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A Narrative Policy Framework Analysis of LGBTQ+ Adoptive Fathers' Experiences in Georgia

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2025

Abstract

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MA, West Virginia University, 2000

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Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

LGBTQ+ individuals continue to face systemic discrimination and inconsistent policies when seeking to adopt, despite legal advancements and growing public support. Existing research has primarily focused on lesbian mothers or broadly on same-sex couples, with limited attention to LGBTQ+ fathers, especially those living in politically conservative states like Georgia. This gap in the literature limits the understanding of their adoption experiences and the development of responsive policies. The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the barriers and success factors experienced by LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia and to identify the federal, state, and local policies they viewed as most impactful. Guided by the Narrative Policy Framework, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine LGBTQ+ fathers who had legally finalized adoptions in Georgia. Thematic coding revealed persistent challenges, including agency discrimination, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inconsistent enforcement of nondiscrimination policies. Success factors included access to LGBTQ+-affirming agencies, peer advocacy networks, and inclusive social workers. These findings suggest the need for policy reforms that standardize adoption procedures, improve cultural competency training, and strengthen support systems for LGBTQ+ families. This study contributes to public policy and family studies literature by amplifying the voices of LGBTQ+ adoptive fathers and illustrating how their personal experiences intersect with policy environments. The results offer actionable insights that support more inclusive adoption systems and promote lasting social change by expanding access to stable, loving homes for all children.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Geta Crosdale, who always believed in me and inspired me to strive for my very best. Her strength and resilience were unwavering, even as she valiantly fought leukemia and lymphoma following her diagnosis in 2024. Despite her courageous battle, she ultimately succumbed to this disease, passing away on February 29, 2024. Her love, belief in my potential, and enduring spirit remain my guiding light throughout this journey.

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I also want to extend my heartfelt thanks to the research participants who courageously shared their stories. Their openness and honesty not only enriched this study but also contributed to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon explored in this research.

I owe immense gratitude to my husband, William Bates. His unwavering support, patience, and dedication have carried me through this process. Thank you for stepping up at home, keeping our small business running, and caring for our two children, Chase and Angelica, with so much love and strength. Your belief in me made this accomplishment possible, and I am forever grateful.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in interest among LGBTQ+ individuals in Georgia in building and expanding their families. For many, adoption- whether through private agencies or state-run programs- has become a key pathway to achieving their family-building goals. While the topic of LGBTQ+ fatherhood is not new, the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015, which legalized same-sex marriage, removed many legal obstacles to LGBTQ+ adoption. This ruling has significantly impacted the adoption landscape, enabling more LGBTQ+ individuals to pursue adoption as a viable path to parenthood (Carpenter, 2020; Martin & Rodriguez, 2022). Previously, aspiring fathers contended with a disparate array of state laws that prevented them from adopting children, often citing pseudo-moral and values-based justifications (Alday-Mondaca & Lay-Lisboa, 2021; Farr & Vázquez, 2020; Perrin et al., 2019b). This reality was particularly pronounced in Georgia, a southern state marked by a history of racial and religious discrimination in its attempts to resist the demands of the civil rights movement and past efforts to advance legislation protecting what it terms traditional family values, measures widely derided by critics as explicit discrimination against LGBTQ+ people (Caldwell et al., 2023).

The 2015 U.S. Supreme Court *Obergefell v. Hodges* case notably altered Georgia's adoption landscape in several ways. Firstly, it conferred legal recognition to LGBTQ+ couples married in other states, where such unions were valid but not yet recognized in Georgia, while also extending legal protections to LGBTQ+ families with children (Bromley, 2021; Hermann, 2015). This measure granted full legal parental rights

to LGBTQ+ for the first time in the state's history. Secondly, it enabled couples to adopt children jointly, a significant shift from the prior periods where only one partner held legal guardianship and the other could not decide about the child's well-being (Frank & Polikoff, 2019; Goldberg & Conron, 2020; Martin & Rodriguez, 2022; Miller & Rettig, 2021). The court's action also forced adoption agencies, critical facilitators in the adoption ecosystem, to end discriminatory policies and treat all clients equitably regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (Frank & Polikoff, 2019; Hermann, 2015; Miller & Rettig, 2021). The court's ruling is further significant because private agencies regularly contract with the state to support key elements of the state foster care program, such as education and training, child placement, and post placement supervision (Menhinick & Sanders, 2023).

Nearly a decade after the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court *Obergefell v. Hodges* case, some agencies continue to resist compliance with the court's decision, citing religious and moral objections (Frank & Polikoff, 2019; Knight et al., 2017). In Georgia, a state where conservative Republicans hold a super majority in the state legislature, these agencies are finding support from elected leaders who themselves have taken public positions denouncing LGBTQ+ adoptions. Members of the LGBTQ+ community, along with their allies and advocates, are pushing back, opting to share their stories publicly to humanize the issue by showing how the intransigence and blatant discrimination impact them. Their efforts are being met by resistance from religious institutions, many of which remain influential within the adoption sector and are outspoken opponents of same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ adoptions (Farr & Goldberg, 2018; Martin & Rodriguez, 2022). These

entities cannot be ignored because they are deeply entrenched in both the private adoption domain and the state foster care system. The tension between these groups underscores the broader struggle for equality in the state. For advocates who championed marriage equality, this struggle is the next frontier in the ongoing fight for equality (Brown & Rogers, 2020; Farr & Goldberg, 2018; Hermann, 2015).

Before 2015, Georgia adoption statutes did not explicitly ban LGBTQ+ couples from adopting children. Similarly for LGBTQ+ couples who already had a child, the laws did not ban second parent adoption (Bromley, 2021; Miller & Rettig, 2021). It was complex, and subject to interpretation by state courts and administrators responsible for implementing the laws and managing adoption agencies and programs. These parents had limited rights, and when they encountered discrimination, they received no protection from the federal government as there were no national protections supporting LGBTQ+ father adoptions. The 2015 U.S. Supreme Court *Obergefell v. Hodges* case legalizing same-sex marriage paved the way for current and aspiring LGBTQ+ fathers to challenge state and local laws, particularly those that narrowly defined marriage as between a man and a woman, which are often used as a basis for discrimination against LGBTQ+ applicants. This landmark decision significantly expanded adoption access for individuals who were previously denied based on their sexual orientation and marital status. Nearly a decade later, the impact of this shift is still being felt, but while adoption is more accessible to LGBTQ+ aspiring fathers than it was a decade ago, more work needs to be done to dismantle the barriers that remain (Farr & Goldberg, 2018; Martin & Rodriguez, 2022).

In this study, I explored the changes in the adoption legal and policy landscape over the last decade, particularly following the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, a landmark decision that legalized same-sex marriage. In Georgia and across the country, these laws and policies fall into several distinct categories. First, while states can no longer outright prohibit adoption by LGBTQ+ applicants, they can retain existing laws that complicate access to adoption services for these individuals (Farr & Goldberg, 2018; Miller & Rettig, 2021). This variability in how states interpret the Supreme Court decision created additional hurdles for aspiring LGBTQ+ parents, whether they are adopting through state foster care programs or private agencies (Frank & Polikoff, 2019; Miller & Rettig, 2021).

Second, municipalities in each state, including Georgia, have varying guidelines for LGBTQ+ adoptive parents to obtain a birth certificate once their adoptions are finalized (Farr & Goldberg, 2018; Fasoli & Maass, 2020; Grigoropoulos, 2022). This inconsistency makes it more difficult for LGBTQ+ parents to complete essential tasks such as registering their children in schools or obtaining passports. Moreover, each county within Georgia's foster care program may interpret and implement policies differently, potentially leading to bias and discrimination against LGBTQ+ applicants. Many of these counties serve rural areas where staff might hold conservative views about family structures that do not include LGBTQ+ families (Broadhurst, Mason, et al., 2018; Goldberg et al., 2019a).

Additionally, I examined how equality advocates are using the Supreme Court decision to challenge discriminatory practices that previously hindered the adoption

efforts of LGBTQ+ individuals and couples. The investigation focused on the differences in training provided to staff across various counties. While some counties offer cultural competence training to prepare staff for working with diverse family types, including LGBTQ+ families, others do not. This disparity significantly impacts the experiences of LGBTQ+ applicants. A strong emphasis was placed on analyzing how LGBTQ+ individuals and couples confront and overcome these legal barriers, thereby reshaping the adoption landscape in Georgia. By exploring these aspects, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current adoption environment for LGBTQ+ parents and their ongoing challenges.

Furthermore, I examined the changes in Georgia's policy framework regarding adoption, focusing on both private adoption agencies and the state foster care program. I highlighted new opportunities for LGBTQ+ aspiring fathers seeking to form families. Central to this evolution are advocacy organizations that have played a crucial role in challenging discriminatory state and federal laws related to marriage and adoption. Evaluating the ongoing contributions of these organizations is essential for understanding their impact in fostering an equitable adoption landscape free from bias and discrimination.

Additionally, I assessed shifts in public opinion that increasingly favor LGBTQ+ fatherhood, reflecting a broader societal acceptance and support for diverse family structures. By addressing the significant gap in scholarly literature regarding the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers, I provided detailed insights into the current adoption

climate in Georgia. I also identified necessary policy and practice adjustments to enhance support for this historically marginalized group.

Ultimately, the findings have significant implications for policy and social change. They raise questions about whether the state environment has evolved adequately to support LGBTQ+ fathers. This aspect is especially important as it underscores the ongoing challenges and progress within the adoption system, indicating where further advocacy and reform are necessary.

In the following section, the primary components of this chapter are discussed. The background section provides historical context for LGBTQ+ adoption, highlighting significant events such as the 2015 US Supreme Court decision that legalized same-sex marriage and the challenges that states like Georgia face in implementing the court's ruling. The problem statement and purpose of the study are presented and discussed, emphasizing the critical gap in the literature that this study aims to address and its broader contribution to the field of public policy. A brief exploration of the two research questions examines the barriers, success factors, and policies that LGBTQ+ fathers identify as influencing their adoption journey. The narrative policy framework (NPF) serves as both a conceptual foundation for the study and a methodological tool for analyzing participant narratives, helping to better understand how these narratives shape public policy.

Additionally, key terms commonly used throughout this dissertation are defined to improve clarity and understanding. In the significance section, I discuss the expected contributions of this study to the existing public policy literature. Finally, I conclude the

chapter with a preview of Chapter 2, which is the literature review chapter. This chapter situates the study within the existing body of research and offers a comprehensive understanding of the current knowledge and gaps in the field.

Background

I examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers as they navigated the adoption process, including the barriers they face and the policies they identify as most impactful to their journey. Despite shifts in public opinion toward greater support and visibility for LGBTQ+ families, a significant gap still exists in the current research exploring the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers. While limited, the available literature highlights several important challenges these individuals encounter throughout the adoption process.

Firstly, a persistent stereotype suggests that LGBTQ+ fathers lack the necessary skills to raise emotionally and socially well-adjusted children (Farr & Vázquez, 2020; Perrin et al., 2019b). This belief stems from the notion that children require a heteronormative household with traditional mother and father figures for optimal development (Farr & Vázquez, 2020, 2020; Goldberg & Garcia, 2020). However, emerging research contradicts this view, indicating that there are no significant differences in the emotional and social development, or overall well-being of children raised by either heterosexual or LGBTQ+ couples (Reczek, 2020). Moreover, the academic outcomes of children from LGBTQ+ households are comparable to those from heterosexual families (Guschlbauer et al., 2017).

Recent studies affirm that LGBTQ+ parents are as nurturing and supportive as those in heterosexual households (Kabátek & Perales, 2021). This is true for children who were adopted as well as those born into LGBTQ+ families. This is particularly relevant in southern states like Georgia, where over 11,000 children are awaiting loving and permanent homes, a great need that aspiring LGBTQ+ parents can help fill (Levitt et al., 2020a).

Despite changing public attitudes toward increased support for LGBTQ+ adoption, policy barriers and discriminatory practices persist (Gallup et al., 2024; Knight et al., 2017; Levitt et al., 2020a). Private adoption agencies, crucial in family-child matching both in Georgia and nationally, often show a preference for white, heterosexual families. Although agencies supporting LGBTQ+ fathers have emerged in the past two decades, they remain a minority in the wider adoption landscape. Bias is also prevalent in state-administered adoption programs, which are typically overseen by religious institutions contracted by the state to provide services to families seeking or adopting children from the state system (Levitt et al., 2020a; Menhinick & Sanders, 2023). These institutions play a vital role in credentialing and supervising child placements, yet often display biases against LGBTQ+ prospective parents, particularly impacting the placement chances of highly sought-after younger children from the foster system.

Efforts to dispel myths about LGBTQ+ parenting are ongoing, but misconceptions still hamper public support for LGBTQ+ family building (Knight et al., 2017; Reczek, 2020; Schumm & Crawford, 2019). Though recent literature is starting to challenge these myths, more must be done to accelerate these efforts (Riggs, 2020). This

background frames the study's intent to contribute to the emerging scholarly dialogue by dissecting the nuances of LGBTQ+ father adoption experiences in Georgia and how these interact with existing policies and societal norms.

The current body of literature on LGBTQ+ adoption, while growing, remains mainly focused on couples and general parenting dynamics, leaving the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers less explored, especially in conservative states like Georgia (Farr & Vázquez, 2020; McConnachie et al., 2020). I addressed the distinct challenges these fathers face within the state's private and public adoption system, scrutinizing the biases and legal frameworks that shape their family formation journey.

For LGBTQ+ individuals, societal expectations and traditional views on parenting can shape their approach to fatherhood, influencing their motivations and decisions throughout the adoption process (Farr & Vázquez, 2020). Although the landmark 2015 U.S. Supreme Court Obergefell v. Hodges case advanced same-sex marriage rights, ingrained biases still favor heterosexual couples in adoption scenarios. In this study, I explored the varied strategies LGBTQ+ fathers employ to advocate for fair adoption access and how these efforts shape their path to parenthood.

Additionally, the financial implications of adoption, mainly through private channels, present significant challenges. While state programs are less expensive, they are not without policy and administrative hurdles (Broadhurst, Mason, et al., 2018; Goldberg et al., 2019a). The financial burden can heavily influence the decision-making process of LGBTQ+ fathers, impacting the timeline of their family formation (Levitt et al., 2020a). This economic factor, along with the choice of adoption routes and the ages

of children adopted, was analyzed for its effect on LGBTQ+ fathers' decision-making processes.

Navigating adoption necessitates resilience and a robust support network. The availability and preferences for support services among LGBTQ+ fathers require further investigation. I examined the fathers' coping strategies and the role of advocacy and support organizations in assisting them through the adoption process. It also explored the motivations driving these fathers towards adoption and how these motivations align with their visions of fatherhood. Lastly, the post-adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers, an underrepresented area in existing research, warrant further exploration. I provide a comprehensive overview of their journey into fatherhood, the subsequent support needs, and how adopted children integrate into their new families, especially across racial and gender lines. This examination sheds light on the broader implications of policy and social change, assessing whether the state environment progressively supports LGBTQ+ fathers in their family formation efforts.

Problem Statement

In this dissertation, I investigated the ongoing problem of the barriers and success factors faced by LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia as they navigate the adoption process. Very few researchers have examined this issue, leaving a notable gap in public understanding of how federal laws, state policies, and practices are implemented and the effects these have on the experiences of aspiring LGBTQ+ adoptive parents. Despite the 2015 US Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that legalized same-sex marriage and removed many federal obstacles to LGBTQ+ adoptions, discriminatory practices at the

state level persist, particularly in Georgia (Broadhurst, Mason, et al., 2018; Gallup et al., 2024; Goldberg et al., 2019; Levitt et al., 2020a).

While in Georgia there are currently no laws that explicitly prohibit LGBTQ+ adoptions, individuals and couples routinely encounter discrimination from both state-run and privately operated adoption services. This discrimination is often compounded by the partnerships between Georgia's adoption agencies and religious institutions, which are involved in the education and credentialing of prospective adoptive parents, potentially denying services to LGBTQ+ candidates on religious or moral grounds. Comprehensive research is needed to address the paucity in our understanding of the barriers and success factors shaping the adoptive experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia, along with the policies and practices these fathers identify as most responsible for shaping their experiences.

Further adding to the complexity, national LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations like the Trevor Project and the Human Rights Campaign have produced reports that illustrate the interests of LGBTQ+ people in starting a family. The Human Rights Campaign's 2020 study revealed that approximately 46% of millennials aspire to start families, with a notable portion of LGBTQ+ individuals considering adoption as a means of doing so (Human Rights Campaign, 2022). Similarly, The Trevor Project noted that about 29% of their survey respondents were exploring adoption to form their families, particularly among younger LGBTQ+ demographics (The Trevor Project, 2023). Their projections indicate that over 391,000 children are in foster care across the United States, many of whom experience frequent relocations, averaging three moves or more within a single

year. This high rate of instability underscores the shortage of stable foster and adoptive homes and the role that LGBTQ+ fathers can play in helping to address this need (Sutherland et al., 2023).

This study was conducted during a crucial period of transition and societal change regarding LGBTQ+ family expansion, particularly with the growing number of LGBTQ+ fathers choosing adoption to expand their families. A decade ago, legal barriers significantly hindered these fathers' aspirations; however, those impediments have shifted dramatically. The dominant societal view driving the heteronormative belief that children fare best in a traditional household with both a mother and father figure is evolving. Recent surveys show a consistent increase in support for LGBTQ+ fathers raising children, confirming a notable change in social attitudes (Davis, 2023). Research has also found no significant differences in the social and emotional well-being or academic performance of children raised by LGBTQ+ parents compared to those raised in heterosexual households (Mazrekaj & Jin, 2023; Wilson & Cariola, 2019).

These findings are timely, as it is estimated that there are now 980,000 LGBTQ+ households in the United States, marking an increase of 51.6% from just a decade ago (Naylor, 2020). Meanwhile, the number of children in foster care remains alarmingly high. In Georgia, it is estimated that over 11,000 children are in care or awaiting adoption, a gap that LGBTQ+ fathers could help close by providing stable and loving foster or adoptive homes (Bromley, 2021).

Current literature typically addresses LGBTQ+ adoption broadly, focusing on legal shifts related to LGBTQ+ adoptions, parenting styles of LGBTQ+ versus

heterosexual parents, and children's development in LGBTQ+ households (Goldberg & Garcia, 2020; Levitt et al., 2020a; McConnachie et al., 2020). However, there is a notable lack of research into the specific experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers, particularly on how they navigate the adoption process. This includes consideration of the policies they view as most impacting their adoption journey, the strategies they use to confront biases and discrimination, how they deal with perceptions of their parenting styles, and finally how they manage the financial and emotional hurdles of private adoption.

While many studies have emphasized national and international adoption trends, less attention has been paid to specific states like Georgia, known for its history of racial discrimination and hesitancy to adopt progressive cultural shifts (Berkowitz, 2020b; Daly et al., 2020; Shenkman et al., 2022). By focusing on adoption as a unique pathway to family formation for LGBTQ+ fathers, this study explored how these individuals confront challenges and capitalize on the opportunities presented during the adoption process. Focusing on Georgia offers a chance to examine how national policies are enacted locally, any state-specific barriers to adoption, and unique opportunities that may facilitate LGBTQ+ adoptions within this setting. For instance, Georgia's large metropolitan areas, which may diverge politically and culturally from the state's more rural regions, provide an opportunity to explore how an area's demographics can influence support for LGBTQ+ father adoption.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the barriers and success factors encountered by LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia as they navigate the adoption

process, and the influence of public policy and administration on their parenting pathways. Despite significant advancements following the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court *Obergefell v. Hodges* case decision legalizing same-sex marriage, the political and policy environment in Georgia remains less than fully supportive of LGBTQ+ fatherhood. The entrenched belief that children thrive best in male-female households continues to shape the experiences of aspiring LGBTQ+ fathers adversely (Alday-Mondaca & Lay-Lisboa, 2021; Farr & Vázquez, 2020). This bias is evident both explicitly in direct interactions and implicitly through the scarcity of private adoption matches with available children in state programs.

While Georgia's laws do not overtly restrict LGBTQ+ adoption, they subtly promote a traditional child-rearing environment that prioritizes heterosexual couples (Bromley, 2021). LGBTQ+ fathers also report encountering hurdles in the private adoption sector, where agencies may subtly or overtly discourage them, sometimes excluding LGBTQ+ clients on their websites or showcasing religious affiliations that deter LGBTQ+ applicants (Levitt et al., 2020a). In state-run foster care systems, LGBTQ+ candidates must navigate biases within agencies responsible for essential services like parental licensing education and child placement, impacting their perceived suitability as parents. In more extreme cases some fathers report facing allegations of endangering children and endure significant mental health challenges during the adoption process (Alday-Mondaca & Lay-Lisboa, 2021). Others report feeling held to unreasonably high standards and compelled to conceal aspects of their identity to meet agency expectations (Mazrekaj & Jin, 2023).

The adoption process may pose immense stress on LGBTQ+ fathers and the resources available to help them cope are primarily provided by national organizations, which may not fully appreciate Georgia's unique context. These fathers often seek support from peers who have successfully navigated the adoption process but for those in rural areas and fathers of color, this can be particularly challenging (Pfitzner et al., 2020).

I used a narrative research design to explore the accounts of LGBTQ+ fathers as they navigate the adoption system in Georgia (see Alday-Mondaca & Lay-Lisboa, 2021; Wilson & Cariola, 2019). This approach is well-suited for understanding the complexities of the adoption process, which demands extensive knowledge, resources, and adaptability from participants. I focused on the unique perspectives of these fathers as they recount the decisions they made along the way, the challenges they faced and the strategies they employed to overcome them. Additionally, I considered how the legal, policy and social biases impact their experiences and adoption outcomes. I also examined the perceived ideals of fatherhood and how these shape LGBTQ+ fathers' approaches to overcoming these obstacles. Finally, the cost of adoption, mainly through private agencies, and the role of LGBTQ+ advocacy support networks, including online and in-person groups, was assessed to understand how they contribute to successful family formation. This comprehensive approach provided insights into the motivations and strategies of LGBTQ+ fathers as they navigate the challenges presented by the adoption process in Georgia.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the barriers or success factors experienced by LGBTQ+- fathers in GA during the adoption process?

RQ2: What federal, state, or local policies or regulations do LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia identify as impacting their adoption journeys?

Theoretical Foundation

I used Jones and McBeth's (2010) NPF to analyze the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia, emphasizing the interplay between personal narratives and their impact in shaping public policy. This framework contends that narratives deeply influence policymaking, and stories have the power to challenge and transform dominant policy narratives. I explored how the personal experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers intersect with Georgia's adoption policies, highlighting the narrative aspects of policymaking and their impact on family formation (see Barker, 2021; Crow & Jones, 2018b). NPF is particularly relevant to this study because it provided a lens through which to examine how the LGBTQ+ fathers' narrative accounts of their adoption experiences intersect with the adoption policies in the state of Georgia.

NPF theorists asserted that narratives are crafted with intention, utilizing popular storytelling elements such as character development, moral, and plot, as persuasive devices to build support for policy outcomes (Jones, McBeth, et al., 2014; Schlaufer et al., 2022). In this study, LGBTQ+ fathers narrated their journey through the adoption process, including the challenges they face and the strategies they used to overcome these obstacles. Their stories are not simply accounts of their experiences; they also provide

insight into the state policy environment that shapes these experiences. These narratives describe the setting, including the policy landscape in Georgia, and its impact on their adoption journeys.

Furthermore, NPF addresses how these narratives influence policy development, implementation, and evaluation, suggesting that well-crafted stories can shift public opinion and sway policymakers (Barker, 2021; Schlaufer et al., 2022). For LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia, their narratives may advocate for revisions to foster care and adoption policies to alleviate the barriers they face. Through these stories, state, and national LGBTQ+ advocacy groups can garner support and drive policy reforms, aiming for a more inclusive set of practices that facilitate family formation for LGBTQ+ fathers.

In short, I examined how the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia influence local and state policy landscapes, particularly in their pursuit of family expansion through adoption. By analyzing these narratives, I revealed the policies that participants viewed as supportive or obstructive to their family formation efforts. The central issues I investigated included legal and policy barriers, unique challenges of discrimination, and the economic pressures associated with private adoption. By understanding how LGBTQ+ fathers perceive and engage with these elements, I provided insights into necessary modifications in the adoption process to effectively support LGBTQ+ fatherhood. Ultimately, applying the NPF in this study underscored the power of storytelling in enhancing public support and shaping policy discussions. This approach not only clarifies the complexities faced by LGBTQ+ fathers but also guides advocacy and policy strategies that promote equitable adoption practices in Georgia.

Nature of the Study

To address the two primary research questions regarding the barriers, success factors, and policies that LGBTQ+ fathers identify as most impactful to their adoption journey, a narrative research design was employed. This approach is particularly beneficial as it allows for a thorough exploration of the stories shared by these aspiring fathers, providing deep insight into the factors that shape, hinder, and enable the outcomes of their adoption journeys. Additionally, this method aligns with the complexity of the adoption process by revealing the social, emotional, and legal aspects of the experiences of aspiring fathers. Furthermore, previous studies have highlighted the benefits of utilizing this approach, including the ability to gather rich, detailed data derived from participants' lived experiences (Bailey & Graves, 2019; Johnson & Lofquist, 2021; Williams & Fisher, 2019).

The narrative approach also provides additional context about events, helping readers interpret and appreciate the study's results more clearly (Crow & Jones, 2018b; Williams & Fisher, 2019). This approach is often celebrated for empowering participants by allowing them to share their personal stories in their own words (Williams & Fisher, 2019). Additionally, the narrative approach enables researchers to conduct a thematic analysis that identifies common patterns across the aggregate group of conversations (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Hill & Hernandez, 2020).

This approach is beneficial as it helps to address a significant gap in the policy literature regarding our understanding of how federal, state, and local policies and practices affect the adoption of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia. The insights gained from

this analysis can identify effective policy areas and those needing reform. Personal narratives also promote greater empathy and build support for LGBTQ+ fathers aiming to expand their families through adoption (Bailey & Graves, 2019, 2019; Jones, McBeth, et al., 2014). Additionally, these narratives may challenge us to recognize and appreciate the diverse experiences of adoptive fathers across common demographics such as race, socioeconomic status, marital status, and geographic location (Bailey & Graves, 2019; Hill & Hernandez, 2020; Williams & Fisher, 2019). Finally, the narrative approach provides foundational information that enhances existing research on LGBTQ+ adoptive father experiences and encourages future research efforts(Gates & Badgett, 2019; Goldberg & Smith, 2019, 2020a).

To capture their experiences, data was collected using semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ fathers who have successfully navigated the adoption process in Georgia. This format is advantageous due to its adaptability. It allows for the exploration of emergent topics and enables participants to direct the conversation towards issues they find significant (Alam, 2021; Wilson & Cariola, 2019). Such an open dialogue ensures authentic responses and detailed narratives illuminating their adoption experiences.

My participant recruitment goal was seven to 10 LGBTQ+ fathers. I recruited participants through various channels, including referrals, online parenting forums, and social media groups, ensuring a diverse sample that spans a broad spectrum of ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses. These participants were comprehensively briefed on the study's objectives and the confidentiality measures to safeguard their contributions. Written informed consent was obtained to assure participants of the

security and privacy of their personal information, which would not be disclosed in any presentations resulting from the study.

In the analytical phase, I used a thematic coding technique to identify key themes and categories that reflected the fathers' experiences within the policy context (see Saldana, 2021). This phase also involves assessing the content and structure of the fathers' narratives, employing the NPF to analyze the embedded policy elements within their stories. This comprehensive analytical approach documented the personal experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers but also revealed how these experiences challenged or reinforced existing policy narratives, contributing to a broader understanding of policy impacts and needs in the field of LGBTQ+ family formation.

Definition of Key Terms

Adoption: Refers to the process managed by private adoption agencies, lawyers, and other facilitators within Georgia or outside the state who serve Georgia residents. It encompasses adoptions through the state-administered foster care program and includes international adoptions, where children are adopted from overseas and brought back to Georgia (Berkowitz, 2020b).

Child Placement Agencies: Licensed organizations that assist the state with various aspects of the foster care program, including educational services and the placement and supervision of children with foster and adoptive families. These agencies may be non-profit or religious institutions (Goldberg et al., 2019; Sutherland et al., 2023).

Closed Adoption: A type of adoption where there is no contact between adoptive and biological families. Adoption records are sealed, and adoptive families do not have access to any identifying information about the biological parents. This practice is declining due to the potential emotional impact on adopted children and their families (Berkowitz, 2020b).

Discrimination: The practice of unjustly differentiating individuals based on attributes such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, or age. This can manifest as indirect discrimination through seemingly neutral policies that disproportionately affect one group or as systemic discrimination where policies consistently disadvantage a specific group (Levitt et al., 2020a).

Family Formation: Refers to the various ways individuals create and expand their families, including but not limited to adoption, in-vitro fertilization (IVF), and surrogacy. This term encompasses the diverse methods individuals use to establish families (Martin & Rodriguez, 2022; Riggs, 2020).

Foster Care System: A state-administered program providing temporary and long-term care for children whose living conditions at home are deemed unsafe. Prospective foster and adoptive families undergo extensive training and background checks. The primary aim is to reunite children with their biological families or secure adoptive placements when reunification isn't feasible. This system offers significant support, such as medical care, childcare, food assistance, and college tuition benefits, making it a cost-effective adoption option (Sutherland et al., 2023).

Legal Barriers: Laws that restrict or hinder the ability of LGBTQ+ individuals to adopt or access family support services available to heterosexual couples. These can include legal constraints imposed by state laws or discriminatory practices by adoption agencies, which are often not legally challenged (Barclay, 2022; Martin & Rodriguez, 2022).

LGBTQ+: For the purpose of this study, LGBTQ+ fathers are individuals who identify as gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer and have successfully adopted a child through private adoption or the state-administered foster care system (Fish et al., 2024).

Marriage Equality: Defined by the legal recognition of same-sex marriages across the United States, as established by the U.S. Supreme Court *Obergefell v. Hodges* 2015 case. This legal status provides LGBTQ+ couples with the same rights concerning inheritance, taxes, medical decisions, and adoption previously exclusive to heterosexual couples (Hermann, 2015; Martin & Rodriguez, 2022).

Open Adoption: An adoption agreement where biological and adoptive parents have access to each other's identities and may remain in contact. This can include scheduled interactions during significant occasions like Mother's Day, birthdays, and Christmas. Open adoption facilitates ongoing contact between the adopted child and their biological family (Berkowitz, 2020b).

Parental Rights: Legal protections traditionally reserved for heterosexual couples, now extended to same-sex couples, encompassing adoption, custody, and the authority to make educational, medical, and legal decisions for a child. These rights are granted to adoptive parents, regardless of their biological connection to the child (Pelfrey, 2020).

Parenting Styles: The various approaches parents use to raise their children, categorized into styles such as permissive, authoritarian, or neglectful. These styles describe parents' behavior patterns and communication methods used to nurture and discipline their children (Goldberg & Garcia, 2020).

Policy Actors: Individuals, organizations, and institutions involved in shaping and enforcing adoption policies. This includes LGBTQ+ advocacy groups that work toward equitable adoption laws and practices, influencing policy development and implementation at both state and national levels (Schlaufer et al., 2022).

Policy Landscape: The comprehensive framework of guidelines, laws, and practices that regulate adoption at the state and national levels. This landscape shapes how policies are formulated, implemented, and assessed, influenced by economic factors, societal norms, and the legal environment (Schlaufer et al., 2022).

Private Adoption: Conducted through private entities such as adoption consultants, attorneys, and independent agencies, this form of adoption directly connects pregnant mothers or families with approved adoptive parents. These arrangements may occur locally within Georgia, nationwide, or internationally (Martin & Rodriguez, 2022; Sutherland et al., 2023).

Social Barriers: Social constructs and prejudices that challenge the acceptance of LGBTQ+ parents, such as the belief that children should be raised in traditional male-female households. These barriers can include skepticism about the capability of LGBTQ+ individuals to nurture well-adjusted children (Perrin et al., 2019a).

Assumptions

This study of LGBTQ+ adoptive fathers' experiences was based on several key assumptions. First and foremost, the LGBTQ+ community is characterized by its diversity, comprising a range of lived experiences, values, socialization patterns, and motivations for adoption. These variances affected how participants responded to questions about their adoption experiences. Additionally, considering the considerable age, income, and demographic diversity among potential participants, extensive efforts were made to ensure that the study sample reflects this diversity. However, it is important to acknowledge that the final participant group may not fully represent the entire spectrum of aspiring LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia.

A second assumption pertains to the representativeness of the participant sample. Although robust recruitment strategies were employed, participation was voluntary, and some individuals chose to opt out due to privacy concerns or negative past experiences related to adoption. To address this, the purpose of the study was clearly communicated, strict confidentiality measures were maintained, and participants were continually reminded that their involvement was entirely voluntary.

The third assumption addressed the limitations related to participants' memory recall. The accuracy of their recollections could have been compromised by the time that had elapsed since the adoption events and the emotional intensity of these experiences. To counter potential recall issues, I used a semi-structured interview format that included memory-jogging prompts and open-ended questions, encouraging participants to share

their experiences freely. This approach aimed to enhance recall accuracy and elicit rich, detailed narratives.

The final assumption pertained to the applicability of the NPF. NPF was anticipated to offer a valuable perspective for analyzing how the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers could inform policy reforms. The framework was expected to be particularly effective in demonstrating how participant narratives could shape policy discussions and suggest areas for potential improvement.

Scope and Delimitations

In this research study, I examined the increasing number of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia who are seeking to build their families through adoption. The landmark 2015 U.S. Supreme Court *Obergefell v. Hodges* case legalized same-sex marriage, removing many legal barriers and enabling LGBTQ+ couples to adopt children and secure parental rights. Despite this progression, obstacles to LGBTQ+ family formation, such as complex policies, discrimination, and bias, remain present. This examination explored the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia, focusing on the challenges and success factors they encounter along their adoption journey, as well as how public policy and administration influence their experiences.

Georgia served as an ideal location for this study due to its influential position as a key southern state, its historical resistance to social changes such as racial equality and religious inclusivity, and its legal allowances for second-parent adoption by LGBTQ+ individuals. Despite a generally open stance towards LGBTQ+ adoption, proposed legislation like the 2018 *Keep Faith in Adoption Bill* highlighted ongoing obstacles to

fully inclusive adoption practices. The study's geographical focus on Georgia was relevant, given the state's diverse demographic, particularly in metropolitan Atlanta, and the prevailing Republican leadership, which significantly shaped the state's political and policy landscape.

Nine LGBTQ+ fathers who successfully completed the adoption process in Georgia participated in this study. Recruitment strategies included online groups, referrals from adoption agencies, and child placement services, ensuring a representative sample across diverse demographics and experiences. I excluded international adoptions due to their intricate legal requirements, focusing instead on adoptions that occur within the state's jurisdiction.

Guiding this study was the NPF as developed by Jones and McBeth (2010), which underscores the impact of narratives on policy outcomes. This framework was utilized to analyze the narratives of LGBTQ+ fathers, assessing the roles of various narrative characters such as villains, victims, and heroes within the policy landscape (Kuenzler & Stauffer, 2023; Schlaufer et al., 2022). The NPF is particularly adept at illustrating how personal narratives and public perceptions interact with public policy in Georgia. While I focused on Georgia, the insights may apply to broader contexts due to similarities in adoption practices and challenges that LGBTQ+ fathers face across different states. However, Georgia's unique political and social landscape, including its significant LGBTQ+ population and political dynamics, might limit the transferability of the findings to other areas.

