Carter, a 37-year-old teacher, and Patrick, a 41-year-old professor, lived in a midwestern suburb. They had been together for approximately 10 years at the time they began to consider parenthood. Before meeting Patrick, Carter had been unsure of whether he would be able to become a parent. He felt that he might have “abandoned that dream” when he came out. In contrast, Patrick had never considered not becoming a parent: “As a gay person there are so many things you can’t do and you just have to work around it. It is just one of those things. I knew that if I want[ed] to have a family, that is just what I am going to have to do.” Meeting Patrick and being exposed to other gay parents led Carter to rethink his initial hesitations about gay parenthood. After 10 years together, and a move into a larger house in a family-friendly neighborhood, the couple finally felt ready to take the plunge. They had a large, supportive network of family and friends and therefore felt well supported in their quest to become parents.

In deciding what route to take to parenthood, both men briefly considered surrogacy but then concluded, largely based on cost, that it did not make
sense. Their interest in an infant, which had initially led them to consider the surrogacy option, influenced their decision to pursue a private domestic adoption. They were also drawn to the philosophy of openness and honesty inherent in open adoption, which is characterized by contact pre- and/or post-placement between the adoptive and birth parents. As Patrick observed, “It is obvious that there is no mom in the picture. We just decided that open adoption was a good way for children to know where they came from.” Both men described actively researching various adoption agencies, because they hoped to circumvent, or at least minimize their exposure to, heterosexism in the adoption process. As Carter recalled, some of the agencies in their area made them feel somewhat uncomfortable, in that “we were being asked to be a little on the deceitful side and that was not what we were willing to do to start a family.” Both Carter and Patrick were firm that they were unwilling to closet themselves in order to adopt a child. This meant that the process of finding an agency that would work with them took many months—a cost that they preferred to incur rather than sacrifice their personal integrity.

Both White themselves, Carter and Patrick ultimately adopted Arianna, a biracial female infant. They were thrilled with their daughter—and so were their families. As Carter laughed, “My mom doesn’t call to talk to us anymore. It’s ‘How’s my granddaughter?’ I’m like, ‘I’m fine, Mom, thanks for asking.’” Interestingly, some of their friends responded less positively—particularly their gay male friends, all of whom were nonparents. As Carter observed, “For them, it’s so far from their realm of reality to even want a kid that they don’t understand why we did this.” He added, “[We now] kind of connect with some of our coworkers [more] than some of our friends.” Both men noted shifts in their support networks in that they spent less time with their nonparent friends (who were mostly gay), and more time with their friends who were parents (and who were often heterosexual). Their social support network had therefore become increasingly straight—and their lives, as they put it, “more mainstream.” They were aware of the irony that, at the same point that their sexuality was suddenly more on display in that they were more readily recognized as a couple, as opposed to just “buddies,” in the presence of a child, they suddenly felt “less gay than before,” in that parenthood, not their sexuality, was the defining feature of their identity. Further, although both men had described themselves as “workaholics” prior to parenthood, and were highly identified with their careers, parenthood caused them to “seriously rethink [their] commitment to work,” such that their work lives now took a backseat to their roles as parents.

* * *
Brazil allows gay unions.
—Financial Times, May 6, 2011

Legal exemptions allow Australian religious groups to discriminate against gays.
—Associated Press, May 4, 2011

U.S. gay couples banned from adopting Russian children.
—Moscow Times, July 22, 2010

Hollywood paints an updated portrait of the American family.
—Philadelphia Inquirer, July 22, 2010

As these news headlines illustrate, gay rights in general and gay parenthood in particular are prominent topics on the social and political agenda. The marriage and adoption rights of sexual minorities are being fiercely debated across the globe, a reality that is reflected in the extensive media coverage devoted to these topics. In addition to receiving more attention in the news, the lives of gay parents and their children are also increasingly being depicted on television and in the movies. The TV show Modern Family premiered on ABC in September 2009—the first network show to feature two gay men raising an infant. And Focus Features released the film The Kids Are All Right in the summer of 2010; although not the first film to depict gay parents, it was unique both in profiling a lesbian-mother family formed through alternative insemination, and in its use of A-list actors. The fact that gay parents are the focus of political, media, and entertainment attention reflects a new reality wherein they are recognized, albeit not universally accepted, as members of society. It also points to the need for social science research to document, and to provide greater insight into, the lived experiences of gay parents and their place in the broader discourse about families. Analysis of gay-parent families’ experiences and perspectives has the capacity to challenge and reconfigure our basic ideas about families.

This book responds to the increased interest in gay parents, and gay fathers specifically, by examining the perspectives of gay men who became parents through adoption. It takes up the lively political and lived contradictions of this historic juncture: indeed, the virulent assault on gay rights and gay parenting occur at the very moment that there is an explosion of new family forms, including gay-father families. Through its exploration of the experiences of gay fathers in today’s society, this book exposes the centrality of heteronormativity in the institutions governing and the discourses...
surrounding families. Further, by examining how gay fathers themselves wrestle with and respond to dominant ideas about families and gender, it pushes us toward a more nuanced understanding of how families and family life operate more broadly. It also encourages us to develop a deeper awareness of our own most basic assumptions about family, parenthood, gender, and sexuality, and how our daily actions and interactions have the potential to either uphold or resist dominant heteronormative discourses and institutions. Indeed, on a most basic level, exploration of the experiences of gay adoptive fathers has the capacity to stretch and enrich our national understanding of the sexuality, gender, and race contours of “family.”

