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STILL "NOT QUITE AS GOOD AS HAVING YOUR OWN"? TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF ADOPTION

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■ **Abstract** Despite the fact that adoption is a common practice in the United States and in much of the world today, sociologists have devoted remarkably little attention to it. This review provides a rationale for much more extensive sociological research on adoption. It then summarizes the available empirical literature on who adopts children, and why, and on who relinquishes children for adoption, and why. Most adoptions have favorable outcomes for the members of the adoption triad (birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees). Yet the number of adoptions by nonrelatives has declined sharply since 1970, and only a small minority of women who have been treated for infertility have ever sought to adopt. These facts suggest that adoption may still have a stigma attached to it. Sociological research could illuminate whether such a stigma exists, and if so, what the causes and consequences of that stigma might be.

INTRODUCTION

Adoption is certainly a very common occurrence in the United States and in much of the world today. No official and complete counts of adoptions exist, but estimates are that about 4% of Americans are adopted (Freundlich 1998b); about half of these have been adopted by persons not related to them by birth (Brodzinsky et al. 1998). Estimates of adoptions in Western Europe and Australia are very similar (Hoksbergen 1999b). However, adoption touches many more lives intimately than these data suggest. A recent national survey of 1416 Americans found that nearly two thirds of the respondents (64%) had a personal experience with adoption, meaning that someone in their family or among their close friends had been adopted, had adopted a child, or had placed a child for adoption (National Adoption Attitudes Survey 2002).

Despite the fact that adoption is hardly unusual, it has received remarkably little attention from sociologists. Hall & Stolley have found that college textbooks on the family devote limited coverage to adoption, ranging from a mean of 2.0 pages per text in the 1960s to 1.1 pages per text from 1988 through 1993 (Stolley & Hall 1994, Hall & Stolley 1997). More recently, Fisher (2003) found that

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21 college texts and 16 readers on the family published from 1998 through 2001 still offered little discussion of adoption. The texts had an average of 2.4 pages and the readers had an average of 3.78 pages devoted to adoption. Moreover, when these books did address adoption, they were likely to portray it as fraught with risks and hazards. Worst case scenarios were often presented as though they were typical of adoption, and the books' negative generalizations about adoption were in many cases not supported by empirical data. Even in more specialized and advanced publications about the family, adoption has received little attention. For example, since 1990 the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (2000), arguably the most prestigious journal in this area, has published a total of six articles and four book reviews on adoption, and its 439-page end-of-the-decade review of research on the family in the 1990s (2000) contained no references to adoption at all in the Keyword Index. Also, the most recent edition of the highly regarded *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (Sussman et al. 1999) included only four brief references to adoption in its 792 pages. Wegar has argued that the scarcity of sociological research on adoption has allowed scholars in other disciplines, especially psychiatry, psychology, and social work, to dominate the study of this topic. Such scholars usually approach the study of adoption "in predominately individualistic terms, without taking into account the social factors and processes that affect adoption experiences and policies" (Wegar 1997, p. 5). Moreover, because their studies often use clinical populations, they are more likely to focus on the occasional pathological aspects of adoption than on its much more common successes and rewards. Even though some distinguished sociologists (Christine Bachrach, William Feigelman, H. David Kirk, Karen March, Charlene Miall, Rita Simon, and Katarina Wegar, among others) have done noteworthy research on adoption, their work has not received the attention it deserves from other sociologists who study the family.

WHY STUDY ADOPTION?

One would expect adoption to be of great interest to sociologists for at least four reasons. First, during the past several decades, research on the family has emphasized the great diversity of forms that families have taken (Wegar 1998)—as American families have included much larger numbers of stepfamilies, single-parent families, and families headed by gay and lesbian partners than was the case 40 years ago; increasing numbers of these three kinds of families are also adoptive families (March & Miall 2000). Adoptive families should be worthy of scholarly attention as significant, unique, and illuminating examples of this diversity. Berebitsky (2000, p. 176) argues that "By sanctioning the creation of families across the boundaries of race and sexuality," adoption can "stretch or even shatter the conventional model of the racially homogeneous and heterosexual nuclear unit." Further study of adoption by sociologists could contribute to "a more genuinely pluralist approach to family diversity" within the discipline

(Stacey & Biblarz 2001, p. 164), an approach that would more fully and accurately reflect what American families really look like today.