LGTB+ adoptive fathers may have experienced discrimination due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. To protect research participants, strict adherence to best-practice ethical guidelines was maintained. Informed consent was obtained as a condition of participation, and participants were free to withdraw at any point. To safeguard participant anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and data was securely stored on a password-protected computer and locked file.

Limitations

In this section, I outline the design and methodological limitations of the study, discuss inherent biases, and detail the measures implemented to mitigate these limitations. I employed a narrative research design to address two research questions aimed at capturing detailed descriptions of participants' experiences during the adoption process and their strategies for forming families. Although this approach was effective for analyzing the narratives of adoptive fathers in Georgia, it does not allow for the generalization of findings to other states or geographic contexts (see Alam, 2021; Daniel, 2019; Johnson et al., 2020). The primary objective was to deepen the understanding of how the policy landscape influences adoption experiences within Georgia, rather than to identify trends or make broad predictions beyond this context.

Methodologically, semi-structured interviews possibly introduced variability in the data collected (Alvesson, 2018; DeJonckheere, 2019). The structure and flow of these interviews varied based on participant responses. Some participants provided succinct answers, while others offered more elaborate details. The emotional nature of the questions elicited deep and sometimes distressing responses. Additionally, my

interpretation of the shared information could have influenced the direction of the interviews and subsequent data analysis. Researcher bias was another potential limitation that could have impacted the collection and interpretation of data. The methodology was further constrained by the number of participants and the diversity of their responses. Although recruitment efforts via referrals, direct outreach on social media, and engagement with relevant organizations serving the LGBTQ+ community were designed to ensure a representative sample, they may not have captured the full diversity of the LGBTQ+ father population in Georgia (Galletta, 2017; Johnson et al., 2020).

To mitigate these limitations, several strategies were employed. First, efforts were prioritized to develop a participant group that reflected racial, economic, cultural, and geographic diversity. This approach aimed to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and insights from the LGBTQ+ father community in Georgia. Additionally, peer debriefing and member checking were utilized to enhance the credibility of the research findings. Participants were allowed to review their interview transcripts to ensure they accurately reflected their viewpoints and experiences. I also included historically marginalized participants, specifically people of color who had faced discrimination due to their race, sexual orientation, and identity. Strict ethical guidelines were adhered to safeguard participant rights and ensure their protection throughout the research process. Only participants who completed the informed consent and agreed to have their interviews recorded were enrolled in the study. Participants were periodically reminded that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms were employed to mask participant identities and prevent their

identities from being revealed. Collected data was carefully stored on a password-protected computer.

The findings and conclusions of this research study were particularly pertinent to Georgia, the specific context in which the research was conducted. To evaluate the applicability of these findings to other settings, it was recommended that future studies replicate this research with their intended populations and geographic contexts. This approach would expand the understanding and impact of this study and the factors shaping LGBTQ+ adoption experiences.

Significance

This research study was significant for several reasons. First, I addressed a notable gap in the public policy literature regarding LGBTQ+ family formation through adoption. Despite the U.S. Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) decision, which removed significant legal barriers for LGBTQ+ couples seeking to adopt, patterns of bias and discrimination persisted, highlighting this phenomenon. Additionally, state policymakers, program administrators, and other stakeholders in Georgia wielded substantial influence over adoption outcomes for LGBTQ+ fathers, and their actions were examined as part of this study. I used the NPF to explore how the narratives of LGBTQ+ fathers shaped state and national adoption policies, potentially yielding valuable insights to enhance the policy environment in support of LGBTQ+ fathers.

This study was further significant in its potential to impact social change by amplifying the voices of LGBTQ+ fathers, thereby influencing public debate and policies related to adoption. By placing their experiences and challenges at the forefront of the

discussion, I sought to challenge dominant narratives, address existing prejudices, and support the development of more inclusive adoption policies. The findings could lead to increased public support and policy changes that more effectively addressed the needs and rights of LGBTQ+ individuals seeking to form families through adoption.

Furthermore, the study had practical implications for stakeholders, including policymakers, private adoption agencies, state foster care administrators, and the LGBTQ+ community. For LGBTQ+ fathers, participating in this research offered an opportunity to share their stories and contribute to broader advocacy efforts aimed at transforming inequitable state adoption policies. Adoption administrators and program leaders could utilize the study's findings to enhance how their programs served the LGBTQ+ community, potentially leading to policy adjustments and improved staff training to effectively combat discrimination.

As research into LGBTQ+ adoption evolves, this study offers valuable perspectives on the successes and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ fathers. It highlights the need for further research in various geographic regions or among specific subgroups within the LGBTQ+ community, such as fathers of color who experience compounded marginalization. These insights enhance the academic literature and inform targeted policy interventions aimed at more effectively supporting the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized populations.

Ultimately, this study was poised to catalyze policy reform and social change, emphasizing the need for continuous efforts to ensure that LGBTQ+ fathers could access adoption services equitably. By documenting and analyzing their narratives, the research

advanced academic knowledge and promoted practical changes in adoption policies that advocated for fairness and justice for all prospective parents.

Summary

In this chapter, I laid the groundwork for the research study that examined the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia, exploring both the barriers and success factors influencing their adoption outcomes. Importantly, these experiences provided valuable insights into the policy landscape, pinpointing supportive policies and identifying those needing reform to ensure equitable family formation for LGBTQ+ individuals. I also highlighted the roles of various stakeholders, including social workers, training specialists, administrators, and policy officials, showcasing how bias and discrimination in the implementation of state adoption laws can adversely affect LGBTQ+ adoptions.

The research questions formulated aimed to further examine the barriers and success factors these fathers encountered, along with the specific policies affecting their adoption journeys. This study's significance was highlighted by its potential to influence adoption policy in Georgia and improve the experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers and other historically marginalized groups. Moreover, the possibility for social change was notable, as this study shed light on a topic insufficiently explored in academic literature, offering a pathway for increased scholarly attention.

Georgia was deliberately chosen as the study site due to its significance as an important southern state with a history of resisting civil rights policies and being governed by a conservative Republican legislature known for advocating policies

detrimental to the LGBTQ+ community. A qualitative approach, specifically semi-structured interviews, was employed to capture participant stories. The data was transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding to identify patterns, codes, and broader themes emerging from participants' narratives.

However, it was essential to recognize the study's limitations. The findings, derived primarily from data within Georgia, may not be generalizable to other regions. Additionally, the nature of semi-structured interviews introduced an element of variability that could influence research outcomes. To mitigate these effects, reflexivity practices were employed to ensure the researcher remained cognizant of their biases and maintained active listening throughout the data collection phase.

Looking ahead, Chapter 2 offers a thorough review of relevant literature, placing the ideas introduced in this chapter within a wider scholarly discussion and theoretical framework. In Chapter 2, I examine the evolving legal structures governing adoption in Georgia, shaped by shifting social attitudes toward LGBTQ+ adoption and efforts to resist perceived threats to traditional family structures. The literature review enhances the study's research questions by showcasing diverse perspectives from the literature, highlighting their significance and relevance.

Additionally, I contextualize LGBTQ+ father adoption narratives, highlighting gaps in the existing literature that this study aimed to address. The goal was not only to provide a cogent account of the current adoption policy landscape in Georgia and nationally but also to demonstrate how LGBTQ+ narratives, viewed through the NPF, have shaped and can continue to shape adoption policies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

LGBTQ+ fathers continue to face significant challenges in navigating the adoption process that are not broadly recognized or understood (Berkowitz, 2020; Brown & Rogers, 2020; Farr & Vázquez, 2020; Fasoli & Maass, 2020; Feugé et al., 2019). In this dissertation, I investigated the ongoing problem of the barriers and success factors faced by LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia as they navigate the adoption process. Few studies have examined this issue, leaving a notable gap in the public understanding of how federal laws, state policies, and agency practices affect the experiences of aspiring LGBTQ+ adoptive parents. To address this gap, this chapter is organized into several key sections. In the first section, I review the historical and legal context of LGBTQ+ adoption, providing a foundation for understanding the systemic barriers faced by LGBTQ+ fathers. I then examine the sociocultural dynamics influencing adoption, including the role of bias, discrimination, and heteronormative assumptions in shaping adoption pathways. In the third section I explore public policy and administration, with a focus on how federal and state laws, particularly following the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, are interpreted and implemented in Georgia. Finally, in the fourth section I discuss existing support networks and success factors that have enabled LGBTQ+ fathers to navigate these challenges and build families. Despite advancements such as the legalization of same-sex marriage, the political and policy environment in Georgia remains less than fully supportive of LGBTQ+ fatherhood, and systemic issues such as bias, discrimination, and inconsistent application of state adoption laws persist. This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the literature,

laying the groundwork for understanding the multifaceted challenges and opportunities LGBTQ+ fathers encounter in the adoption process.

Reports indicate a growing interest in family formation among LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly among younger demographics who are increasingly opting for adoption over other family-building routes (Levitt et al., 2020a). Meanwhile, national, and state-level data point to an alarmingly high number of children in foster care, with Georgia alone responsible for over 11,000 children, many of whom are available for adoption (Levitt et al., 2020a, 2020b; Sutherland et al., 2023). This is due in part to a legal and policy environment that is not supportive of LGBTQ+ adoptions, the prohibitively high cost of accessing private adoption services, and the bureaucratic complexity associated with completing all the training and paperwork needed to successfully navigate the adoption process (Goldberg et al., 2019a; Goldberg & Smith, 2020a).

In Georgia, the legal framework governing adoption does not explicitly address LGBTQ+ families, leaving significant interpretive power in the hands of policy leaders and program administrators, some of whom do not support LGBTQ+ adoptions (Farr & Goldberg, 2019; Mallory et al., 2021). This omission occurs within a political context where the state legislature, dominated by a Republican supermajority, and other elected officials have vocally opposed LGBTQ+ adoption. Notably, in 2018, they attempted to pass the *Keep Faith in Adoption Act'* in the Georgia Senate, which would have provided legal protections to private adoption agencies that denied services to LGBTQ+ individuals based on religious or moral objections. The bill passed the senate but

ultimately stalled in the house due substantial public backlash (Singh, 2018). This instance, while not resulting in new legislation, underscores the tacit support that exists among some state officials for discriminatory practices against prospective LGBTQ+ parents.

Understanding the unique challenges and successes that LGBTQ+ fathers encounter in the adoption process is crucial. I focused on the direct and indirect effects of policies and practices that shape their experiences, particularly those that either facilitate or obstruct their paths to successful adoption. Additionally, I considered the narrative strategies these fathers use to articulate their experiences, which offers valuable insights into the state policy environment and those policies that enable or inhibit their adoption outcomes. Additionally, Georgia, like many other states across the nation, collaborates with various private and religious organizations in administering its state foster care system, from which many LGBTQ+ fathers seek to foster and eventually adopt children. These organizations, tasked with critical roles like pre-licensure training and child placement, have long-standing public positions against LGBTQ+ adoptions and strong political support in the state legislature. They have also shown a willingness to advance bills requested by these groups (.Brown, 2020).

In this chapter, I examine the scholarly LGBTQ+ adoption literature to frame this research in a broader context, considering available studies that evaluate the factors shaping the adoption experiences of LBGTQ+ fathers. By expanding on previously identified gaps in the literature, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how their experiences navigating the adoption process intersect with

public policy. I explore less researched areas, particularly the interaction between LGBTQ+ adoption narratives and policy development. The identified gap in the literature guides the research focus, seeking to explore how societal attitudes and policy frameworks collectively influence the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers. I aimed to foster a connection between the research findings from participant narratives and theoretical perspectives drawn from existing research. Ultimately, this approach may yield practical recommendations for enhancing state policies to better support LGBTQ+ fathers.

This chapter is organized to clarify and comprehensively address the complex factors shaping LGBTQ+ adoption in Georgia. It begins with a historical review of the state adoption landscape, evaluating how social, legal, and policy dynamics have influenced access to adoption for LGBTQ+ individuals. This review sets the stage for examining both private and public adoption systems, identifying shifts and trends that have impacted LGBTQ+ adoption accessibility. I paid particular attention to adoption policies, noting significant changes and their effects on LGBTQ+ adoption outcomes. By offering a detailed theoretical and historical perspective, I sought to equip readers with a nuanced understanding of the factors that shape the opportunities and barriers for LGBTQ+ fathers seeking to expand their families through adoption.

Literature Search Strategy

The following databases and scholarly sources were accessed to support the writing of this chapter: Academic Search Premier; Cambridge Core; Child Welfare Information Gateway; Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ); EBSCOhost

Academic Search Complete; Eric and Education; Family Studies Abstracts; Gender Studies Database; Georgia Department of Children's and Families; Google Scholar; HeinOnline; JSTOR; LGBT Source Google Scholar; LexisNexis Academic; PAIS Index; ProQuest; PsycARTICLES; PsycINFO; PubMed; SAGE Journals; Scopus; Social Science Research Network; SocIndex; Sociological Abstracts; Walden Public Policy and Administration Database; Web of Science.

The following key terms guided the literature search: *LGBTQ+ fathers, queer parenting, gay parenting, LGBTQ+ fathers, same-sex fathers, homosexual parenting, same-sex adoption, Georgia adoption laws, adoption policy, intersectionality in parenting, social attitudes towards LGBTQ+ adoption, legal challenges for LGBTQ+ parents, LGBTQ+ father/same-sex couples, adoption, parental experiences, adoption experiences, geographic disparities, challenges and barriers, support systems, policy and advocacy, family building, family formation kinship care, foster care system, child welfare, LGBTQ+ family dynamics, transracial adoption, adoption psychology, discrimination in adoption, LGBTQ+ mental health, post-adoption support, adoption success factors, LGBTQ+ rights, gender identity in parenting, socio-economic factors in adoption, adoption law reforms, cultural competency in adoption services,* and *adoption resilience.*

The review search produced 1,142 research articles and reports, 117 of which I deemed relevant to this dissertation.

Theoretical Framework

The focus of this qualitative dissertation was to examine the barriers and success factors that shape the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers as they navigate the adoption process in Georgia. Additionally, I evaluated the policies aspiring fathers identify as most impactful on their adoption journey. With some national impediments to LGBTQ+ adoption largely removed by the Supreme Court's decision supporting same-sex marriage and granting greater parental rights to LGBTQ+ individuals, the onus now falls on state officials, policy practitioners, and adoption administrators to develop or revise policies to align with the Court's ruling.

In Georgia, conservative Republicans control the state legislative and policy apparatus and have a history of advancing policies adverse to the LGBTQ+ community (Bromley, 2021). Aspiring fathers, allies, and advocacy organizations are justified in their concern that state officials and their allies may remain reluctant to interpret and implement the Supreme Court's ruling in a manner favorable to them (Mallory, Hasenbush, et al., 2019). To better understand how state policies are being implemented, it is, therefore, necessary to capture and assess the narrative accounts of LGBTQ+ fathers' experiences navigating the adoption process to gain needed insights into how the Supreme Court ruling, along with relevant state laws and policies are being implemented and the impact they are having on facilitating or inhibiting LGBTQ+ fathers from accessing adoption services (Frank & Polikoff, 2019; Hermann, 2015; Miller & Rettig, 2021).

The next section introduces the NPF which provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing these personal narratives. The NPF allows for an examination of how individual stories intersect with systemic dynamics, highlighting the roles of policy, administration, and sociopolitical contexts in shaping the experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers. The framework examines narrative elements within participants' accounts, such as characters, plots, and moral implications, to offer meaningful insights into the implementation and lived experience of policies in practice.

Narrative Policy Framework

The NPF was formally established in 2010 by Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan to explicitly consider how narratives shape public policy (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2011). NPF was initially applied to help us understand how various parties to climate policy leveraged narratives to advocate for outcomes aligned with their self-interests. This framework was used to help trace which narratives were most effective in driving action on issues such as resource management, population control, and climate change (Jones & McBeth, 2010). Climate leaders were interested in simplifying complex scientific messages to reach a lay audience. Additionally, they tested message resonance with key audiences and its effect on policy adoption in fields like environmental sustainability and public health (Shanahan et al., 2017).

Over the past decade, NPF has been increasingly applied to social policy fields, mainly to increase access to safe housing, reduce poverty, and improve health outcomes (Crow & Jones, 2018b). Global policy researchers also turn to NPF to understand how narratives can influence international policy on social justice, poverty, and opportunity

(Weible & Sabatier, 2017). More recently, researchers have also begun to examine how NPF can be used to understand issues affecting the LGBTQ+ community . For example, Jones and McBeth (2020) examined how the LGBTQ+ rights movement was influenced and shaped by narratives of justice, equality, and discrimination during the presidency of Trump. They found that narratives remain a powerful way to dispel myths, counteract misinformation, and promote democratic systems. Neto and Barcelos (2020) used NPF to examine how religious organizations, policy leaders, and other advocates used narratives to build support for their positions in the debate over LGBTQ+ adoption. They found that the "best interest of the child" narrative framework was regularly used in the debate and was influential in shaping policy outcomes that were adverse to LGBTQ+ aspiring parents (Jones & McBeth, 2020; Neto & Barcelos, 2020).

McDermott et al. (2021) examined how the narrative choices of advocates shaped the adoption of policies that promoted inclusive and supportive outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth. Their meta-narrative synthesis indicated that critical stakeholders such as parents, educators, and advocates were instrumental in proliferating narratives that positively influence support for LGBTQ+ youth. In a study on how narratives are used in the media to challenge stereotypical portrayals of LGBTQ+ people, Bates et al. (2020) found that both positive representations of LGBTQ+ individuals and counter-narratives from opponents play roles in shaping public opinion. Together, these studies reinforce the importance and utility of NPF as a tool to understand how the narratives of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia may provide insights into the policy landscape and how their stories simultaneously shape and are shaped by the state policy environment (Golombok, 2020).

NPF provides a tool to trace how LGBTQ+ father narratives are developed, deployed, contested, and adopted into policy. This is particularly relevant in this study, which seeks to examine how the stories of LGBTQ+ fathers shape their understanding of the policy environment and the policies they view as limiting or enabling them to grow their families through adoption in Georgia (McDermott et al., 2021).

The principles of NPF are drawn from psychology, rhetoric, and narrative analysis (Jones, Shanahan, et al., 2014). It is partly rooted in the work of 20th-century scholars like Lindblom (1959) and Lasswell (1971), who looked at how ideas and symbols shape policy. They contended that policymaking is not just a rational process but rather a dynamic one where ideas are debated and contested in the public sphere. They argued that public policy inherently reflects the power and ideas that ultimately emerge after vigorous debate.

NPF was further shaped by feminist scholars like Fraser (1990) and Walsh (1996), who showed how dominant policy narratives can be challenged and transformed by committed and equipped marginalized groups. Scholars like Foucault (1991) and Geertz (1973) also highlighted that policymaking involves several interrelated steps, such as defining the problem, constructing meaning, and implementing and evaluating solutions. They further contended that the dominant narrative in public policy is developed and sustained by the power as a means of manifesting their self-interest.

NPF comprises three levels on which policy narratives are characterized: macro, meso, and micro. Scholars use this framework to organize and evaluate narratives based on their characteristics and function in each context (Jones, Shanahan, et al., 2014). For

example, the macro narrative, such as the "American Dream," conjures a sense of nostalgia and is widely associated with heteronormative male-female families. This framework excludes emerging family structures like single-parent and LGBTQ+ families. To challenge macro narratives and win greater public acceptance, LGBTQ+ fathers and their allies must successfully leverage the media, conduct research, lead training, and effectively tell their stories to a critical mass of the public.

Meso narratives happen when LGBTQ+ advocacy groups share research results and stories reinforcing that there are no differences in the physical, emotional, and social well-being of children raised in LGBTQ+ households versus those raised in heterosexual households (Golombok, 2020). Meso narratives also occur when groups challenge and counter biased stereotypes using stories of LGBTQ+ adoptive parents and their children, pushing back against religious groups that argue LGBTQ+ parents disrupt the natural order of society or are unfit due to historical prejudices (Neto & Barcelos, 2020). Micro narratives are those shared by the people directly impacted by the phenomenon, such as LGBTQ+ fathers, birth moms, LGBTQ+ allies, and advocates in the adoption process. This might include a birth mother explaining why she chose to place her child with an LGBTQ+ father or the adoption experiences of an LGBTQ+ father recounting the challenges they experienced on their adoption journey.

NPF uses popular story elements such as setting, character, and plot. The setting refers to the context in which the narrative occurs (Jones, Shanahan, et al., 2014). In Georgia, for example, the debate over LGBTQ+ father adoption happens within a state context where there are no explicit prohibitions on LGBTQ+ adoption, and the "best

interest of the child" standard is used to make placement and adoption to secure the well-being of children in the state foster care program . LGBTQ+ aspiring parents and advocates have expressed concern because they believe this standard is often interpreted in ways that are adverse to their desire to adopt children (Brown & Rogers, 2020; Khun et al., 2020; Mallory et al., 2021). The setting may also refer to political and social contexts in the state where public support is shifting in favor of equitable access to adoption services by LGBTQ+ people. On one side of this debate are conservative Republicans who control all state elected roles and hold a supermajority in both houses of the legislature, and on the other are aspiring LGBTQ+ fathers, advocacy groups, and allies demanding the legislature pass laws banning discrimination in the state's adoption statutes. A successful outcome to this debate for LGBTQ+ fathers means not just convincing the legislature to support new policies but also preventing them from passing policies adverse to the interests of LGBTQ+ adoptive parents.

In narratives, characters are the actors whose choices help shape public policy (Jones & McBeth, 2020; Shanahan et al., 2011, 2017). Pertaining to the Georgia adoption policy debate, proponent characters include directly impacted individuals and couples seeking to grow their family through adoption, private adoption agencies with inclusive policies supporting LGBTQ+ adoption, and birth mothers seeking to identify a prospective adoptive family with whom to place their child. Other actors include social workers and private agencies who manage the home study program and administer training targeted to aspiring LGBTQ+ parents. On the other hand, opponent characters consist of religious institutions that, even after the US Supreme Court struck down

opposition to same-sex marriage, continue to oppose full adoption access for LGBTQ+ aspiring parents. This group also includes state elected officials who echo and elevate biased and discriminatory messages against LGBTQ+ individuals, perpetuating harmful stereotypes despite emerging research showing that LGBTQ+ parents are no less capable than heterosexual parents in raising children.

Narratives also consist of plot lines, or the causal sequence of events narrators use when explaining policy options. They are used to complex issues, shaping public opinion, and guiding policy decisions (Bailey & Graves, 2019; Barker, 2021). Related to LGBTQ+ adoption, questioning whether LGBTQ+ people are as equipped as heterosexual couples to raise children is an example of an opponent plot line. In contrast, the proponent plot answers this question by putting forward research showing no meaningful differences in the emotional regulation, academic performance, and general well-being of children raised by LGBTQ+ parents when compared to those raised by heterosexual parents (Golombok, 2020). In either case, it is important to note that plotlines are constantly being contested, where both proponents and opponents offer narratives and counter-narratives to influence the ultimately adopted policy (Coontz, 2016).

In addition to the levels of analysis and narrative elements, NPF also guides evaluating the strategies used in developing and proliferating policy narratives (Kuenzler & Stauffer, 2023; Shanahan et al., 2017). For example, narratives consisting of frames such as the “best interest of the child,” “LGBTQ+ rights,” and “religious freedom” are three examples that are intentionally constructed to appeal to audiences whose support is

needed to get a policy adoption. Narratives also consist of language that evokes fear, anger, or compassion (Crow & Jones, 2018b; Schlaufer et al., 2022). For example, opponents to LGBTQ+ adoption regularly use narratives that invoke fear of the loss of a moral society or a breakdown in the traditional family structure to intentionally frame aspiring LGBTQ+ parents as deviant and, therefore, morally unacceptable. LGBTQ+ aspiring parents and their allies may utilize similar techniques while appealing for a different outcome, such as using fear-based narratives about government overreach or personal autonomy to garner support for LGBTQ+ adoption (Berkowitz, 2020b; Neto & Barcelos, 2020).

Influence of Narratives in Policymaking

There are several ways that narratives help to build support for adoption policies that align with the aspirations of LGBTQ+ fathers. First, narratives can humanize the adoption debate, especially in instances where directly impacted groups such as LGBTQ+ fathers or birth moms share their first-hand accounts of their experiences navigating the adoption process (Crow & Jones, 2018b; Haji & Fasoli, 2022; McDermott et al., 2021). These stories provide us with the most direct insight into policies that are working and those that may need to be transformed. They are also one of the best tools for building public support for an issue necessary for policy change. As poignantly demonstrated in the fight for marriage equality, it was primarily by increasing public support that advocates could raise money and mobilize the people necessary to win on this issue (Bates et al., 2020). In so doing, they were able to shift the balance of power and demonstrate that policies that once seemed impossible can become new common sense,

ushering in a paradigm that extends dignity and opportunity to previously marginalized groups.

Additionally, narratives are powerful tools for challenging stereotypes and offering alternative ways of evaluating an issue (Berkowitz, 2020b; Schlaufer et al., 2022). For example, there is a prevailing heteronormative belief that women are inherently more nurturing than men, a supposition that is often the basis for questioning the fitness of LGBTQ+ fathers adopting children. The counter-narrative to this point is the emerging research suggesting there are no meaningful differences in the children raised in heterosexual vs LGBTQ+ parent households (Golombok, 2020). Both positions are debated and evaluated as part of the LGBTQ+ adoption policy debate. The position that ultimately emerges on top reflects the narratives that resonate most with a critical mass of our society and the direction in which political power is shifting.

Further, there are moments in the policy debate when it becomes necessary to show the scale and depth of public support for one's policy positions. In these instances, narratives are critical for engaging and mobilizing people to act (McDermott et al., 2021; Perey, 2015) . In these instances, advocates develop and deploy narratives that form a strong emotional connection with their audiences, appealing to their hopes, anger, or fears that a proposed policy path will either be achieved or denied, leading to an adverse outcome for their target group (Crow & Jones, 2018b; Jones & McBeth, 2020). They seek to build a collective identity among the people and groups supporting the LGBTQ+ adoption policy. They paint an attainable picture of the desirable action that can be achieved through collective action to motivate support and foster a sense of collective

identity within the group. By portraying the sense that their community is being threatened by an identifiable target and issuing a strong call to action to mitigate the threat, advocates can motivate and mobilize their supporters to get off the sidelines and join their movement.

Applying these concepts to the LGBTQ+ adoption policy debate demonstrates the direct link between public support and advocates' narratives to engage target audiences. Advocates must effectively engage their target groups; ensure they clearly understand the problem and commit to being a part of the solution to create a state policy environment that strongly supports equitable adoption policies. For example, as part of the home study process, LGBTQ+ aspiring fathers must confront and overcome the “ideal family” narrative that typically places heterosexual couples at the center of the policy debate and the standard to which all others are compared. In confronting this narrative, they may offer an affirmative case detailing how they want to raise their family and their ability to provide a safe, nurturing, and loving home. Challenging these narratives further helps to highlight policy gaps and dispel the negative stereotypes about LGBTQ+ adoptive parents that, left unchecked, become the basis for inequitable adoption policies (Fish & Russell, 2019; Goldberg & Smith, 2020c; Scheitle & Ecklund, 2020).

Literature Review

The journey for LGBTQ+ people toward legal, policy, and social acceptance of their ability to create families through adoption has been defined by challenges and slow progress. Although the formal recognition of LGBTQ+ adoption rights gained momentum in the latter half of the 20th century, the foundations of discrimination against

LGBTQ+ individuals can be traced back much earlier (Koppelman, 2000; Morris, 2019). In the early 20th century, societal norms and legal frameworks reinforced heteronormative family structures, leaving LGBTQ+ individuals with little to no visibility or recognition in the adoption system. During this period, societal and legal structures broadly marginalized LGBTQ+ people, prioritizing rigid definitions of morality and family that excluded nontraditional configurations. These deeply entrenched biases laid the groundwork for the widespread discrimination LGBTQ+ individuals faced in the decades that followed (Barclay, 2022; Farr & Goldberg, 2018; Martin & Rodriguez, 2022).

The decision to begin this review in the 1960s reflects a pivotal shift in the adoption landscape, as this decade marked the beginning of publicized cases and growing awareness of LGBTQ+ individuals seeking to adopt. The absence of legal protections during this era and the overt hostility faced by aspiring LGBTQ+ adoptive parents underscore the discriminatory practices that persisted for decades (Bishin et al., 2020; Marr et al., 2020). The 1960s also introduced landmark moments, such as the widely publicized case of Bill Jones, a California man who successfully adopted a child in 1968. His case brought national attention to LGBTQ+ adoption, igniting debates among elected officials, faith leaders, and social service agencies (Wilson, 2007). By starting in the 1960s, this review captures the critical turning point where the exclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in adoption processes began to be publicly contested, setting the stage for subsequent legal and policy developments.

The 1970s were marked by emerging national visibility for LGBTQ+ people and multiple attempts to challenge discriminatory adoption laws openly The Stonewall Riots of 1969, though not explicitly about advocating for LGBTQ+ adoption, drew national attention to the broader issue of equal rights for LGBTQ+ people and are widely credited as a critical launching event of the gay rights movement (Baumle, 2018; Gates, 2015b). The riots drew critical attention and increased publicity to the unfair and dehumanizing treatment of LGBTQ+ people, not just in New York City, where the events happened, but across the country. For members of this community, it was one of the earliest accounts where they saw LGBTQ+ advocates verbally and physically resist attempts by those in power to deny them their fundamental right to exist, which was highly inspirational. Stonewall opened a national dialogue about the rights and fair treatment of LGBTQ+ people that began to shift public attitudes and opened new pathways for public support. It also helped form several state and national advocacy organizations that later became instrumental in the broader fight for marriage equality and adoption rights for LGBTQ+ people (Koppelman, 2000; Morris, 2019).

In addition to Stonewall, the 1970s were further shaped by several high-profile attempts to challenge state exclusionary and discriminatory adoption laws (Green, 2020). For example, the lesbian couple Madeleine Isaacson and her partner Sandy Schuster successfully challenged officials in Washington State, becoming the first to win custody of their adopted son in 1978. Also, that same year, New York became the first state in the nation to begin accepting adoption applications from LGBTQ+ people. This move did not grant adoption rights to these applicants, but it was an important step that opened the door

to recognizing the desire of these applicants to create families through adoption (Morris, 2019).

The 1980s were defined by critical legal progress and increases in the number of LGBTQ+ families, expanding the previously heteronormative boundaries that narrowly defined families to include only male and female-headed households (Goldberg & Smith, 2020b; Patterson, 2019). The rise in LGBTQ+ people serving as foster parents challenged the legal and policy structures at the time to recognize the connections they formed with children and families they had created. Early scholarship emerged during this period, focusing on children's social, emotional, and academic well-being (Patterson, 1992; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Though in its infancy, several studies began to report findings showing no meaningful differences in the well-being of children raised in households with LGBTQ+ parents (Golombok et al., 1997; Wainright & Patterson, 2006). It was also during this period that LGBTQ+ parenting support groups began to emerge (Hicks, 2005). Spurred on by the public activism from a decade earlier, support groups provided a safe space where aspiring parents could share resources, openly discuss raising children, and devise strategies to push for continued acceptance.

The issue of second-parent adoption also began gaining much more attention during this period. In cases where one parent was biologically related to the child, the laws did not allow the second parent the same legal right to that child as the biological parent. In instances where medical, educational, or other legal decisions needed to be made for that child, only the biological parent was allowed to participate (Marr et al., 2020). Invariably, when some of these relationships ended, the non-biological parent was

not granted legally supported visitation rights. This measure led to instability within the LGBTQ+ family structure and denied two-parent support to children being raised in LGBTQ+ households. A landmark California case in 1983 ruled that in cases where LGBTQ+ people were co-parenting, this may continue even after the relationship between the adults ended. Similarly, a 1985 New York case developed what became known as "de facto parents," with one of the first rulings in the country granting parental rights to non-biological parents in a custody dispute (Carr, 1992).

Beyond the emerging legal progress, the 1980s was further significant because it marked one of the earliest periods where public support shifted notably in favor of LGBTQ+ families (Gates, 2015b). The emergence and growth of state and increasingly national advocacy organizations equipped and trained leaders in various tactics, including media and storytelling, helping advocates better prepare to leverage the media as a core mechanism in the movement for full LGBTQ+ rights (Fetner, 2008). This preparation helped them become more confident in telling their stories and driving a consistent narrative that challenged the stereotypical depictions of LGBTQ+ people (Armstrong & Crage, 2006). But increased visibility also came at a cost; the 1980s also ushered in renewed conservative resistance to the LGBTQ+ rights movement, and several discriminatory laws were passed across the country, making explicit what was already the informal policy that only heterosexual and, in some cases, married couples were allowed to adopt children (Klarman, 2012).

The 1990s was one of the most consequential periods in the fight for equal adoption rights for LGBTQ+ people. This period saw continued public attention and

increasing support for LGBTQ+ adoption, along with state victories expanding adoption rights to LGBTQ+ people (Bennett & Gates, 2019; Gianino et al., 2019). For example, in 1997, a key ruling in New Jersey granted joint adoption rights to a lesbian couple, marking the first such court action in the country to do so. This was an important shift because, prior to this action, two-parent adoption by LGBTQ+ couples was not allowed (Fetner, 2008). Building on the New Jersey model, other states followed their lead, passing similar measures extending similar rights to LGBTQ+ couples. In 1993, Massachusetts passed a measure allowing LGBTQ+ people the right to serve as foster parents, the first state in the country to do so. Other states responded by adding further restrictions to foster and adoption rights of LGBTQ+ people. Florida, in 1996, passed a law prohibiting LGBTQ+ adoption, which was a significant blow to the movement for LGBTQ+ rights. On the other hand, Vermont in 1999 became the first state to legalize civil unions for same-sex couples, a move that provided renewed energy to proponents of LGBTQ+ adoption rights (Gates, 2015b). Throughout the decade, advocates and opponents flocked to state legislatures demanding action to expand and restrict LGBTQ+ adoption rights, placing state-elected leaders at the center of the policy and legal fight.

The actions in New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Vermont were also credited with renewing the national debate surrounding equal adoption rights for LGBTQ+ people. Because these were groundbreaking measures, they drew tremendous national media attention and brought the public spotlight to this issue. This debate centered on familiar themes (Gates, 2015b; Gates & Badgett, 2019). LGBTQ+ advocates argued that it's a fundamental human right to be able to build a family and raise children in safe and loving

homes. Opponents countered by declaring that extending adoption rights to LGBTQ+ people would lead to the continued moral decline in the country, erode the foundation of the family, and threaten children placed in the care of LGBTQ+ people. Advocates weren't winning outright but were shifting public opinion in their favor. Public polls taken at the time showed a gradual but important shift in public support for LGBTQ+ adoption, and it was enough to inspire advocates to continue the fight. By the decade's end, advocates were inspired by the shift in public support to call for federal action to bring cohesion to all the disparate state laws and extend adoption rights to everyone across the country (Fetner, 2008).