How Did We Get Here? A Look at Families through the Past Few Decades

How did we get to a place where films and TV shows depicting gay-parent families are described in a *Philadelphia Inquirer* article as “represent[ing] America’s evolving social arrangements” and “repainting the portrait of the American family”? (Rickey, 2010). An answer to this question requires some discussion of the broader changes in family life and social relationships that have occurred in the United States over the past six decades (Cherlin, 2010; Thornton & DeMarco, 2001). Sociological and demographic data tell us that employment rates among women have increased dramatically since the 1960s, especially among White women (Cohen & Bianchi, 1999). The marriage and baby booms after World War II were followed by subsequent declines in marriage and childbearing rates (Fitch & Ruggles, 2000), and divorce rates accelerated sharply in the 1960s and 1970s (Cherlin, 1992). The 1960s and 1970s were also characterized by rapid increases in premarital sex and cohabitation (Bumpass & Lu, 2000) and innovations in medical technology, such as the birth control pill and other effective contraceptives (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

Attitudes and values about gender roles and family life in the United States shifted alongside these behavioral changes. National surveys have documented substantial and persistent trends toward the endorsement of gender equality in families since the 1960s. Americans are increasingly likely to desire less differentiation of male and female roles, and to view maternal employment as benign as opposed to harmful for children and families (Thornton, 1989; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). A long-term trend towards tolerance of a diversity of personal and family behaviors is also evident, as exemplified by increased acceptance of divorce, premarital sex, cohabitation, remaining single, and choosing to be child-free (Thornton, 1989; Thornton &
Young-DeMarco, 2001). On average, Americans have also become increasingly tolerant of nontraditional approaches to family formation over the past several decades. National surveys indicate that Americans show increasingly favorable attitudes toward adoption (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2002) and reproductive technologies (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2002; Kindregan, 2008) as a means of becoming a parent.

These behavioral and attitudinal shifts have led bodies such as the United States Supreme Court to contend that “the demographic changes of the past century make it difficult to speak of an average American family” (Troxel v. Granville, 2000, p. 63). Yet while it is difficult to dispute the existence of these changes, Americans differ widely in their opinions and interpretations of them. There is considerable debate among both the general public and scholars as to whether they are indicative of “family decline and disintegration,” or whether such changes should be interpreted as evidence that “the family is merely changing rather than declining” (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, p. 1011). Regardless of the actual observable changes in family life that are occurring, idealized notions of the family as nuclear, heterosexual, and biologically related continue to dominate contemporary popular media and public discourses (Chambers, 2000); these notions necessarily have implications for the lived experiences of gay fathers and their families.

Homosexuality: Political Movements and Changes in Attitudes

Alongside these large-scale shifts in behaviors and values relevant to family life, historical changes in gay identity politics and attitudes about homosexuality have also occurred. Such changes provide the historical backdrop for the way the current generation of gay fathers understands and approaches their roles and identities. They also provide the backdrop for our knowledge of how contemporary society responds to gay fathers.

The gay and lesbian revolution of the 1960s and 1970s has been described as the “stepchild of all the radical social and political movements of the decade—the student movement and the New Left, the anti-war movement, radical feminism, the Black Panthers, hippies and yippies” (Miller, 2006, p. 339). The early gay liberation movement was characterized by an atmosphere of openness and pride, increased organizing efforts, and, by extension, the influx of gay men and lesbians into the cities or “gay ghettos.” Karen Heller, citing a 1989 San Francisco Examiner article by Richard Ramirez, estimated that one-third of San Francisco’s gay male population had migrated to the city between 1974 and 1978 (Heller, 1993). In this new atmosphere of openness, the nature of gay male sex also shifted: “It was as if years of repression
had suddenly shed its skin, as if every gay man were 16 again and all the
men about whom he had ever fantasized . . . were suddenly available for a
smile” (Miller, 2006, p. 393). In other words, as the 1970s wore on, gay male
sex—which in previous decades had often been quick and anonymous, out
of necessity or fear—was increasingly becoming casual and anonymous out
of choice.

Then, in the 1980s, the first cases of AIDS were diagnosed. Gay men were
disproportionally represented among these early cases, which led to AIDS
initially being dubbed the “gay disease” or the “gay cancer.” The syndicated
columnist (and eventual presidential candidate) Pat Buchanan wrote in a
1983 column that “the sexual revolution has begun to devour its children,”
described gay men as a “community that is a common carrier of danger-
ous, communicable, sometimes fatal diseases,” and pronounced AIDS to
be “nature’s revenge” (Miller, 2006, p. 421). The deaths of millions of gay
men from AIDS prompted widespread mobilization by the gay commu-
nity, which became increasingly recognized as a political force during the
1980s and 1990s. In fact, in 1988, the Human Rights Campaign Fund, which
gives money to political candidates who support gay rights and AIDS issues,
became the ninth-largest PAC in the country (Bernstein, 2002; Miller, 2006).
As bars and cruising areas became less central to the social life of the gay
community, new types of organizations and institutions began to take their
place, such as 12-step groups, gay churches and synagogues, gay choruses,
and gay athletic clubs. In addition, as the perceived need to be in the “cen-
ter of the action” declined, gay men began to disperse beyond the confines
of gay ghettos, with many settling in the neighboring suburbs. The 1990s
marked a period during which gay men were “no longer leaving their home-
towns to establish separate identities and live in urban enclaves,” but were
“choosing to be part of the American mainstream” (Seidman, 2002, p. 3).
Indeed, the journalist Frances FitzGerald visited the Castro (a neighborhood
in San Francisco that had been very densely populated with gay men during
the 1970s) in 1985 and observed that it was “still a gay neighborhood, but it
had lost its ‘gender eccentricities.’ It was a neighborhood much like the other
white, middle-class neighborhoods surrounding the downtown. . . . It [was]
stable and domesticated” (as cited in Miller, 2006, p. 417). About the social
changes that followed the advent of AIDS, the journalist Neil Miller writes:

Many of the social changes in the lives of gay men might have occurred
anyway if AIDS hadn’t come along. The aging of the “baby boom” genera-
tion, the more conservative social climate, the gradual lessening of social
hostility toward homosexuals, an increasing sense of self-confidence and
As more and more gay men became sick from AIDS, the importance of recognizing ties (e.g., between lovers) became more apparent, as dying men’s assets and possessions were often given to their parents and other members of their family of origin (Bernstein, 2002; Miller, 2006). Therefore, during the 1980s and 1990s, there was an increased push for domestic partner legislation and bereavement leave, which became central priorities for the movement. By the late 1990s, a number of cities ranging from Minneapolis to Seattle to New York permitted same-sex couples to register their partnerships, and more than 3,500 businesses or institutions of higher education offered some form of domestic partner benefit (Miller, 2006; Seidman, 2002). During the 1990s, considerable steps toward legal and social integration were made (Seidman, 2002; Stychin, 2005). Efforts to secure other rights—such as partner relationship recognition—continued to build steam during the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2000, Vermont became the first state to offer civil unions to same-sex partners. In 2003, Massachusetts became the first state to grant civil marriage to same-sex partners.

