Embracing Consumption:
Making Sense of Gay Fathers’ Strategies for Becoming Parents

Ellen Lewin
University of Iowa
Departments of Gender, Women’s & Sexuality Studies and Anthropology
ellen-lewin@uiowa.edu

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Becoming parents is not an easy process for gay men. They can’t get pregnant (yet), so unless they decide to have a child jointly with a woman (lesbian or not) or are able to work out an informal intra-familial adoption, they find themselves caught in a highly commodified pathway that can only be navigated with careful strategizing. The options open to them are adoption through the public foster care system, private domestic adoption, international adoption, and surrogacy. Choosing any one of these paths involves a complicated calculus in which the economic costs of each are weighed in relation to other priorities: racial and gender preferences for the future child, the relative importance of the child’s age (i.e., infant vs. older child), fears about possible fetal exposure to drugs or alcohol, and the willingness to cope with various kinds of disabilities. These choices are then filtered by other concerns, especially how to combat homophobic policies on the part of adoption agencies, social workers, health care providers, and foreign governments. All of these considerations are further inflected by social and cultural logics: values concerning social justice, attraction to or dislike of particular foreign cultures, and religious or spiritual agendas.

When I was writing my book, *Gay Fatherhood*, based on fieldwork carried out mainly in the Chicago area, I found myself worrying about how to represent the pathway to parenthood both accurately and respectfully. I was keenly aware of pervasive and toxic representations of gay men as affluent and obsessed with consumption, images that generally cast these men as lacking the basic quotient of altruism necessary to be good parents. I struggled, as well, with my own discomfort with what I saw as the growing commodification of reproduction in general. As I strove to write ethnographically about the process of becoming gay fathers, I also had to work within my own professional commitment to what might be called “ethnographic realism,” an understanding that I had to confront what the data told me, no matter how unpalatable it might
be. I found myself returning to my understanding of the classic form of anthropological relativism which sees all people’s lives and beliefs as comprehensible and logical, not matter how much the ethnographer—or the reader—may find them unappealing or even reprehensible. Still, finding a way to represent practices that we or others find unappealing has to be accomplished in accord with our professional commitment to “do no harm,” a principle spelled out in the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (2012).

Gay men who seek fatherhood enter a marketplace populated by other potential adoptive parents. They are mostly white, and must compete for the small number of highly valued white infants available through the public and private adoption systems. But because their parental desires are not supported as much as those of straight married couples, they find themselves liable to be matched with a child considered “hard to place,” i.e., categorized as less desirable across a range of racial, gender, age, and health-related features, many of which are glossed as “special needs.” Like other prospective parents who are white, they may be more willing to consider children who are racially different from themselves if the children are Latino, Asian, or mixed race, i.e., not black, apparently perceiving all colors other than black as somehow occupying an intermediate position only slightly removed from white (Pertman 2000), what one of Christine Gailey’s informants called “off-white” (Gailey 1999). And just as white infants are more highly valued as potential adoptees, white middle-class heterosexual couples are the conventional standard of appropriate placement, and are more likely to obtain the kind of child they prefer than gay men, lesbians, or single parents.

For some gay men (as well as many other prospective adopters), adoption from the foster care system is the only path available since they either lack the resources to undertake more costly options, or choose not to expend them in this way. In these cases, a counter-narrative to
the usual evaluative schema may emerge, as a child rejected by some families comes to have special value because he cries out for rescue; some gay men (and others) who can invest more money in the quest for a child are thus morally compelled by the social value of public adoption. For them, the racial and gender attributes (non-whiteness, maleness, non-infancy) that lower the market value of these children are precisely the qualities that make them desirable; potential parents who take this path affirmatively choose to adopt a “hard to place” child, a “gift” in the language of some discourses of disability (Landsman 1999). To be sure, gay men are not the only potential parents who maximize altruism or battle racism in choosing a child, but gay men may be under particular pressure to do so, as the other options sometimes available to conventional families are less likely to come their way.