The legal and policy fight between LGBTQ+ proponents and opponents continued between 2000 and 2015 (Morris, 2019). Emboldened by wins on primary legislation curtailing or outright banning LGBTQ+ adoption and fostering, the opposition, mainly the religious right, expanded their efforts, pressing state legislatures that had not yet passed these measures to do so. Some advocates continued to call for state wins to expand adoption and fostering rights, while others argued that attention should be shifted instead to fighting for marriage equality nationally. They argued that by winning the marriage equality fights, full adoption and fostering rights would be granted because of it. Also, in this period, several states passed measures expanding adoption rights to LGBTQ+ couples. The District of Columbia in 2000 passed a measure allowing joint adoption for LGBTQ+ couples, while a decade later, Florida reversed its prior ban on LGBTQ+ adoption and became the last state in the union to do so (Armstrong & Crage, 2006).

The focus on the national push for marriage equality was informed in part by the continued increase in public support of LGBTQ+ people and their family-building goals (Gates & Badgett, 2019; Goldberg, 2019). LGBTQ+ advocates recognized that they were up against an opposition that was far better funded and had much more bi-partisan political support, even from prominent Democrats who did not want to splinter their base due to a lack of support from clergy and well-organized religious organizations. Shifting attention away from state legislatures and instead to a national campaign to win marriage equality allowed them to circumvent costly state-by-state fights that showed very little likelihood of success in a timeframe that would extend the dignity and opportunity to LGBTQ+ people. A national campaign offered the opportunity to put forward a clear, cohesive message, focus attention on a concentrated set of political targets, and deploy resources strategically to win full adoption rights and marriage equality through a single campaign.

The decision to frame the campaign as one focused on achieving full marriage equality rather than civil unions was controversial for some (Gates & Badgett, 2019; Green, 2020). However, advocates believed that calling for anything short of equal rights for LGBTQ+ people would not inspire and motivate the people they needed to be excited and invested in the campaign. This frame deeply resonated with the public, and opinion polls supported this approach (Chen, 2020; Farr & Goldberg, 2020). Organizers effectively utilized support from politicians and celebrities, deploying them across the media in op-eds, interviews, and paid media campaigns. Simultaneously, they leveraged lobby events, pride parades, rallies, and voter registration drives to normalize the issue of

equal rights for LGBTQ+ people, build momentum for the campaign, and create a sense of inevitability that they would win (Morris, 2019).

The shift in strategy to a national campaign for marriage equality also proved beneficial in the fight for adoption rights (Green, 2020). With support building for marriage equality, more people began to focus on the bias and discrimination in the foster and adoption systems (Chen, 2020; Hart-Brinson, 2019). Renewed focus on these laws also called attention to the politicians and organizations supporting them. Opponents of same-sex marriage began getting a lot of attention. They ultimately began to retreat under the pressure because they did not want to be viewed as intolerant, advocating for measures that discriminated against LGBTQ+ people. In states like Massachusetts and California, where marriage equality was previously enacted into law, measures were passed granting full adoption and fostering rights to LGBTQ+ people. These efforts culminated in 2015 when the US Supreme Court ruling, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, granted full marriage rights to same-sex couples nationwide (Hermann, 2015; Miller & Rettig, 2021). As proponents predicted, the action by the US Supreme Court in the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* case also granted automatic adoption and full parental rights to LGBTQ+ people, preventing the need for a state-by-state fight for these rights (Gates & Badgett, 2019; Hart-Brinson, 2019). This was a legal and cultural shift in the country that was on par with the fight for civil and voting rights for black Americans five decades earlier and the reproductive justice for women back in 1973.

With the court siding with LGBTQ+ people and their allies, the fight turned back to states to demand that they recognize these new rights and change their policies,

aligning them with the court's ruling (Hermann, 2015; Morris, 2019). And in the decade following the national campaign's victory, marriage equality and adoption advocates have not relented in the fight for justice. They recognized that laws and policies are implemented by people whose actions are not always on display where bias and discrimination can be easily identified. For example, the decision on whether to place a foster child in a home of an LGBTQ+ couple happens far out of view of the couple, who may be denied this opportunity based on their sexual orientation or identity, with them not being made aware of the real reason why they were turned down. Addressing this type of bias or discrimination requires passing state law that explicitly bans this as a factor to consider in adoption and foster care child placement decisions. It also requires private and foster care entities to develop and proliferate anti-discrimination policies and provide training to staff on equitable practices for working with LGBTQ+ applicants (C. Brown & Rogers, 2020; Khun et al., 2020) .

Adoption Process in Georgia

For those interested in adopting a child in Georgia, state statutes require that prospective adoptive parents reside in the state for at least six months before submitting an adoption petition. While there is no minimum age limit to be eligible, applicants must be at least ten years older than the child they seek to adopt, with exceptions for relatives or stepparents. Applicants must clear extensive federal and state background checks and complete a home study by a licensed social worker (Farr & Goldberg, 2019; Goldberg et al., 2019a; Matthews & Cramer, 2006). This home study is thorough, requiring medical clearance to ensure prospective parents have no health issues that would prevent them

from caring for a child, as well as a financial evaluation to identify any fiscal barriers to providing for the child (Mason et al., 2020). Applicants must provide written responses to a set of questions, gather letters of recommendation, and have their home inspected to ensure there are safety issues that could harm a child (Berkowitz, 2020b; Farr & Goldberg, 2019). For many hopeful adoptive parents, clearing the home study is one of the most stress-inducing steps of the process. The process is quite similar for applicants seeking to adopt through foster care, with slight exceptions. Foster care applicants must complete an eight-week pre-licensure course and submit all the other documents like the private adoption pathway (Bennett & Gates, 2019; Goldberg et al., 2019a).

Like options available elsewhere in the country, hopeful adoptive parents in Georgia may choose to adopt either from foster care or a private adoption agency. The infant adoption program is the most competitive of all pathways, and it can be pursued through a private adoption agency or the foster care program. Private agencies often have more applicants than they have expectant birth moms seeking to place a child (Khun et al., 2020). Consequently, this option tends to be very expensive, with programs costing $70,000 or more and taking 12-18 months before the applicant is matched with a prospective birth mother (Mason et al., 2020). Because in many states, birth mothers can change their minds even after a child is placed in their new home, agencies are often reluctant to make guarantees about the outcome of their matching process. When working with private agencies, prospective parents develop elaborate marketing materials, including websites, social media sites, and videos, to stand out to birth mothers and families looking to place an infant for adoption. Despite this, it is estimated that for every

successful adoption, the prospective adoptive parents were matched with several other birth moms, where the process was disrupted for various reasons before they achieved success (Goldberg et al., 2019a; Goldberg & Allen, 2022). The estimates are less precise for LGBTQ+ applicants, but it is estimated that these applicants experience higher rates of disrupted placements before finally achieving success.

Adopting through foster care is a preferred option for applicants who wish to help a child who might not otherwise experience permanency or those who cannot afford the high cost of the private infant adoption program (Bennett & Gates, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2023). The goal of the state foster care program in Georgia, as in the rest of the country, is first to reunite children with their birth families, but when this is not possible, they seek to find safe and loving adoptive homes. Before a child is made eligible for adoption through foster care, their parental rights must be terminated, a process that occurs after rigorous and extensive attempts at reunification with birth parents and families. The state provides several financial incentives to encourage adopting children in foster care, including healthcare, a monthly stipend, attorney fees, and college assistance to children who have been in care for two years or more (Goldberg et al., 2019a; Goldberg & Allen, 2022).

In addition to private infant adoption and foster care, a third pathway is private adoption using the services of an attorney specializing in adoption. In some instances, pregnant mothers reach out to an attorney instead of a private agency to request assistance in finding a suitable adoptive family. There are also instances where hopeful adoptive parents and birth mothers find each other through informal means, such as

referrals, and then seek the assistance of an attorney to manage the legal aspects of the adoption process (Haslanger, 2023; Sisson, 2022).

Irrespective of the selected pathway, adoptions are finalized through the state court system. The process involves prospective adoptive parents, usually through their attorney, filing a petition with the court declaring their intent to adopt the eligible child. The petition leads to a hearing where the judge considers the petition and the applicant's home study. The judge evaluates the request and may ask for more information to address concerns that arise during the hearing. Once all issues are resolved, the judge approves the adoption, officially terminating the parental rights of the birth parents and granting parental rights to the adoptive parents. Georgia has no revocation period or formal timeframe for birth parents to change their minds; however, it is up to the judge's discretion to determine if something occurred during the adoption process that would warrant reversing the adoption. In limited instances where adoptions are reversed, birth parents must demonstrate that they had inadequate legal representation or were coerced into giving up their child (Goldberg et al., 2019; Goldberg & Allen, 2022; Marr et al., 2020).

Though the public perception of LGBTQ+ adoption in Georgia remains primarily anecdotal, national surveys find that public support has steadily grown over the past four decades. A 2021 Gallup survey reports that over 73% of Americans favor LGBTQ+ couples adopting and raising children (Gallup, 2021). Most Americans believe that adoption agencies should not be able to prevent LGBTQ+ people from adopting children (Broadhurst, Mason, et al., 2018; Farr & Goldberg, 2019; Neto & Barcelos, 2020). These

views reflect a continued improvement from even a decade earlier and further help to explain why public policy continues to improve in favor of LGBTQ+ people. These improvements include not just more people expressing support for LGBTQ+ individuals raising children but also a decline in public opposition to it. Estimates find that between 2016 and 2021, public support for LGBTQ+ adoption grew by 14 percentage points (Pew Research Center, 2020). Surveys also find urban versus rural differences in support for LGBTQ+ adoption (Movement Advancement Project, 2021). For example, there is likely more significant support for LGBTQ+ adoption in the metropolitan Atlanta area, the major population and economic center of the state, which is much more progressive in its views than in rural parts of the state. There are also gender and generational differences, with data showing women and youth are more likely to express support (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Public sentiments in Georgia are also heavily shaped by the significant role that religious elites play in controlling and directing important levers of government (Bishin et al., 2020; Goldberg & Allen, 2022; Koppelman, 2000). For example, religious conservatives hold a supermajority in the state legislature and control all state-elected roles, such as governor, secretary of state, and attorney general. Technically and politically, they have enough power to pass and enact any legislation they desire into law. Despite this, legal protections for LGBTQ+ people have remained the same or improved over the past two decades (Frank & Polikoff, 2019; Hermann, 2015; Miller & Rettig, 2021). The opposition, primarily religious leaders from rural and less diverse parts of the state, has become less vocal in denouncing LGBTQ+ adoption and support for marriage

equality. This may be partly due to the recognition of the shifting demographics impacting the future political landscape in the state (Bates et al., 2020; Jones & McBeth, 2020). The 2020 general election saw the state supporting Democrat Joe Biden for president and electing two Democrats to the US Senate. It is also clear that metropolitan Atlanta is not just the demographic center of the state but is also growing in political importance with the ability to shape the state's political landscape. While stereotypes, discrimination, and bias against LGBTQ+ people persist, the climate in the state has improved from even a decade earlier, and projections indicate a shift toward continued support for LGBTQ+ adoption (Movement Advancement Project, 2021).

LGBTQ+ Father Experiences

Navigating the adoption process presents unique challenges for LGBTQ+ fathers. In addition to facing discrimination based on sexual orientation and identity, they also encounter gender bias that favors women as better suited to raise and nurture children (Farr & Goldberg, 2020; Goldberg, 2019). This bias permeates the entire adoption process. For instance, a 2018 study finds that fathers report experiencing bias and discrimination during the home study process, an area overseen mainly by women who may question why a single man, or male couple is seeking to adopt a child (Broadhurst, Mason, et al., 2018). These fathers report feeling excessively scrutinized and held to a higher standard because of their gender and sexual orientation (Goldberg et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2020). This attention may be partly because our society often views men as the parents responsible for disciplining children. This leads to questions about their

ability to provide a nurturing environment, a role typically associated with mothers (Goldberg et al., 2019a; Goldberg, 2022).

LGBTQ+ fathers also have fewer prospects for matching in the highly competitive private adoption system, resulting in longer wait times and increased costs associated with marketing and outreach (Goldberg & Allen, 2022). The pool of adoptive parents continues to grow as more people, including LGBTQ+ applicants, elect to start families using adoption, while the group of prospective birth parents placing children for adoption remains static or even on the decline. To be eligible to match with a birth parent when seeking to adopt an infant, an LGBTQ+ applicant signs a contract with a private adoption agency and prepares marketing materials that prospective birth parents review to determine the family with whom they wish to place their child. Known as the match process, it is highly competitive as each applicant seeks to stand out and get selected by a limited group of birth moms (Haysom et al., 2020; McGuire-Snieckus, 2023; Sims, 2020). Adoption agencies also influence this process by promoting prospective parents they believe are a good match for a particular birth mom, and some say this is where a bias for heterosexual, male-female households play a role in limiting the prospects of LGBTQ+ applicants. Facing reduced prospects for getting matched, LGBTQ+ applicants are more likely to adopt a child from the state foster care program compared to heterosexual applicants (Goldberg & Allen, 2022; Mallory, Brown, et al., 2019). This process is more affordable but may be more complex due to the bureaucratic nature of the state program, leading to increased wait times and higher costs.

Navigating the complex and uncertain bureaucracy is an additional concern for aspiring adoptive fathers (Goldberg et al., 2019a; Matthews & Cramer, 2006). The extensive paperwork, required training, background checks, intrusive questions, and home visits are processes that most applicants are unfamiliar with, which can deter those considering adoption. Understandably, navigating the adoption process is one of the primary issues aspiring fathers reference as the thing most likely to keep them from initiating the adoption process (Broadhurst, Mason, et al., 2018; Mason et al., 2020).

At the federal level, for example, adoptions must adhere to the guidelines of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, which sets requirements for background checks, the need for a home study, and guidelines for transporting children across state lines in cases where applicants are seeking to adopt from a state where they don't reside (Albert et al., 2021; Bureau, 2020). State laws also specify requirements such as residency, age, health, training, and financial stability for adopting a child. States may also proliferate additional guidelines, such as the revocation period or the legal timeframe a birth parent has after a child has been placed with a prospective adoptive family to change their mind (Hollingsworth, 2018). The state foster care program put forward a set of policies and procedures that theoretically must align with federal and state statutes. Private agencies also have varying policies depending on geography, size, and religious affiliation. There is also a tremendous amount of paperwork, including home study documents, disclosure forms, and declarations, many of which are specialized and may require assistance from an adoption specialist or attorney to complete (Goldberg et al., 2019a; Seymore, 2019).

The complex nature of the adoption process produces a significant level of stress and anxiety for many applicants (Grigoropoulos, 2022; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2018; Menhinick & Sanders, 2023). Additionally, there are critical moments along the journey once various requirements have been completed, and applicants must wait for a decision on that step. This wait time is its unique stressor because there is no clear timeframe for how long each step of the adoption process can take. For example, the home study process can take just a few months for some, while it can stretch toward a year or more for others (Goldberg, 2019; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2018). Similarly, for those seeking to adopt an infant through the private adoption system, the wait time can last from just a few months to multiple years to get to successful finalization (Farr et al., 2020; Farr & Goldberg, 2018). Other hurdles and roadblocks can pop up along the way, including paperwork that is either missing or needs to be completed again due to errors. Those adopting out-of-state report facing surprises and disappointments due to delays in getting paperwork processed and securing approval to transport prospective adoptive children across state lines (Brodzinsky, 2011).

The high cost of adoption also presents a financial strain on aspiring fathers. Agencies charge application fees, marketing fees, placement, and administration fees, which can exceed $70,000 or more, with some reporting paying upwards of double this amount (Costa & Tasker, 2018; Mason et al., 2020). Applicants must also pay legal expenses and travel costs, which can vary depending on whether they are adopting a child from out of state. The collective toll of meeting all these requirements places tremendous stress on aspiring fathers, causing some to give up on their dream of becoming fathers

and leading others to seek support from counselors and support groups to find answers to their questions and get emotional help dealing with the enormous stress of the process (Carroll, 2018a; Grigoropoulos, 2022).

Policy and Legal Challenges

There is no explicit prohibition in Georgia statutes preventing LGBTQ+ adoption; instead, it leaves the decision to judges and adoption professionals to act in the "best interest of the child" (Goldberg, 2019). The statute specifies that factors such as the safety and stability of the intended adoptive home, the financial capacity of the prospective adoptive parents, and the emotional and social well-being of the child should be considered (Mallory, Hasenbush, et al., 2019). Critics argue that this policy is vague and leaves room for arbitrary and discriminatory interpretation, making it more difficult for LGBTQ+ individuals to adopt children in the state (Goldberg, 2019). Judges, lawyers, and social workers, the legal and policy actors in charge of implementing this policy, may lack sufficient cultural awareness and knowledge of the LGBTQ+ community, potentially making decisions based on biased or discriminatory stereotypes regarding LGBTQ+ fathers (Baumle, 2018; Gianino et al., 2019).

The "best interest of the child" standard is not new nor exclusive to Georgia. It is widely used in family and adoption case law (Bromley, 2021). For example, this same standard is used when courts must determine whether a child should be removed from the home of their birth parent and placed in the state foster care system (Goldberg & Allen, 2022; Khun et al., 2020). Similarly, this standard is also applied when judges must decide whether the parental rights of a birth parent should be terminated, making a child eligible

for adoption through the foster care system (Farr & Goldberg, 2020; Martin & Rodriguez, 2022). Social workers also use this standard when recommending to courts whether a birth parent should be granted visitation rights with their children and the terms under which the visit should be given (Bennett & Gates, 2019). In divorce and separation cases, judges apply this standard to determine which parent should be awarded custody of children (Goldberg, 2019; Goldberg & Romero, 2018). Given that LGBTQ+ adoption is still relatively new in Georgia and across the country, the case law where this criterion has been applied is only just emerging (Bromley, 2021). LGBTQ+ legal advocates recognize the sometimes-arbitrary ways this standard has been used and are beginning to bring forward cases challenging it in court (Farr & Goldberg, 2019; Goldberg & Romero, 2018).

LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations are also working in Georgia to ensure the “best interest of the child” standard is not used as a tool to discriminate against aspiring adoptive LGBTQ+ parents (Bromley, 2021). They are educating legal and adoption administrators on how to equitably apply this standard, drawing on available research showing LGBTQ+ parents are capable of raising children in safe, loving, and nurturing homes that produce well-adjusted members of society (Gess et al., 2024; Goldberg & Garcia, 2020). These advocates are also raising money to provide a capable defense for Georgia residents who believe they are being discriminated against based on sexual orientation or identity in their adoption cases. These cases are costly and take time to adjudicate, requiring petitioners to wait years for relief (Farr & Goldberg, 2018; Goldberg, 2022).

In addition to courts inequitably applying the “best interest of the child” standard, there is additional concern about adoption professionals in both private and state foster care programs communicating openly and transparently with aspiring adoptive fathers. The adoption process remains primarily opaque, with most decisions occurring outside of the presence of aspiring parents (Coulter et al., 2022; Esmaeilzadeh, 2019; Gato et al., 2021). For example, in the private infant adoption system, arguably the most expensive and competitive form of adoption, the match process that pairs aspiring adoptive parents with birth parents seeking to place a child for adoption happens primarily out of view (Goldberg & Allen, 2022; Khun et al., 2020). Adoption officials meet with birth parents, present them with profiles of prospective parents they believe meet their criteria, and answer their questions. This is an asymmetrical power relationship where the adoption officials appear to be providing a service and leaving the decision to the birth parents. However, upon closer scrutiny, presenting a list of suitable candidates narrows the birth parents' choices (Khun et al., 2020).

Further, birth parents, arguably in a vulnerable emotional state, may look to adoption officials as experts to help guide them through the process (Lapidus et al., 2023; Sisson, 2022). The beliefs and perceptions of adoption officials about LGBTQ+ applicants are of utmost importance in determining if and how often these couples get presented to birth parents as suitable parents to consider for adoption (Berkowitz, 2020a; Khun et al., 2020). LGBTQ+ adoptive parents also report feeling like they are being held to a higher standard and believe they are not given the same level of exposure to birth parents as heterosexual applicants (Barclay, 2022; Berkowitz, 2020b; Matthews &

Cramer, 2006). These couples face longer wait times and increased expenses for marketing and administrative fees, leading to delays or, in some cases, derailing their adoption process altogether (Goldberg, 2019).

The home study process is another legal and policy hurdle LGBTQ+ fathers must clear to be eligible to adopt. It involves extensive state and federal background checks, health assessments, financial evaluations, in-person interviews, and an evaluation of the applicant's home to ensure no safety hazards could harm the child. LGBTQ+ aspiring fathers report feeling overwhelmed by the process, especially in instances where the social worker leading it requests information or asks questions, they believe cross the line into areas they believe are biased and discriminatory (Broadhurst, Alrouh, et al., 2018). This likely happens because the social worker may not have been given training on LGBTQ+ cultural awareness and strategies for identifying and avoiding bias and discrimination in the adoption process (Gato et al., 2021; Goldberg & Allen, 2022). When social workers ask questions about the aspiring father's sexual orientation or ability to provide for the emotional needs of children, they believe these questions are rooted in stereotypes that women are better equipped to nurture children and children raised by LGBTQ+ parents will grow up to be gay (Goldberg, 2019).

Policy and legal hurdles could have a chilling effect on interest in adoptions in Georgia and nationally (Bromley, 2021; Gianino et al., 2019). Available data suggest increasing interest in adoption as a pathway for family formation by LGBTQ+ people, especially those who are younger (Grimstad & Garborcauskas, 2021; McConnachie et al., 2020). Data find that LGBTQ+ people are more likely than heterosexual couples to

choose adoption over other forms of family-building. This should be welcome news in Georgia, where it is estimated that over 11,000 children are in the state foster care program, with many seeking permanent adoptive homes (Goldberg et al., 2019b). Removing the legal and policy barriers to LGBTQ+ adoptions is an immediate way to begin addressing this pressing problem in the state (Goldberg, 2019).

An overly burdensome and discriminatory adoption process means LGBTQ+ applicants may pursue other family-building pathways, such as IVF, which are expensive but do not subject them to the issues faced in the adoption process (Carroll, 2018a; Sims, 2020). The adoption legal and policy apparatus in the state must be improved to address these issues. Nondiscrimination laws that explicitly outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity are needed. Legal and administrative personnel responsible for administering these programs must also complete cultural competency training to address differential treatment, bias, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ applicants. These are the minimum steps that should be taken to make the state adoption system more equitable and inclusive (Goldberg, 2019).

Coping Strategies and Support Networks

The adoption process can be highly stressful, prompting aspiring LGBTQ+ fathers, who face significant bias and discrimination, to turn to a range of tactics and support pathways (Grigoropoulos, 2022; Horne et al., 2022; Menhinick & Sanders, 2023). This bias can emerge at multiple points along their adoption journey. For instance, some private adoption agencies are faith-based, and while they are careful not to explicitly discriminate against LGBTQ+ clients, through their marketing materials and

staffing composition, they can communicate a bias for serving primarily heterosexual couples. Similarly, social workers in the foster care system may hold a personal bias that children should be raised in a household with both male and female parents and consequently discriminate against LGBTQ+ aspiring parents by overlooking them when a placement comes up or only sending them children that heterosexual couples have turned down. In both instances, the LGBTQ+ aspiring parents face longer wait times in finding an agency to represent them or getting contacted for a placement. They further must confront the emotional and financial challenges requiring coping strategies from friends and family, online groups, and mental health professionals.

LGBTQ+ fathers report facing a range of emotional challenges throughout their adoption journey. One challenge is the persistent fear of rejection at key moments, such as during the home study process when they must wait to learn if they have been granted approval, or waiting to learn whether they have been matched with a birth mother seeking to place her child for adoption (Bell, 2020; Mackenzie-Liu, 2022). They also report experiencing stress due to the feeling that they are not welcome or embraced by the people they must engage and those who hold responsibility for deciding if their adoption journey will end with a child successfully placed in their home (Grigoropoulos, 2022; Menhinick & Sanders, 2023). The stress is further compounded by the bureaucratic nature of the adoption process and the sense of feeling judged due to persistent stereotypes about whether LGBTQ+ fathers are equipped to raise children. They report feeling ill-equipped to adequately manage these challenges, leading them to seek help

from mental health professionals, support groups, and peers (Carroll, 2018a, 2018b; Golombok, 2020).

The high cost of adoption is an additional source of stress LGBTQ+ aspiring fathers must confront on their adoption journey(Mazrekaj et al., 2020). Many of them report cost as a primary source of delay in starting or completing their adoption journey. The available data suggest that adoption costs, primarily through private agencies, can range between $70,000 to $100,000 or more, placing it far out of reach for most potential fathers (Khun et al., 2020; Rosenbaum, 2021). Many fathers report seeking out limited grant programs, applying for personal loans or second mortgages on their homes, and some have even turned to hold fundraising events to raise the money to cover adoption costs. For fathers of lower socioeconomic status, options for covering these costs can be even more limited, leading many to postpone or give up on private adoption altogether.

Some fathers avoid the private adoption system altogether, turning instead to the state foster care system where most of the adoption costs are waived, and additional benefits such as healthcare costs and college tuition assistance are provided (Broadhurst, Mason, et al., 2018; Gallup et al., 2024; Khun et al., 2020). Despite these benefits, the foster care program has its challenges. For example, the wait time when adopting through foster care is much longer due to the extensive measures that must be taken to reunify a child with their birth families before a judge is willing to terminate parental rights, making a child eligible for adoption. Additionally, prospective adoptive parents may only get limited background information such as family history, past training, and medical history about a child adopted through foster care (Farr et al., 2020; Gianino et al., 2019).

The absence of information can produce stress and uncertainty both in preparing to finalize the adoption and how to parent this child in the future (Grigoropoulos, 2022; Horne et al., 2022).

To cope with these challenges, LGBTQ+ fathers seek out a wide range of support services. Some reported turning to mindfulness practices, such as deep breathing, yoga, and other meditation-related techniques (Carroll, 2018b; Finlay-Jones et al., 2021; Iacono, 2019) . Others have indicated that developing a journaling practice has been a great way to express their thoughts and feelings without worrying about whether they are being judged. They further note that in journaling, they have found a path to help process the complex emotions they encounter during the adoption process. These fathers also use journals to set adoption-related goals, which allow them to prioritize the actions they plan to pursue and empower them to keep going (Livingston & Youssef, 2021; Yu et al., 2018).

Additionally, aspiring LGBTQ+ adoptive fathers name peer support as a coping mechanism they have found to be useful in helping them manage the stress encountered on their adoption journey (Arnold & Bailey, 2018; Pepping et al., 2018; Pullen-Sansfaçon & Boyd, 2016). Connecting with someone with whom you share a common set of experiences can be an effective outlet for alleviating stress, and those who have utilized this technique describe it as both empowering and cathartic (Pullen-Sansfaçon & Boyd, 2016). Past research has reported that peer support also helps participants validate their experiences and freely express their concerns (Pepping et al., 2018). It also provides practical benefits, such as giving aspiring fathers a reliable space for asking questions

about the adoption process and learning from the experience of others who have successfully adopted children. Through this engagement, aspiring fathers can avoid costly, time-consuming mistakes that could derail their adoption prospects. They may also learn about essential adoption resources such as grant programs, financing adoptions, and parenting training.

Traditional therapeutic services from professionals specializing in LGBTQ+ issues provide much-needed coping strategies for helping aspiring fathers deal with adoption-related stress or anxiety (Pepping et al., 2018; Pullen-Sansfaçon & Boyd, 2016). Therapy offers a safe and dedicated space for sharing one's feelings and becoming equipped with the tools and tactics needed to work through issues. A skilled therapist can cultivate a space rooted in trust where aspiring fathers are comfortable sharing their thoughts without fear of judgment; they can also help them surface underlying issues such as past discrimination experiences or anxiety aspiring parents may be facing regarding stepping into a parenting role (Frost & Meyer, 2019; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2018; McCullough & Dispenza, 2020) . Through this relationship, aspiring parents can gain additional coping strategies, such as relaxing techniques or methods to help navigate bias from specific groups such as social workers, adoption agency administrators, and foster program case workers (Pepping et al., 2018; Pullen-Sansfaçon & Boyd, 2016).

Identification of Research Gaps

While the number and type of research studies examining LGBTQ+ adoption experiences have grown over the past decade, there remain notable gaps in our understanding of key issues shaping the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers. Chief

among these gaps is the lack of diversity of voices in the available literature. Past studies have primarily been informed by the views and experiences of middle and upper-class LGBTQ+ married couples, with less representation from those of lower socioeconomic status, fathers of color, and single fathers (Gess et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2021). While the reasons for this lack of diversity are unclear, issues such as limited research funding and inadequate recruitment techniques have contributed (English & Fenby-Hulse, 2019; Goldberg et al., 2020; Perrin et al., 2019b). The absence of diverse voices may also be attributed to the fact that the most visible early advocates for LGBTQ+ rights were white male couples who, despite their sexual orientation, still occupied positions of privilege in their community. This may have tilted research toward these groups, prioritizing their experiences over more diverse voices (Costa & Tasker, 2018; Mountz & Capous-Desyllas, 2020).

Similarly, few studies have considered the intersectionality of race, identity, and socioeconomic status and how these factors impact the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers (Barclay, 2022; Berkowitz, 2020b; Few-Demo et al., 2016; Perey, 2015). The lack of research in this area limits our understanding of complex issues affecting their experiences in the LGBTQ+ community. For example, a father of color who is of lower socioeconomic status must simultaneously confront issues of gender, identity, race, and social class, all of which may profoundly impact their adoption experiences. Without this research, it may be incredibly challenging to craft policies that truly respond to the issues facing the broadest cross-section of aspiring adoptive parents and consequently may leave the issues of the most historically marginalized groups unaddressed. Additionally,

the lack of an intersectional approach may make it difficult to surface implicit bias and, worse, could perpetuate the existing inequities (Barclay, 2022).

More research is also needed that considers specific geographic factors that impact LGBTQ+ adoptive father experiences. So far, few studies have considered geographic differences within the United States and what role such differences may play in shaping the outcome of LGBTQ+ adoptions (Brodzinsky, 2020; Goldberg & Allen, 2020; Pugh, 2022). For example, there are no longer any federal laws prohibiting LGBTQ+ adoption, but the laws within each state still vary. Some states, like Massachusetts and New York, have state laws that clearly state that LGBTQ+ adoption is permitted, while other states, like Georgia, do not mention it in their state adoption statutes. Some states have also passed additional measures explicitly banning discrimination based on sexual orientation and identity, further affirming the U.S. Supreme Court ruling, while others have not enacted these measures. The level of support and resources available to LGBTQ+ people seeking to adopt also vary by state. This is especially important given that covering the cost of adoption is one of the primary barriers that prevent LGBTQ+ aspiring parents from utilizing private adoption services.

While the available research consistently points to bias and discrimination as primary obstacles to successful adoption outcomes for LGBTQ+ parents, there are remaining gaps in our understanding of the specific aspects of the adoption process that are most impacted by it. For example, the home study process is where most aspiring adoptive fathers first encounter adoption officials who must render a decision on their ability to adopt. The views and perceptions of these individuals may have a lasting

impact on aspiring fathers, and therefore, this relationship must be more deeply examined in the literature (Hines, 2021). Similarly, adoption agency officials play an essential role in determining how quickly LGBTQ+ aspiring fathers get matched with birth mothers. In instances where they don't fully support LGBTQ+ fathers adopting children, they may be reluctant to recommend these fathers' birth mothers, resulting in delays and increased costs to aspiring fathers (Goldberg et al., 2019a; Khun et al., 2020). Future research must examine these issues more deeply to help close the gaps in our understanding of how bias and discrimination affect LGBTQ+ adoption outcomes.

Lastly, the current research has reported no differences in the growth and development of children raised by heterosexual parents versus those raised by LBGTQ+ ones (Carroll, 2018b; Goldberg et al., 2020; Mazrekaj et al., 2020; Perrin et al., 2019b). This finding is based on studies conducted at specific points in time rather than longitudinally. Opponents of LGBTQ+ adoption policies often claim there are differences in children raised by LGBTQ+ parents, highlighting the importance of thoroughly examining this issue in the literature (Kabátek & Perales, 2021; Leland, 2020). These studies could track families over time and assess key dimensions of a child's well-being, such as academic achievement, mental health, and social adjustment. In contrast, the available research attributes perceived differences to sexual orientation, whereas longitudinal studies can evaluate whether other factors, such as the family environment and socioeconomics, play a more significant role in shaping child development. Furthermore, findings from studies conducted over time may help dispel myths and

challenge stereotypes that are often used to deny access to adoption services for aspiring LGBTQ+ parents.

In short, the gaps explored in this section collectively point to the need for more intersectional research examining the adoption experiences of aspiring adoptive parents. The limited available research exploring the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers was based primarily on the experiences of white, upper-class LGBTQ+ married couples and less often from fathers of color, single fathers, and those from a lower socioeconomic background. To further understand the complex issues facing LGBTQ+ fathers, future research must take an interactional approach, concurrently examining socioeconomic issues, race, and identity. Given that state adoption laws vary but still have a significant impact on the adoption outcomes of LGBTQ+ fathers, future research must consider the possible impact of geographic factors. Furthermore, bias and discrimination remain a primary obstacle in the adoption process, especially in critically important moments such as the home study and when decisions are made on whether to place a child in the home of an LGBTQ+ aspiring parent. Finally, there is a need for longitudinal studies that examine perceived differences in the growth and development of children raised in LBGTQ+ households versus heterosexual ones to dispel this myth. Future research must investigate these issues to help close the gap in the scholarly literature and provide the information needed for equitable adoption policies.

Themes in the Existing Literature

LGBTQ+ father adoption experiences are continually evolving. Although major legal obstacles from a decade ago have been removed, challenges persist at the state and

local levels. Systemic barriers, such as the high cost of private adoption, the complexity of the state foster care programs, unclear state adoption statutes, and ongoing bias and discrimination, continue to pose significant challenges to LGBTQ+ individuals seeking to build a family through adoption (Broadhurst, Mason, et al., 2018; Costa & Tasker, 2018; Gato et al., 2021; T. Johnson et al., 2021). A literature review highlights several important themes previously found to impact the adoption journeys of LGBTQ+ aspiring parents.

One of the most salient themes in the literature pertains to the policy and legal challenges still facing LGBTQ+ fathers (Gianino et al., 2019; Jones & McBeth, 2020). This is hardly surprising given the emphasis by LGBTQ+ activists on state and federal litigation to win marriage equality before the US Supreme Court. Their action not only helped pave the way for expanding the civil and human rights of LGBTQ+ people, but it also demonstrated that legal intervention can be a viable path for achieving victories even in ideologically and politically divided courts. While this progress is critical, it has not eliminated all barriers across the country to adoption services. Farr and Goldberg (2018) examined the legal landscape shaping LGBTQ+ adoption, focusing on how differences in state laws affect the outcomes for LGBTQ+ applicants. They explored how popular policy frameworks like the "best interest of the child," while well-meaning, often lead to arbitrary and discriminatory interpretations that adversely impact the adoption process for LGBTQ+ people. Similarly, Mallory et al. (2017) explored how the failure of some states to pass adoption laws that explicitly preclude discrimination based on sexual orientation

and gender identity leaves the impression that such actions are permissible and could lead to increased discrimination against LGBTQ+ aspiring parents.