Society’s attitudes about homosexuality have shifted alongside these changes in the gay political movement. Up until the early 1970s, the American Psychiatric Association classified homosexuality as a mental illness in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* (Sullivan, 2003). In the 1970s, gay activists began to protest this designation, and it was removed from subsequent revisions of the *DSM*. Survey data suggest that attitudes began to shift toward greater tolerance of homosexuality during this time period. The National Opinion Research Center’s General Social Survey indicated that between 1972 and 1994, the percentage of people who believed that homosexuality was “not wrong” increased from 19% to 31%, and, with the exception of the late 1980s, when the number of deaths from AIDS was at a peak in the United States, the trend has been in the direction of increasing tolerance over time (Sullivan, 2003; Sullivan & Wodarski, 2002). By the early 1990s, the *New York Times*, reflecting this trend toward tolerance, began to feature almost daily articles on various aspects of gay/lesbian life (Miller, 2006). By 1998, the percentage of respondents who believed that homosexuality was “not wrong” had risen to 34% (Sullivan, 2003). Survey data gathered by the Pew Research Center indicate that in 2006, 36% of Americans believed that homosexuality is something that people are born with, up from 20% in 1985 (Pew Research Center, 2006). Other national survey data suggest that even more tolerant
attitudes toward homosexuality in American society have taken hold today. A 2010 Gallup poll found that 52% of Americans considered homosexual relations morally acceptable, up from 40% in 2001 (Saad, 2008, 2010). The news that Americans’ acceptance of gay relations crossed the 50% threshold inspired excitement among pro-gay advocates, who claimed this as a noteworthy victory for the gay rights movement (Biesen, 2010).

The Emergence of Gay Fatherhood

What are the implications of these social changes for gay parenthood? During the 1970s and 1980s, the gay community was political, politicized, and often regarded as entirely separate from—indeed, an alternative to—the “straight world.” There was little acknowledgment of gay men’s “procreative consciousness” (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). In fact, gay men were often stereotyped as uninterested in children and as “antifamily” (Stacey, 1996). In the 1990s, increasing acceptance of homosexuality, coupled with increased options for becoming parents in the context of same-sex relationships, led to a rise in the number of intentional gay-father households. These numbers increased even more sharply during the beginning of the twenty-first century, when adoption, fostering, and surrogacy became more widely available to gay men. Estimates based on U.S. census data suggest that about 1 in 20 male same-sex couples and 1 in 5 female same-sex couples were raising children in 1990. In 2000, these numbers had risen to 1 in 5 male same-sex couples and 1 in 3 female same-sex couples (Gates & Ost, 2004).

Yet even though attitudes toward homosexuality are becoming more tolerant on average, many Americans continue to hold ambivalent or hostile attitudes, particularly where matters of parenting are concerned (Stein, 2005). In 2006, only 42% of Americans favored allowing lesbians and gay men to adopt, up from 38% in 1999 (Pew Research Center, 2006). Religious and politically conservative persons are particularly likely to have negative attitudes about homosexuality, and to believe that gay persons should not be allowed to adopt children (Brodzinsky, Patterson, & Vaziri, 2002; Logan & Sellick, 2007; Whitley, 2009). For example, politically conservative and religiously oriented organizations like the Family Research Council believe that “since reproduction requires a male and a female, society will always depend upon heterosexual marriage to provide the ‘seedbed’ of future generations. The evidence indicates that homosexual or lesbian households are not a suitable environment for children” (Family Research Council, 2011). Gay men, then, pursue adoptive parenthood in a climate that is both complex and contested.
In addition to contending with broader social attitudes about homosexuality, gay men also confront dominant, sometimes conflicting, ideas about gender and parenthood. Gay men who become adoptive fathers in the context of same-sex committed relationships are typically doing so without a female co-parent. They often encounter powerful ideologies regarding the importance of female parents to child development, as well as complicated and sometimes contradictory ideals regarding fatherhood (Goldberg, 2010a). Old stereotypes of fathers as primarily breadwinners and as less involved in the care of their children continue to prevail (Blankenhorn, 1995), yet at the same time, a new fatherhood ideal is emerging (Coltrane, 1996; Henwood & Procter, 2003). Changes in societal attitudes toward gender and increases in women’s employment have contributed to greater expectations for fathers’ involvement with their children—not just as breadwinners and playmates but also as equal co-parents (Coltrane, 1996; Henwood & Procter, 2003). As men in relationships with other men, gay fathers and fathers-to-be must negotiate these competing ideals as they create and enact their roles as parents.

Studying Gay Adoptive Fathers: Theoretical Perspectives

This book explores the perspectives and experiences of 70 gay men (35 adoptive couples) who were first interviewed while they were actively seeking to adopt, and then again after they became parents—3–4 months post-adoptive placement—in order to provide a picture over time of how their lives changed when they became parents. It offers insight into how these men decided to become parents in the context of various competing discourses about whether gay men can parent; how they reconfigured their roles as partners and workers once they became parents amid contradictory ideals of masculinity and fatherhood; how they viewed their changing relationships with friends, family members, and the larger society during the transition to parenthood; and how they managed their families’ visibility and multiple minority statuses in the context of their larger communities. Although the sample of men is relatively racially homogenous (82.5% White) and well educated, half the men adopted transracially, allowing for variability in the number and type of intersecting minority statuses with which families contended. Moreover, the sample of couples is geographically diverse, allowing for variability in the kinds of challenges and barriers they faced in their quest to adopt, and once they became parents. This book focuses on gay men who adopted their children, as opposed to men who became parents through surrogacy, for several reasons. First, adoption represents the more common route to parenthood for male same-sex couples who are intentionally
pursuing parenthood. Further, surrogacy is typically pursued by only a nar-
row subset of gay men: those who have considerable financial resources (the
average cost of surrogacy in the United States is over $100,000; see Goldberg,
2010a). Also, gay men who adopt must navigate multiple ways in which
their families are different from the dominant notion of “family,” in that they
are nonheterosexual and their children are not biologically related to them
(and may be racially different from them as well).