Nonetheless, these choices are experienced through a lens of authenticity, as is adoption more generally, with the child who is chosen typically perceived as “intended,” the entire transaction “meant to be,” understandings often framed in a language of spirituality and mysticism, or as a vehicle for moral transcendence. It was not uncommon for men I interviewed to explain that becoming parents allowed them to decisively separate themselves from the frivolous concerns they identified with “gay life,” to achieve moral stature they associated with contributing to the future, focusing on what some characterized as “down to earth,” and leading lives more focused on children than on iconic gay pursuits like opera, eating out, home décor, and so on. For men who are religious, the call to parenthood is often associated with a spiritual mandate and a commitment to serving God; an impulse especially marked for black gay fathers who feel called to save African American children (especially boys) from the insults of the foster care system.
But not all gay men approach fatherhood as a route to community service or as a way to right the wrongs of an unjust social system. Instead, like many prospective, mostly white, parents, they seek children who (at least superficially) resemble them, children whose ethnic, medical, and/or genetic backgrounds are at least partly open to examination, and in most cases, children who are not black. These preferences speak to the imaginary of a family that is “as if” naturally formed (Modell 1994), with the assumption that the more likely a particular family configuration might occur in “nature,” to pass the test of “resemblance talk” (Becker, Butler & Nachtigall 2005), the more desirable it is, a goal that demands investment in private or international adoption, or in surrogacy.

The classic artifact produced in private adoption transactions is the “Dear Birth Mother” letter. These documents resemble advertisements more than conventional letters, striving to demonstrate the wholesomeness of the prospective adoptive family, typically by providing photographs of them involved in stereotypically “family-oriented” activities—outdoor sports, playing with pets, or decorating Christmas trees, often in the company of relatives. They also may signal the economic solidity of the family by including pictures of their home, referring to their occupations, and making prominent mention of vacation travel that would not be accessible to persons of lesser means.

Private adoption, however, can be a risky proposition. Prospective parents can become involved in a circuitous process that may not produce results even after large financial investments. Birth mothers may change their minds during the pregnancy or immediately thereafter. The birth mothers and the adoptive families tend to come from very different economic circumstances, so the process of forming bonds across class lines can generate unrealized expectations and other complications. Another alternative, international adoption,
allows prospective parents to circumvent the uncertainties of working with a known biological mother; while requiring some compromise on matters of race and age, it sidesteps the more stigmatized adoption of an African American child, though recent high-profile adoption cases (e.g., Madonna, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt) suggest that foreign-born black children have an allure not possessed by US-born blacks who find themselves in the foster care system.

But most countries that provide children to the Western adoption market restrict access so that gay men (as well as lesbians and unmarried people in general); to take advantage of these options; gay couples must nearly always present themselves as single men, with only one of them being designated as the adoptive parent. In recent years, these possibilities have shrunk even further, as some countries that once exported children have curtailed adoptions in response to internal political opposition.

Finally, surrogacy offers the option of having a child whose genetic background is partly that of its intended father(s). In a process reminiscent of the “Dear Birth Mother” letter, individual men or couples must woo surrogates and/or egg donors and negotiate the complex medical procedures needed to achieve pregnancy. Unless the couple has a friend or relative who wishes to serve as a surrogate and/or ovum donor, they will need pay for these services, working with an agency that specializes in facilitating all the arrangements. Each phase requires substantial financial outlays, often exceeding $100,000 per pregnancy, particularly since the fathers, agencies, and surrogates may each be located in a different part of the country. Both surrogates and potential parents select one another, typically through written profiles and often, as well, through some sort of personal interview, and this connection may be solidified with ongoing e-mail and telephone communication. Fathers-to-be typically seek a woman who is personally likeable and whose health practices—diet, smoking, alcohol use—are acceptable.
Similar processes underlie negotiations between ovum donors and fathers, though in those instances the donor’s appearance, ethnic background, and educational achievements contribute directly to the value of her genetic material. In the current environment, the most typical option is gestational surrogacy in which the surrogate is impregnated via IVF with embryos to whom she has no genetic relationship; such arrangements are understood to make her feel that the fetus she is carrying is not her own, and thus to avoid emotional conflicts after delivery (Ragoné 1994; Teman 2010).