Another prevalent theme in the literature is the pervasive discrimination and bias LGBTQ+ fathers encounter throughout the adoption process (Levitt et al., 2020a; Lind, 2004). This occurs despite shifting public attitudes in the country, where support has grown consistently for LGBTQ+ rights more broadly and adoption more specifically. Levitt et al. (2020) studied the impact of discrimination on the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ applicants, looking closely at discrimination in medical, adoptive, and foster care systems. They pointed to the home study process as an area where bias and discrimination can have the pernicious effect of slowing down or outright derailing the adoption process for LGBTQ+ applicants. They further note that while LGBTQ+ applicants and their allies are challenging overt discrimination, covert bias can be much more difficult to identify, and therefore, it's less often challenged in court. For example, Fasoli and Maass (2020) reported that some LGBTQ+ applicants experienced discrimination based on sounding too stereotypically masculine or feminine. Adoption professionals associate negative qualities to LGBTQ+ applicants based on their speech pattern and tonality (Gallup et al., 2024; Levitt et al., 2020a). Consequently, they are less likely to refer them to birth mothers in the case of private adoption or assign children to their homes in the case of the state foster care program.

The high cost of adoption, primarily through private agencies, is an additional consistent theme in the literature (Mason et al., 2020). In fact, many LGBTQ+ point to the high cost of adoption as one of the primary reasons they either delay starting their

adoption journey or put it off altogether (Mason et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2018; Rosenbaum, 2021). Black et al. (2007) and Badgett et al. (2013) drew an important connection between racial and gender discrimination in the workplace and the ability of LGBTQ+ applicants to afford adoption services. They argue that the economic disparities leave these groups struggling to afford immediate and critical services like transportation, food, and housing, leading them to delay pursuing their family-building aspirations. Giesler (2012) also affirmed this point, noting that LGBTQ+ people of lower socioeconomic status face unique economic barriers to accessing adoption services, leading them to seek donations from friends and family grant programs. They further note that some applicants avoid private adoption altogether, turning instead to the state foster care program where much of the cost is waived, and additional benefits such as medical and college tuition are provided to children who meet the criteria.

The strategies aspiring LGBTQ+ parents use to cope with the stress experienced in the adoption process is an additional theme found in the existing literature. Grigoropoulos (2022) applied the minority stress theory to LGBTQ+ father experiences, arguing that the layered identities of being gay, a father and a person of color can be a source of great stress requiring varying levels of peer and professional emotional support. Giesler (2012) also noted that for many LGBTQ+ aspiring parents, peer and community support made the difference in whether an applicant prematurely ended their adoption journey or pursued it to a successful outcome. Support groups were also instrumental in providing advice and encouragement on issues of adoption and LGBTQ+ parenting. Gabrielle-Black et al. (2021) reported in their research that connecting with other

LGBTQ+ families offered a place for them to connect and fostered a sense of belonging. In addition to providing a place to come together, advocacy groups also provided pathways for volunteers to take civic and political action, such as registering voters, writing an op-ed, or testifying in front of a legislative body.

A final theme discussed in the literature is the resilience of LGBTQ+ aspiring parents, not just initiating their adoption journey but also refusing to give up, even considering the many well-documented barriers they face along the way (Frost & Meyer, 2019; Livingston & Youssef, 2021; McCullough & Dispenza, 2020; Pullen-Sansfaçon & Boyd, 2016). According to Black and Lobo (2008), resilience helps aspiring parents better manage stress and bounce back from the disappointment of things not always going their way. Resilience helps them better operate in uncertain environments and adapt to changing circumstances to find creative solutions (Black & Lobo, 2008; Luthar & Eisenberg, 2017; Walsh, 2016) . Furthermore, resilience is connected to effective emotional regulation and fostering connections through strong support networks (Cane, 2020; Despax et al., 2020; Ranieri et al., 2021; Shpiegel et al., 2021). Ranieri et al., (2021) report a strong positive relationship between resilience and a successful adoption outcome. While this research was not conducted with an LGBTQ+ research population, anecdotal accounts from LGBTQ+ aspiring parents indicate this finding is worth further exploration.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter provided a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, highlighting several past issues affecting the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers.

The variation in state laws and policies in private adoption agencies and the foster care system poses unique challenges for those seeking to adopt. Additionally, the absence of explicit policies banning discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as the lack of clarity on state prohibitions of LGBTQ+ adoption, adds unnecessary complexity to the state adoption process. Furthermore, the widely used 'best interest of the child' standard leaves the door open for arbitrary policy interpretations that can lead to discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals.

While public support for LGBTQ+ equality and access to the full range of adoption services has grown significantly over the past decade, stereotypes, biases, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ aspiring parents persist. At critical stages along their adoption journey, aspiring parents report encountering bias and discrimination, such as in their interactions with the social workers leading their home study and the private agency staff managing the match process with birth moms. Bias and discrimination are also prevalent in the state foster care program, often manifesting in more discrete ways where agency decisions are made far out of view of aspiring parents, and explanations supporting these decisions are rarely given (Broadhurst, Mason, et al., 2018; Goldberg et al., 2019a; Goldberg & Allen, 2022). The lack of clarity and transparency in both private and state systems often leaves applicants in a state of great uncertainty, contributing to unnecessary stress and anxiety (Grigoropoulos, 2022; Horne et al., 2022; Pepping et al., 2018).

Further, the high cost of adoption remains an insurmountable barrier for many aspiring parents, leading them to place their adoption journey on hold or defer it

indefinitely. This is especially true in private adoption, where costs can vary significantly between agencies and can exceed $100,000. Grant programs and special financing instruments have been introduced over the past few years, but these remain limited in popularity and are not meeting the increased demand for adoption services. High adoption costs more adversely impact those of lower socioeconomic status and aspiring parents of color because they coincidentally face more significant financial challenges in other areas of their lives (Costa & Tasker, 2018; T. Johnson et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2020) .

To cope with the stress and anxiety brought on by the obstacles and challenges encountered during the adoption process, aspiring parents are seeking out resources from peer support groups, culturally competent therapeutic services, supportive family networks, and state and national advocacy organizations. They are also tapping into other support services, such as journaling and mindfulness practices, previously associated with effective coping and building resilience (Finlay-Jones et al., 2021, 2021; Smith & Brown, 2020; Yu et al., 2018). Advocacy organizations play a dual role by helping aspiring parents cultivate meaningful connections with each other and build civic power to challenge and ultimately transform inequitable and discriminatory policies at the state and national levels.

The goal of this chapter was to examine the available literature on the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers. This research contributes to the larger field of study by highlighting gaps in the literature and how they limit our understanding of the full range of factors impacting LGBTQ+ fathers' adoption journeys. This chapter also demonstrates

that LGBTQ+ adoption is complex and influenced by a host of social, psychological, economic, policy, and legal factors. It reinforces the urgent need for more equitable policies to support and expand adoption services for aspiring LGBTQ+ applicants.

NPF was used to examine the interplay between the state policy landscape and the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers. Previous studies demonstrated that this framework is practical for understanding how policy narratives help shape public perception and policy implementation (Bates et al., 2020; Jones, McBeth, et al., 2014; Jones & McBeth, 2020; McDermott et al., 2021; Schlaufer et al., 2022; Shanahan et al., 2018). By applying NPF, this analysis seeks to identify specific policies, barriers, and success factors that impact the adoption journey of LGBTQ+ fathers. Within this dissertation, the framework helped surface how policy narratives hinder or support equitable adoption outcomes, potentially uncovering bias and discrimination across the adoption landscape. The goal is to identify these factors and provide actionable recommendations for policy reform, disrupting inequitable practices and improving the adoption process for LGBTQ+ fathers. This approach contributes to the broader academic discourse and offers practical insights for policy development.

The following chapter outlines the design and methodology for exploring critical questions and issues related to LGBTQ+ adoption experiences within Georgia's private and state foster care systems. Chapter 2 sets the stage for further discussion by examining the previously identified policies, barriers, and success factors that shape LGBTQ+ adoptions. It highlights gaps in the literature and identifies areas where additional research is necessary to enhance our understanding of this critical issue. The next chapter

proposes the research approach, detailing how the research questions were addressed. It elaborates on the narrative research approach and its application in addressing this dissertation's two main research questions. Furthermore, the process of collecting and analyzing data is explained, as well as how the findings are expected to connect to theoretical foundations. This connection offers actionable strategies for improving state policies to support LGBTQ+ fathers.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to increase the understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia as they navigated the adoption process. I sought to address gaps in the literature regarding the barriers and success factors shaping the LGBTQ+ adoption landscape in Georgia by focusing on how LGBTQ+ individuals navigate these challenges to build their families. Georgia provided a unique sociolegal context for this research, particularly following the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision that legalized same-sex marriage and removed many national impediments to LGBTQ+ adoption (Frank & Polikoff, 2019; Hermann, 2015).

Given Georgia's history as a Southern state that resisted civil and voting rights advancements for Black Americans, and its current political climate where conservative Republicans hold a supermajority in the state legislature, this study provides crucial insights into how these factors may shape the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers navigating both social and legal landscapes. Adoption laws and practices vary significantly by state, and not all states have interpreted the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court Obergefell v. Hodges decision in ways that support the family-building aspirations of LGBTQ+ families (Miller & Rettig, 2021; Movement Advancement Project, 2021; O'Donnell, 2015). By capturing and evaluating the narrative accounts of LGBTQ+ fathers' adoption experiences, this study sought to provide detailed insights into the specific state and local factors affecting LGBTQ+ adoption in Georgia.

To achieve these objectives, I present the methodology used to examine LGBTQ+ father adoption experiences, research design, criteria for identifying and selecting

research participants, and the data collection and analysis framework. By systematically presenting the study's design and rationale, I provide a clear roadmap of the research process, ensuring transparency and rigor in exploring the challenges and successes faced by LGBTQ+ fathers. In the subsequent sections I discuss the components of the research design, beginning with a restatement of the research questions and an explanation of the central concepts or phenomena under investigation.

Research Design and Rationale

In this study, I sought to answer two research questions:

RQ1: What are the barriers or success factors experienced by LGBTQ+- fathers in Georgia during the adoption process?

RQ2: What federal, state, or local policies or regulations do LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia identify as impacting their adoption journeys?

The research questions were intentionally crafted to elicit detailed information from LGBTQ+ adoptive fathers in Georgia who have successfully navigated the adoption process, either through a private adoption agency or the state foster care program. These questions were designed to narrow the study's focus to the most pertinent issues affecting the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers.

The first research question sought to uncover aspiring fathers' triumphs and challenges on their journey to forming their families. By listening directly to individuals with firsthand experience, I sought to shed light on a phenomenon that is not widely understood. Using a semi-structured interview format, participants were guided by general parameters, allowing them to surface the issues that are most significant to them

(see Galletta, 2017). This approach ensured that the data collection process was both structured and flexible, capturing a broad spectrum of experiences and deeper insights from research participants.

The second research question focused on the policies and regulations these fathers identify as most impacting their adoption experiences. Their responses highlight the policies that contribute to successful adoption outcomes for LGBTQ+ fathers and those that require reform. I sought to capture the participants' subjective understandings of the policies and practices they encountered, whether as barriers they had to overcome or as supportive measures that enhanced their adoption experiences. Through thematic analysis of their responses, I provide a broader understanding of the factors that universally prohibit or enable the adoption of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia (see Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Narrative research design was selected for this study because it supported incorporating the rich, detailed collection of personal stories directly from participants, capturing their experiences in their own words (see Bamberg, 2020). This method was particularly suited for exploring the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia, as it provided insight into the complexity of their journeys, focusing on their lived experiences and perceptions (see Bamberg, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A primary goal of this dissertation was to examine these unique experiences by inviting fathers to share their narratives. I sought to uncover the most influential barriers and success factors that shape their adoption journeys, while also exploring the legal frameworks and policies that govern adoption and foster care in the state.

LGBTQ+ fathers, as members of a historically marginalized community, often face societal and institutional challenges that extend beyond the adoption process (Bailey & Graves, 2019; Johnson & Lofquist, 2021). These challenges include verbal threats, physical violence, and limited representation in policy discussions concerning adoption and child safety (Farr et al., 2020; Frost & Meyer, 2019). A key focus of this study was to share their experiences, ensuring their perspectives are considered in policy debates. I sought to identify policies that either facilitate or hinder LGBTQ+ family-building efforts in Georgia. By examining their stories, I provide insights to inform efforts to expand LGBTQ+ adoption rights and highlight areas for policy reform to ensure equitable access to adoption services.

Narrative research centers on collecting and analyzing participants' stories to understand how they make sense of their experiences over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2020; Riessman, 1993). Unlike other qualitative methods, narrative research emphasizes the participants' voices, with minimal interference from the researcher (Adhikari, 2021). This method is especially valuable when working with marginalized groups, as it offers a platform for participants to tell their stories in their own words (Barker, 2021).

The researcher’s role in narrative research is reflexive, creating space for participants to share their experiences without imposing interpretations (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011). While the researcher may ask guiding questions to draw out contextual factors such as political or social influences, they must ensure that the participants’ stories remain authentic and undistorted (McDermott et al., 2021). This approach allows participants to shape their narratives, attributing their meaning to their

experiences. This contrasts with other research methods, where the researcher plays a more dominant role in interpreting the data. Narrative research, in contrast, centers the participants' interpretations, making it an ethical and empowering approach, particularly with marginalized communities.

By gathering a range of narratives from diverse LGBTQ+ fathers across Georgia, I sought to identify common patterns, such as challenges and support systems, that characterize the state's adoption landscape. These stories provided a window into how legal, policy, and social frameworks shape the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ families, offering insights into areas where policy reform may be necessary. The narratives shared by participants shed light on the emotional and logistical complexities of the adoption process, such as long waiting periods, the financial burden of private adoptions, and instances of bias and discrimination. In utilizing narrative research, this study captured these nuanced experiences, offering a deeper understanding of the adoption journey in Georgia and beyond.

Through the lens of the NPF, I examined how participant stories reflect broader policy debates. NPF explores how narratives shape public opinion and influence policy decisions (see Crow & Jones, 2018b). By analyzing participant stories through this framework, this study identified the policies that facilitated and those that hindered LGBTQ+ family formation, as well as how these narratives might shape future policy reform. Overall, narrative research empowered participants by allowing them to control how their stories are told. This method provided a respectful and ethical platform for

sharing lived experiences, ensuring that LGBTQ+ fathers can shape the discourse on adoption and family-building policies.

Role of the Researcher

In this study, I served as both an observer and the primary instrument for capturing and analyzing data. I took steps to minimize the influence of my thoughts and experiences on participant responses (see Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). I managed key data collection functions, including recruiting participants, securing informed consent, and guiding the data collection process. This process involved posing questions to participants and probing to encourage deeper responses. Throughout this process, I worked to remain present but ensure that my presence did not overshadow the participants. While I had opinions about the information participants shared, I limited my self-disclosure and refrained from offering opinions that could discourage participants from sharing their authentic responses. Instead, I bracketed my biases and differing viewpoints regarding shared information (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Transparency was a key component of my approach. I clearly outlined the research goals, desired outcomes, methods, and limitations. I also acknowledged my experience adopting a child through private adoption and serving as a foster parent in Georgia (see Braun & Clarke, 2019). Additionally, I emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any point. Participants were informed that the project's purpose was to capture stories from LGBTQ+ fathers who successfully navigated the Georgia adoption process and were willing to share their experiences. They were also told that their responses supported the development of

dissertation, presentations, or publications that provide insights into LGBTQ+ adoption in Georgia. Clear language, free of jargon, enhanced participant comprehension and understanding. By modeling transparency, I sought to build trust with participants, encouraging them to be more open in sharing their adoption experiences. Transparency helped me build confidence in me and the study results by providing readers with additional context to interpret and engage with the findings. For future researchers interested in building on the outcomes of this study, transparency provided a foundation to replicate the study or make adjustments to extend its scope (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

I recruited a diverse group of participants for this study. Participants had no prior relationship with me. To ensure objectivity, I actively recruited individuals outside of my immediate network, minimizing any potential influence on their responses. In the rare instances where a participant was previously acquainted with me, the nature of the prior connection was disclosed, and steps were taken to encourage open and authentic participation (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I also proactively disclosed any potential conflicts of interest as part of the institutional review board (IRB) process and sought recommendations on how to mitigate their impact on the research outcomes.

I further acknowledged and addressed the potential for an asymmetrical power dynamic between myself and the participants. Such dynamics could have negatively affect the study by making participants hesitant to share their perspectives, viewing me as more knowledgeable or authoritative (see Ali & Brooks, 2021; Owen & Rivett, 2020). To create a safe and open space where participants felt comfortable and empowered to share

their stories, I started each conversation by explaining the purpose of the study, my connection to it, how the collected information will be used, and the measures taken to safeguard participant identities, such as using pseudonyms and ensuring no identifying information is shared. I also provided clear information on what participants could expect during the conversation, including creating space for them to respond fully to the questions with minimal interruptions. Participants were also informed that I may ask follow-up questions if a topic needed further exploration (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Although every effort was made to follow all guidelines, I acknowledge that some degree of bias was inevitable in any research study. Recognizing and addressing these biases openly helped to build trust with participants and enhanced the credibility of the study's findings. For example, by acknowledging that I previously adopted a child through the private adoption system and am a current foster parent in Georgia, participants were able to better understand my connection to the research topic and possible motivations for conducting it (see Adams & Holman Jones, 2011; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Several efforts were made to minimize my bias. First, the study was reviewed and approved by the university's IRB to ensure I obtained the necessary training and had a solid protocol for safeguarding all research participants. Next, I provided a detailed explanation of the study and obtained informed consent prior to participant involvement in the study. Finally, I used peer debriefing to identify any measures that could have been implemented to minimize bias.

Methodology

In the methodology section, I provide a comprehensive overview of the research design, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques that I used to address the two research questions of this study. The primary goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers and success factors that shaped the adoption journeys of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia. Additionally, I sought to explore the policies that participants identify as having the most significant impact on their adoption experiences. The narrative research design is particularly well-suited for this study because it centers the voices of historically marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ fathers, offering them a platform to share their stories and interpret the meanings behind those stories. In this section, I will provide further details on the research design, participant recruitment and selection, data collection instruments, and data analysis process. I followed strict ethical guidelines, which will be discussed in detail.

The issue of LGBTQ+ adoption is underrepresented in the public policy literature, and employing a narrative approach contributes to this body of knowledge by highlighting the personal experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers and allowing them to express their stories in their own words. This section includes an in-depth examination of the research design, participant selection, data collection, instrumentation, data analysis, ethical considerations, and strategies to ensure trustworthiness.

Participant Selection Logic

This study consisted of a diverse population of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia who successfully adopted a child through either private adoption or the state foster care

program. The term LGBTQ+ is intended to be inclusive of the broad spectrum of how participants self-identify, including gay, transgender, bisexual, and queer individuals. This expansive definition allowed me to capture diverse perspectives and rich narrative data detailing how participants navigated the state adoption system.

To be included in this study, participants must have successfully completed the adoption process for at least one child, from being matched with a birth mother to receiving final parental rights through the court. While it is widely recognized that there are multiple pathways through which aspiring fathers can successfully adopt, this study focused on those who completed adoptions either directly working with a private agency, attorney, or through the foster care program. Those who adopted through an international program were not eligible to participate in this study since a large portion of their adoption journey happened outside of Georgia.

I used a hybrid sampling strategy consisting of purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is a widely used qualitative data-gathering technique in which I intentionally targeted and recruited participants based on specific characteristics or qualities (Campbell, 2020; Shaheen, 2019). Using this approach, I ensured that the information gathered focused on the research questions and that the responses help address the key issues. This method involved selecting participants who identified as LGBTQ+ fathers living in Georgia and who have successfully adopted a child through foster care or private adoption. Through this approach, I sought to recruit participants who provided firsthand accounts of their adoption experiences in Georgia.

I began the snowball sampling approach by recruiting an initial set of participants, who I then asked to help identify additional participants until the recruitment target was met or saturation was reached, when no new ideas emerged during the interviews. This approach has proven effective in recruiting hard-to-reach populations, especially those underrepresented in research (Chambers et al., 2020; Leighton et al., 2021; Saviet & Ahmann, 2022). Unlike blanket outreach methods, snowball sampling relies on relationships between individuals. I recruited participants by leveraging existing relationship networks to identify the first set of participants. I then encouraged them to refer others who met the study's inclusion criteria. This process continued until I met the recruitment goals (Chambers et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Combining both purposive and snowball sampling allowed me to draw on the best of both approaches (Campbell, 2020; Chambers et al., 2020). The broader outreach strategy characteristic of purposive sampling and the relationship-centered approach of snowball sampling were combined to help me meet my recruitment goals. In so doing, I gathered detailed and rich data, enhancing the study's outcome. This increased the chances of addressing the research objectives because the information collected included nuanced details, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon.

The final study sample was both relevant and well-rounded. For example, Georgia is a large, diverse state with a significant metropolitan area around Atlanta and small rural counties. I did not have deep relationships that allowed me to recruit participants from all regions of the state, but by using snowball sampling, I started with established relationships and branched out through referrals to other areas (Leighton et al., 2021).

Combining both approaches brought operational efficiency and helped me recruit participants in a reasonable amount of time.

To be eligible for participation in this study, participants must reside in Georgia and successfully adopt a child through either the foster care system or private adoption. This criterion ensured that I remained focused on the study's objectives of exploring the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia and not drift into unrelated areas. It was also important that participants had their adoption cases fully adjudicated, meaning the birth parents' rights had been terminated, and a judge had granted them full adoptive rights as the legally recognized parent of the child. This criterion ensured the inclusion of participants who could speak to the entire adoption process, including the policies and practices that positively or adversely impacted their experiences. These insights provided a foundation for developing policy recommendations to improve the state adoption process, enhance access, and better support outcomes for LGBTQ+ fathers.

In addition to residing in Georgia, I sought to achieve greater geographic diversity by including participants from multiple areas of the state, spanning both rural and urban regions. Similarly, diverse adoption pathways were represented, involving individuals who adopted through foster care and those who utilized private adoption agencies and attorneys. I anticipated that participants' adoption experiences would vary, and including fathers who became parents through different pathways added another dimension to the study. Efforts were also made to approach participants from various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds to ensure a diverse sample. Lastly, participation in this study was voluntary, and only those who willingly consented were included.

Ensuring that only participants who met the inclusion criteria were enrolled in the study was of paramount importance. I developed and used a screening questionnaire to verify that potential participants met the study's inclusion criteria. The questionnaire included questions about the participant's adoption pathway, racial identity, geographic location, and willingness to participate. Participants were also required to confirm that they had legally completed the adoption process and had been granted full adoptive rights for their child. This approach, which has been used in past studies, helped maintain focus on the study's objectives and ensured the relevance of the participants' experiences. (Busetto et al., 2020; Hamilton & Finley, 2019).

To balance this study's desired breadth and depth, I sought to recruit 7-10 participants, consistent with narrative research methodology (Adhikari, 2021; Shaheen, 2019). Given the two research questions that guided this study, I anticipated that the target number of participants would provide the rich, detailed narratives needed to address these questions. This number was also manageable and could be recruited within a reasonable timeframe, enabling the study to be completed efficiently. I expected this target number to facilitate data saturation, where no new ideas or themes emerged that other participants had not previously shared. Reaching saturation confirmed that the study achieved the desired depth and captured nuanced information that contributed to meaningful findings, enhancing understanding of the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia (Busetto et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Shaheen, 2019). Additionally, this target number was expected to achieve geographic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity, offering a comprehensive view of how the state's landscape

influenced the adoption experiences of aspiring fathers. Given the available resources, this target was also feasible to recruit and manage, ensuring the study remained practical and focused.

This study was conducted to satisfy the requirements of my dissertation, to provide a robust and comprehensive project within the limitations of time and resources. The target number of participants was manageable while providing rich and comprehensive data to satisfactorily address the research questions and study goals. Recruiting 7-10 participants will provide the data needed to conduct a comprehensive thematic analysis to evaluate the differences and similarities across the demographic criteria of this study (Shaheen, 2019). I anticipated that the study's findings would contribute to the current body of literature in public policy and related fields, enhancing our understanding of LGBTQ+ adoption experiences. These findings were also anticipated to spur additional research that challenges and expands the conclusions of this study, further enhancing its impact.

I identified and recruited participants from a variety of sources, employing both purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Social media groups and forums served as valuable spaces where LGBTQ+ fathers build community by sharing their stories, family-building approaches, and offering social and emotional support to current and aspiring fathers. I tapped into these networks to identify and recruit participants for the study. This included contacting the administrators of these groups to secure permission to share study materials with potential participants who met the study criteria. Additionally, I contacted state LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations focused on advancing policies that support

LGBTQ+ adoption. I contacted these organizations' leaders to gain permission to share study details and materials to identify eligible participants. Furthermore, I reached out to leaders of private adoption agencies and the state foster care program to facilitate the identification and recruitment of participants.

Once participants were identified, I made initial contact using the most appropriate means for each person. I shared details about the study and ensured the participant met the study's inclusion criteria (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Those who met the requirements receive a more detailed explanation of the study and the informed consent form approved by the IRB. I emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary throughout their involvement and reminded them of the steps I took to safeguard their information. For example, interview recordings were stored in a password-protected file, and participants' names or other identifying details were not released.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument for this study. This method, commonly used in qualitative research, offered a structured framework to guide participants while also allowing flexibility for them to introduce additional concepts and ideas that might not have been initially anticipated. (Alvesson, 2018; Galletta, 2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This approach is highly valued for its ability to generate rich, detailed narrative data and uncover nuanced insights that might not emerge from fully structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews encourage natural, free-flowing conversations that align with human communication patterns,

fostering a comfortable environment where participants feel at ease and more willing to share their perspectives openly. Establishing rapport in this manner is essential for eliciting honest and detailed responses, ensuring the depth and authenticity of the data collected (Alvesson, 2018; DeJonckheere, 2019).

The semi-structured interview guide (See Appendix A) will be adopted from a previously published study focused on LGBTQ+ adoption experiences (Levitt et al., 2020a). Permission was requested and granted to use and modify the guide for this study. Since the guide had been validated through prior research, it provided a reliable framework to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. The questions were carefully designed to align with the two research questions of this study, incorporating both closed-ended and open-ended formats to capture concrete answers and exploratory responses. Probes were also used to delve deeper into relevant concepts that may not have been fully developed in participants' initial responses, ensuring the collection of nuanced details essential for thorough data analysis (DeJonckheere, 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Additionally, demographic questions were incorporated into the interview guide to collect background information about the research participants, including age, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, geographic location, family structure, and adoption pathway (see Appendix A). This information provided a basis for understanding the representativeness of the research sample and enabled comparisons between different groups of participants. For example, it allowed for an analysis of the experiences of participants living in urban versus rural areas or those who adopted through private

agencies versus the state foster care program. Furthermore, this demographic data was instrumental in monitoring and achieving the desired diversity in participant recruitment.

Adopting a research instrument previously published in peer-reviewed studies helped to establish content validity, ensuring alignment with best practice guidelines for developing semi-structured interview guides (Levitt et al., 2020b; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldana, 2021) . Since the instrument had already been validated in prior research, additional expert feedback was unnecessary. The construct under study, the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia, remained consistent with the instrument's original design. The adapted instrument explicitly focused on private agency and state foster care adoptions and intentionally excluded international adoptions to maintain a focus on the state policy context.

Although the instrument had been published and validated, I conducted a critical review of the existing literature to ensure the interview guide was tailored to this study's specific research questions. After this review, the final instrument was submitted to the IRB for approval to confirm compliance with the institution's research guidelines before being administered to participants (Busetto et al., 2020; Hamilton & Finley, 2019).

Data Collection

I collected data from a diverse group of LGBTQ+ fathers who had successfully adopted a child in Georgia through the state foster care program, private agencies, or adoption attorneys. All participants had completed the adoption process, with their cases fully adjudicated and a judge conferring full parental rights to the child. To identify and recruit research participants, I reached out to social media groups, leaders in the state

foster care program, private agencies, and used direct referrals. Advocacy organizations supporting LGBTQ+ families were also engaged and invited to assist in identifying and recruiting participants (Campbell, 2020; Leighton et al., 2021; Shaheen, 2019). I was solely responsible for all data collection activities, including outreach to organizations and participant recruitment.

I personally administered the research instruments and gathered observational data during the interviews to facilitate data collection. Each participant was interviewed individually in a single session. Although follow-up sessions were not anticipated, they were arranged when necessary, such as in cases of disruptions or if all items could not be covered in one sitting. Interviews lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, beginning with a demographic questionnaire that took around 15 minutes. Following this, a semi-structured interview guide was used to direct the conversation. All interviews were recorded using audio software, which supported the data analysis process by allowing me to review verbal and nonverbal cues and note contextual details about the interview setting. An accessible platform was utilized to ensure participation from individuals across the state, particularly in cases where travel was not feasible (Galletta, 2017).

To expedite the recruitment of the target number of research participants, I employed both purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Using purposive sampling, I identified and recruited an initial group of participants (Campbell, 2020). Subsequently, through snowball sampling, I asked this initial group to refer others who met the study's inclusion criteria (Chambers et al., 2020). Flexible interview times were offered to accommodate participants' schedules. Before enrollment in the study, all participants

provided written informed consent and were given the opportunity to ask any clarifying questions about the study. This included an explanation of the steps taken to safeguard their data and how the data would be used to support research and scholarship (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

At the end of the interview, I debriefed participants and provided them with additional opportunities to ask follow-up questions or share feedback about their experiences. I also reminded them of the safety procedures in place to protect the confidentiality of their data. Additionally, participants were given the study's inclusion criteria and encouraged to refer other eligible individuals who might be interested in participating in the study. (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Data Analysis Plan

I gathered qualitative data through semi-structured interviews to address the study's two research questions: exploring the barriers and success factors LGBTQ+ fathers encountered during their adoption journey and identifying the policies and regulations that most influenced their experiences. The semi-structured interview method allowed participants to share detailed and in-depth accounts of their adoption experiences. This approach provided flexibility, enabling participants to highlight the aspects of their journey most relevant to their unique context (Bamberg, 2020; Crow & Jones, 2018a). Narratives were particularly valuable because they offered deep insights into personal experiences, allowing participants to express their emotions and reflect on the barriers and success factors they encountered.

Narratives also provided essential context by illustrating how events were shaped by social, regulatory, and economic factors within the state (Bamberg, 2020; Crow & Jones, 2018a). For example, some adoption agencies, while affiliated with religious institutions, did not explicitly exclude LGBTQ+ families but featured only heterosexual couples in their marketing materials. Aspiring fathers shared how they navigated this critical step of identifying an agency they felt would fairly represent them in their efforts to grow their families. Narrative data further supported thematic analysis, which was crucial for identifying themes and patterns that addressed both research questions. This data captured the complex nature of LGBTQ+ adoption in Georgia, where barriers often arose from interconnected factors such as discrimination, stigma, policy, and financial constraints. By documenting these narratives, the study was able to explore these complexities thoroughly (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Once all data was collected, reviewed, and organized, I used thematic coding to analyze it. This approach enabled me to identify and report themes that emerged from the participants' narratives. Thematic coding was particularly well-suited for this study as it helped condense a large volume of text into a more manageable format, highlighting key patterns and themes that aligned with the research questions. By focusing on themes rather than mere descriptive summaries, this method provided deeper insights into how LGBTQ+ fathers navigated the adoption process in Georgia and the policies that influenced their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The first step of thematic coding involved carefully reviewing the text with minimal distractions. I located sections of the narrative that addressed specific aspects of

the adoption journey, such as decisions around choosing a private agency or foster care and assigned codes to these sections. For instance, some texts discussing the decision-making process for adoption pathways were labeled as “adoption options” or “family-building strategies.” These codes were instrumental in capturing the participants’ voices and providing an initial understanding of the patterns and themes emerging from the data.

Once the data was coded, I identified recurring themes by examining the connections between codes. These themes provided deeper insights into the patterns emerging from the data. For instance, within the code “adoption options,” themes such as “affordability” or “discrimination” emerged, highlighting common challenges LGBTQ+ fathers faced during their adoption journey. This thematic analysis allowed me to move beyond the surface of participants’ narratives, uncovering broader meanings and implications of their experiences (Crow & Jones, 2018a).

Through this process, I identified themes related to the barriers and success factors described by participants and the policies and regulations they believed most influenced their adoption journey. Thematic coding enabled me to connect these personal experiences to the broader state policy landscape, shedding light on areas where reform might be necessary.

Delve was used to manage the data, assisting with generating codes and identifying themes. After completing all interviews, I transcribed and refined the transcripts before uploading them into Delve. Observation notes and demographic data were also stored in the software. Any data that did not fit established patterns was treated as a discrepant case. These instances were documented, and their context was explored to

gain a deeper understanding. Discrepant cases were addressed in the study results, as they offered potential areas for further research or highlighted exceptions that provided insight into unique aspects of the adoption journey (Saldana, 2021).

Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility of my study, I focused on ethically and accurately capturing and presenting the perspectives of my research participants (Bourke, 2014). Trustworthiness also encompasses the transferability, dependability, credibility, and confirmability of the research findings. To ensure credibility, I prioritized transparency by providing detailed accounts of how each step of the study was conducted, including the factors that influenced my decisions, particularly those that significantly impacted the study's outcomes and conclusions (Stahl & King, 2020). Transparency was essential in achieving one of the study's desired outcomes: inspiring curiosity and interest that encourages future research to confirm or expand upon these findings. By offering a clear view of the research process and the decisions guiding it, I strengthened the trustworthiness of this research project.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research refers to accurately representing participants' ideas and ensuring the findings genuinely reflect their shared perspectives and experiences. The research is deemed credible when readers perceive the findings as believable and trustworthy. To enhance the credibility of this study, prolonged engagement with participants was prioritized (Adler, 2022; Byram, 2022). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, providing sufficient time to cover prepared topics

while allowing participants to offer substantive answers without feeling rushed. The interview guide used for these conversations was developed following best practices informed by decades of scholarship on designing and conducting research interviews (DeJonckheere, 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Stahl & King, 2020). Before submitting the guide to the IRB and using it in the study, feedback was sought from research design experts, and revisions were made to streamline the guide. Non-essential questions were removed to focus on topics critical to answering the two research questions, while also leaving room for unstructured dialogue to explore participants' experiences deeply.

Credibility was further enhanced during the data analysis phase by adhering to guidelines for persistent engagement. Ample time was dedicated to understanding the broader context surrounding each code and theme (Hamilton & Finley, 2019). Peer debriefing sessions were conducted to review the research process and discuss emerging findings, with feedback incorporated to refine the analysis and ensure the accurate interpretation of participant narratives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).These strategies collectively ensured that the study findings authentically represented participants' experiences and upheld the highest standards of credibility in qualitative research.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the applicability of research findings to other contexts beyond the specific setting in which the study was conducted (Awasthy, 2019). To enhance the transferability of this study's findings, I provided a thick description of the findings, the participants engaged, and the research context. Detailed context was also given for the themes identified in the study, offering readers additional insights to

improve the relevance and applicability of the findings (Daly et al., 2020; Elliott & Timulak, 2021). A hybrid sampling technique was employed, combining purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Purposive sampling, in particular, has been noted as a method for improving transferability by ensuring the recruitment of participants with diverse but direct insights into the research questions (Campbell, 2020; Kalu, 2019). Providing meaningful context for the findings enhances the study's transferability, improving their relevance and utility (Campbell, 2020; Kalu, 2019). This approach enhanced their relevance and utility for broader applications (Busetto et al., 2020)by providing a meaningful context for the findings.