This book is about how gay fathers both shape and are shaped by their
broader social context. As we will see, by embarking on and enacting father-
hood, the gay men in this study can be viewed as disrupting heteronormativ-
ity, an act that may lead them to (re)define gender and family for themselves,
their families, their friends, and their communities. To examine these men’s
stories, we need a framework that situates them in the larger sociohistorical
and political context and that acknowledges the multiple and often compet-
ing discourses and ideologies that shape their identities, behavior, and func-
tioning. This study draws from social constructionist and queer theoretical
perspectives to frame its research questions, data analysis, and the overall
approach in this book.

A social constructionist perspective views both families and gender as
socially and materially constructed. From this perspective, the meaning of
family is not “objective,” and it is constantly being (re)defined and (re)nego-
tiated in different contexts (Stacey, 2006). Similarly, gender can be concep-
tualized as not merely a defining, stable characteristic of individuals (i.e., a
personality characteristic or role), but rather as something that is created,
defined, and maintained through daily interactions (West & Zimmerman,
1987). From a social constructionist perspective, gender is deeply embedded
in the social processes of daily life and social organizations, and is therefore
constructed at both the micro-level (family) and macro-level (laws, ideol-
ogy, culture) (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Risman, 2004). Queer theorists also
view gender, sexual orientation, and family as fluid and contested. That is,
there are many ways to “do gender,” to “do sexual orientation,” and to “do
family.” Queer theory, however, is distinct from social constructionism in
that it situates heteronormativity at the center of analysis (Oswald, Blume,
& Marks, 2005). Heteronormativity has been described as “the mundane,
everyday ways that heterosexuality is privileged and taken for granted as
normal and natural” (Martin, 2009, p. 190). It can perhaps be even more
precisely defined as “an ideology that promotes gender conventionality, het-
erosexuality, and family traditionalism as the correct way for people to be”
(Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005, p. 143). Queer theory attends to the inter-
dependence of gender, sexuality, and family in relation to heteronormativity,
and to how heteronormativity is produced through discourse—that is, the talk and action of everyday life. Queer theory can be used to challenge several binaries embedded in heteronormativity: “real” males and “real” females versus gender deviants; “natural” sexuality versus “unnatural” sexuality; and “real” families versus “pseudo” families. Sexual minorities, because of their marginalized status in society, are in a unique position to engage in “queering processes”—that is, to engage in acts and put forward ideas that challenge such binaries and therefore expand our ideas about gender, family structure, and sexual orientation. Alternately, some gay men, despite their marginalized status, may choose to focus their efforts not on “queering” the status quo, but on adapting and conforming to the existing heteronormative structures in which they and their families live.

From both of these theoretical perspectives, gay-father families contest and expose traditional conceptualizations of family and highlight the ways “family” and “parenthood” are subjectively interpreted (Stacey, 2006). By actively disentangling both heterosexuality and biology from parenthood, gay adoptive fathers destabilize several key assumptions about family, such as the notion that all families are created through heterosexual reproduction and the notion that all families are biologically related. The very fact that men are parenting with male, not female, co-parents is a fundamental challenge to traditional notions of “motherhood” and “fatherhood.” Men’s same-sex relational context by definition precludes the enactment of traditional heterosexual mother and father roles, and in turn upends basic assumptions about the meaning of “family” and “parenthood” (Goldberg, 2010b). Their unique relational and social context may lead gay adoptive fathers to act or construct meaning in ways that dislodge or challenge traditional family relations (e.g., the notion of a “mother” and “father” role) and gender relations, including their intimate partner relationships and their relationships with their children. Indeed, men’s marginalized status as gay men parenting with another man arguably allows them greater freedom to create meaningful and personally satisfying parental roles and identities. To the extent that the gay men in this study describe parenting desires that are not predicated on biological relatedness to one’s child, and act in ways that defy traditional notions of masculinity (e.g., as tied heavily to breadwinning), they invite us to reexamine our implicit associations about families and gender, what is a “masculine” man, and the unspoken dominance of heteronormativity in our most basic ideas about family processes.

Gay men are, of course, exposed to the same societal and cultural ideologies about family, gender, and parental roles as heterosexual women and men, such as those of women as caretakers and nurturers, and of men as
breadwinners and playmates. Gay adoptive fathers necessarily negotiate parenthood within a societal system that is fundamentally gendered, and one in which women and men (and mothers and fathers) are assumed to have different and complementary qualities, roles, and responsibilities (Blankenhorn, 1995). Women as mothers are presumed to be nurturing, caring, and self-sacrificing, whereas men as fathers are presumed to be more practical, less emotional, and strongly committed to paid employment (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Thus, at the same time that gay adoptive fathers may construct and enact meanings in ways that resist heteronormativity and gendered relations, they are not insulated from or immune to heteronormative gender norms and ideals. They may alternately or simultaneously draw from or derive meaning from normative conceptualizations of family, fatherhood, and parenthood even as they create their own “nontraditional” families. It is overly simplistic to assume that all gay parents, as “family outlaws” (Calhoun, 1997), actively and purposefully transform traditional notions of family. Such an approach precludes exploration of how the choices, behaviors, relationships, and roles of gay fathers may be accommodating or assimilating rather than resistant and revisionist in nature (Goldberg, 2009a). By extension, it is possible that some gay men, realizing their marginalized status as gay fathers, feel additional pressure to conform to traditional notions of fatherhood and family because they do not want to expose themselves and their children to additional criticism or attack. Or, alternatively, some gay men may simply long for the type of parenting arrangements that heterosexual couples have long enjoyed, and may not be particularly interested or attuned to the ways they do, or do not, challenge heteronormativity.