One afternoon I met with Alan Zuckerman and Art Keller, at their large Chicago apartment. Located on an upper floor of an elegant Art Deco building, with a stunning view of Lake Michigan, Alan and Art spoke passionately about the reasons they chose to become parents, many of which they linked to achieving legibility as a Jewish family. They were careful to situate their decision making about race in terms being responsible parents. On the one hand, they worried that having a non-white baby in a Jewish family (the most likely outcome of a public adoption) would cause difficulties for the child; on the other, they presented themselves as uncomfortable with the moral ambiguity of international adoption, which they felt was steeped in an ethos of consumption, “like buying a baby.” Their decisions were located in their imaginings of what their family would look like, a priority that emerged in comments about the importance of physical resemblance between parent and child, or between siblings. They defined family by phenotypic parameters, with only so much flexibility possible before it no longer “looks like” a family.

Although they would have preferred a Jewish egg donor, the reality is that there are very few, and obtaining “Jewish eggs” involves a significant increase in cost, so they settled for someone whose coloring would likely produce a child that would be in “between” them,
maximizing the chances that the two children they intend to have will easily see themselves as siblings. When I asked the two men whether paying for the entire process constituted a financial strain for them, Art curtly replied, “Let’s just say we can afford it.”

The processes of acquiring a child when conventionally “natural” methods of procreation are inaccessible entails a particularly focused engagement with a world of commerce and consumption. Prospective parents must “shop” for a child—or for genetic material and reproductive service providers—and must weigh monetary costs and other investments against their images of what they expect from a child and from parenthood (Spar 2006; Triseliotis 1999). At the same time, American parents must meet stringent moral requirements that dictate separation between material factors and parenthood so that parental motivations can be experienced (and viewed by others) as purely affective (Zelizer 1985). To do this, they must transform the commercial, monetary, and consumption-related dimensions of becoming a parent into appropriate categories: love, nature, and notions of preordination.

Gay men move through the similar processes as do straight people who seek parenthood but cannot procreate conventionally, but they do so with the knowledge that their parental desires are less valued by the wider society. They enter the market for children as disadvantaged consumers; just as children available for adoption are evaluated according to race, gender, age, and health, potential parents who are single rank below married couples, and gay men (or lesbians) appraised below them. In other words, gay men enter the world of reproduction at a disadvantage, and can only succeed in achieving parenthood if they negotiate wisely. Gay fathers make explicit assessments of their ability to traverse various obstacles, often finding that maximizing virtue by seeking to adopt a devalued child or that spending money on mechanisms outside the public foster care system can enhance their odds of achieving their dream. Whether
they spend a lot of money in the process of becoming fathers or not, they cannot readily escape the consumption stories that surround reproduction; their choices are inevitably “about” consumption even when they minimize specific instances of it.

However, consumption doesn’t occur in a vacuum. References to the work of consumption are embedded in larger narratives that elaborate themes of family and nature, morality and belonging. In the context of acquiring children, consumption is not a simple process of “buying” children, genetic material, or the services of persons who can channel genetic material to constitute a family. Rather, consumption plays out in a complex locus of meanings in which family, love, and goodness are articulated against the background of what being gay means in America. One doesn’t just “become” a father in this location. One becomes a father within a web of meanings in which gayness, family, love, sacrifice, belonging and other attributes compete with each other for starring roles, all the while being balanced against material exigencies and ethical considerations that limit possibilities. As is the case for putatively mainstream families, gay fathers and their families accurately anticipate the need to perform their kinship status in a context in which none of the elements of performance occurs in a neutral environment. I took care to make these complicating factors clear, embedding gay fathers’ consumption practices in their full cultural context. This meant closely documenting the intense longing for parenthood the men expressed and the sacrifices they made for the children who eventually entered their lives. Are balance and context the answer to the ethical dilemmas of ethnography? I can only hope that they are.
References Cited

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