Additionally, I conducted a comparative analysis, linking the study's findings to other scholarly works to further improve transferability (Cilesiz & Greckhamer, 2020). For instance, while limited past studies have specifically examined the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers, this study connected findings from Georgia with existing results in the broader body of scholarly literature, allowing readers to draw meaningful parallels and contextualize the insights. Together, these strategies strengthened the transferability of the findings, ensuring their applicability to other settings and informing future research and practice.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of research findings, as well as the overall study design and approach. Research is considered dependable when the process is well-documented, allowing readers to understand the decisions made and the rationale behind them clearly (Awasthy, 2019; Byram, 2022) . Dependability also

requires a logical and well-structured research framework that adheres to guidance from the literature (Adler, 2022). To enhance dependability in this study, I maintained an audit trail that included all study records, such as copies of study instruments, data collection materials, and a detailed summary of decisions made during the research process, especially in cases where modifications to the research protocol were necessary (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Furthermore, I sought an external review from a colleague not involved in the study to provide critical feedback on the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis. This external input offered an additional layer of scrutiny, ensuring the research adhered to established standards of rigor and reliability. These measures collectively strengthened the dependability of the study, ensuring that its findings and processes were consistent, transparent, and grounded in sound research practices.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which research findings are objective, neutral, and free of bias, ensuring they reflect the perspectives of the research participants rather than the researcher's personal biases (Hayashi et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). o enhance confirmability in this study, I documented the data collection process and detailed the guidelines followed to generate codes and themes. Along with cataloging the themes, I provided context for their emergence and explained how they were developed and refined during the analysis process.

To further strengthen confirmability, I sought peer review from an expert researcher with experience in the chosen research design and methodology. The research

protocol, including study instruments, coding structure, and thematic analysis, was presented to this expert to solicit constructive feedback. This feedback was reviewed and incorporated to ensure the findings were rooted in the data and free from undue bias.

Additionally, I practiced reflexivity throughout the research process by maintaining a heightened awareness of my own biases and proactively developing strategies to mitigate their influence on the study's outcomes. Reflexive journaling was used to document thoughts, potential biases, and decisions made during data collection and analysis, promoting transparency and critical self-reflection. These measures collectively ensured that the study's findings accurately represented participants' perspectives and adhered to the highest standards of confirmability in qualitative research.

Ethical Procedures

Before initiating data collection, I sought and obtained approval from the IRB. As part of this process, I provided the IRB with a detailed overview of the project, including final copies of all study instruments and materials. This step included a description of the known risks and benefits to participants along with a plan to mitigate these risks. A comprehensive informed consent document was submitted to the IRB as part of the protocol review. This document included a detailed description of the study, its purpose, how results would be used, the associated risks and benefits, and a reminder that participation was entirely voluntary. The IRB requested adjustments to the research protocol and related instruments, which I promptly addressed until final approval was

granted. Additionally, as part of purposive sampling, I obtained permission from institutions that serve and support LGBTQ+ adoptive fathers in Georgia.

I also secured permission from moderators of online forums and support groups where LGBTQ+ fathers gather to recruit study participants. All study materials were created with clarity and transparency, ensuring that all relevant details, including the purpose, expectations, and duration of the study, were clearly communicated to potential participants. Efforts were made to recruit diverse participants through equitable recruitment practices while engaging multiple sources. Participants were reminded at key points throughout the study that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. All participants enrolled in the study were required to complete a written informed consent form before participation. These signed forms were securely stored in a password-protected file on my computer.

I safeguarded participants' privacy and confidentiality throughout the study to uphold the highest ethical standards. Each interview was conducted individually and recorded using audio software. Participants were encouraged to join the interviews from quiet, private spaces where they felt comfortable sharing openly. No sensitive questions outside the scope of the research were asked, and participants were free to skip any questions they found too personal. Instances of declined responses were noted in the transcripts (DeJonckheere, 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Confidentiality was maintained by replacing real names with pseudonyms and removing all identifying information from the data before coding. Any identifying information was stored separately in a password-protected file on my computer. Access to the data was restricted to myself, my advisor,

and any necessary IRB members. Additionally, data was aggregated before dissemination to further protect participants' identities (Hayashi et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Summary

This chapter outlined the research design and methodology used to address the study's two research questions, which explore the barriers, success factors, and policies impacting the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia. The findings of this study aim to identify policies that facilitate adoption for this group while highlighting areas where reforms may be needed. A narrative research design was employed, incorporating thematic analysis to generate themes from participants' narratives. This approach was selected because prior studies have demonstrated its effectiveness in producing rich, descriptive data that aligns with the research questions (Bamberg, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2019; Elliott & Timulak, 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The study involved 9 participants: a sample size consistent with narrative research methodology. Participants were required to have completed the adoption process in Georgia through the state foster care program, a private agency, or an attorney. International adoptions were excluded to focus on the state's policies. Upon enrollment, all participants' cases were fully adjudicated, meaning they had been granted full parental rights by a judge. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method for data collection, allowing participants to share detailed and in-depth accounts of their adoption experiences. This flexible approach enabled participants to emphasize aspects of their journey that were most relevant to their unique contexts. The interview guide was

adapted from a previously validated study(Levitt et al., 2020a) to ensure alignment with the study's objectives.

Participants were recruited from organizations serving the LGBTQ+ community, online social media groups, and referrals from enrolled participants. Thematic coding was used to analyze the data, identifying patterns and key themes within participants' narratives. Strategies such as prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, thick descriptions, audit trails, and reflexivity were implemented(Adler, 2022)to ensure trustworthiness. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including submitting the research protocol to the IRB and obtaining approval before data collection.

In Chapter 4, the research findings will be presented. These results will be grounded in the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), focusing on core elements such as setting, character, plot, and moral of the story. The chapter will explore how participants' narratives illuminate the policy environment in Georgia and how their experiences contribute to advocacy for policy changes. A comparative analysis will connect participants' personal narratives with existing policy narratives in the state, highlighting how LGBTQ+ fathers use their stories to influence public opinion and build support for inclusive adoption policies. Additionally, the study will identify policies participants believe hindered or facilitated their adoption journeys, providing insights into areas where reform is needed. The codes and themes derived from this study will be interpreted through the NPF, linking individual experiences to the broader policy context and fostering a deeper understanding of how narratives shape adoption policies and practices.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the barriers and success factors faced by LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia as they navigated the adoption process, along with the influence of public policy and administration on their parenting pathways. Despite significant advancements following the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, which legalized same-sex marriage, the political and policy environment in Georgia remained only partially supportive of LGBTQ+ fatherhood. The entrenched belief that children thrived best in male-female households continued to negatively impact the experiences of aspiring LGBTQ+ fathers (Alday-Mondaca & Lay-Lisboa, 2021; Farr & Vázquez, 2020) . This bias was evident both explicitly in direct interactions and implicitly through the scarcity of private adoption matches with available children in state programs.

The following two research questions were explored and addressed using the NPF as the conceptual framework and a narrative research design to guide the processes of data collection, analysis, and presentation of results. This approach facilitated a deep exploration of participants' lived experiences, ensuring their stories were central to understanding the barriers, successes, and policy impacts shaping their adoption journeys.

RQ1: What are the barriers or success factors experienced by LGBTQ+- fathers in Georgia during the adoption process?

RQ2: What federal, state, or local policies or regulations do LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia identify as impacting their adoption journeys?

This chapter begins with a description of the research setting in Georgia, which serves as the backdrop for understanding the experiences of prospective LGBTQ+ fathers navigating the state's adoption landscape. Following this, demographic details about each participant are provided to give greater context for the results presented later in the chapter. A summary of the data collection process is included, detailing the number of participants, the duration of interviews and conversations, the methods used to record and store information, and any unusual circumstances that arose during this process. The chapter then transitions into the data analysis section, which outlines the selected techniques and their application in analyzing the recorded and transcribed interviews. The coding process, from initial codes to categories and ultimately themes, is described in substantial detail.

Additionally, a discussion on evidence of trustworthiness is presented, addressing the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure the rigor of the research. The results section shares key findings related to the two research questions, accompanied by an analysis framed by the NPF. The findings are presented both as a narrative overview and in tables to visually represent the results. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings that directly support the research questions, followed by a transition to Chapter 5, where a more in-depth analysis and interpretation of the research findings will be provided.

Study Setting

The setting for this study was Georgia, a state with a complex historical and sociopolitical backdrop that significantly shaped the experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers

navigating the adoption process. Georgia has a storied history of resisting progressive social reforms, including desegregation and inclusivity measures, making it an important context for examining the intersection of LGBTQ+ rights and adoption policies (Bromley, 2021). Despite the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, which legalized same-sex marriage and removed many barriers to family building for LGBTQ+ couples, adoption processes remain largely governed at the state and county levels. This localized decision-making allows individual biases and institutional practices to influence adoption outcomes, underscoring the relevance of studying this issue within Georgia's diverse yet politically conservative setting.

For example, even after the *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling, some county clerks nationwide refused to conduct same-sex marriage ceremonies, with a few clerks opting for jail time rather than compliance (Frank & Polikoff, 2019; The Williams Institute, 2020). Similar biases may manifest in adoption practices where officials, while not explicitly denying applications, can hinder same-sex couples through tactics such as slow-walking applications, posing intrusive questions during home studies, or creating an unwelcoming environment. Private adoption agencies and attorneys also play a crucial role, with many agencies affiliated with religious institutions that implicitly discourage LGBTQ+ applicants through marketing materials and imagery that exclusively feature heterosexual, white families. These factors collectively shape the landscape for LGBTQ+ adoption in Georgia, making it a critical setting for this study.

Georgia's geographic and demographic diversity also made it an ideal site for this research. While much of the state remains rural and politically conservative, metropolitan

cities of Atlanta and Savannah have emerged as growing hubs for the LGBTQ+ community. Atlanta has become a political and economic powerhouse, significantly influencing state and national politics. The metro area was instrumental in historic electoral outcomes, such as the 2020 elections that brought the first Black and Jewish U.S. Senators from Georgia to office (Bromley, 2021; Capello, 2021). These metropolitan areas provide relative safety and a strong sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ residents, juxtaposed against the broader conservative backdrop of the state. This duality, living in a politically red state while finding refuge in progressive urban centers, adds complexity to the narratives of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia.

Despite Atlanta's growing influence, most counties in Georgia remain rural and are characterized by high levels of religious affiliation and church attendance (Moore et al., 2022). This dynamic creates a policy environment where LGBTQ+ individuals must navigate significant cultural and systemic barriers. These regional contrasts highlight the importance of studying the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers across diverse geographic settings within Georgia.

According to the 2020 Census, Georgia's population is racially diverse, comprising 50.1% White, 30.6% Black, 10.5% Hispanic or Latino, 4.5% Asian, 6.9% multiracial, and 5.2% from other racial backgrounds (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Women make up 51.3% of the population, while men account for 48.7%. The LGBTQ+ population is estimated at 425,000 individuals, or approximately 4.5% of the state's population, with roughly 27% of LGBTQ+ adults over 25 raising children. These figures position Georgia as the 8th most diverse state nationally and the 9th largest LGBTQ+

population. It ranks 18th in the number of LGBTQ+ individuals raising children. This demographic diversity enabled the study to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives within the LGBTQ+ father community (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

The adoption landscape in Georgia is shaped by various systemic, organizational, and political factors. While I primarily focused on the narratives of LGBTQ+ fathers, I also gained insights into private adoption agencies, attorneys, and the state foster care system, which served as primary pathways for participants to build their families. Private agencies often operate with a religious affiliation, introducing implicit biases that discourage LGBTQ+ applicants (Bromley, 2021). These agencies must maintain profitability, and their marketing strategies typically target heterosexual, cisgender families, further marginalizing LGBTQ+ individuals.

The study took place during a time of significant sociopolitical tension, marked by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the approach of the 2024 general election. The political climate was influenced by narratives and legislative actions that impacted LGBTQ+ adoption, both directly and indirectly. For instance, Georgia introduced Senate Bill 140 on February 9, 2023, which bans gender-affirming care for minors. This bill passed both the House and Senate before being signed into law by Governor Kemp on March 23, 2023 (Kassa & Merritt, 2023). Furthermore, Senate Bill 88, known as the “Parents and Children Protection Act of 2023” or the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, was introduced on February 2, 2023 (Vedder, 2024). Although it was read and referred to the Senate on February 6, 2023, it ultimately failed to progress further due to public backlash and threats of economic boycotts.

At the federal level, the “Stop Sexualization of Children Act” (H.R. 9197), introduced on October 18, 2022, aimed to prohibit federal funding for programs involving “sexually oriented material,” which is broadly defined to include gender identity and sexual orientation (Serafin, 2023). Critics contended that its vague language risked stigmatizing LGBTQ+ communities and limiting adoption services. Although the bill did not progress, it highlights the challenges LGBTQ+ individuals encounter in a polarized political climate.

Several systemic and personal factors likely influenced the study results. Systemic biases and discrimination remain prevalent, particularly within private adoption agencies and the public foster care system. Participants shared narratives of explicit and implicit bias during the adoption process, such as overly bureaucratic procedures, intrusive questioning, and delays in matching with birth mothers. Many reported frustrations with heteronormative language on adoption paperwork and the lack of cultural competence in hospitals during the birth and placement process.

Alongside systemic challenges, participants faced significant personal and emotional burdens during the adoption process. Many couples sought counseling to manage the pressures and conflicts that arose from the prolonged nature of the journey (Gess et al., 2024; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2018). Despite these obstacles, participants exhibited resilience and advocacy, often making considerable efforts to obtain resources and ensure their children’s well-being. These systemic and personal influences highlight the importance of exploring the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia. By

examining these narratives, this study emphasizes the necessity for policy and systemic reforms to establish a more equitable adoption process for LGBTQ+ families.

Demographics

In this section, I provide a comprehensive overview of the research participants, highlighting their diversity in age, race, marital status, number of children, and length of residency in Georgia. These demographic details are essential for understanding the context and dynamics that influence LGBTQ+ adoptive fathers' experiences and align with the study's goals of transferability and depth. The diversity of participants strengthens the study's findings by offering a broader perspective that may resonate with other communities sharing similar demographic conditions to Georgia.

As outlined in earlier chapters, achieving participant diversity was a crucial goal of this research. Diversity enhances the study's transferability, making the results applicable to other communities with similar social and political climates. Moreover, varied demographics provide a richer context for interpreting the findings (Jackman et al., 2024). For example, I investigated two primary research questions: the barriers and success factors affecting LGBTQ+ fathers' adoption journeys, and the influence of policies on their experiences. Demographics such as age and marital status offer insights into these findings. To illustrate the breadth of participant diversity, Table 1 presents key demographic characteristics, including age, marital status, and parental pathways. These factors help contextualize the two primary research questions explored in this study: the barriers and success factors affecting LGBTQ+ fathers' adoption journeys and the influence of policies on their experiences. For instance, older participants who faced

overt discrimination may highlight societal shifts that have made the adoption process more accessible to younger LGBTQ+ individuals. Similarly, differences between the experiences of single and married participants may underscore how social and financial support networks impact adoption outcomes.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Race	Sexual orientation	Marital status	Children	Years in Georgia
Marcus	38	African American	Gay	Married	2	5 years
Jamal	36	African American	Gay	Not Married	8	7 years
Malik	46	African American	Gay	Married	1	18 years
Peter	61	White	Gay	Married	3	38 years
David	49	White	Gay	Married	4	15 years
Jordan	32	African American	Gay	Married	1	8 years
Antonio	36	Hispanic	Gay	Married	1	36 years
Arjun	39	South Asian	Bisexual/Gay/Queer	Married	1	6 years
Andre	49	African American	Gay	Not Married	1	27 years

I aimed to recruit seven to ten participants, which aligns with narrative research methodology wherein the participant count ranges from one individual to more than five to ensure in-depth narrative capture. A total of nine participants were recruited, supporting the goal of achieving maximum variation sampling to gather diverse perspectives. Maximum variation sampling, as emphasized in methodological literature, ensures the inclusion of participants with diverse experiences and characteristics, enriching the research findings (Aguboshim, 2021; Bekele & Ago, 2022).

Participants ranged in age from 32 to 61 years old, reflecting a broad generational spectrum. All participants self-identified as LGBTQ+, with eight identifying as gay and one as bisexual/queer. This distribution aligns with expectations, as gay men often have greater visibility within the LGBTQ+ parenting community (Bekele & Ago, 2022).

The racial composition of participants showcased significant diversity, with five identifying as African American, two as White, one as South Asian, and one as Hispanic. This demographic distribution reflects Georgia's diversity and its concentration of LGBTQ+ families, particularly in metropolitan Atlanta. Metro Atlanta's progressive and inclusive environment, in contrast to rural areas, offers LGBTQ+ individuals a space to live openly and gain acceptance for their families. Additionally, recruitment efforts relying on purposive and snowball sampling methods contributed to this racial distribution. Many participants were sourced from online forums and community groups focused on LGBTQ+ parenting, highlighting the inclusivity of urban spaces.

Seven of the nine participants were married. This finding is consistent with longstanding practices in the adoption process, where agencies have historically shown bias against single applicants. Additionally, the financial and emotional demands of adoption often necessitate dual incomes and robust support networks, factors that married participants identified as crucial to their successful adoptions. For example, married participants reported relying on their spouses for emotional support during the stressful adoption process, which they attributed to their perseverance and eventual success.

Participants reported having between one and eight children, with the average number of children being two. The average age of participants' children was 7 years,

ranging from 1 year old to 24 years old. These figures underscore the varied stages of parenthood represented in the study, offering insights into the challenges and successes experienced across different parenting timelines.

The average length of residency in Georgia among participants was 17.78 years, ranging from 5 to 36 years. This longevity reflects participants' deep-rooted connections to the state, which shaped their adoption experiences. Georgia's unique political and social climate, marked by progressivism in urban areas and conservatism in rural regions, directly influenced participants' narratives.

The diversity among participants significantly enriched the research findings, revealing both shared and unique thematic threads. For instance, participants consistently reported high levels of stress during the adoption process, with married participants emphasizing the importance of spousal support. Single participants, on the other hand, highlighted the financial and social challenges of navigating adoption independently. Additionally, racial and cultural diversity brought nuanced perspectives to the findings. For example, African American participants described facing intersectional challenges related to both race and sexual orientation, which compounded the difficulties of adoption.

The broad age range of participants also provided valuable insights into generational differences in societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ families. Older participants recounted overt discrimination, while younger participants benefited from a more inclusive legal and social environment shaped by recent policy changes.

Data Collection

The purpose of this section is to detail the process used to collect data for this study, in which I explored the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with nine participants, providing detailed narrative accounts of their journeys navigating the adoption process in the state.

Data collection took place entirely online to accommodate participants' schedules and ensure convenience. This shift from the originally planned in-person and online data collection occurred before IRB approval and was helpful for privacy and accessibility. Georgia's large geographical area meant that in-person interviews would require extensive travel, potentially discouraging participation. Online semi-structured interviews allowed participants to join from locations of their choice, ensuring confidentiality and minimal disruptions.

Each participant engaged in a single interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The length of each interview depended on the depth and breadth of the narratives shared. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on topics they deemed important, contributing to the variation in interview length. After completing their interviews, participants were provided with a $25 Visa gift card as a token of appreciation.

Interviews were audio-recorded using secure software to ensure accurate capture of participant narratives. Transcriptions were prepared within 24–48 hours of each interview to maintain the fidelity of participants' accounts. Transcription software was used to expedite this process, but each I reviewed each transcript and edited while I listened to the recordings to ensure accuracy. Handwritten notes were taken during

interviews to document salient points and observations. Reflexive journaling followed each session, allowing the researcher to capture salient points, initial impressions, and areas for further exploration in subsequent interviews.

All recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer accessible only to me. Pseudonyms were used instead of participants' real names to protect their identities. This approach maintained the narrative flow of their accounts while adhering to ethical guidelines.

Data collection followed the protocol approved by the IRB. Participants received an informed consent document via email and were given opportunities to ask questions before providing their consent. All interviews adhered to strict ethical guidelines, including reminding participants at the start of each session that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants were also informed that they could skip any question they found uncomfortable.

Participants were recruited through online forums and public spaces where LGBTQ+ fathers gather for community and support. Recruitment proved challenging due to the high demand for this demographic's feedback in research and advocacy efforts. Persistence was crucial in following up with potential participants, ensuring they met inclusion criteria, and scheduling interviews. Some participants required multiple reminders or rescheduled their interviews due to family commitments. Despite these challenges, participants who joined the study were highly engaged, with some even wanting to continue discussions beyond the scheduled time.

Overall, data collection proceeded smoothly with minimal disruptions. There were no bandwidth or technical issues during the online interviews. One participant needed to pause the session briefly to attend to a child with special needs, but the interview resumed without complications. These minor adjustments did not interfere with the integrity of the study.

Data Analysis

In this section, I describe the process used to analyze the narrative data collected from nine participants to address the study's two research questions: (a) What barriers and success factors do LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia experience during the adoption process? and (b) What federal, state, or local policies and practices do LGBTQ+ fathers identify as influencing their adoption journeys? This study employed a narrative research design, which was particularly well-suited to examining participants' lived experiences through their detailed personal stories. Narrative research design provided a robust framework for capturing the richness and complexity of the participants' adoption journeys. Saldana's (2021) multicycle coding framework and the NPF were integral to the analysis, enabling a deep exploration of how participants' narratives intersected with the broader policy environment in Georgia (see Adhikari, 2021; Saldana, 2021; Schlaufer et al., 2022).

After conducting and transcribing interviews, I carefully reviewed each transcript to become intimately familiar with the data. This initial immersion was guided by Saldana's (2021) emphasis on thoroughly understanding the text before proceeding with coding. Transcripts were cross-checked against audio recordings to ensure accuracy, and

this process not only improved data fidelity but also deepened my understanding of the participants' experiences. The coding process began with first-cycle coding, which incorporated descriptive coding, In Vivo coding, values coding, and process coding. Descriptive coding summarized the primary topics discussed, while In Vivo coding captured participants' exact words, ensuring their voices were authentically represented. Values coding interpreted the underlying beliefs and attitudes expressed in participants' narratives, while process coding focused on actions participants described. For example, the code "Preference for Newborn Adoption" emerged from narratives emphasizing a desire for adopting newborns, and "Feeling Marginalized" was derived from participants' descriptions of systemic bias.

Following the first-cycle coding, second-cycle coding was conducted to identify patterns, establish categories, and synthesize overarching themes. Pattern coding grouped recurring codes, such as "Agency Resistance" and "Policy Delays," into categories like "Adoption Process Barriers." Axial coding further refined these categories by connecting related concepts, such as linking "Adoption Process Barriers" with "Systemic Pressures." Finally, thematic coding synthesized the data into four main themes: "Navigating Institutional and Policy Barriers," "Struggles with Post-Adoption Sustainability," "The Role of Advocacy in Securing Resources," and "LGBTQ+ Parenting and Social Perceptions." As recommended by Saldana, this iterative approach allowed for revisiting earlier stages of analysis to refine and validate findings, ensuring they accurately reflected participants' experiences.

The NPF provided an additional lens for analyzing participants' stories, positioning their narratives within Georgia's sociopolitical and policy contexts. Key elements of the NPF- setting, characters, plot, and moral- were instrumental in understanding how participants' experiences shaped and contributed to the broader adoption landscape (Kuenzler & Stauffer, 2023; Shanahan et al., 2018). The setting was Georgia, a state characterized by a mix of progressive urban centers and conservative rural areas, with Atlanta serving as a hub for LGBTQ+ communities. Participants often depicted themselves as heroes overcoming systemic barriers, while adoption agency staff and social workers fluctuated between supportive allies and obstructive figures. The plot centered on participants' adoption journeys, highlighting challenges such as bias, delays, and policy-driven hurdles. The moral of these narratives emphasized the need for systemic reforms to create a more equitable adoption process for LGBTQ+ families (see Crow & Jones, 2018a; Jones & McBeth, 2020).

Verification strategies were used to ensure the credibility of the findings. Reflexive journaling allowed me to capture initial impressions and reflect on biases during data analysis. Member checking involved sending summaries of transcripts to participants for validation, ensuring their experiences were accurately captured. For instance, one participant added details about an interaction with hospital staff during the adoption process after reviewing their transcript summary. Peer debriefing with a colleague experienced in qualitative research further enhanced the rigor of the analysis by validating the codes and themes.

Discrepant cases, those that deviated from common patterns, were incorporated into the analysis to provide a comprehensive view of participants' experiences. For example, one participant reported a seamless adoption journey, which contrasted with the challenges faced by others. These cases enriched the findings by highlighting variations in experiences and underscoring the complexity of adoption processes.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In this section, the focus shifts to the steps taken to address the study's trustworthiness, highlighting how the strategies presented in Chapter 3 were applied throughout data collection and analysis. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is critical for ensuring the findings accurately reflect the lived experiences and perspectives of participants while maintaining methodological rigor. It includes four essential components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each of these elements contributes to the study's integrity, providing confidence to readers and stakeholders that the research was conducted ethically, systematically, and transparently. By following a structured and reflective approach to trustworthiness, this study not only enhances the reliability of its findings but also reinforces their relevance and applicability to broader contexts, particularly in understanding the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the accuracy and authenticity of the findings, ensuring they genuinely reflect participants' perspectives and experiences. In this study, multiple strategies were employed to enhance credibility, ensuring that the

research findings authentically represented participants' lived realities and the context of their narratives. Credibility was achieved through the careful design and implementation of data collection, member checking, and reflective practices, which collectively strengthened the alignment between participants' accounts and the study's conclusions.

First, semi-structured interviews were employed to create a conversational and flexible environment that encouraged participants to share detailed narratives about their adoption journeys. The interviews, lasting between 60–90 minutes, allowed participants to explore their experiences comprehensively. Probing questions were strategically used to clarify and expand on key themes, ensuring that the full depth and breadth of participants' narratives were captured accurately. This approach not only encouraged participants to share freely but also helped uncover nuanced perspectives essential to addressing the research questions.

Second, member checking was used as a primary strategy to verify the accuracy of the collected data. After interviews were transcribed and summarized, participants received a copy of their transcripts or summaries for review. This process provided participants the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of their narratives, clarify their intended meanings, and contribute additional insights. This iterative exchange ensured the data authentically reflected participants' experiences and eliminated potential misinterpretations, bolstering the credibility of the study.

Third, reflective journaling was integrated throughout the research process as a mechanism to document immediate reactions, salient points, and emerging patterns after each interview. This practice allowed me to continuously reflect on the data, identify

potential biases, and ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts rather than influenced by preconceived notions. By maintaining an ongoing dialogue between the researcher's reflections and participants' narratives, reflective journaling enhanced the authenticity and rigor of the findings.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of this study can be applied to other contexts or populations (Jackman et al., 2024). By employing deliberate strategies to enhance the richness and applicability of the data, I ensured that the results could resonate with broader audiences while remaining relevant to the specific experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers navigating the adoption system in Georgia. The measures taken to bolster transferability focused on capturing diverse perspectives, facilitating detailed narratives, and using consistent yet flexible methods to gather contextualized data.

A key strategy for enhancing transferability was recruiting nine participants who represented maximum variation in demographics and life circumstances. The participant sample included five African Americans, two Whites, one South Asian, and one Hispanic individual, closely mirroring the racial diversity of Georgia, particularly in metropolitan Atlanta. Participants also varied in marital status, with seven being married and two single, and family sizes ranged from one to eight children. Additionally, the length of time participants had resided in Georgia varied from five to 36 years, with an average of 17.78 years. This diversity ensured a broad range of perspectives on the adoption system,

reflecting both shared experiences and unique challenges, thereby strengthening the study's applicability to other diverse settings.

Thick descriptions were another critical element used to enhance transferability. Participants were encouraged to provide detailed accounts of their adoption journeys, including the challenges, successes, and systemic influences they encountered. This emphasis on rich, descriptive data allowed for a nuanced portrayal of their lived experiences. By presenting participants' narratives with depth and context, the study enables readers to evaluate the resonance of its findings with their own contexts or beliefs, thereby facilitating a meaningful connection to other settings or populations.

The use of a semi-structured interview guide further contributed to the study's transferability. While the guide ensured consistency by addressing core topics aligned with the research questions, its flexible format allowed participants to explore issues they deemed most relevant to their adoption experiences. This balance between structure and adaptability resulted in comprehensive, contextualized data that speaks to both the specifics of Georgia's adoption system and broader themes relevant to LGBTQ+ adoption nationwide.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research ensures the research process is consistent, systematic, and transparent, allowing others to replicate or build upon the study with confidence (Adler, 2022; Byram, 2022). In this study, I implemented measures to establish a clear and reliable framework for data collection, analysis, and reporting, thereby highlighting the rigor of the research process. A systematic protocol, approved by

the IRB, guided all stages of this study, from recruitment to analysis. I maintained an audit trail to document each step, including recruitment logs, interview schedules, and member-checking activities. The recruitment logs captured key details such as the methods used to contact participants, the frequency and nature of follow-ups, and the outcomes of these engagements. This ensured a transparent and organized approach to participant selection, thereby enhancing the reliability of the process.

The semi-structured interview guide played a critical role in ensuring consistency during data collection. While the guide provided a standardized framework by outlining core questions to address the research objectives, it also allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to share unique insights and experiences. This balance ensured that the data collection process was both systematic and responsive to individual narratives.

For data analysis, Saldana's (2021) structured multicycle coding process was used. This approach added rigor by offering a step-by-step framework for identifying codes, organizing them into categories, and deriving overarching themes. In following these steps, the study ensured that its findings were grounded in the data and could be reliably traced back to the narratives shared by participants.

Confirmability

Confirmability emphasizes the need to ensure that research findings are based on participants' genuine experiences rather than influenced by the researcher's personal biases or assumptions (Adler, 2022; Byram, 2022). This study employed various intentional strategies to improve confirmability, offering a transparent and rigorous foundation for the findings presented.

One of the primary methods I employed was reflective journaling, an integral part of both data collection and analysis. After each interview, I recorded my immediate impressions, key points, and significant observations, allowing me to authentically capture participants' narratives. This reflective practice served as a tool for maintaining awareness of my own biases and ensuring they did not influence my interpretation of participants' stories. For instance, by consistently revisiting these journal entries during the analysis process, I was able to compare my initial reactions with the transcripts and the coding structure, confirming that my interpretations were firmly based on the data rather than my subjective assumptions.

Thick descriptions further strengthened confirmability by prioritizing detailed and contextualized representations of participants' experiences. This strategy involved incorporating verbatim quotes from participants to authentically highlight their voices and perspectives. For instance, when describing systemic barriers in the adoption process, I included direct quotes that vividly illustrated participants' encounters with institutional resistance, allowing readers to engage directly with their perspectives. These thick descriptions provided transparency, enabling readers to trace the findings back to the original narratives and assess their alignment with the study's interpretations.

An audit trail provided greater transparency and rigor. This comprehensive documentation encompassed every stage of the research process, including recruitment methods, interview schedules, member-checking activities, and the coding process. By maintaining this detailed record, I ensured that my findings could be traced back to the original data with clarity and precision. The audit trail also fostered an organized

approach to data management, enabling iterative review and refinement during the coding and analysis phases.

Moreover, following the research protocol approved by the IRB strengthened the study's confirmability. By closely adhering to the established protocol, I ensured that the research process remained aligned with its initial objectives and avoided deviations that could compromise the integrity of the findings. This adherence was supported by structured tools, such as Saldana's (2021) multicycle coding process, which added rigor and systematization to the analysis, further grounding the findings in the data.

Study Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia, with a focus on how federal, state, and local policies, along with institutional practices, shaped their journeys. I aimed to identify the barriers, and success factors these fathers encountered, as well as the broader systemic influences that affected their ability to form and sustain their families. By amplifying the voices of LGBTQ+ adoptive fathers, this research seeks to provide insights into how policies and practices can become more inclusive and supportive of diverse family structures.

I employed a narrative research design, which is particularly well-suited for understanding individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they assign to their journeys. Through semi-structured interviews, participants shared detailed personal stories about their adoption processes, enabling the researcher to capture rich, nuanced data. This approach facilitated the identification of patterns and themes that illuminate the interplay between personal experiences and systemic factors.

The NPF was employed as the conceptual framework to address the research questions and structure the results. The NPF emphasizes the role of narratives in shaping policy processes, focusing on elements such as characters, plots, and moral arguments (Kuenzler & Stauffer, 2023). This framework guided my analysis by highlighting how participants' stories reflect broader policy dimensions and systemic challenges. Key elements of the NPF, including narrative structures, policy beliefs, and strategies, were used to organize and interpret the results, ensuring alignment with the study's purpose and research questions.

The findings are presented thematically in the following sections, linking participants' narratives to the research questions and the broader policy context. Themes such as barriers in the adoption process, the impact of marriage equality, and the role of institutional practices are explored in detail, illustrating how participants navigated systemic challenges and leveraged success factors to achieve their family-building goals.

Theme 1: Barriers to Adoption

Research Question 1 examined the barriers and success factors LGBTQ+ fathers encountered during the adoption process. Theme 1, barriers to adoption, highlights challenges such as discriminatory practices, inconsistent policies, and systemic inefficiencies within Georgia's adoption and foster care systems. The following section begins by presenting the findings that specifically address the systemic barriers participants encountered, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ fathers. These findings are organized into six subthemes: bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of transparency, systemic discrimination, heteronormative biases, lack

of resources and support, and the emotional and psychological toll. Each subtheme is supported by rich, detailed narratives and verbatim quotes from participants, ensuring their experiences are authentically conveyed. Table 2 presents an overview of the subthemes of Theme 1.

Table 2

Adoption Barriers

Subtheme	Description	Frequency of mentions	Emotional impact	Policy recommendations
Bureaucratic inefficiencies	Delays caused by turnover, lost paperwork, and inefficient processes within adoption agencies and DFCS.	High	Frustration, disappointment	Implement electronic systems to streamline paperwork and improve retention of caseworkers.
Lack of transparency	Difficulty accessing clear and consistent information about adoption policies and processes.	Moderate	Confusion, helplessness	Mandate transparency in adoption processes through standardized informational resources.
Systemic discrimination	Instances of overt and covert discrimination against LGBTQ+ families by agencies and officials.	High	Anger, exclusion	Enforce anti-discrimination laws and provide oversight for private agencies.
Heteronormative biases	Policies and practices favoring traditional family structures, often marginalizing LGBTQ+ parents.	Moderate	Alienation, marginalization	Revise forms and practices to recognize diverse family structures.
Lack of resources and support	Insufficient resources, such as financial aid or specialized support, for LGBTQ+ adoptive families.	Low	Financial stress, insecurity	Increase funding for adoption subsidies and accessible training programs.
Emotional and psychological toll	Emotional burden caused by systemic barriers, including frustration, anxiety, and exhaustion.	High	Exhaustion, resilience	Provide mental health resources and advocacy support for adoptive parents.

Subtheme 1: Bureaucratic Inefficiencies

One of the most pervasive challenges participants described was the deeply entrenched bureaucratic nature of the adoption system, which introduced delays, frustrations, and emotional strain into an already complex process. Participants frequently recounted inefficiencies such as prolonged waiting periods, high staff turnover, and duplicative administrative requirements, all of which compounded the difficulties of navigating the adoption journey. These systemic issues not only created logistical obstacles but also heightened participants' sense of uncertainty and vulnerability, often leaving them feeling unsupported and disheartened.