The societal system within which gay adoptive fathers negotiate parenthood is, of course, not only gendered but also heterosexist. Gay men become parents in a societal climate that often denigrates their sexual orientation and choice of partners in both symbolic and practical ways. In most states, gay men’s commitment to their partners is undermined by the absence of laws that recognize and protect their unions. Their commitment to their children is similarly undermined by the lack of legal protection for both parents. Gay men who wish to adopt may also encounter discrimination and opposition at other, more localized levels. They may confront adoption agencies that refuse to work with them or that perpetuate more subtle types of discrimination; or they may face a lack of support from family members and friends. Gay men’s experience of parenthood, and, specifically, the degree to which gay men resist and accommodate to dominant cultural and societal norms (such as the societal presumption that family members should look alike), may be shaped by the broader sociopolitical/
legal climate and the degree to which gay men perceive their relationships and families as being under attack.

The men’s experiences of negotiating heteronormativity, and their ability or willingness to challenge heteronormative discourses and practices, are likely influenced not only by broader legal/structural factors but also by the social, geographic, and financial resources they have available to them. For example, a fairly affluent gay man living in an urban and progressive area may feel more comfortable challenging heterosexist treatment by adoption agencies than a gay man who lives in a conservative area of the country and is not financially privileged, and therefore has fewer adoption options available to him. Likewise, a gay man with a large social support network may be more willing and able to resist family members’ gendered and heteronormative assumptions regarding child rearing than a gay man who, lacking extensive social ties, feels he must conform to these stereotypes in order to be accepted by his family of origin. By examining how the gay men in this study create and maintain their families in the context of broader norms and ideologies that uphold heteronormativity, we can gain an understanding of how, and the conditions under which, heteronormativity can be resisted and alternative notions of gender and family realized—and, likewise, how, and under what conditions, gay men yield to or internalize heteronorms (Oswald, Kuvalanka, Blume, & Berkowitz, 2009).

Gay fathers are but one example of individuals who are parenting “against the grain,” and their struggles and creativity are in some ways reflective of the types of experiences and possibilities engaged by new family forms (e.g., single-parent families, adoptive families, multiracial families, and grandparent-headed families). The men in this study can be seen as “innovating” family and parenthood through their resourceful family-building efforts, their creative parenting practices, and their ability to carve out new political and personal possibilities for themselves and others, thereby illuminating what is possible in terms of family life. In short, the increasing presence of gay adoptive fathers in society has the capacity to revision dominant understandings of family, including who is “seen” and recognized as family.

Finding the Men

Community, state, and legal contexts necessarily shape the experiences of gay men who adopt. Gay men who reside in states that do not allow gay men to co-adopt their children openly, for example, may face a broader set of challenges and barriers than do men who live in states characterized by more flexible adoption laws. Gay men who live in urban communities with
a visible gay community may have a different experience in seeking to adopt and then raising their child than do men who live in rural communities with a limited gay presence. My interest in the social geography of men’s lives, and how men’s experiences and perspectives might be shaped by both immediate and more distal contextual factors, led me to seek out a geographically diverse sample.

I used U.S. census data to identify states with a high percentage of lesbians and gay men (Gates & Ost, 2004) and made an effort to contact adoption agencies in those states. More than 30 agencies agreed to provide information to their clients—that is, prospective adoptive parents—typically in the form of a brochure that invited them to participate in a study of the transition to adoptive parenthood. Clients were asked to contact me for more information about the study. For the larger study from which this sample is drawn, both same-sex couples and heterosexual couples were invited to participate. Inclusion criteria for the larger study were that couples must be adopting their first child, and both partners must be becoming parents for the first time. Because some same-sex couples may not be “out” to agencies about their sexual orientation, I also enlisted the help of large gay/lesbian organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) to aid me in disseminating study information. For example, the HRC posted study information on their FamilyNet Listserv, which is sent to 15,000 people per month.

I did not extend my recruitment efforts beyond the United States for several reasons. First, the nature of adoption—including the procedures for adopting, the regulations surrounding adoption, and the role of adoption in society—varies significantly across cultures. Second, the nature of adoption by gay men in particular necessarily varies cross-culturally. Because of these differences, and my uncertainty about how I would synthesize and effectively compare findings from such different international contexts, I limited my study to residents of the United States. The findings of the current study must be viewed within this particular cultural context. This study therefore focuses on a particular cross section of adult men in the United States who are actively engaged with, and transforming, the landscape of the American family, at a politically contentious moment in gay human rights history.

Doing the Study

To gain insight into how gay men experience and perceive the transition to adoptive parenthood, and, more broadly, how they wrestle with and navigate heteronormative and sometimes conflicting discourses regarding parenthood, family, and gender, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews
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(with open-ended questions) with 70 men (35 gay male couples)—both before they became parents, while they were waiting to be placed with a child (Time 1), and after they became parents, 3–4 months after adoptive placement (Time 2). Because of the geographically diverse nature of the sample, all participants took part in telephone interviews, which lasted about 1.5 hours on average (usually ranging from 1 to 2.5 hours). At the time of the pre-adoptive (Time 1) interview, the majority of couples had completed their home study, an in-depth evaluation of the pre-adoptive parents. In addition to participating in individual interviews, both partners also completed a questionnaire packet at Time 1, which they mailed back to me in separate, postage-paid envelopes. After these initial interviews, I maintained regular contact with participants. Checking in periodically with them by phone and e-mail enabled me to learn quickly of a child placement, and so to schedule the post-adoptive placement interview (Time 2). At Time 2, both partners again completed an individual interview and a questionnaire packet.

Semi-structured interviews, which I would later analyze using theoretically grounded coding strategies, seemed most appropriate given how little is known about gay men's parenthood experiences, as well as the nuances and complexity of the issues I was interested in studying. Open-ended interviews allowed me to tailor my questions and follow-up queries to the men's specific experiences and social locations. For example, I asked different questions and follow-up inquiries depending on whether the men had adopted transracially, had adopted via public adoption versus private adoption, and were able to legally adopt their child.

