those few agencies that sent back the survey without filling it out, the most common reason given for nonparticipation was that the program director did not have the time. As noted above, six program directors sent back the questionnaire indicating that they refused to participate in the research because of moral and/or religious objections to homosexuality. Undoubtedly, some of the nonparticipants who we did not hear from held similar views. The bottom line, however, is that we know nothing about the policies, practices, or attitudes at agencies that did not respond. Still, it is important to recognize that the responses we did receive represent adoption agencies in 45 states and the District of Columbia. Consequently, our findings are not limited to any particular geographical area; nor are they limited to agencies focusing on a specific type of adoption program. As noted previously, the agencies that took part in the research were quite varied in the nature of their adoption placements. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that a better response rate would increase our confidence in the potential generalizability of our findings. In addition, it would have been valuable to obtain the perspectives of more than one respondent at each agency, and to collect a broader array of information from each participating respondent. Surveying the practices and attitudes of adoption attorneys, who facilitate the bulk of independent adoption placements in this country, also would have provided important information about the extent of adoption placements with lesbians and gay adults outside of the formal adoption agency system. Despite these limitations, however, the present survey represents the first systematic effort to assess the climate for lesbian and gay prospective adoptive parents at agencies across the United States, and provides valuable information from a large, diverse sample of agencies.

Our findings have implications for a variety of different groups. First, the results show that many—but not all—adoption agencies are open to applications from lesbian and gay prospective parents. Thus, lesbians and gay men who wish to become adoptive parents would be well-advised to review agency policies and practices with care before committing themselves to work with any particular adoption agency. Second, our findings reveal that although many agencies are willing to accept applications from lesbians and gay men, a much smaller percentage of agencies actually have recruiting programs that target the lesbian and gay communities as a potential parenting resource for children needing to be adopted. Given the findings from research suggesting that many lesbians and gay men who are not already parents wish to raise a child (Beers, 1996; Morris et al., 2000; Sbordone, 1993), it would appear that much more education needs to be conducted with adoption agencies regarding ways of successfully reaching out to the lesbian and gay communities. Third, our findings reveal that some adoption agency directors are not well-informed about the legal status of adoptions by lesbians or gay adults, or about the data on psychological outcomes for children raised by homosexual parents. Consequently, educational programs on legal and psychological issues related to adoption by lesbian and gay individuals would be potentially beneficial for adoption professionals. Finally, despite our findings that adoptions of children by lesbian and gay adults are occurring across the country, little is known about child development in these families. Although research on children raised by a biological parent who is lesbian or gay has not shown these youngsters to be at greater risk for psychological problems than children raised by their heterosexual biological parents (Patterson, 1997; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001), we have no empirical data on the psychological outcomes for children raised by lesbian or gay adoptive parents. Similarly, although research has suggested that adopted children are at greater risk for various types of adjustment problems than nonadopted children (Brodzinsky, 1993; Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, in press; Brodzinsky et al., 1995; Brodzinsky et al., 1998), we do not know whether this pattern would hold for children of lesbians and gay men. Future research clearly is needed in this area.

Finally, our survey highlights a potential ethical and practice dilemma for those agencies involved in international adoption. As noted previously, many foreign countries either formally prohibit the placement of children with gay and lesbian individuals, or have regulations which indirectly pose barriers to such placements (e.g., requiring the adoptive parents to be married). Yet, in our research, the respondents from agencies

specializing in international adoption had very favorable attitudes regarding adoption and parenting by lesbians and gay men, and many of these individuals acknowledged that their agency accepted applications from this group of individuals and had made adoption placements with them. In light of increasing resistance from placing countries regarding adoption by lesbian and gay adults, adoption agencies appear to be faced with at least three possible options, each of which has ethical implications. First, agencies can choose to withhold information about a client's sexual orientation, which increases the chances of children in need finding a stable and nurturing home environment. This option, however, ignores the cultural values and standards of other countries and violates the ethical principle of truthful dealings in adoption practice. Second, agencies can choose not to collect information about the client's sexual orientation, thereby adopting a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Although this option increases the chances of needy children finding a permanent home, it also deliberately ignores the values of the child's birth country and places the agency in the ethical bind of failing to take proactive steps that are consistent with the standards set by that country. In addition, this option may prevent the agency from being able to help lesbian and gay adoptive parents explore relevant family related issues that they will likely encounter in the future (e.g., when and how to "come out" to their children; how to help their children cope with peer teasing regarding the parents' sexual orientation). Third, agencies can request information about a client's sexual orientation and report this information to the placing country. Although this practice is consistent with the ethical principle of honesty and openness in adoption practice, it may well deprive some children of timely placements in a stable and well-functioning home. Clearly, for those agencies involved in international adoption, placement of children with lesbian and gay adults represents a complex issue requiring careful consideration of many legal, ethical, human rights, and social casework concerns.

In summary, our findings suggest that although adoption of children by lesbian and gay adults remains controversial, it is a reality in the United States today. Many adoption agencies are willing to accept applications from lesbian and gay individuals, and many such adoptions have been completed. Further research will, it is hoped, explore child adjustment and patterns of family interaction within lesbian- and gay-parented adoptive families.

NOTE

1. Since the time the data were collected, New Hampshire has repealed the ban on adoption by homosexuals, and Mississippi and Utah have passed statutes that either directly or indirectly prohibit adoption by lesbians and gay men.

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