Delays in processing adoption applications emerged as a particularly frustrating barrier for participants, highlighting inefficiencies and systemic issues that significantly hindered their progress. Marcus reflected on his experience engaging the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), the agency responsible for managing Georgia's foster care program, stating, "The foster care process could be standardized a lot better… it was actually DFCS that held up the process." His comment underscores the need for a more streamlined and consistent approach to managing the foster care process, as the inefficiencies he encountered added unnecessary delays and complications.

Jamal's frustration stemmed from the lack of timely communication, which left him feeling disconnected and unsupported. He shared, "After chasing them down, I think they were slow to return phone calls. It was just a headache trying to get in with them and get the ball rolling." This lack of responsiveness from agency staff created a sense of

inertia, forcing Jamal to take the initiative in following up repeatedly, a task that added to his emotional burden.

Peter pointed to the issue of frequent staff turnover within DFCS as a major source of disruption. “DFCS was so terribly slow at doing their job… the social worker leaves, the case manager leaves,” he remarked. His experience highlights how the high turnover rates within the agency compounded delays, often requiring participants to reintroduce themselves and their cases to new staff members, further prolonging an already slow process.

Andre’s experience illustrated another layer of inefficiency: administrative errors that caused delays. He recounted, *“*It seemed like they kept losing paperwork. I had to resend the same documents multiple times, and it delayed everything by weeks.” These errors added not only time but also frustration and uncertainty to the adoption journey, as participants were left questioning whether their efforts were being handled with the care and attention they deserved. Collectively, these accounts paint a picture of a system struggling to meet the needs of prospective adoptive parents, with inefficiencies at multiple levels that resulted in prolonged timelines, emotional strain, and a lack of trust in the agencies tasked with facilitating their journeys.

These inefficiencies not only slowed the adoption process but also eroded participants’ trust in the institutions meant to guide and support them. The lack of consistency and reliability forced many participants to take a more proactive stance, frequently following up with agency staff or relying on family and friends for emotional support. The cumulative effect of these challenges extended beyond logistical hurdles,

contributing to feelings of frustration, helplessness, and skepticism about the system's commitment to facilitating successful adoptions. For many, the process became a test of resilience, requiring sustained effort to overcome systemic barriers that seemed indifferent to their personal stakes and aspirations.

Subtheme 2: Lack of Transparency

Participants described a pervasive lack of transparency in the adoption process, compounding the challenges of navigating an already complex and emotionally taxing system. Many entered the process with optimism and a strong desire to start or grow their families, often conducting extensive research and preparation beforehand. However, they soon encountered vague communication and unclear timelines that left them feeling excluded from critical decisions and progress updates. The absence of clear and open communication eroded their confidence in the system and added to their emotional strain.

Antonio provided a striking example of this ambiguity, sharing, "We kept hearing, 'We're working on it,' but there was no transparency. It felt like we were being strung along." His experience highlights how the lack of clarity undermined his ability to plan or feel secure about the process. Similarly, Arjun reflected on the opaque nature of communication, stating, "They'd say, 'We're reviewing your case,' but wouldn't tell me what that meant or how long it would take." For Arjun, this vagueness created a sense of disempowerment, as he was left in the dark about the steps being taken to advance his adoption journey. Andre's account further underscored this issue, as he remarked, "There were no clear timelines. They'd just say, 'We're working on it,' but I had no idea what was actually happening." His experience illustrates how the lack of defined milestones

left participants with an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, questioning whether their cases were progressing.

This pervasive lack of transparency created a culture of uncertainty and frustration among participants, many of whom felt unsupported and unimportant within the system. The absence of clear communication not only delayed their progress but also caused emotional and psychological stress, leading some to question whether they would ever achieve their goal of a successful adoption. Addressing these transparency issues is crucial to improving the experience for prospective adoptive parents and fostering trust in the adoption process.

Subtheme 3: Systemic Discrimination

Despite significant legal advancements, systemic discrimination continues to pose substantial barriers for LGBTQ+ fathers navigating the adoption process. Although marriage equality and federal protections have broadened access for LGBTQ+ individuals and families, many participants reported encountering both overt and covert biases based on their sexual orientation. These discriminatory practices not only impeded their progress but also forced participants to work harder to prove their suitability as adoptive parents, fostering a sense of inequity and alienation.

The home study process, a critical step in the adoption journey, was a notable site for discriminatory experiences. Antonio described the invasive and inappropriate questions he faced, stating, “They asked questions that had nothing to do with whether we could be good parents… stuff that felt way out of line.” This experience illustrates how deeply personal and irrelevant inquiries can undermine the dignity of prospective

adoptive parents. Jamal, reflecting on his own experience, noted, “We kind of faced discrimination even from the beginning… it may not have been discrimination; it could just have been a stereotype.” His hesitation underscores how subtle biases can be difficult to pinpoint but remain deeply felt.

For some participants, discrimination manifested as explicit policy barriers. Peter recalled encountering direct restrictions: “No same-sex adoptions. Period… that was the explicit policy of Cobb County.” This statement reveals how localized policies can perpetuate systemic inequities despite broader legal protections. Similarly, Andre shared the unique challenges he faced as a single gay man, explaining, “As a single gay man, I felt like they didn’t take me seriously… It wasn’t overt, but there was this undertone of, ‘Are you sure this is something you can handle?’” His experience highlights how societal assumptions about family structures can lead to subtle but pervasive discrimination.

These discriminatory practices created significant emotional and logistical burdens for participants. Many felt they had to expend extra energy advocating for themselves and their families, navigating systems that seemed designed to exclude them. These barriers not only delayed their adoption journeys but also left lasting impressions of inequity, emphasizing the need for systemic reforms to create a more inclusive and equitable adoption process.

Subtheme 4: Heteronormative Biases

Heteronormative practices within the adoption system presented additional challenges for LGBTQ+ families, reinforcing inequities and creating unnecessary hurdles. Participants frequently described how standard forms, procedures, and

institutional practices assumed a traditional, heterosexual, married-couple structure. These assumptions not only invalidated the identities of LGBTQ+ parents but also complicated their ability to navigate the system.

A common frustration stemmed from outdated documentation and forms that failed to reflect the realities of diverse family structures. Malik expressed his exasperation, stating, “All the paperwork says Mother, Father… why does it still say Mother and Father on documents when you’re allowing same-sex couples?” This lack of inclusivity in something as fundamental as paperwork reflected broader systemic issues. Similarly, Arjun shared, “The forms, the interviews, everything assumes you’re a straight couple.” This pervasive assumption often left participants feeling unseen and excluded from the very process designed to support family formation.

The issue extended beyond forms and into interactions with adoption professionals. Andre described how the system consistently catered to traditional family models, observing, “Everything about the system assumes you’re a married heterosexual couple.” This assumption often required LGBTQ+ families to spend extra time and energy explaining their family dynamics or correcting misunderstandings. Antonio succinctly captured the emotional toll of these experiences, stating, “The whole system is built for straight couples… It’s exhausting.” His sentiment highlights the persistent burden of navigating an adoption system that fails to fully recognize LGBTQ+ families.

These heteronormative practices created significant barriers, forcing participants to contend with systems that failed to acknowledge or accommodate the diversity of modern family structures. Beyond being an inconvenience, these practices reinforced

feelings of exclusion and inequity, underscoring the urgent need for reforms to ensure that all families, regardless of structure, are supported and validated throughout the adoption process.

Subtheme 5: Lack of Resources and Support

Participants identified a significant lack of institutional resources and support as a persistent challenge throughout their adoption journey. This gap was evident at every stage of the process, from understanding the initial steps to navigating long-term post-adoption needs. The absence of clear guidance and accessible assistance left participants feeling isolated and forced to rely heavily on their own initiative.

Obtaining accurate and detailed information about the adoption process emerged as a critical need. Participants frequently described how agencies and officials provided minimal or unclear explanations, leaving them to navigate the complexities of adoption on their own. Malik emphasized this frustration, stating, “We asked a lot of questions about what happens after the kid gets out of foster care… There wasn’t any information.” His comment illustrates the systemic failure to equip adoptive parents with essential knowledge for preparing their children for the future. Similarly, Arjun recounted the challenges of seeking financial assistance: “When I asked about financial assistance or support programs, they gave vague answers.” This lack of transparency forced him to expend considerable time and effort to piece together the information he needed.

Andre further highlighted the barriers to accessing resources, noting, “They didn’t explain the resources that were available to me. I had to dig and ask a lot of questions.” This experience of having to actively seek out information, rather than being supported

by the system, was a common theme. Participants often found themselves in a position where they had to act as advocates for their own needs, navigating a system that seemed disjointed and unprepared to provide comprehensive support for LGBTQ+ adoptive families.

The lack of institutional resources and support not only created logistical and financial hurdles but also contributed to emotional strain. For many participants, the burden of navigating these gaps added to the challenges already posed by an inherently complex adoption process. These findings underscore the importance of systemic reforms to ensure that adoptive families, particularly LGBTQ+ families, have access to the guidance and resources they need to succeed both during and after the adoption journey.

Subtheme 6: Emotional and Psychological Toll

The cumulative challenges of navigating institutional barriers, systemic inefficiencies, and social biases had a profound emotional and psychological impact on participants. The stress of prolonged uncertainty, combined with the systemic roadblocks and lack of support, left many participants feeling frustrated, emotionally drained, and at times, doubtful about the feasibility of their adoption journey.

Antonio captured the emotional strain caused by the prolonged and often opaque waiting periods, stating, “The waiting felt endless… It felt like we were being strung along.” His words highlight not only the lack of transparency in the process but also the deep frustration of investing significant time and emotional energy without clarity or progress. Andre echoed these sentiments, describing how the systemic obstacles wore on him, saying, “The whole process made me question if it was even worth it. There were so

many roadblocks." This sense of doubt reflects the broader psychological toll of navigating a system that participants felt was not designed to support them fully.

Married participants shared that they often relied on their partners for emotional support, which helped them endure the many challenges they faced. For instance, they reported leaning on each other during moments of frustration, using their shared commitment to building a family as a source of strength. However, single participants described a heightened sense of isolation, with one participant noting that the lack of a partner amplified the emotional toll of the process. This discrepancy underscores the additional burden placed on single prospective adoptive parents, who must navigate the same obstacles without the benefit of shared emotional and practical support.

These emotional and psychological challenges reveal systemic flaws that exacerbate the already demanding adoption process. They highlight the urgent need for reforms to reduce unnecessary stressors, improve transparency, and provide robust support systems for all prospective adoptive parents, particularly those from marginalized communities. By addressing these systemic issues, policymakers and agencies can create a more equitable and compassionate framework that supports the well-being of adoptive families.

Theme 2: Adoption Success factors

Theme 2: Adoption Success Factors explored the key elements that enabled LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia to successfully complete their adoption journeys. Participants shared invaluable insights into the factors that contributed to their positive outcomes, offering a deeper understanding of what facilitates success in the adoption

process. While all participants met the inclusion criteria of finalized adoptions, the specific mechanisms driving their success were not predetermined and are analyzed here.

Examining these success factors provided a balanced perspective, shedding light on how participants overcame systemic challenges to build their families. The findings highlight effective strategies and resources that not only supported adoption outcomes but also challenged heteronormative stereotypes, contributing to broader societal understandings of family structures and informing policy and practice improvements.

Five subthemes emerged as central to these success stories: Supportive Professionals, Access to Resources, Effective Preparation, Persistence and Advocacy, and Community and Partner Support. These subthemes illustrate the dynamic interplay of systemic supports, individual resilience, and community networks in achieving successful adoption outcomes for LGBTQ+ families. Table 3 provides a detailed breakdown of these subthemes, highlighting key participant experiences and examples that underscore their impact on the adoption process.

Table 3

Adoption Success Factors

Subtheme	Description	Frequency of mentions	Emotional impact	Strategies and recommendations
Supportive professionals	Positive interactions with inclusive social workers, agency staff, and legal professionals.	High	Validation, empowerment	Increase training for adoption professionals to foster inclusivity and cultural competence.
Access to resources	Availability of financial aid, grants, or tailored	Moderate	Relief, security	Expand access to financial assistance and create

	support services for LGBTQ+ adoptive families.			specialized resources for LGBTQ+ parents.
Effective preparation	Thorough home study processes and comprehensive pre-adoption education.	Moderate	Confidence, readiness	Develop standardized pre-adoption training tailored for diverse family structures.
Persistence and advocacy	Personal determination and proactive efforts to navigate systemic challenges.	High	Resilience, pride	Encourage advocacy skills among adoptive parents and provide tools for effective self-advocacy.

Subtheme 1: Supportive Professionals

Adoption journeys are often defined by uncertainty, and participants frequently relied on professionals, such as social workers, attorneys, and therapists, to navigate these challenges. However, the quality of support participants received varied significantly, shaping their overall experience.

Participants emphasized the pivotal role of social workers in managing the home study process, a critical early stage of adoption. The home study often set the tone for the adoption experience, requiring prospective parents to provide extensive personal details, undergo background checks, and demonstrate readiness to adopt. Marcus described his experience, sharing, “The case worker who managed our home study was very nice and told us things to look out for, you know, things we might not have even thought about. That kind of heads-up made the whole thing feel less overwhelming.” Jamal also reflected on the importance of having an empathetic and well-organized case manager, stating, “There was one case manager that was really good. She kept everything

organized, and you could tell she genuinely cared about what was best for the kids and for us. It made us feel like we weren't just another file on someone's desk."

In contrast, some participants described the home study process as invasive, requiring them to disclose deeply personal information, which compounded their stress. This was particularly true for foster care adoptions, where bureaucratic procedures and frequent staff turnover often created additional challenges. Despite these hurdles, positive experiences with professionals transformed the process into something manageable. Arjun shared, "Our home study process went incredibly smoothly. We worked with a local company that had high reviews on Google, and they were fantastic. They explained everything clearly and made sure there weren't any surprises. That really helped us feel more confident about the whole thing."

Attorneys played a crucial role in navigating the legalities of adoption, especially in cases involving contested adoptions or interstate placements. Peter highlighted the significance of working with a specialized attorney: "Finding our adoption attorney was key. She knew exactly how to handle everything. She was like, 'Here's what you say. Here's what you don't say. This is how we present it to the court.' I mean, having her expertise was everything, especially for us as a same-sex couple. She just got it." Similarly, David shared how his attorney's understanding of LGBTQ+ adoptions made all the difference: "We had an attorney who really understood this stuff. Like, she knew the ins and outs of adoptions for same-sex couples. She reassured us when things got a little tricky and knew exactly how to navigate the system. It was such a relief to have her in our corner."

Therapists with trauma-informed expertise were particularly valuable for parents adopting children from foster care, as many of these children had experienced significant trauma. Malik highlighted the value of ongoing support, saying, “If it wasn’t for the adoption case manager we would have had way more roadblocks. The resources she connected us to truly made the difference. She’s the one who still keeps in touch with us, checks on our child, and lets us know about things like financial support for pre-existing conditions. She’s been a lifesaver, really.”

The presence of proactive and empathetic professionals significantly reduced participants’ stress and streamlined the adoption process. David appreciated the personal touch provided by his case manager, sharing, “We had a good support structure with DFCS. Our case manager wasn’t just doing her job, she really cared. We even connected on Instagram, so she still sees pictures of the kids growing up. That kind of connection meant so much to us.”

However, not all experiences were positive. Instances of unresponsive or disorganized professionals often caused delays and frustration, underlining the critical need for skilled and motivated staff in adoption systems. Participants who faced these challenges noted how the absence of professional support heightened their anxieties and prolonged the process, adding unnecessary stress to an already difficult journey.

Subtheme 2: Access to Resources

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of accessing financial, medical, and legal resources to overcome the inherent challenges of the adoption process. For many, these resources were the difference between navigating the journey

successfully or being overwhelmed by the barriers they encountered. This theme underscores the necessity of systemic supports to reduce these barriers and facilitate positive outcomes for adoptive families.

Financial resources were critical, particularly for private adoptions, which are often prohibitively expensive. Many participants described how they struggled to cover the high costs of private adoptions, which could include attorney fees, agency fees, and travel expenses. Marcus, reflecting on his experience, explained, “We had to hire an attorney for the birth mom, and honestly, I didn’t even blink at the cost. After paying for IVF, which was a small fortune and didn’t work for us, the cost of a lawyer for my son seemed like a bargain. But still, it adds up. You don’t realize how much until you’re in it, and you’re like, ‘Where am I going to get this money?’” For many participants, federal and state adoption tax credits provided substantial financial relief. Arjun shared how these credits made a significant difference: “There was this adoption tax credit that we found out about during the process, and it was one of the things that helped us manage the financial stress. It felt like, finally, something was working in our favor to alleviate these enormous costs.”

For participants adopting through the foster care system, access to Medicaid and subsidies significantly eased the financial burden of parenting, especially for children with medical or therapeutic needs. Malik described the transformative impact of these supports: “Getting Medicaid for our son was honestly a game-changer. I mean, it covered so many of the therapies and medications he needed, things we couldn’t have afforded otherwise. Without it, I don’t know how we would have managed. It’s one of those things

you don't even realize how important it is until you're in the thick of it." Similarly, Peter highlighted the importance of Medicaid in ensuring ongoing care for their child: "He got Medicaid, and it pretty much gives him everything I asked for. It's not just medical, it's therapy, it's anything he might need. Knowing he has that safety net takes so much of the pressure off us as parents."

Participants also relied on legal resources to navigate the complexities of adoption, particularly in contested cases or when adopting out of state. David recalled how his attorney's expertise provided reassurance during a particularly stressful situation: "We hit a snag when the biological grandfather got involved, and it threw us for a loop. I remember panicking, thinking this was all going to fall apart. But our attorney came back and said, 'No, this is common, and here's how we're going to handle it.' That reassurance, just having someone who knew what they were doing, made all the difference. It gave us the confidence to keep moving forward."

However, accessing these resources was not always straightforward. Participants frequently reported needing to advocate for benefits, such as negotiating financial subsidies for foster children or ensuring continued Medicaid coverage. Andre, reflecting on his experience, remarked, "They paid for everything for the child when he was in foster care such as childcare, medical, all of it. I think it was almost $2,000 a month. But then, as soon as the adoption was finalized, it felt like they were ready to wash their hands of it. I had to fight to make sure he still got the support he needed. It's not just about the money; it's about making sure he has what he needs to thrive."

Participants also described the challenges of navigating bureaucratic systems to access these resources. Many noted that information about available supports was often incomplete or unclear, requiring them to take the initiative to seek out details and push for what their families needed. For example, some participants discovered critical financial and medical benefits only after significant delays, while others faced resistance from officials who were unfamiliar with the unique needs of LGBTQ+ adoptive families. These hurdles underscored the importance of persistence and advocacy in ensuring access to vital resources.

The examples provided by participants illustrate the critical role of resource access in enabling successful adoption outcomes. Whether it was financial support, healthcare access, or legal expertise, these resources formed the backbone of their ability to navigate the adoption process. However, the need for self-advocacy highlighted gaps in the system that could be addressed to make the process more equitable and supportive for all families.

By leveraging these resources, participants not only overcame immediate challenges but also set the stage for creating stable, loving homes for their children. This resilience in accessing and utilizing available supports ties directly to the broader narrative of persistence and advocacy, which is explored in greater detail in the next subtheme.

Subtheme 3: Effective Preparation

Preparation emerged as a defining factor in participants' adoption journeys, with many emphasizing the critical role of research, training, mentorship, and self-reflection in

navigating the complexities of the process. These preparatory efforts were not only practical but also emotional, enabling participants to build the resilience needed to confront the inevitable challenges of adoption.

Research and education were central to participants' preparation, as they sought to understand the legal, financial, and logistical aspects of adoption. Many began their journeys by learning about different pathways to adoption, often weighing the pros and cons of foster care, private adoption, or other options. Marcus shared, "We originally started off by trying to do foster care. I mean, that seemed like the natural route, but my partner had read some information about private adoption and started talking to me about it. At first, I thought he was crazy, like, why complicate things even more? But the more he shared, the more it started to make sense. So, we decided to dig deeper and see what the private route would look like for us."

For some, preparation involved not only gathering information but also identifying the right organizations and professionals to work with. Arjun emphasized the importance of this step, saying, "We did a lot of research into different facilitation organizations. It wasn't just about finding one that was reputable; it was about finding one that was queer-friendly and aligned with our values. We wanted to make sure we were working with people who understood our perspective and who wouldn't make the process harder than it already was."

Training programs were another key aspect of preparation, providing participants with practical insights into the adoption process and the unique needs of adopted children. Jamal recalled, "We went to every training session they offered. At first, it felt

like overkill, like, how much can there really be to learn? But honestly, it helped us prepare for challenges we hadn't even thought about. They gave us tools for understanding trauma, how to manage behavioral issues, and even how to navigate the bureaucracy. It wasn't just training; it was survival skills." Similarly, Malik reflected on the value of workshops, sharing, "We attended several workshops, and they weren't just about the adoption process. They helped us understand what it meant to parent a child coming from foster care, what their experiences might be and how we could best support them. Those sessions were eye-opening."

Preparation also extended beyond logistical planning to include self-reflection and partner alignment. Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that they, and their partners, where applicable, were emotionally and mentally ready for the journey. David shared his perspective, saying, "We really developed, I think, a very strong bond and friendship first, even before we seriously started the adoption process. It was important for us to have those conversations upfront, to make sure we were on the same page about what this would mean for our relationship and our family. Adoption isn't something you can just jump into. You've got to be ready, both individually and as a team."

Participants also highlighted the mental fortitude required to persist through the ups and downs of the adoption process. Preparing for the unexpected was often as important as planning for the expected. Many described their preparation as an ongoing process, with new challenges requiring them to adapt and learn as they went.

The role of preparation in shaping successful adoption outcomes cannot be overstated. By equipping themselves with knowledge, building strong partnerships, and engaging in meaningful self-reflection, participants laid the groundwork for navigating the adoption journey. These efforts not only helped them address challenges proactively but also enabled them to approach the process with greater confidence and clarity. As participants demonstrated, effective preparation is intricately tied to persistence and advocacy. These qualities, which are explored in the next subtheme, allowed participants to overcome systemic barriers and achieve their goal of creating loving families.

Subtheme 4: Persistence and Advocacy

Participants consistently described persistence and advocacy as vital to overcoming the numerous challenges encountered during the adoption process. These qualities allowed them to navigate systemic inefficiencies, confront discriminatory practices, and push for their rights and the rights of their prospective children. For many, persistence and advocacy were not just strategies but core attributes that fueled their determination to create loving families.

Persistence was critical in addressing the delays and inefficiencies inherent in the adoption process. Many participants faced bureaucratic hurdles, including misplaced paperwork, prolonged timelines, and a lack of communication from professionals. David reflected on the importance of perseverance: “Everybody nowadays really wants instant gratification, but that’s not how adoption works. You’ve got to stick with it, even when it feels like you’re running into brick walls. Having patience and not giving up, that was

essential for us. There were times I wanted to throw in the towel, but then I'd think about the child waiting for us, and that kept me going."

Similarly, Jamal emphasized the mental and emotional resilience required to endure setbacks: "Patience, patience, patience, understanding, those are the things that get you through. You're gonna hit roadblocks, and you're gonna feel like nothing's moving, but you can't give up. That's the only way to get to the finish line. I kept reminding myself why I started this journey in the first place, and that helped me push through."

For some participants, persistence also meant pushing through the uncertainty of private adoptions, where outcomes were far from guaranteed. Arjun captured this sentiment, saying, "You're putting money into something that you don't even know if it's actually going to happen. It's a gamble, really. But you have to stay the course and trust that it'll work out in the end. If you let the fear or doubt get to you, you'll never get there."

Advocacy played an equally significant role, especially in confronting systemic barriers and discriminatory practices. Participants frequently found themselves advocating for their rights as LGBTQ+ adoptive parents, as well as for the needs of their prospective children. This often-required challenging outdated policies or negotiating with professionals who lacked understanding or sensitivity.

For example, participants adopting through foster care described the importance of advocating for benefits, such as Medicaid coverage or financial subsidies, which were not always readily offered. Andre shared his experience: "They paid for everything for

the child when he was in foster care, childcare, medical, all of it. But once the adoption was finalized, it felt like they were ready to take all that away. I had to fight to make sure he still got what he needed. It's not about the money for me; it's about making sure he's taken care of, no matter what."

In some cases, advocacy also meant standing up against discriminatory practices that excluded or marginalized LGBTQ+ families. Peter described the challenges he faced: "We really had to push, especially in the early days, because the process just wasn't set up for people like us. It felt like every step of the way, there was some new obstacle, and if we didn't push back, we would've been stuck. Advocacy wasn't just a part of the process; it was the process."

Advocating for their children's well-being was another significant focus for participants, particularly when it came to ensuring access to healthcare or education. Malik shared how he had to push for proper medical evaluations: "The system didn't communicate well at all, and I had to advocate to get the right evaluations for my child. They wanted to stick with the initial diagnosis, but I knew it wasn't right. I kept at it until they did what was needed, and that made things so much easier for school and everything else."

Through persistence and advocacy, participants learned to navigate a system that often seemed unresponsive or even hostile. They leaned on these qualities to overcome inefficiencies, confront biases, and push for the support and resources their families needed. As Jamal summarized, "It's not easy. You have to speak up, you have to keep

pushing, and you have to believe that what you're doing matters. That's the only way you make it through."

The lessons participants gained from persistence and advocacy extended beyond the adoption process itself. They described learning to remain steadfast in the face of adversity, to communicate their needs clearly, and to challenge unjust systems effectively. These qualities not only helped them achieve their adoption goals but also equipped them to navigate the complexities of parenthood with resilience and determination. This theme of persistence and advocacy ties closely to the importance of community and partner support, which provided participants with the emotional and logistical foundation to persevere. This connection is explored in the next subtheme.

Subtheme 5: Community and Partner Support

Community and partner support emerged as a cornerstone of successful adoption outcomes, providing participants with emotional resilience, logistical assistance, and a sense of solidarity during a challenging and often unpredictable process. Whether through partners, family, friends, or broader support networks, participants consistently highlighted the importance of having people they could rely on throughout their journey.

For many participants, partners were the most significant and constant source of support, particularly during moments of uncertainty and stress. The shared responsibility and emotional connection within these partnerships often provided the foundation needed to persevere. Malik reflected on his experience, saying, "My husband and I leaned on each other a lot during this process. We talked everything through, every decision, every setback. When one of us was feeling low, the other would step up. That kind of teamwork

is what got us through the tough parts. We were in it together, and that made all the difference." Jamal similarly emphasized the critical role his partner played, sharing, "Having my partner there through all of this was everything. I cannot even imagine doing this on my own. He was my sounding board, my cheerleader, and my rock. Whenever I felt like giving up, he reminded me why we started this journey in the first place."

Participants also relied on families and friends to provide emotional support and practical assistance. Peter described how his partner's family immediately embraced their adoption journey, noting, "my husband's family was incredibly supportive from day one. They saw the child as part of the family right away with no hesitation or questions. That kind of acceptance was huge for us. It made us feel like we were not doing this alone, that we had people in our corner who really cared." Similarly, Arjun shared how his social circle became an invaluable source of support: "We had a good social support system. There were people we could turn to when we were frustrated, people who would just listen and let us vent. Sometimes, that is all you need, to know someone is there, even if they cannot fix it for you."

For some participants, traditional family structures were not their primary support network. Instead, they built chosen families, close-knit communities of friends and allies who offered unwavering support. David described how his chosen family became a lifeline during the adoption process: "We have a very strong chosen family out here. They showed up for us in ways that I cannot even describe. Whether it was helping us navigate some of the logistical stuff or just being there to celebrate the little victories

along the way, they were always there. It is a reminder that family is not just who you are born with; it is who shows up for you."

In addition to individual relationships, many participants turned to support groups for guidance and solidarity. These groups, often made up of other LGBTQ+ adoptive parents, provided a space where participants could share experiences, seek advice, and find encouragement. These connections offered both practical insights and emotional reassurance. Participants appreciated the ability to talk openly with others who had faced similar challenges, which helped them feel less isolated in their journeys.

Support networks played a dual role, offering practical assistance and emotional reassurance. Family and friends often stepped in to help with day-to-day logistics, such as managing paperwork, attending appointments, or providing childcare during critical moments. On an emotional level, these networks reinforced participants' resilience, reminding them that they were not alone in their struggles. This combination of logistical and emotional support was especially critical in navigating setbacks, such as delays or disrupted adoptions, which could otherwise feel insurmountable.

While most participants described their support networks as overwhelmingly positive, some also encountered challenges in building or maintaining these connections. For example, a few participants faced resistance or skepticism from family members who were unfamiliar with or unsupportive of adoption, particularly by LGBTQ+ parents. Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated a remarkable ability to forge new connections and seek out allies who shared their vision and values.

The lessons participants learned from these experiences underscore the importance of cultivating robust support systems. Many emphasized the need to proactively seek help and build relationships early in the adoption process rather than waiting until challenges arise. As Arjun summarized, “You cannot do this alone. You need people, whether it is your partner, your family, your friends, or even strangers who have been through it before. That support is what keeps you going when things get hard.”

The collective impact of these support networks cannot be overstated. By providing a stable emotional foundation, reducing logistical and financial burdens, and ensuring a welcoming and loving environment for adopted children, community and partner support became a critical enabler of successful adoption outcomes. This theme highlights the interconnectedness of personal resilience and external support in overcoming the challenges of the adoption journey.

Theme 3: Policies that Impact LGBTQ+ Adoption Journey

This section examines the federal, state, local, and institutional policies that LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia identify as impacting their adoption journeys. While the landmark federal case *Obergefell v. Hodges* removed many barriers for same-sex couples adopting and accessing marital benefits, adoptions are primarily managed at the state and local levels. This created a layered policy environment where bureaucratic inefficiencies, individual ideologies, and procedural hurdles can significantly influence adoption outcomes. For instance, slow-moving bureaucratic processes may not overtly deny adoption rights but can disrupt journeys, leaving prospective parents frustrated and uncertain. In Georgia, the foster care system is overseen by a director appointed by the

state's Republican governor, whose public statements have at times been unsupportive of LGBTQ+ adoption. Participants' experiences highlighted the interplay between policy frameworks and individual decision-makers responsible for managing adoption processes. This section explores these experiences, focusing on the barriers and success factors identified by participants in navigating these policy environments. Subthemes include federal, state, local, and institutional policies, illustrating how these layers intersect to shape adoption experiences.

Table 4 presents a structured overview of these policy influences, categorizing the specific federal, state, local, and institutional factors that shaped participants' adoption experiences. It highlights key themes emerging from participant narratives and illustrates how different levels of policy intersect to facilitate or hinder adoption processes.

Table 4

Policies that Impact LGBTQ+ Adoptions

Policy Name	Perceived Impact	Illustrative Quote
Obergefell v. Hodges	Positive	"Marriage recognition made it possible for us to adopt together. Before, we couldn't even get our names on the same document without a court fight." - Peter
Georgia state foster care policies	Mixed	"DFCS didn't really know he was living with us… back and forth, we would meet the worker, show the child, and then go back home. DFCS was so terribly slow." - Peter
Faith-based adoption laws	Negative	"Homophobia got the best of the agency. It ultimately caused us not to adopt that little girl." - Marcus

Adoption subsidy programs	Positive (limited scope)	"It was helpful to have some financial assistance, but the system makes it hard to access those funds unless you meet very specific criteria." - Jamal
County-specific policies	Mixed	"Cobb County made us redo everything we had already done for the state. It's like they wanted to make it harder for us." - David

Subtheme 1: Marriage Equality

The 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* represented a seismic shift for LGBTQ+ rights in America. By legalizing same-sex marriage nationwide, it extended critical legal, financial, and social benefits previously exclusive to heterosexual couples. For LGBTQ+ individuals and couples, this decision transcended legal recognition, offering validation of their relationships and paving the way for a broader redefinition of family structures. As Arjun shared, "Marriage was not just a personal commitment for us; it was necessary to ensure we could legally adopt as a couple." This legal affirmation also removed barriers that had long hindered the adoption process for LGBTQ+ families.

Before *Obergefell v. Hodges* , same-sex couples faced significant challenges when attempting to adopt. Many states used marital status as an informal eligibility criterion, denying adoption rights to LGBTQ+ couples under the guise of "family suitability." This was often compounded by requirements for piecemeal adoption processes. As David explained, "We encountered delays in finalizing the adoption because the county clerk didn't understand that same-sex spouses could legally adopt together." Such practices left one parent legally unrecognized, preventing them from making decisions regarding the child's education, medical care, or other essential needs.

While *Obergefell v. Hodges* was a historic victory, it did not eliminate systemic discrimination or societal biases overnight. Instead, it triggered a backlash in many conservative regions, including Georgia. The political and social resistance to marriage equality often intersected with efforts to restrict LGBTQ+ adoption rights. Marcus highlighted this challenge, stating, “The process of private adoption really opened our eyes to how marriage equality doesn’t always translate into equal treatment. Some agencies still subtly pushed for a ‘traditional’ family setup.”

Georgia, a state with deep-rooted conservative politics, has been a focal point for such resistance. Republican leaders, many of whom have built their careers opposing LGBTQ+ rights, continue to shape policies in ways that create barriers for LGBTQ+ adoptive parents. As Peter emphasized, “The leadership in DFCS matters a lot. If the person in charge doesn’t support LGBTQ+ families, that attitude trickles down to the workers handling cases.” This political environment has made it difficult for some LGBTQ+ families to access equitable adoption services despite the federal mandate for marriage equality.

One of the most transformative outcomes of *Obergefell v. Hodges* was the ability for same-sex couples to adopt jointly. Before the ruling, LGBTQ+ couples often had to navigate burdensome processes to secure legal recognition as co-parents. Peter highlighted the complications of these pre-Obergefell practices: “We had to rent an apartment and show that we lived here [in Fulton County] while doing the adoption. My husband did the adoption, and then I think it was 30 days later, we went back and did another family adoption, adding me as the other parent.” These cumbersome procedures

placed undue emotional and financial strain on families, leaving children vulnerable to legal uncertainties.

With marriage equality, joint adoptions became legally viable, streamlining the process and providing greater security for families. David shared a poignant example: “The judge actually remembered us from 2015 when we got married.” This demonstrates how marriage recognition not only simplified legal proceedings but also fostered a sense of legitimacy and belonging for LGBTQ+ families.

The legalization of same-sex marriage also contributed to shifting societal attitudes about LGBTQ+ families. Public opinion polls have shown increasing support for LGBTQ+ rights and parenting, challenging stereotypes about the ability of same-sex couples to raise children. These cultural changes have helped normalize LGBTQ+ families in many communities. However, participants emphasized that biases persist. Marcus noted, “Let’s not discriminate because of someone’s sexual preference. The law says we’re equal, but some people don’t see it that way.”

Institutional resistance remains evident in adoption agencies and legal systems. David recounted, “Our son was born at a hospital in Marietta. The hospital didn’t seem to understand same-sex adoption. Even after notifying them that we were adoptive dads, they still persisted in trying to go to the birth mom at that time.” These experiences underscore the disconnect between legal recognition and its practical implementation in conservative areas.

Although *Obergefell v. Hodges* established a federal framework for marriage equality, the practical application of these rights often depends on state and local policies.