I was determined to interview gay men both before they had adopted and after they had become parents, given my interest in how their ideas and experiences pertaining to family, gender, and parenthood might change after they were placed with a living, breathing child. Further, I set out to interview gay male couples, as opposed to single gay men, because I was aware that for these couples, parenthood renders their sexual orientation more visible in that they are now navigating the world as “two men and a baby.” In turn, I sought to document how these men simultaneously made families and managed an “invigorated visibility” as gay couples. I also wanted to interview members of couples because of my interest in how relational processes (such as the division of paid and unpaid labor) were renegotiated during the transition to parenthood. Finally, as noted, I felt that it was important to seek out a geographically diverse sample because I was interested in gaining insight into how men in different social contexts (in terms of legal barriers, community climate, etc.) negotiated their identities and experiences as gay male parents. This ultimately led me to conduct telephone interviews with all the
men, who were spread throughout the United States. In the interest of developing solid rapport with all participants, I spent time on e-mail and the telephone talking to and getting to know them prior to our official “interviews.” I also made an effort to leave time for informal chat before, during, and after the actual interview.

All the men were interviewed separately from their partners in order to allow them to speak openly about their own personal perspectives, opinions, and experiences. Interviewing both partners separately was important since partners sometimes had very different perspectives and experiences of particular issues. For example, gay men whose work arrangements differed markedly from their partners’ often voiced different challenges and concerns related to their work-family arrangements. Interviewing both partners separately also enabled me to access complicated and sometimes negative emotions that the men might have been unwilling to share had they been interviewed with their partners.

The interview questions asked in the study were often quite personal (see appendix C for the interview questions). For example, I—or sometimes one of my trained graduate research assistants—inquired about participants’ personal and family (combined) income, questions that often highlighted the disparity between partners’ incomes (or, at the post-placement interview, underscored the fact that only one partner was now “bringing home the bacon”). No participant resisted providing this financial information, but it was clear that it made a few men uncomfortable—particularly when they did not make any money (e.g., because they were a graduate student, or not working because they were caring for the child). Some men responded to these questions with elaborations about how they used to be the primary earner (e.g., before returning to school). Thus sometimes the difficult questions led men into a discussion of masculinity and cultural ideologies of manliness, enabling me to obtain valuable data to which I otherwise would not have had access.

Another line of inquiry that proved somewhat uncomfortable for some participants was questions about how couples chose which partner would adopt as a single parent, among those couples in which partners could not co-adopt. Some of the men seemed uncomfortable with highlighting discrepancies in job status, income, and educational level between themselves and their partners—even though (and perhaps because) the decision of who would adopt often rested on these very discrepancies. Those men with the higher job status, income, and educational level were more attractive “on paper” and therefore chosen to be the adoptive parents. Yet these men, and their lower-status partners, expressed discomfort with the notion that one
partner presented—even on the most superficial level—the more “attractive” package. They also seemed to resist the reality that occupational status/money was power, in that it granted the higher earner the legal privilege of completing the official legal adoption. Indeed, this is an example of how, without gender to “naturalize” differences within couples, these men had to navigate the meaning and implications of differences in power and responsibilities within couples—an experience that they generously shared with us, and which provides us with insights about how difference and power may operate more broadly in all couples.

Of note is that our use of telephone interviews, as opposed to in-person interviews, eliminated certain rapport-building devices, such as facial cues. We therefore made considerable efforts to build rapport before, during, and after the interviews with participants. We strived to be sensitive and warm in our interactions with participants; to express our genuine appreciation for their participation, time, and insights; and to convey our congratulations appropriately when they were finally placed with a child (e.g., by sending a card and a gift). We also sent our participants quarterly newsletters that included updates about the research, resources on gay parenting adoption, newsworthy items pertaining to parenting and adoption, and seasonal activities for parents and children. These quarterly newsletters served as a periodic “thank-you” to our participants and, we hope, conveyed to them our ongoing appreciation of their contributions.

Analyzing the Data

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative methods, in general, and a thematic analysis, more specifically, because these methods are particularly suited to grounding participants’ constructions within their specific sociocultural context (Morrow, 2005). My analysis is grounded in a social constructivist philosophy of science, whereby I view participants’ discourse as illustrative of their meaning-making processes, rather than of any presumed objective reality (Gergen, 1985; Ponterotto, 2005). Although I emphasize the emergence of themes throughout this book, I recognize that any analysis of the data involves my own (i.e., the researcher’s) constructed interpretation of the participants’ responses (Gergen, 1985). Further, I approached the data using a social constructionist and queer theory–informed theoretical framework, which necessarily sensitized me to attend to certain themes and issues and to ignore or minimize others. Thus my choice and use of that theoretical frame inevitably shaped the data and themes that I report.
I engaged in a thematic analysis, which involved carefully sorting through data to identify recurrent themes or patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I first engaged in line-by-line analysis of each participant’s transcript, attending closely to their statements to generate initial theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006). During this stage I considered and compared responses across participants, whereby the responses of partners within couples were compared, and the data from Time 1 and Time 2 were compared, both within and across couples (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At the start of the coding process, I was broadly interested in the ways that the men negotiated their parenting desires and experiences amid broader cultural discourses about gender, family, and parenthood. I was also interested in changes in men’s experiences and perceptions across the transition to parenthood. These broad interests framed my selective analysis and coding of the data. I first read and applied initial codes to the transcripts of the first five couples (10 men) and then wrote extensive memos about the transcripts. Careful analysis of these memos led me to identify a number of initial themes. I then read the transcripts of the next five couples, wrote memos about the emergent themes in these transcripts, and then compared their data to those of the first 10 men. This led to further refinement and specification of themes. For example, I consolidated some specific themes into larger, more abstract categories. I repeated this process—that is, reading transcripts, writing in-depth memos, articulating themes, and comparing these themes against already-coded data—until all the data had been coded. Then, using the emerging coding scheme, I reread all the transcripts multiple times, attempting to categorize all the participants’ narratives in the existing coding scheme. This process led to further refinement of the emerging categories. For example, some codes were combined with other codes, some were modified or reconceptualized, and others were dropped. This thorough analysis process also led me to identify linkages or connections between categories, as well as to notice both consistency and contradiction within the narrative of an individual participant, and between the narratives of partners within a couple.

At this point, I had a very long list of fairly specific codes. Therefore, I next applied focused coding to the data, using the most significant, meaningful, and substantiated coding categories to sort the data. This led me to further integrate some codes and to discover new connections among the data. Several rounds of focused coding of all the narratives enabled me to refine my descriptive categories further. Also at this stage, I examined the relationships among key categories (Charmaz, 2006). For example, I examined how participant demographics such as race, geographic location, and adoption type might relate to or serve to categorize participant responses. My focused
codes, which can be understood as being more conceptual and selective (Charmaz, 2006), became the basis for what I refer to as the themes developed in my analysis. Then I reapplied the coding scheme and made subsequent revisions until all data were accounted for. I organized the findings around the final coding scheme, which consisted of five major sections—that is, the five major chapters in the book.

Throughout the process of writing each chapter, I made minor revisions and additions to the scheme. I also frequently revisited the data to extract quotes that I had previously identified as being exemplars of a particular theme. Thus the process of coding and writing was an iterative one, whereby I consistently compared my writing, the participants’ narratives, and the coding scheme against one another, querying and addressing all inconsistencies.

Pseudonyms were assigned to the men and their children to protect their confidentiality. I also took a number of other steps to preserve the confidentiality of the participants while also maintaining the meaning and integrity of the interviews and the reality of participants’ lives. For example, while general job titles were typically preserved (e.g., lawyer, physician), those job titles that were more specific were altered somewhat. Efforts were made to ensure that the altered job title was fairly close to the actual job title in terms of level of education required, type of responsibilities involved, and approximate annual income earned. In addition, when introducing participant quotes and stories, I generally discuss participants’ geographic location in terms of the U.S. region in which they resided (East, West, South, Midwest) and whether they lived in an urban, rural, or suburban locale. In some instances, however, I identify the specific city and state in which participants resided, because this information provides important contextualizing detail.

Of course, while I took steps to protect the confidentiality of participants, those who read this book may very well be able to identify themselves—and their partners. Thus it is impossible to keep participants’ responses entirely “secret” from their partners.

The Men in the Study

The men who were interviewed for this study tend to be somewhat older than were the average heterosexual first-time parents (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). At the time they were first interviewed, the men’s mean (average) age was 38.4 years old (their ages ranged from 30 to 52; SD = 4.5 years). The men largely identified as “exclusively gay/homosexual” (86%); a minority (14%) identified as “predominantly gay/homosexual.” (No men identified as bisexual.) The men were generally in fairly long-term
relationships: on average, they had been in their current relationships for 8.3 years (relationship length ranged from 1 to 19 years; \( SD = 3.8 \) years). At the time of the pre-adoptive placement interview, 55% of the men reported having had a commitment ceremony, and 12% of the men reported having had a civil marriage (not necessarily in their state of residence; only one couple was legally married in their home state). The men were also fairly well educated and affluent: seven of the men (10%) had graduated high school with no further education; five (7%) had an associate’s degree or some college; 28 of the men (40%) had completed college; 19 of the men (27%) had a master’s degree; and 11 (16%) had a PhD, JD, or MD. Pre-adoption, the men’s annual median personal salary was $70,000 (\( SD = 6,702; \) range $0–$450,000), and their annual median family (combined) income was $122,800 (\( SD = 9,463; \) range $53,000–$510,000).11

The men waited for an average of 13.7 months for a child placement (\( SD = 10.4 \) months, range 2–60 months). Twenty-four couples pursued private domestic open adoptions (i.e., adoptions in which there is contact between the birth and adoptive parents before or after the adoptive placement); nine couples pursued public domestic adoptions (i.e., they adopted through the child welfare system); and two couples pursued international adoptions (i.e., they adopted from abroad). Twenty-five couples (75%) were placed with newborns or infants, five couples (15%) were placed with toddlers, and five couples (15%) were placed with school-aged children. Twenty couples adopted boys, and 15 couples adopted girls. Most adoptions were transracial for at least one partner.12 Specifically, 58 of the men (82.5%) were White/Caucasian; five (7%) were Latino; three (4.5%) were Asian; two (3%) were biracial/multiracial; and two (3%) were African American. With regard to the children’s races, 17 (49%) were White/Caucasian, seven (20%) were biracial/multiracial; five (14%) were African American; five (14%) were Latino/Latina; and one (3%) was Asian.

In terms of geographic region, 10 couples lived in California; three couples each lived in Washington DC, Washington State, Oregon, and New York; two couples each lived in Texas, Georgia, and Missouri; and one couple each lived in Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Vermont. Most of the participants (31 of 35 couples; 89%) lived in counties that are characterized as “large metropolitan areas” (1 million residents or more) by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Three couples lived in small metropolitan areas (fewer than 1 million residents) and one couple lived in a micropolitan area—that is, a community adjacent to a small metropolitan area. Thus most participants were living in urban metropolitan areas. But living in a metropolitan area does not guarantee, and is not
always associated with, the presence of a large number of gays and lesbians or gay/lesbian-parent families. According to the U.S. census, only five of the couples (14%) lived in cities where more than 2% of households reportedly were comprised of same-sex couples (e.g., San Francisco). Another 14 couples (40%) lived in cities where 1–2% of households were same-sex couples (e.g., Atlanta). Finally, 16 couples (46%) lived in cities where less than 1% of households were same-sex couples (e.g., St. Louis); in seven of these cases, the percentage of same-sex-couple households was less than 0.5%.