Participants highlighted significant disparities across Georgia's counties. Peter explained, "Cobb County had policies against same-sex adoptions unless one partner was entirely uninvolved. Fulton was different, which is why we moved." Such regional inconsistencies forced families to navigate a patchwork of policies, creating additional burdens.

Faith-based organizations also continue to exert significant influence on adoption policies in Georgia, often advocating for exemptions that allow discrimination against LGBTQ+ families. Arjun observed, "There were some policies… particularly from faith-based organizations not wanting to allow gay parents to adopt." This opposition has shaped state-level debates and legislation, further complicating adoption access for LGBTQ+ couples.

Beyond the legal and procedural implications, Obergefell v. Hodges carried profound emotional significance for LGBTQ+ families. For many participants, the ruling validated their relationships and affirmed their right to form families. David shared, "Our parents, when we decided to get married the first time in 2005 and then again in 2015 when it was legal, sat us down… it marked a real change for our families." This sense of validation strengthened participants' confidence as they pursued adoption.

Marriage equality also reshaped societal narratives about family, allowing LGBTQ+ parents to challenge outdated perceptions and advocate for broader acceptance. As Peter stated, "Marriage recognition is a big step, but it's not the final step. There's still so much that needs to be done to make adoption accessible and equitable."

In sum, the legalization of same-sex marriage through *Obergefell v. Hodges* marked a pivotal moment in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, significantly reducing legal barriers to adoption for same-sex couples. However, participants' experiences reveal that societal biases, regional disparities, and institutional resistance persist. While marriage equality has fostered progress, it remains insufficient in addressing the broader systemic and cultural challenges that LGBTQ+ families face. Participants emphasized the need for continued advocacy and policy reform to ensure that the promise of marriage equality translates into equitable adoption experiences for all. This foundation sets the stage for the next theme, which will explore federal policies and practices that further shape adoption accessibility.

Subtheme 2: Federal Policies

While most participants focused on challenges at the state and county levels, federal policies and the national political climate also played a significant role in shaping their adoption journeys. These policies not only dictated logistical requirements but also added financial and emotional burdens that impacted participants' sense of stability and security as LGBTQ+ adoptive parents.

One prominent federal policy participants discussed was the Adoption Tax Credit, designed to offset the financial burden of adoption. However, navigating this policy often proved challenging due to its complexity and lack of clear guidance. Arjun shared his experience: "There was this adoption tax credit… something that was in our favor to alleviate costs. But we ended up having to work with an accountant who had to educate herself about it. She was eventually able to submit our taxes for us and get us the credit."

Similarly, Antonio explained, “I think they reimbursed, I want to say, about $5,000… and then we would get a credit back whenever we filed our taxes as well.” While the tax credit provided much-needed financial relief for some, others found the process daunting, lacking the resources or knowledge to claim it effectively. This underscored the need for better communication and support systems to help adoptive parents navigate these federal benefits.

Another federal requirement that placed significant strain on participants was the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC). This policy governs the legal and procedural compliance for interstate adoptions and requires adoptive parents to remain in the child’s birth state until they receive official clearance to return home. For many families, this waiting period created logistical, emotional, and financial challenges. Antonio recounted, “There’s a policy that states that once we receive our child, we can’t leave that state because we had to cross states, and we can’t enter our state. So, we had to be with a newborn for two weeks in a completely different state in a hotel room during the middle of a pandemic. We were just stuck in the room. It was very difficult to do anything, even to get food, because of the pandemic.”

Arjun, who adopted a child in Michigan, described the added expense and uncertainty of this process: “We knew about the Interstate Compact and knew that if we ended up adopting a child from out of Georgia, we would have this waiting period. We had to stay in Michigan for about two weeks after our daughter was born.” Although his family experienced an unexpectedly quick resolution, he acknowledged the stress of preparing for an indefinite stay: “We were expecting to have to stay up in Michigan for

like two weeks, but I think from the birth to leaving Michigan was like six days." This temporary relocation meant families not only had to manage the cost of accommodations and travel but also contend with the emotional weight of being far from home with a newborn. As Antonio described the moment of finally returning home, "Finally being able to get back on the road and come back home… it was kind of magical honestly, because as soon as we walked in the door, our daughter smiled for the first time. It was like she kind of knew that she was home."

The financial strain of the ICPC process was a recurring theme for participants. Many incurred significant costs for extended hotel stay, meals, and other living expenses while waiting for clearance. Arjun explained, "We probably could have gotten back to Georgia a day or two earlier, but we decided to make the trip back at our own pace." While his family chose to ease their transition, other participants described the stress of managing these unplanned expenses during an already costly adoption process.

Adding to these challenges was the broader political climate, which further heightened participants' anxieties. While many began their adoption journeys during the Biden administration, the lingering effects of the Trump administration created concern over potential disruptions to LGBTQ+ rights, including same-sex marriage and adoption. Arjun reflected on this uncertainty: "We started the adoption process in October 2020… there was a political atmosphere, a pushback against gay men adopting children. Thankfully, none of that necessarily came to fruition, but it was something we had to be aware of as we navigated the system." This sense of instability was compounded by measures introduced in Georgia's legislature that sought to limit same-sex adoptions.

Although these measures ultimately failed, their presence contributed to a stressful and unpredictable environment. Peter highlighted the importance of stable and inclusive policies, stating, “Now that marriage is recognized, I think it has made things smoother. Before, there were always questions about who the real parent was.”

These narratives demonstrate the heavy toll federal policies like the ICPC, and broader political dynamics take on adoptive parents, particularly LGBTQ+ families. From financial strain to emotional uncertainty, these challenges underscore the need for clear, inclusive, and stable policies that support adoptive families and reduce the burdens they face.

Subtheme 3: State and County Level Policies

Adoption policies at the federal level, such as marriage equality, have reshaped the landscape for LGBTQ+ families, but it is the policies and practices within individual states that often dictate the accessibility of adoption services. Georgia’s unique political and social climate plays a pivotal role in determining how these services are administered, reflecting both systemic challenges and the progress achieved. Despite the absence of explicit laws prohibiting same-sex adoptions in Georgia, the state’s conservative leadership, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and local disparities significantly impact the experiences of LGBTQ+ adoptive parents. This section explores the themes of discriminatory practices, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and legal hurdles, shedding light on how state policies shape adoption journeys.

Participants frequently highlighted how discriminatory attitudes and faith-based opposition influenced their adoption experiences in Georgia. While the state has no

formal laws restricting LGBTQ+ adoptions, the actions of state actors and the political environment created significant barriers. Arjun pointed out the influence of religious organizations on state policy: “There were some policies… particularly from faith-based organizations not wanting to allow gay parents to adopt.” These organizations often advocate for measures to protect religious freedom, potentially enabling agencies to deny services to same-sex couples based on their beliefs.

Marcus recounted a painful instance of discrimination within the state foster care system, reflecting on how deeply rooted biases derailed his family’s adoption journey. He shared, “Homophobia got the best of the agency. We did everything right, completed the training, met all the requirements, but it didn’t matter. Their biases were stronger than their willingness to see us as capable, loving parents, and it ultimately caused us not to adopt that little girl.” His words highlight the emotional toll of systemic discrimination and the profound impact it has on LGBTQ+ individuals striving to build their families. This experience also underscored how personal biases within agencies directly impact the adoption process, even when overt discriminatory policies are absent.

The influence of leadership at the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) further shaped participants’ experiences. Peter observed: “The leadership in DFCS matters a lot. If the person in charge doesn’t support LGBTQ+ families, that attitude trickles down to the workers handling cases.” As the DFCS director is appointed by Georgia’s conservative governor, participants expressed concern that these appointments reinforced a culture less inclusive of LGBTQ+ families.

Bureaucratic inefficiencies within Georgia's foster care system presented another substantial barrier for LGBTQ+ adoptive parents. Participants described significant delays, redundant processes, and frequent turnover among social workers and case managers, all of which complicated their journeys. Peter captured the frustration with these inefficiencies: "DFCS was so terribly slow… Social workers leave, the case manager leaves… every day was like starting new."

This lack of continuity often resulted in extended waiting periods and the need to repeatedly submit documentation. David shared his experience navigating Cobb County's duplicative requirements: "Cobb County does not really care what the state does. They want their own home studies, investigations, and background checks. So, we had to redo everything." These redundant processes not only delayed adoptions but also placed additional emotional and financial strain on participants.

The state foster care system's emphasis on reunification also created challenges for LGBTQ+ families. David explained: "DFCS ultimate goal is reunification no matter what. That was a barrier we faced as foster parents, especially when we developed bonds with the children." While reunification is a critical goal of foster care, participants felt that this priority sometimes conflicted with the best interests of the child and the adoptive family.

Legal complexities surrounding second-parent adoptions further complicated participants' experiences. Before marriage equality was federally recognized, same-sex couples in Georgia often had to navigate piecemeal adoption processes to establish legal parenting rights. Peter explained: "We had to do the adoption in stages. First, my husband

adopted, and then we went back to do a second-parent adoption to add me. That was the only way it could be done at that time."

The recognition of same-sex marriage has alleviated some of these challenges, but participants noted that residual inconsistencies remain. Arjun emphasized the significance of marriage in securing adoption rights: "Marriage was not just a personal commitment for us; it was necessary to ensure we could legally adopt as a couple." However, even with marriage recognition, Peter reflected on the lingering effects of past policies: "Now that marriage is recognized, I think it has made things smoother. Before, there were always questions about who the real parent was."

Within Georgia, local disparities in policy interpretation further shaped participants' experiences. County-level administrators often applied policies inconsistently, leading to significant variations in adoption accessibility. Peter shared how these disparities forced him to relocate temporarily: "The only county that would do a gay adoption was Fulton County. We had to move to Fulton, at least on paper." This experience underscores how local jurisdictions can create additional hurdles for LGBTQ+ families, even within the same state.

Participants also criticized the lack of transparency within Georgia's foster care system. Marcus stated: "The foster care adoption primarily through DFCS in Georgia… needs to be a lot more transparent, and the folks involved need to follow the policies." This lack of transparency, coupled with bureaucratic inefficiencies, led to delays and frustration for many participants. Andre highlighted how policy inconsistencies within the foster care system created financial challenges: "The policies shifted…when I got my

foster child, assistance like childcare and medical was covered because he was considered high need. But then they told me that once I adopted him, I'd have to take on those costs myself."

In sum, State policies play a critical role in shaping the adoption journeys of LGBTQ+ families in Georgia. Discriminatory practices, whether overt or covert, reflect broader societal biases and influence how policies are implemented. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and local disparities create additional barriers, while the legal complexities of second-parent adoptions highlight gaps in state policies. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and advocacy, emphasizing the need for more inclusive, transparent, and streamlined policies. These findings highlight the importance of addressing systemic barriers to ensure equitable access to adoption services for all families.

Subtheme 4: Institutional Interactions

Institutional interactions are a defining element of the adoption process, especially for LGBTQ+ families in Georgia. Prospective adoptive parents must navigate various systems, including the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS), private adoption agencies, hospitals, and the courts. These institutions serve as gatekeepers to adoption, with their policies, practices, and personnel significantly shaping the experiences of aspiring LGBTQ+ fathers. For many participants, these interactions were pivotal in either facilitating or hindering their adoption journey.

DFCS plays a critical role in Georgia's foster care system, overseeing the placement and adoption of children. Participants frequently highlighted both the opportunities and challenges inherent in navigating this institution.

One key factor influencing participants' experiences was the perception of DFCS as a bureaucratically cumbersome entity. Andre reflected on his frustrations, explaining, "With DFCS, there was always something causing delays. Whether it was turnover, lost paperwork, or just inefficiency. It felt like every time we made progress, we'd end up starting over." These inefficiencies led to repeated setbacks, prolonging the adoption process and leaving prospective parents feeling unsupported.

Bias within DFCS also emerged as a significant barrier. Some participants encountered overt or implicit discrimination from caseworkers, reflecting broader societal biases against LGBTQ+ individuals. Andre shared his disheartening experience: "With DFCS, I ended up having a couple of babies come to my house, but then they were given back to their family. That happened two or three times, and I couldn't do it anymore." Such interactions underscored the emotional toll of navigating a system that often-prioritized reunification over the needs of foster children and prospective parents.

Participants employed various strategies to overcome these challenges, including seeking support from higher-level administrators or connecting with other LGBTQ+ parents who had successfully navigated the system. These connections provided critical insights and emotional reassurance during an otherwise arduous process.

Private adoption agencies offered a contrasting experience, with a wider range of policies and practices. While some agencies demonstrated inclusivity and support, others

reflected the influence of faith-based ideologies that often-marginalized LGBTQ+ families.

Participants noted the variability in agency practices. Arjun observed, “We used a national facilitation organization. They were open to working with LGBTQ+ couples, but you could tell they catered to certain demographics.” Such implicit biases shaped how agencies communicated and the resources they allocated to LGBTQ+ clients.

Faith-based agencies were particularly challenging. Arjun described his experience, stating, “There were policies in place, often unspoken, that made it clear they weren’t comfortable working with gay couples. It wasn’t outright discrimination, it was subtle, but you could feel it in how they treated us.” These instances highlighted how some agencies used coded language or indirect practices to exclude LGBTQ+ families while maintaining plausible deniability.

To navigate these barriers, participants sought out LGBTQ+-affirming agencies, even if it meant adopting out of state. Antonio explained, “We went with a national agency that was LGBT-friendly. It made a world of difference in how we were treated.” The Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) facilitated the ability to engage agencies across state lines, providing participants with more options and greater agency in their adoption journey.

Hospitals emerged as another critical institution, particularly for those pursuing private infant adoptions. Participants highlighted a range of experiences, from supportive environments to instances of exclusion rooted in heteronormative assumptions.

David described the stark contrast between two hospital experiences: “Our daughter was born at Hospital A in North Georgia. It was like they do this regularly every day, they had separate rooms and everything ready for us. But at Hospital B, it was a nightmare. Even after notifying them that we were adoptive dads, they still persisted in trying to go to the birth mom.” These interactions underscored the variability in hospital policies and staff training.

Forms and paperwork also reflected outdated assumptions. Antonio noted, “We are gay male parents… the paperwork says stuff like, ‘What is the maiden name?’ or ‘What is the mother?’ It didn’t have very inclusive language.” Such administrative hurdles further complicated the process for LGBTQ+ adoptive parents.

Despite these challenges, participants advocated for themselves, often enlisting attorneys or social workers to clarify their legal rights. They emphasized the importance of assertive communication and preparation to ensure their role as parents was recognized and respected. The legal system played a pivotal role in finalizing adoptions, whether through foster care or private processes. Participants encountered both supportive and adversarial interactions within the courts.

Peter highlighted the importance of legal representation: “When we got ready to adopt, we found a local adoption attorney… who has been around the gay adoption world forever. She’s an awesome LGBTQ adoption attorney.” Having knowledgeable legal counsel often made the difference between a smooth process and prolonged delays.

Court proceedings also revealed inconsistencies in how judges approached LGBTQ+ adoption cases. Some judges demonstrated inclusivity, while others imposed

additional scrutiny. David shared, “We encountered delays in finalizing the adoption because the county clerk didn’t understand that same-sex spouses could legally adopt together.” These experiences underscored the need for systemic reform to ensure consistent and equitable treatment across the legal system.

Navigating institutional interactions often took a significant emotional toll on participants. The combination of systemic inefficiencies, bias, and resistance to change created a challenging environment for LGBTQ+ adoptive parents.

Jordan reflected on the emotional strain: “You just feel so depleted because it’s like, if you take, take, take, and you never put anything back, then eventually you just run out.” Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience, finding strength in their partnerships and support networks.

Positive interactions, though less common, were profoundly validating. Marcus emphasized the importance of institutional support: “Having the support of my partner was critical because we faced so many questions that felt targeted at our relationship rather than our ability to parent.”

Institutional interactions are a critical component of the adoption process, shaping the experiences of LGBTQ+ families in profound ways. While supportive institutions empowered participants and facilitated successful adoptions, discriminatory practices and systemic inefficiencies created significant barriers. These findings highlight the need for standardized, inclusive policies and comprehensive training to reduce bias across all adoption-related institutions. Participants’ stories underscore the importance of ongoing

advocacy to ensure equitable access to adoption for LGBTQ+ families in Georgia and beyond.

Applying NPF to Study Results

This section applies the NPF to analyze the institutional interactions and policies shaping the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ parents in Georgia. Using NPF's core elements: Setting, Characters, Plot, and Moral of the Story, this analysis weaves participant narratives into a structured understanding of how systemic barriers and facilitators influence their adoption journeys. By incorporating findings from multiple themes, the section demonstrates the interplay between state policies, institutional practices, and participant resilience, providing a comprehensive view of the adoption landscape in Georgia. Table 5 provides a structured analysis of LGBTQ+ adoptions in Georgia using the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), emphasizing key elements such as setting, characters, plot, and the moral of the story. This framework situates participants' experiences, illustrating the systemic barriers, advocacy efforts, and policy implications that affect adoption outcomes for LGBTQ+ families.

Table 5: Narrative Policy Framework

NPF element	Description	Findings and examples
Setting	The broader context of LGBTQ+ adoptions in Georgia, including political, cultural, and institutional factors.	Georgia's political environment is conservative, with institutional barriers like DFCS inefficiencies, faith-based agency biases, and uneven county-level adoption practices.
Characters	Key actors involved in the adoption process, categorized as heroes, villains, and victims.	Heroes: LGBTQ+ adoptive parents, inclusive social workers, and advocates.- Villains: Discriminatory agencies and officials. Victims: Children denied loving homes.

Plot	The sequence of events and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ adoptive families.	The journey includes excitement, systemic barriers, failed matches, and court delays. Progress requires persistence and advocacy to overcome systemic discrimination and inefficiencies.
Moral of the story	Policy implications and lessons derived from participants' experiences.	Advocacy for inclusive policies, training for adoption professionals, and systemic reforms to reduce bias and inefficiencies, ensuring equitable adoption opportunities for LGBTQ+ families.

Georgia represents a complex backdrop for LGBTQ+ adoptions, with its sharp contrast between the progressive metropolitan area of Atlanta and its predominantly conservative rural counties. Metro Atlanta, one of the fastest-growing regions in the country, serves as a hub for Georgia's LGBTQ+ population, offering relative safety and inclusivity compared to other areas in the state. However, Georgia remains politically conservative, with all levels of government dominated by Republicans who have frequently opposed LGBTQ+ rights. Despite this, there are no state laws explicitly prohibiting LGBTQ+ adoptions. Instead, local counties and institutions often create barriers through fragmented policies, discriminatory practices, or administrative inefficiencies.

Key institutions involved in adoption, DFCS, private agencies, hospitals, and courts, exemplify this variability. DFCS, tasked with overseeing foster care adoptions, was criticized by participants for its inefficiencies, including high caseworker turnover and lost paperwork. As one participant explained, "Every day was like starting new." Private agencies presented similar challenges, with faith-based organizations often employing coded language to discourage LGBTQ+ families. Hospitals, a crucial player in private adoptions, frequently demonstrated a lack of preparedness for nontraditional

family structures, leaving some adoptive parents feeling excluded during critical moments such as birth. Courts, while finalizing all adoptions, also exhibited variability in their treatment of LGBTQ+ parents, with outcomes largely dependent on the attitudes of individual judges.

The primary heroes in this narrative are LGBTQ+ adoptive parents, who displayed resilience and determination in overcoming systemic barriers to grow their families. Participants framed themselves as prepared and steadfast, emphasizing their commitment to navigating discrimination and inefficiency. One parent described this resolve, stating, “We were committed to not letting obstacles derail our vision of becoming parents.” Other heroes include advocates and allies, both within Georgia and nationally, who have worked tirelessly to challenge discriminatory laws and promote inclusivity. Social workers who foster affirming environments were also praised as transformative figures in participants’ adoption experiences, particularly during the pivotal home study process.

Villains in the narrative include discriminatory institutions and officials, such as agencies that subtly or overtly discourage LGBTQ+ adoptions through exclusionary practices. Faith-based organizations often emerged as key antagonists, with their discriminatory policies cloaked in religious language. High turnover rates and bureaucratic inefficiencies within DFCS further compounded these challenges, making the system itself a source of frustration for prospective parents.

The victims in these narratives are children denied stable and loving homes due to systemic biases and inefficiencies. Participants emphasized the harm caused by

unnecessary barriers, particularly for children in foster care, who often experience instability and multiple placements. One participant remarked, “The system doesn’t hurt us as much as it hurts the kids who could have a home but don’t because of unnecessary barriers.”

Participants’ adoption journeys unfolded as complex narratives filled with highs and lows. The initial excitement of deciding to adopt often gave way to frustration during the home study process, where bureaucratic inefficiencies and discriminatory practices were common. Some parents faced significant delays due to lost paperwork or redundant requirements, while others encountered explicit bias from caseworkers or agency staff. These challenges were particularly acute in counties with conservative leadership or faith-based agency dominance.

For those pursuing private adoptions, failed matches with birth mothers and high costs were recurring obstacles. On the foster care side, participants contended with lengthy court processes, during which birth parents’ rights were adjudicated before a child could be adopted. Positive turning points included supportive interactions with progressive agencies, affirming social workers, and successful court rulings. These moments provided much-needed validation, as one participant reflected, “Finding an agency that aligned with our values made all the difference. It reassured us that we weren’t alone.”

The overarching moral emphasizes the urgent need for systemic reforms to create a more inclusive and equitable adoption process for LGBTQ+ families. Participants consistently advocated for more affordable adoption services, particularly in the private

sector, where costs can be prohibitively high. They also called for streamlined processes within DFCS, including electronic tracking of paperwork and improved caseworker training to reduce turnover and enhance cultural competence.

Faith-based organizations, often central to adoption services, were identified as a key area for reform. Participants recommended stricter oversight to ensure these agencies adhere to inclusive policies, with penalties for discriminatory practices. Systemic advocacy was also highlighted as essential to protecting and expanding LGBTQ+ adoption rights, with participants urging local, state, and federal action to address existing disparities.

Participants employed various narrative techniques to contextualize their experiences, providing a rich lens through which to understand the challenges and triumphs of LGBTQ+ adoption journeys in Georgia.

Causal stories were particularly prevalent, as participants identified specific systemic barriers and connected them directly to delays, disruptions, and setbacks in their adoption processes. For instance, participants frequently pointed to bureaucratic inefficiencies within DFCS, such as frequent caseworker turnover, as a significant impediment to timely adoption finalization. One participant recounted, “Every time a new caseworker came on board, it felt like starting over. We had to reintroduce ourselves, resend documents, and explain everything all over again.” Such stories underscored how systemic flaws not only hindered procedural efficiency but also created emotional fatigue, as prospective parents were repeatedly forced to navigate a fragmented and

disorganized system. Similarly, the high costs associated with private adoptions were framed as structural barriers that limited accessibility.

Participants described how financial burdens, including travel for out-of-state adoptions and attorney fees, disproportionately affected LGBTQ+ families, many of whom already face unique socioeconomic challenges.

Emotional appeals were another prominent narrative strategy, as participants framed their experiences within a context of resilience, determination, and hope. These narratives often juxtaposed the joy and fulfillment of forming a family with the deep frustration and disappointment of facing discrimination and systemic inequities. For example, participants described the emotional toll of being questioned about their suitability as parents during the home study process, even after completing rigorous requirements. One participant shared, “It felt like they were questioning our humanity, not just our ability to parent.” Such experiences highlighted the emotional labor required to persist through a system that frequently reinforced heteronormative biases. Despite these challenges, participants often emphasized their unwavering commitment to their family-building goals. As another parent reflected, “Even after Obergefell, we had to prove ourselves over and over. It’s exhausting, but we never gave up.”

These emotional appeals not only captured the participants’ personal struggles but also served as a call to action for broader systemic change. Through framing themselves as resilient yet vulnerable, participants highlighted the need for reforms that reduce unnecessary barriers and foster a more inclusive adoption environment. Their narratives revealed a duality of emotions: on the one hand, the joy and pride of parenthood; on the

other, the exhaustion and disillusionment that comes from confronting ongoing discrimination and systemic resistance.

In utilizing causal stories and emotional appeals, participants were able to articulate a comprehensive critique of the adoption system, making their experiences relatable and compelling. These narrative techniques not only validated their own journeys but also shed light on the broader implications of systemic flaws, emphasizing the urgent need for reforms that uphold equity and inclusion in adoption practices.

Summary

In summary, the findings reveal how institutional interactions profoundly shape LGBTQ+ adoption experiences in Georgia. Supportive practices empower and validate prospective parents, fostering positive outcomes and a sense of belonging, while discriminatory or inefficient systems perpetuate inequities that hinder the adoption journey. Participants identified specific challenges, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, financial burdens, and the exclusionary practices of certain faith-based agencies. To address these issues, they recommended targeted reforms such as standardized cultural competency training for adoption professionals, electronic systems to streamline DFCS processes, and stricter oversight of faith-based agencies to ensure inclusivity. These measures, combined with systemic advocacy efforts, have the potential to create a more equitable adoption landscape for LGBTQ+ families in Georgia and beyond.

In centering participants' stories within the NPF, this analysis underscores the critical need for comprehensive policy and institutional reforms to ensure all families have an equal opportunity to grow and thrive through adoption. These findings not only

illuminate the systemic barriers faced by LGBTQ+ adoptive parents but also provide actionable insights to drive social change.

Chapter 5 will expand on these findings, going deeper into their implications for practice, policy, and future research. Chapter 5 will discuss how these results align with existing literature, propose specific strategies to address the identified challenges, and highlight areas for continued advocacy and exploration to advance equity in adoption practices.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia, focusing on the barriers and success factors they encountered, as well as the influence of federal, state, and local policies on their journeys. Despite the growing recognition of LGBTQ+ families, systemic inequities and cultural biases continue to shape their adoption experiences. Nonetheless, their voices remain largely absent from academic literature and policy discourse. By centering the narratives of LGBTQ+ fathers, I aimed to fill this gap by providing a platform for their stories and uncovering insights to inform equitable adoption practices.

Grounded in the NPF, I analyzed participants' personal stories to uncover broader systemic and policy-related dynamics. The narrative research design allowed for an in-depth exploration of the complexities of the adoption process, illuminating the interplay between personal resilience, systemic barriers, and institutional practices. I pursued two primary objectives. First, I sought to highlight the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia, including experiences of discrimination, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inconsistencies in policy enforcement. Second, I aimed to identify the strategies and support systems that facilitated their success, such as advocacy efforts, community networks, and the role of supportive agencies. By achieving these objectives, I contribute to a deeper understanding of how adoption policies and practices can be reimagined to better serve LGBTQ+ families, fostering greater equity and inclusion in family-building efforts.

The findings from Chapter 4 revealed important insights into the experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers navigating the adoption process in Georgia, addressing both barriers and success factors (RQ1) and the impact of policies (RQ2). Participants faced considerable obstacles, including discrimination by private and state-run adoption agencies, often influenced by biases favoring heterosexual couples. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, such as excessive paperwork, long wait times, and inconsistent application of policies across counties, created additional challenges, particularly for those in rural areas. Cultural and religious biases further compounded these difficulties, with some participants encountering resistance rooted in conservative interpretations of family values and the "best interest of the child" standard.

Despite these barriers, participants identified several factors that facilitated their success. Support networks, including advocacy organizations and peer groups, were instrumental in guiding them through the adoption process. Working with LGBTQ+-affirming agencies or social workers also contributed to more positive experiences. Many participants highlighted the importance of resilience and self-advocacy in overcoming systemic challenges, highlighting their determination to build families in the face of adversity.

Policies at the federal, state, and local levels significantly influenced participants' adoption experiences, often shaping the trajectory of their journeys in profound ways. The 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision marked a critical milestone, legally enabling LGBTQ+ couples to adopt jointly; however, its impact was uneven, as some agencies and counties were slow to implement the ruling. At the state level, participants encountered

inconsistent enforcement of anti-discrimination protections, with limited mechanisms to hold agencies accountable for bias. Religious exemption policies further complicated the landscape, allowing some agencies to deny services based on faith-based objections. Geographic disparities also played a key role, with urban centers like Atlanta offering comparatively inclusive practices, while rural counties posed heightened challenges due to cultural conservatism and a scarcity of LGBTQ+-affirming adoption resources. These findings underscore the connection between policy environments and the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers navigating the adoption process.

Thematic analysis of participants' narratives highlighted systemic disparities in the adoption process, driven by inconsistent policies and cultural biases. The presence or absence of LGBTQ+-affirming practices within agencies significantly shaped their experiences, pointing to the need for cultural competency training. Furthermore, participants' stories reflected resilience and advocacy, offering powerful counter-narratives to stereotypes about LGBTQ+ parenting. These findings underscore the interplay between individual determination, systemic barriers, and policy impacts, emphasizing the urgent need for reforms to foster a more equitable adoption landscape for LGBTQ+ families.

The findings of this study, analyzed through the lens of the NPF, revealed how the personal stories of LGBTQ+ fathers navigating the adoption process in Georgia reflect broader systemic and policy-related challenges. Participants' narratives included key elements of the NPF such as characters, plots, and morals that illustrate their experiences and the policy environment shaping their journeys.

The characters in participants' stories included themselves as protagonists (advocates for their families and symbols of resilience in the face of adversity), villains (discriminatory agencies, bureaucratic systems, and biased policies), and victims (children awaiting adoption and LGBTQ+ families denied opportunities). The plots often focused on overcoming systemic barriers such as agency bias, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and geographic disparities. These challenges were met with themes of resilience, advocacy, and support from inclusive networks, which helped participants successfully navigate the adoption process.

The moral of the stories consistently emphasizes the need for systemic reform and greater equity in adoption practices. Participants' narratives highlight the critical importance of policy consistency, cultural competency training for adoption agency staff, and the enforcement of antidiscrimination laws. Their stories also underscore the transformative impact of federal rulings like *Obergefell v. Hodges* while revealing the uneven application of these policies at the state and local levels.

The findings of this study highlight several critical policy recommendations aimed at addressing systemic barriers and promoting equity in the adoption process for LGBTQ+ families in Georgia. First, standardizing adoption practices across counties is essential to eliminate inconsistencies in how policies are interpreted and enforced. A statewide framework should be established to ensure uniformity in eligibility criteria, home study requirements, and placement procedures, thereby providing equal opportunities for prospective parents regardless of their location. Second, mandatory cultural competency training for adoption agency staff is crucial. This training should

focus on addressing implicit biases, enhancing awareness of LGBTQ+ issues, and promoting equitable service delivery, with LGBTQ+ advocacy groups playing a key role in its development and implementation.

Strengthening the enforcement of antidiscrimination policies is another critical step. This includes introducing transparent reporting systems for prospective parents to file complaints and implementing penalties for agencies that fail to comply with these protections. Additionally, addressing religious exemption policies is vital to ensure that all prospective parents, regardless of sexual orientation, have equal access to adoption opportunities. Closing loopholes that allow agencies to deny services based on religious beliefs would significantly reduce discriminatory practices. Finally, targeted outreach and resource allocation are necessary to support rural LGBTQ+ communities. These families face heightened challenges, including limited access to LGBTQ+-affirming agencies and support networks. Addressing these disparities is essential to creating a more inclusive and equitable adoption landscape in Georgia and nationally.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings from this study both affirm and extend existing knowledge in the field of LGBTQ+ family studies and adoption policy, while also challenging certain assumptions present in the peer-reviewed literature outlined in Chapter 2. The persistence of systemic barriers, including discrimination, bias, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, aligns with well-documented challenges faced by LGBTQ+ families in the adoption process. Consistent with studies by Farr and Goldberg (2018), participants in this study described instances of overt prejudice and subtle microaggressions from adoption agency staff,

often stemming from heteronormative biases. Religious exemptions, which allow agencies to deny services based on religious beliefs, were frequently cited as significant barriers. This reflects the systemic entrenchment of discrimination identified in the literature, particularly in conservative states. Bureaucratic inefficiencies such as long wait times, excessive paperwork, and inconsistent policy enforcement further complicated the adoption process, echoing findings by Riggs (2020) and Broadhurst et al. (2018) highlighting how these obstacles disproportionately impact marginalized groups. Additionally, the value of support networks, including LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations and peer groups, was strongly emphasized by participants, reinforcing the critical role these networks play in providing guidance, emotional support, and practical resources during the adoption process, as highlighted by Goldberg et al. (2019).

However, this study also revealed findings that challenge certain assumptions in the existing literature. While national and statewide studies often generalize experiences across geographic regions, I uncovered significant disparities within Georgia. Participants in rural areas reported heightened challenges, including cultural conservatism, limited access to LGBTQ+-affirming resources, and increased resistance from agencies and community members. These rural-urban differences underscore the importance of considering local contexts when examining adoption experiences. Contrary to the prevailing narrative that religious exemptions are insurmountable barriers, some participants demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability by leveraging alternative agencies, advocacy networks, and informal support systems to successfully navigate the adoption process. This nuanced finding suggests that while systemic barriers remain

formidable, individual agency and strategic resource utilization can mitigate their impact, a perspective not fully explored in previous research.

This study also extends the existing literature in several critical ways. The application of the NPF provides a unique lens through which to understand participants' experiences, offering a structured approach to analyzing how personal stories illuminate systemic inequities and inform policy reforms. Participants' narratives included key elements of the NPF: they positioned themselves as advocates (heroes) confronting systemic bias (villains) and emphasized the moral imperative of equity and inclusion in family-building practices. These narratives also illustrated how personal resilience and advocacy intersect with broader policy dynamics, providing a richer understanding of how individual experiences can influence public discourse and policy development.

Moreover, this study highlighted the importance of intersectionality in understanding adoption experiences. While prior research has examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ parents broadly, I examined how intersecting identities such as race, geographic location, and sexual orientation collectively shaped participants' experiences. For LGBTQ+ fathers of color, the compounded impact of racial and sexual orientation discrimination created unique challenges that were distinct from those faced by their white counterparts. These findings extend the work of Levitt et al. (2020) by providing evidence of the connection between multiple forms of marginalization in the adoption process. Additionally, I was able to present information on the ongoing impact of the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges decision. While the ruling was transformative in enabling LGBTQ+ couples to adopt jointly, participants' experiences revealed that its

implementation remains uneven across Georgia. Many rural agencies and local officials were slow to adjust their practices, creating disparities that continue to affect LGBTQ+ families.

The study's findings also emphasized the dynamic interplay between systemic barriers and individual agency. Participants consistently demonstrated resilience, resourcefulness, and advocacy in the face of discrimination and bias, challenging stereotypes about LGBTQ+ parenting. These narratives not only countered prevailing biases but also provided powerful evidence for advocacy efforts aimed at promoting equity and inclusion in adoption policies and practices. Furthermore, by applying the NPF to these narratives, the study contributes to a growing body of work that uses policy frameworks to analyze the lived experiences of marginalized groups, offering an important methodological contribution to the field.

Participants' narratives prominently featured themselves as protagonists or heroes, actively advocating for their rights and those of their families. This aligns with the NPF's emphasis on identifying central figures in policy narratives who drive change or challenge existing structures (Crow & Jones, 2018a; Schlaufer et al., 2022). Many participants described their perseverance and resourcefulness as critical to overcoming systemic obstacles, such as navigating discriminatory agencies and addressing bureaucratic inefficiencies. These personal accounts framed their journey as one of resilience and determination. Simultaneously, the villains in their stories were often systemic actors, including biased adoption agencies, social workers, and state policies that perpetuate inequities. Religious exemption laws were highlighted as emblematic of

systemic barriers, consistently creating hurdles that required navigation. Additionally, participants identified victims in their narratives, especially the children in foster care who remain without stable homes due to systemic discrimination against LGBTQ+ families. By positioning children as victims, participants underscored the societal harm caused by these inequities and reinforced the moral imperative to reform adoption practices.