Focus of the Book

This book uses data from these 35 gay male adoptive couples to explore how gay men navigate and respond to heteronormativity in the process of becoming, and then living as, adoptive parents. By showing how they respond to available sociocultural discourses and also how they drew on their own creative potential and personal resources, these men’s stories provide insight into the “doing” and “creating” of new family forms and practices against a backdrop of societal resistance. As this book will illustrate, when gay men choose to become parents (especially adoptive parents) in the United States today, they continually encounter societal, legal, and institutional practices, as well as mundane interpersonal experiences, in which heteronormativity is either explicit or implicit—and is in some cases enforced by legal statutes. Indeed, gay couples who adopt inescapably come face-to-face with elements of heteronormativity that single gay men, or gay couples not seeking to adopt, may never encounter. The men in the study, as we will see, sometimes actively confronted and resisted such practices and discourses, perhaps at times prompting or promoting societal change. In other cases, they conformed to such practices and discourses for the sake of expediency (e.g., they did not want to jeopardize their chance of adopting a child) or relational harmony (e.g., they did not want to jeopardize interpersonal relationships with family members). Relatedly, they sometimes seemed to draw unselfconsciously on heteronormative meaning systems (e.g., conventional notions about gender and parenting) to understand their own experiences.

Chapter 1 explores the men’s perceptions of their parenting trajectories and choices, with attention to the historical, social, and geographical backdrop of their decision making. Specifically, it addresses how the men constructed their parenthood desires amid the controversy surrounding gay parenthood, and how they wrestled with the broader heteronormative context in realizing, and then articulating, their parenting desires. It also explores how the men decided to pursue adoption over surrogacy—a process that in some
cases was fraught with ambivalence, revealing the power of dominant discourses surrounding biogenetic relationships for some of the men. Another issue it takes up is the process by which the men decided what type of adoption to pursue, and how the heteronormative values, laws, and practices of the surrounding culture constrained their choices. The discussion of these decision-making processes attends to the personal, contextual, and temporal factors that the participants perceived as influencing their decision making. This chapter reveals how all the men contended with salient and interconnected discourses concerning biologism, heteronormativity, and the family. But the men varied in the degree to which they accepted or resisted these discourses. Some men, for example, strongly desired a genetic connection to their child. This desire did not foreclose their decision to pursue adoption, but rather just delayed it. Other men rejected the centrality of biogenetic relatedness in defining family, and embraced more expansive notions of family, implicitly “queering” or challenging heteronormativity. This chapter also illuminates the role of financial privilege in shaping the degree to which men can circumvent heteronormativity. For example, gay men with financial resources were in a better position to pursue and embody certain aspects of the heteronormative ideal (e.g., to adopt a newborn via private adoption) than men with few financial resources.

Chapter 2 explores the formal and informal barriers that the men encountered as they sought to build their families through adoption. It attends to how broader social and legal inequities, such as state laws regarding gay adoption, shaped the path to parenthood of the men in this study, and how they negotiated and responded to these, either through resistance or accommodation. Further, the men’s ideas about and valuing of marriage are examined. This chapter considers the degree to which the men viewed marriage as more important once they were parents, insomuch as marriage offered practical and symbolic support for their families; or as unimportant, because, for example, the men had access to other legal supports or because they rejected the institution of marriage as heterosexist. This chapter builds on chapter 1 to illustrate how geographic and economic privilege fundamentally influenced the men’s ability to resist or circumvent heteronormativity in the adoption process. It also illustrates how some men used the limited power available to them, regardless of their social locations, to resist heteronormativity.

Chapter 3 examines how the men in the study configured their roles and identities as parents in the context of broad cultural discourses regarding gender, parenthood, and family. The chapter discusses how the men made decisions about the division of work and family responsibilities, and how
they felt about those arrangements—with particular attention paid to the experiences of men whose work arrangements violate cultural expectations for masculinity (i.e., they were working part-time or staying at home). Further, it explores how the men reexamined their work roles in light of fatherhood, and the degree to which they felt less committed to work upon becoming a parent. This chapter shows how gay men must navigate and reconcile dominant ideologies surrounding masculinity (which emphasize breadwinning) with their own realities as parents who are “doing it all” (i.e., performing both paid and unpaid labor, which have stereotypically been associated with fathering and mothering, respectively).

Chapter 4 explores the men’s changing relationships with their immediate social networks—namely, their family members and friends—during the transition to parenthood. It first examines the men’s perceptions of families’ and friends’ support (or nonsupport) for their parenting efforts, and attends especially to the ways their family members’ and friends’ concerns reflect broader heteronormative discourses regarding families and gender. It also examines how the men’s family and friends responded in diverse ways to the arrival of a child, thereby provoking dramatic shifts, in some cases, in the men’s social networks. For example, some men described their family members as becoming increasingly supportive during the transition to parenthood. Sexual orientation suddenly paled in importance next to the significance of their new role as parents. In sum, this chapter reveals how gay men’s social networks may both influence and be influenced by gay men’s status as parents. It further reveals the potential for network members themselves to actively challenge heteronormativity (e.g., by recognizing and acknowledging their gay family member’s family as family).

Chapter 5 examines how the gay adoptive fathers in this study managed their multiple (often visible) differences in the context of societal scrutiny and ignorance. It addresses the extent to which they felt that parenthood made their sexuality more “visible,” and the extent to which those who adopted transracially experienced a heightened sense of visibility because their children’s race marked them and their families as “definitely adoptive,” thereby inviting additional inquiries about their families and sexuality. This chapter shows how gay men may respond to the increasing visibility of their sexual orientation and family status in diverse ways. For example, they may view this visibility as an opportunity to challenge others’ ideas about families, or they may resent it because it disrupts their efforts to “blend in” and “go mainstream.”

This book as a whole reveals the contexts and ways in which heteronormativity operates, as well as the varied, often creative responses that the
men employed in dealing with systemic heteronormativity. It also provides insights into the “doing of” and the “living in” of new family forms, particularly families that have been formed amid sociopolitical opposition. The creativity and resourcefulness that the men exhibit reveal the exciting potential of the “new families”—both those of today and those of the future.