The plots of participants' stories often revolved around overcoming systemic barriers to achieve family formation. For instance, many participants described navigating convoluted and discriminatory policies, challenging cultural biases, and leveraging support networks to achieve their goals. These narratives portrayed adoption as a process fraught with challenges but ultimately one that could be navigated through determination and advocacy. Subplots that reflected geographic disparities emerged, with rural participants facing heightened resistance from agencies and community members, contrasting with the relatively inclusive environments in urban areas like Atlanta. These subplots illustrated the localized nature of systemic barriers, highlighting the importance of considering geographic contexts when interpreting adoption experiences.

The moral of the story, as consistently articulated by participants, was the urgent need for equity in adoption practices. Their narratives emphasized the necessity of standardizing policies, enforcing antidiscrimination laws, and promoting inclusive practices within adoption systems. These calls for systemic reform align with the NPF's focus on how narratives advocate for specific policy changes. The participants' emphasis

on fairness, inclusion, and children's rights reinforced the ethical and societal implications of addressing systemic inequities in adoption.

On a systemic level, participants' microlevel narratives reflected macrolevel policy dynamics. For example, individual experiences of discrimination by agencies were not isolated incidents but indicative of entrenched systemic inequities, including weak enforcement of antidiscrimination policies and the persistence of religious exemption laws. This aligns with the NPF's principle that personal narratives can illuminate broader systemic issues. The localized application of federal protections, such as the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, also emerged as a key theme. Participants highlighted how inconsistent implementation of this landmark ruling created unequal experiences across Georgia, particularly for those in rural areas. These findings underscore how policy narratives can manifest differently based on local contexts.

Intersectionality further enriched the narratives, adding complexity to the findings. LGBTQ+ fathers of color described unique challenges stemming from the compounded effects of racial and sexual orientation discrimination. Their stories highlighted the importance of considering multiple intersecting identities when analyzing adoption experiences. This finding extends the NPF's application by demonstrating how overlapping systemic inequities can shape individual narratives, providing a more nuanced understanding of policy impacts.

Importantly, participants' narratives also revealed the potential for narrative power to drive policy reform. When participants frame themselves as advocates and highlighting the societal harm caused by systemic inequities, they demonstrate how

personal stories could humanize policy debates and build public support for reform. For instance, by positioning children as victims of an inequitable system, participants shifted the focus from LGBTQ+ rights to the broader moral imperative of ensuring stable homes for children. This reframing adds power to their advocacy for policy changes and promotes a deeper understanding of the societal implications of adoption inequities.

Interpreting these findings stays within the scope of the data and study objectives, preventing overgeneralization. Although the NPF offered a valuable framework for understanding the participants' experiences, I do not assert that my findings are universally applicable to all LGBTQ+ families or adoption contexts. Instead, my study emphasizes the specific challenges faced by LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia and their significance to broader policy and social dynamics.

Additionally, in situating the findings within the NPF, I offer a detailed analysis of how personal narratives intersect with systemic issues and policy reform efforts. The framework's emphasis on characters, plots, and morals enabled a structured interpretation of participants' experiences, revealing the power of individual stories to shed light on systemic inequities and advocate for more equitable adoption practices. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of adoption for LGBTQ+ families and underscore the potential for narrative-driven change.

Limitations of the Study

While the study was designed with robust measures to ensure trustworthiness and rigor, several limitations became apparent during its execution, underscoring the challenges of conducting qualitative research on sensitive and nuanced topics. These

limitations, which impacted the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study, provide critical insights into the difficulties faced in capturing and interpreting participants' lived experiences. Addressing these limitations not only provides transparency about the study's methodological boundaries but also enhances the contextual understanding of its findings. In the section that follows, I reflect on these issues and their potential influence on the research process. This discussion underscores the importance of acknowledging both the strengths and constraints inherent in qualitative inquiry. These limitations also inform future research efforts, offering lessons on refining methodologies and addressing similar challenges in studies focused on marginalized populations. I will also reflect on the earlier discussion in Chapter 1 to ensure a balanced presentation of the study's scope, reinforcing the integrity of this research while highlighting its contributions within the boundaries of the design I used to carry it out.

Credibility

One of the key limitations to the credibility of the study was the potential for recall bias, as participants were asked to recount their adoption experiences retrospectively. This reliance on memory introduced inherent challenges, as the passage of time, the emotional intensity of certain events, and external influences may have shaped how participants remembered and narrated their experiences. For example, participants may have unintentionally emphasized certain moments while downplaying or omitting others, resulting in a narrative that reflected perception rather than an entirely accurate recounting of events. This issue is particularly salient in qualitative research that

relies on personal accounts, as emotions, social context, and subsequent experiences often influence memory. The potential for participants to reinterpret past events in light of their current perspectives further complicated the accuracy of their narratives (Arizmendi et al., 2024; Sanghera et al., 2024).

Compounding this limitation was the variability in narrative depth among participants. While some individuals provided rich, detailed, and reflective accounts, others offered more concise or fragmented stories. This variability may have been influenced by several factors, including participants' comfort with storytelling, familiarity with the interview process, or willingness to share personal information. Some participants may have felt constrained by the emotional nature of the topic, while others might have lacked clarity in recalling specific details. These inconsistencies could have resulted in uneven data, with certain participants' experiences being more comprehensively represented in the findings than those of others.

To address these challenges and enhance credibility, the study incorporated a semi-structured interview design that allowed for flexibility while ensuring that critical topics were consistently covered. The interview guide included targeted prompts designed to encourage specificity and elicit detailed recollections. For example, participants were asked to describe key moments in their adoption journey, such as initial interactions with agencies, specific challenges encountered, and their reflections on policy impacts. These prompts were supplemented with follow-up questions to probe for additional insights and to clarify or expand on incomplete or ambiguous responses. The iterative nature of the interviews, where participants were encouraged to revisit and

elaborate on their narratives, helped to mitigate the effects of memory lapses and facilitated a deeper exploration of their experiences.

Despite these efforts, the potential for memory distortions remained an inherent limitation of the retrospective design. It is crucial to acknowledge that participants' narratives, while highly valuable, may not represent a fully accurate account of events. Instead, they provide a subjective perspective through which individuals interpret their experiences, highlighting the interplay between personal interpretation and lived reality. This subjectivity, while a limitation regarding factual accuracy, is also a strength in narrative research, as it captures the authentic voices and meanings that participants attribute to their experiences (Adhikari, 2021; Bailey & Graves, 2019).

Future research could address this limitation by incorporating triangulation methods, such as collecting supplementary data from agency records, policy documents, or contemporaneous notes kept by participants during the adoption process. These additional data sources could provide a more comprehensive context for participants' narratives and help corroborate their accounts. Furthermore, conducting longitudinal studies that follow participants through the adoption process in real time could minimize recall bias and capture the evolution of their experiences as they unfold.

Transferability

The study's focus on LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia introduced several limitations regarding transferability, raising important considerations about the broader applicability of its findings. While participants' experiences provided valuable insights into the adoption process, these insights are deeply rooted in the specific sociopolitical and

cultural landscape of Georgia. The state's unique context, characterized by a mix of progressive urban areas like Atlanta and more conservative rural regions, significantly shaped participants' narratives. This duality reflects a dynamic tension between inclusive policies in certain parts of the state and entrenched cultural conservatism in others, creating a context that may differ markedly from that of other states or regions. Consequently, the findings may not fully generalize to LGBTQ+ families navigating adoption processes in areas with different legal frameworks, policy environments, or cultural attitudes.

Another limitation to transferability arises from the characteristics of the participant pool. While the study aimed to recruit a diverse range of LGBTQ+ fathers, the sample may not encompass the full spectrum of experiences within this population. Factors such as socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic background, family structure, and geographic residence likely influenced participants' adoption journeys, but these dimensions may not have been equally represented in the data. For instance, LGBTQ+ fathers of color often encounter compounded challenges due to intersecting racial and sexual orientation discrimination, whereas families in rural areas may face greater cultural resistance compared to those in urban settings. These variations highlight the complexity and heterogeneity of experiences among LGBTQ+ fathers, which the study could not completely capture.

Efforts were made to enhance transferability by providing rich, thick descriptions of participants' contexts and experiences. Detailed accounts of participants' interactions with agencies, community attitudes, and systemic barriers were included to allow readers

to assess how the findings might apply to other settings. These descriptions serve as a critical tool for contextualizing the study's findings and enabling readers to draw meaningful parallels between the participants' experiences and other adoption contexts. For instance, the challenges related to religious exemptions and inconsistent policy enforcement may resonate with LGBTQ+ families in other conservative states, even if the specific circumstances differ.

Despite these measures, the contextual details of the study remain a limitation that must be acknowledged. Georgia's legal and cultural environment provided the backdrop for participants' experiences, and the findings reflect this distinctive setting. The study does not claim to generalize its results to all LGBTQ+ families or adoption systems. Instead, it offers a nuanced examination of adoption experiences within a particular context, contributing valuable insights that can inform broader discussions about equity in family-building practices.

Future research could broaden the geographic and demographic scope of similar studies to tackle the transferability issue. Examining the adoption experiences of LGBTQ+ families in different states or regions with varying policy environments would provide a comparative perspective and help identify commonalities and differences across contexts. Moreover, studies that encompass larger and more demographically diverse samples could offer a more thorough understanding of the intersecting factors that influence adoption outcomes. Longitudinal research designs that follow families through the adoption process and into post-adoption experiences could also enhance insights into how systemic and cultural factors evolve over time and across various settings.

Dependability

Dependability was another important consideration in this study, particularly due to the reliance on remote data collection methods. These methods were chosen for logistical and practical reasons, offering flexibility and accessibility to participants throughout Georgia. However, the use of virtual interviews introduced certain limitations that may have affected the consistency and depth of the data collected. Establishing a sense of trust and comfort through a virtual medium can be more challenging than in-person interactions, potentially impacting participants' willingness to share deeply personal or sensitive experiences. Nonverbal cues, often critical for establishing rapport and understanding, may have been diminished in a virtual setting, further complicating the dynamic between the researcher and participant.

Another factor impacting dependability was the variability in interview duration. Some participants engaged in extended, detailed conversations, offering comprehensive narratives that provided rich insights into their adoption journeys. In contrast, others offered briefer responses, which may have limited the breadth and depth of data collected. Participants' comfort levels, availability, or understanding of the questions could have influenced this variability. While all participants were asked the same core questions, the depth of their responses varied, potentially introducing inconsistencies in the data.

To mitigate these challenges, I implemented several strategies aimed at enhancing dependability. First, efforts were made to create a welcoming and supportive virtual interview environment. Clear communication about the study's purpose, confidentiality

measures, and the importance of participants' contributions was emphasized at the outset of each interview. This transparency helped to establish trust and encourage openness. Second, I used a standardized interview guide to ensure that core topics and questions were consistently addressed across all interviews. This guide provided a structured framework while allowing for flexibility to explore unique aspects of each participant's narrative.

The iterative nature of the interviews also contributed to dependability. Participants were encouraged to revisit and expand on their responses, ensuring that critical themes were thoroughly explored. Follow-up questions and clarifications were used to address ambiguities and fill gaps in the data. Additionally, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, allowing for detailed review and analysis. This systematic approach ensured that the data collection process was as consistent as possible despite the inherent variability in participant responses.

While these measures enhanced dependability, it is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in remote data collection. The absence of physical presence may have affected the depth of connection between researcher and participant, particularly in discussing sensitive topics such as discrimination and bias in the adoption process. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating mixed methods that combine virtual and in-person interviews, allowing for greater flexibility while capturing the benefits of face-to-face interaction.

Confirmability

My positionality as an LGBTQ+ community member and adoptive father introduced both opportunities and challenges to the confirmability of the study. On one hand, this shared identity fostered rapport with participants, creating an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding that enriched the data collection process. Participants often expressed appreciation for being interviewed by someone who could relate to their experiences, which likely encouraged openness and honesty in their narratives. Additionally, my personal experiences provided nuanced insights into the adoption process, enabling a deeper understanding of participants' challenges, successes, and perspectives.

On the other hand, this positionality posed a risk of introducing researcher bias into the analysis and framing of findings. My personal experiences and perspectives could have influenced the interpretation of participants' narratives, potentially leading to selective emphasis on themes that resonated with my own journey or an unconscious minimization of themes less aligned with my perspective. This dual role of insider and researcher required careful reflection to ensure that personal biases did not overshadow the authentic voices of participants.

To address these risks and enhance confirmability, I employed reflexive journaling throughout the research process. This practice involved systematically documenting thoughts, reactions, and potential biases during data collection and analysis. By maintaining a continuous record of reflexive observations, I was able to identify and acknowledge moments where personal perspectives may have shaped interpretations.

This iterative process encouraged self-awareness and provided a mechanism for critically examining the influence of positionality on the research.

In addition to reflexivity, I conducted member checking by inviting participants to review and provide feedback on my interpretations of their narratives. This step ensured that my understanding accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives, adding an additional layer of validation to the findings. Peer debriefing sessions with colleagues further strengthened confirmability by offering external perspectives, challenging assumptions, and encouraging alternative explanations for the data. These sessions ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the evidence rather than being overly influenced by personal experiences.

While these measures significantly enhance confirmability, it is important to acknowledge that the influence of researcher subjectivity cannot be entirely eliminated in qualitative research. The process of interpreting narratives inherently involves a degree of subjectivity, as researchers bring their own lenses and frameworks to it. However, the transparency afforded by reflexive journaling, member checking, and peer debriefing ensures that these influences are documented and critically examined, thereby mitigating their impact on the study's findings.

Addressing Limitations

To address the limitations identified and enhance the study's overall trustworthiness, several mitigation strategies were carefully implemented throughout the research process. These strategies were designed to uphold the rigor of the study while navigating the inherent complexities of qualitative research.

A key strategy involved using semi-structured interviews, which balanced structure and flexibility. This approach allowed me to maintain consistency in the topics covered across all participants while also providing the freedom to explore unique aspects of each participant's narrative. The standardized interview guide ensured that core themes such as barriers, success factors, and policy impacts were consistently addressed, minimizing variability in the data collected. At the same time, the semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own words, fostering authenticity and richness in the data.

To enhance reflexivity and confirmability, I employed reflexive journaling throughout the study. This practice provided an ongoing mechanism for self-reflection, enabling me to document personal thoughts, potential biases, and evolving interpretations of the data. Reflexive journaling also served as a tool for identifying moments where my positionality as an LGBTQ+ community member and adoptive father might have influenced the analysis. By systematically reflecting on these moments, I was able to approach the data with greater objectivity and transparency.

To further strengthen the findings, I conducted member checking by inviting participants to review my interpretations of their narratives. This process ensured that their perspectives were accurately represented and addressed any potential misinterpretations in the analysis. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions with colleagues provided an external perspective, challenged assumptions, encouraged alternative viewpoints, and validated key findings. These debriefing sessions contributed significantly to the study's credibility and confirmability.

To address limitations related to transferability, the study included rich, detailed descriptions of participants' contexts and experiences. It provided comprehensive accounts of participants' interactions with adoption agencies, systemic challenges, and support networks to enable readers to evaluate how the findings can be applied to other settings. The study examined participants' narratives through the lens of their geographic, cultural, and policy environments, offering a nuanced understanding of LGBTQ+ adoption experiences in Georgia and insights that can be effectively applied to other contexts.

Standardized protocols were a vital component of the study's design. They ensured that all participants received consistent treatment and that data collection methods were applied uniformly. From the recruitment process to the interview format and data analysis procedures, these protocols minimized inconsistencies and strengthened the reliability of the findings. For instance, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, providing a clear and accurate record of participants' narratives for analysis.

Despite these efforts, the limitations noted, including recall bias, variability in narrative depth, and the contextual specificity of the study, underscore the inherent challenges of qualitative research. These challenges emphasize the need for transparent reporting, both to acknowledge the boundaries of the study's findings and to offer a roadmap for future researchers aiming to build on this work.

Recommendations

Building on the strengths and limitations of this study and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, several recommendations for future research are proposed to enhance our understanding of LGBTQ+ family-building and adoption processes. Chapter 2 emphasized the critical role of sociopolitical and cultural contexts in shaping adoption experiences. Considering this, future research could broaden the geographic scope to investigate adoption experiences in states with contrasting policy environments, such as progressive states like California and more restrictive states like Texas. Studies comparing these regions could shed light on how state-level policies and cultural attitudes shape the barriers and success factors for LGBTQ+ families. This recommendation aligns with previous research (e.g., Farr & Goldberg, 2018), which highlights the importance of state-specific policies in LGBTQ+ adoption outcomes.

Chapter 2 also emphasized the importance of intersectionality in understanding family-building among LGBTQ+ individuals; however, these intersections were only partially explored in this study. Future research could explicitly focus on the experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers of color, who encounter compounded barriers due to systemic racism and heteronormativity. Studies like those by Levitt et al. (2020) have highlighted how intersecting identities amplify challenges in adoption, particularly for marginalized groups within the LGBTQ+ community. Research that examines how race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation intersect to shape adoption journeys would enhance existing knowledge and address gaps identified in the literature.

The retrospective nature of this study, while valuable for understanding participants' reflections, introduces limitations such as recall bias. Longitudinal research that follows LGBTQ+ families throughout the adoption process and into post-adoption experiences could provide real-time perspectives, reducing reliance on memory and capturing how challenges and successes evolve. This approach would address the gaps noted in Chapter 2, where few studies have examined the dynamic and ongoing nature of adoption experiences. Such research could also explore how policy changes and advocacy efforts influence adoption outcomes over time, building on studies by Mallory et al. (2021), which emphasize the need for temporal context in analyzing policy impacts.

Post-adoption experiences, a theme underexplored in Chapter 2, represent another critical area for further research. While existing literature primarily focuses on the adoption process, future studies could examine how LGBTQ+ families integrate into their communities, interact with schools and healthcare systems, and navigate long-term impacts of systemic discrimination. Goldberg et al. (2019) identified post-adoption support as a key factor in family stability, suggesting that exploring these experiences could provide a more holistic understanding of the systemic barriers LGBTQ+ families face.

Participants in rural areas of this study reported unique challenges, including heightened cultural resistance and limited access to LGBTQ+-affirming resources, consistent with themes found in existing literature. Future research could focus exclusively on rural LGBTQ+ families to deepen the understanding of their distinct experiences and strategies for navigating conservative cultural settings. These studies

would build on the findings by Riggs (2020), who highlighted the geographic disparities in access to inclusive adoption services.

Adoption agency practices emerged as pivotal in shaping participants' experiences. Future studies could investigate how cultural competency training, policy enforcement, and staff attitudes impact outcomes for LGBTQ+ families. Additionally, as noted in Chapter 2, federal policies like the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges decision have been transformative but inconsistently implemented. Research examining how federal protections are interpreted and applied at state and local levels could provide insights into ensuring equitable access to adoption. This recommendation aligns with the work of Sutherland et al. (2023), which emphasizes the role of policy enforcement in addressing systemic inequities.

Ultimately, research comparing experiences across various LGBTQ+ family structures, such as lesbian mothers, transgender parents, and nonbinary caregivers, would yield a more thorough understanding of adoption barriers and successes. Chapter 2 emphasized the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community and the different levels of acceptance and challenges faced by various groups. Examining these variations would fill gaps in the literature and provide insights for advocacy and policy reform. Furthermore, investigating the use of personal narratives in advocacy efforts, as suggested by Mallory et al. (2021), could showcase how storytelling campaigns shape public opinion and facilitate legislative change to advance equity in adoption practices.

Implications

Social Change

The findings of this study hold significant potential to contribute to positive social change across various levels: individual, family, organizational, and societal/policy. By focusing on the narratives of LGBTQ+ fathers navigating the adoption process in Georgia, this research emphasizes systemic barriers and success factors, providing actionable insights to promote equity and inclusion in family-building practices.

At the individual level, this study amplifies the voices of LGBTQ+ fathers, validating their experiences and highlighting their resilience and advocacy. The narratives documented in this research provide practical guidance and inspiration for other LGBTQ+ individuals considering adoption. By equipping prospective adoptive parents with knowledge about potential challenges and strategies for overcoming them, the study fosters empowerment, confidence, and readiness among LGBTQ+ individuals to pursue adoption. This empowerment not only benefits individuals as they navigate the adoption process but also lays the foundation for building strong, affirming family units.

Moving to the family level, the study emphasizes the importance of creating environments that allow LGBTQ+ families to thrive. The research identifies systemic barriers, such as discrimination and inconsistent policies, and advocates for practices that promote equitable access to adoption opportunities. These findings directly affect family stability, encouraging the development of policies and resources that support long-term well-being. Additionally, the focus on post-adoption needs underscores the necessity of strong support systems, including counseling services, community networks, and

educational resources, which are vital for fostering the growth and success of LGBTQ+ parents and their children.

The impact extends beyond families to the organizational level, where adoption agencies and institutions play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of LGBTQ+ families. The study offers valuable insights into how organizational practices, such as cultural competency training and equitable policy enforcement, can mitigate biases and inconsistencies in service delivery. These recommendations not only ensure fair treatment of LGBTQ+ families but also enhance the quality of services for all prospective parents. Additionally, advocacy organizations can leverage these findings to design targeted programs and campaigns that address the unique needs of LGBTQ+ adoptive parents, thereby strengthening their support networks and access to essential resources.

At the societal and policy level, the findings contribute to broader efforts to advance equality and inclusion for LGBTQ+ families. By highlighting systemic inequities in the adoption process, the study provides compelling evidence for policy reforms aimed at addressing discrimination and enforcing anti-bias measures. For instance, the uneven implementation of federal protections, such as the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, emphasizes the need for consistent policy enforcement and the elimination of religious exemptions that disproportionately harm LGBTQ+ families. These insights can guide advocacy efforts, influencing policymakers to create equitable frameworks for adoption and foster a more inclusive legal and policy environment.

The societal implications go beyond policy reform, offering the potential to shift public perceptions of LGBTQ+ parenting. Participants' narratives challenge negative

stereotypes and demonstrate their dedication, capability, and resilience in providing loving homes for children. These stories can foster empathy and support among the broader public, gradually transforming societal attitudes. Over time, this cultural change can reduce stigma and promote broader acceptance of diverse family structures, reinforcing the broader push for equality.

Methodological Implications

This study's findings provide significant methodological implications for understanding LGBTQ+ family-building and adoption policy. These implications emphasize the study's contributions to research design, conceptual frameworks, and the advancement of knowledge in the field.

Methodologically, the study illustrates the value of a narrative research design in capturing the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers navigating the adoption process. The use of semi-structured interviews proved particularly effective in eliciting detailed and personal narratives while maintaining consistency in data collection. This approach demonstrated how qualitative methods can uncover rich insights into complex and sensitive topics, such as systemic discrimination and family-building within marginalized populations. Additionally, the study emphasized the importance of reflexive practices, including journaling, member checking, and peer debriefing, as tools for managing researcher bias. These strategies were especially critical given my shared identity with participants, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the data while acknowledging my positionality. These methodological practices offer a robust

framework for future qualitative studies on LGBTQ+ experiences and marginalized groups more broadly.

Conceptually, the application of the NPF illuminated how participants' stories reflected broader systemic and policy dynamics. The study identified key narrative elements such as characters, plots, and morals, demonstrating how personal experiences can reveal systemic barriers and inform policy reform. For instance, participants positioned themselves as advocates (heroes), highlighted discriminatory practices by agencies (villains), and underscored the moral imperative of equity in adoption. By applying the NPF through an intersectional lens, the study extended the framework's utility, revealing how overlapping identities (e.g., sexual orientation, race, and socioeconomic status) compounded the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ fathers. This approach provided a more nuanced understanding of how multiple systems of oppression intersect, offering a valuable contribution to the literature on policy narratives and marginalized populations.

Additionally, the study addresses noted gaps in the literature on LGBTQ+ adoption, particularly in conservative sociopolitical contexts like Georgia. The findings provide detailed insights into the barriers and success factors experienced by LGBTQ+ fathers, including discriminatory practices, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the transformative role of supportive networks. Through documenting these experiences, the study contributes to a growing body of research that examines how systemic inequities impact LGBTQ+ families. Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of federal policies, such as the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, while highlighting the

uneven implementation of these protections at the state and local levels. This inconsistency underscores the need for further research on how federal rulings translate into practice and their real-world impacts on marginalized populations. The study also sheds light on rural-urban disparities in access to inclusive adoption services, an underexplored area that warrants deeper investigation.

Finally, the study's emphasis on post-adoption challenges and the long-term needs of LGBTQ+ families highlights areas for future research. Examining how LGBTQ+ families integrate into communities, interact with schools and healthcare systems, and navigate the lingering effects of discriminatory practices would provide a more comprehensive understanding of systemic barriers and inform targeted support programs.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this study provide several actionable recommendations for enhancing equity and inclusion for LGBTQ+ families navigating the adoption process. A critical first step is to implement mandatory cultural competency training for adoption agency staff and social workers. This training should focus on addressing implicit biases, understanding diverse LGBTQ+ family structures, and providing equitable services. Designed in collaboration with LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations, these programs would ensure alignment with the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and address the systemic barriers identified in this study. Regular updates and evaluations of the training are necessary to maintain consistent standards of inclusivity.

To address the inconsistencies in policies and procedures among agencies and counties, standardization is essential. Clear and uniform guidelines for eligibility criteria, home studies, and placement processes would eliminate variability and ensure that all prospective parents are treated fairly, regardless of sexual orientation or geographic location. Furthermore, agencies and policymakers must confront the challenges posed by religious exemption practices, which this study identified as a significant barrier. Developing inclusive policies that prioritize the best interests of children over subjective beliefs and collaborating with advocacy groups can help reduce discriminatory practices.

LGBTQ+ families in rural areas face additional challenges due to limited access to inclusive agencies and conservative cultural environments. To address this, adoption agencies should enhance outreach and services in rural communities, leveraging mobile services, virtual consultations, and partnerships with local organizations to bridge resource gaps. Additionally, strengthening advocacy and peer-support networks is vital. Participants emphasized the importance of these networks in navigating systemic barriers, and agencies should work with advocacy organizations to expand peer-support programs that provide guidance, emotional support, and practical advice throughout the adoption process.

Post-adoption support is another critical area for improvement. Agencies should offer comprehensive services, including counseling, community-building activities, and educational resources tailored to the unique needs of LGBTQ+ families. Engaging schools and healthcare providers in these efforts can ensure that families receive inclusive and affirming community support. Moreover, stronger mechanisms for monitoring and

enforcing anti-discrimination policies are necessary to address biases within adoption agencies. Establishing transparent complaint and resolution processes, along with regular audits and feedback systems, can hold agencies accountable and improve trust among LGBTQ+ families.

Conclusion

This study highlights the experiences of LGBTQ+ fathers navigating the adoption process in Georgia, emphasizing their resilience and the systemic barriers they encounter. It reveals a stark contrast between the progress symbolized by federal protections, such as the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, and the ongoing inequities in the implementation of these policies at the state and local levels. Discrimination, inconsistencies in policy enforcement, and cultural biases continue to hinder LGBTQ+ families' ability to adopt and provide stable, loving homes for children. Despite these challenges, the fathers in this study demonstrate remarkable perseverance, utilizing personal advocacy, support networks, and creativity to overcome obstacles and achieve their family-building goals.

Through their narratives, these fathers helped us understand the connection between individual agency and systemic inequities. Their stories reflect the broader struggles of marginalized groups seeking equity within systems not designed with their needs in mind. Discriminatory practices within adoption agencies, religious exemptions, and the lack of uniform policies across counties emerged as significant barriers, underscoring the urgent need for reforms. At the same time, the study revealed the transformative potential of supportive networks and inclusive practices. LGBTQ+-

affirming adoption agencies, advocacy groups, and peer-support networks played pivotal roles in helping these families navigate and ultimately succeed in the adoption process.

The findings of this study carry potentially far-reaching implications, highlighting the need for systemic reforms at multiple levels. At the individual level, the research empowers prospective LGBTQ+ adoptive parents by sharing strategies and resources to navigate the adoption landscape. At the family level, it underscores the importance of creating environments where LGBTQ+ families can thrive, advocating for policies and practices that promote long-term stability and inclusion. At the organizational level, the study identifies actionable changes, such as implementing cultural competency training, standardizing policies, and strengthening anti-discrimination measures, to ensure equitable treatment for all prospective parents. Finally, at the societal and policy levels, the research provides compelling evidence for advocating for equitable frameworks that eliminate discriminatory practices, address rural-urban disparities, and ensure consistent enforcement of federal protections.

This study also challenges harmful stereotypes about LGBTQ+ parenting, offering a powerful counter-narrative that emphasizes the dedication, resilience, and capability of LGBTQ+ fathers to provide loving homes for children. These narratives introduce a human element to the policy debate, with the potential to shape public opinion, shift cultural attitudes, and drive policy reforms that support not only LGBTQ+ families but all families navigating the adoption process. The study's application of the NPF further highlights the potential of personal stories to illuminate systemic barriers, advocate for change, and inform more inclusive policies.

Ultimately, the key takeaway from this study is clear: establishing an equitable and inclusive adoption system is both a moral and practical imperative. This research calls for a collective effort to transform adoption practices into a model of fairness and inclusivity by addressing systemic barriers and amplifying the voices of LGBTQ+ families. Through targeted reforms, strengthened advocacy efforts, and a commitment to dismantling inequities, society can create a more inclusive future for all, ensuring that every family, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, can provide a stable and loving home for children.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Guide

Purpose of the Interview: The purpose of this interview is to gain a deeper understanding of your experiences as an LGBTQ+ father in Georgia navigating the adoption process. I aim to explore both the challenges and successes you encountered, as well as the policies and regulations that impacted your journey. Your feedback and insights will contribute to a broader understanding of the adoption landscape for LGBTQ+ parents in Georgia and help identify areas where policy improvements can be made to better support future adoptive families.

Voluntary Participation: I want to assure you that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from this interview at any time, without any penalty or impact on your future participation in related studies. If you choose not to answer any questions or wish to stop the interview at any point, you may do so without consequence.

Confidentiality: Everything you share in this interview will be kept completely confidential. Your responses will be anonymized, and no identifying information will be included in any reports or publications resulting from this study. All data will be stored securely, and only the research team will have access to it.

Contact Information: If you have any questions or concerns about your participation or your rights as a participant, please feel free to contact me at. You may also contact the Walden University IRB at.

Consent Statement: Before we begin, I want to confirm that you understand the purpose of this interview and that your participation is entirely voluntary. With that in mind, do I

have your verbal consent to proceed with the interview?

I. Demographic Questions

- What is your age?
- What is your race/ethnicity?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- Gender identity?
- What is your marital status?
- How many children do you have?
- What are the ages of your children?
- How long have you lived in Georgia?
- Which adoption pathway did you choose (private agency, attorney, state foster care)?

II. Warm-Up Questions

Can you tell me a little about yourself and your family?

Probes:

- How would you describe your family's daily routine?
- Have you lived in other states? How does Georgia compare?
- What brought you to Georgia, and how has your experience been living here as an LGBTQ+ parent?

III. Adoption Journey

Can you describe your adoption journey?

Probes:

- What initially motivated you to adopt?
- Can you describe the process of choosing an adoption pathway (private agency,
- attorney, or state foster care)?
- Were there any pivotal moments or turning points during the adoption process?

IV. Barriers and Challenges

What challenges did you face during the adoption process?

Probes:

- Can you provide specific examples of any legal or procedural barriers you encountered?
- How did societal attitudes or biases affect your adoption journey?
- Were there any unexpected obstacles that you had to overcome?

VI. Success Factors

What supports or resources helped you successfully complete the adoption process?

Probes:

- Were there any organizations or support groups that were particularly helpful?
- Did you receive any assistance from friends or family members?
- Were there any policies or regulations that facilitated your adoption process?

VII. Policies and Regulations

How did state or local policies impact your adoption process?

Probes:

- Were there specific policies or regulations that were particularly challenging?
- Can you describe any positive interactions with adoption agencies or legal systems?
- Did you feel that state or local policies were supportive of LGBTQ+ adoptions?

VIII. Experiences with Adoption Agencies and Legal Systems

Describe your experiences with adoption agencies or the legal system during your adoption journey?

Probes:

- How would you rate the support and guidance you received from the adoption agency or attorney?
- Did you encounter any bias or discrimination from these entities?
- How did these experiences influence your overall perception of the adoption process?

IX. Impact of Advocacy and Support Networks

Were you involved with any advocacy or support networks during your adoption journey? If so, how did these networks impact your experience?

Probes:

- Can you provide examples of how these networks provided support or resources?
- Did you participate in any advocacy efforts to change adoption policies or practices?
- How did your involvement with these networks affect your adoption journey?

X. Reflections and Recommendations

Looking back, what would you say were the most critical factors that influenced your adoption journey?

Probes:

- What advice would you give to other LGBTQ+ parents considering adoption?
- What changes or improvements would you recommend making the adoption process more accessible and supportive for LGBTQ+ parents in Georgia?
- Are there any specific policies or practices you believe should be reformed?

XI. Closing Questions

Is there anything else you would like to share about your adoption experience that we haven't covered?

Probes:

- Are there any particular stories or experiences that stand out to you?

- Do you feel there are aspects of your journey that are unique or particularly important to highlight?
- Is there any advice you would give to policymakers or adoption professionals?

Do you have any questions for me about this study or the research process?

Probes:

- Is there anything you would like to know more about regarding this research?
- Do you have any concerns or suggestions about the study?
- How do you feel about the confidentiality and use of your shared experiences?

Appendix B: Email Invitation

Subject line: Interviewing LGBTQ+ Fathers in Georgia About Adoption

Email message:

I am doing a study about LGBTQ+ fathers in Georgia and their experiences with adoption. Your stories can help us understand the challenges and successes you face, as well as how policies affect your journey.

About the study:

- One phone interview lasting 60–90 minutes that will be audio recorded (no video)
- Your privacy is important, so we won't share your name or any details that identify you in the study.

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- You must identify as an LGBTQ+ father
- You must have gone through the adoption process in Georgia
- You must be at least 18 years old

This interview is part of my doctoral study at Walden University. The interviews will take place in fall 2024.

Please email me at if you want to participate. You can also share this invitation with others who might be interested.

Appendix C: Social Media Invitation

🌈 Study Seeks LGBTQ+ Fathers in Georgia for Research on Adoption Experiences! 🍼
Are you an LGBTQ+ father who has gone through the adoption process in Georgia? I'm conducting a study that will explore your unique experiences and how adoption policies impact your journey. Help us shed light on the challenges and triumphs faced by LGBTQ+ adoptive fathers.

About the Study:

🗣️ **One phone interview** lasting 60–90 minutes (audio recorded, no video)

🔒 **Your privacy is protected** – your name and personal details won't be shared in the study

Requirements to Participate:

✅ Identify as an LGBTQ+ father

✅ Have completed the adoption process in Georgia

✅ Must be 18 years or older

This research is part of my doctoral study at Walden University, with interviews taking place this fall.