Second, sociologists have persistently argued that families are not just a product of blood relationships but are increasingly a "social construction," a matter of deliberate choice. For example, Weston's (1991) book on lesbian and gay kinship is entitled *Families We Choose*. Another example is the distinction that low-income African Americans in an Eastern city made between biological "fathers" and sociological "daddies" who provided much of the financial and personal support for children (Furstenberg et al. 1992). Like these other kinds of "families," adoptive families have been created by choice rather than assigned by biology. The study of adoptive families could help sociologists to confront fundamental questions about what factors other than blood ties make a group of people a family. Modell (1994, p. 238) has stated that when a child is severed from blood kin, adopted by strangers, and given a new birth certificate, "the lineaments of kinship are drawn. Adoption shows what kinship is supposed to do." Berebitsky describes a recent court case in New York City in which a plaintiff successfully petitioned the court to adopt her lesbian partner's daughter, whose birth the two women had jointly planned. An expert witness who testified on behalf of the women contrasted "the fact that this parent-child constitution came into being as a result of thoughtful planning and a strong desire on the part of these women to be parents" with the "caretaking environments of a vast number of children who are abused, neglected, and otherwise deprived of security and happiness" (2000, p. 172). This example, Berebitsky concludes, shows that "adoption is on the cutting edge in redefining kinship terms—in a public forum" (2000, pp. 172–73). In short, adoption separates the biological from the social, nurturing part of parenting (Miall 1996).

Third, adoption should intrigue sociologists because it raises important questions about the influence of race and ethnicity, social class, and gender on how families are formed and how they function. These factors are certainly critical ones in sociology (Anderson & Collins 2001), and all of them have a significant influence on adoption. Questions like whether children who are adopted by persons of a different race and/or nationality experience serious confusion and conflict about their identity, or whether adoption exploits lower-class women for the benefit of infertile middle-class families, present intriguing possibilities for sociological research and insight.

Fourth, adoption is important because it directly and profoundly affects the lives of millions of Americans who are part of the adoption triad: birth parents who have placed children for adoption, adoptees, and their adoptive parents. Adoption also touches the lives of millions of other persons who say that they once considered adoption seriously but ultimately decided not to adopt (39% of adult Americans describe themselves this way), and the reasons that people give for making this decision could reveal what they regard as most important about being a family (National Adoption Attitudes Survey 2002, Bachrach et al. 1991).

In short, the sociological study of adoption could further illuminate many of the changes occurring in American families today. Consistent with this argument, Berebitsky (2000, p. 168) asserts: "Adoption continues to function as a site on which the culture at large works out its understanding about 'family,' including the issues of who should be in a family, what roles family members [including both birth parents and adoptive parents] should play, and what functions (both public and private) the family should fulfill."

WHO ADOPTS CHILDREN, AND WHY?

In the United States, the characteristics of adoptive parents, and the reasons they adopt, differ according to whether the child being adopted is already related to the adoptive parents (for example, a stepchild or grandchild) or is unrelated to them. Nearly all research on adoption has focused on unrelated adoption, which is much more common among white, well-educated (having at least some college), and higher income persons, whereas related adoption is more common among those who are black, poor, and poorly educated (Bachrach et al. 1991). The dearth of research on adoptions by relatives, including adoptions by stepparents, is a significant gap in the literature that should be filled (Cherlin & Furstenberg 1994).

Infertility is clearly the most common reason that adoptive parents have given for deciding to adopt. Hollingsworth (2000), in an analysis of data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth (N = 10,019 women between the ages of 18 and 44), found that 15% of all women who had been treated for infertility had sought to adopt, by either contacting a lawyer or an adoption agency, whereas only 3% of women who had not been treated for infertility had taken such an initiative. Similarly, Berry et al. (1996), in a survey of 2,587 adoptive parents in California, found that about two thirds of them (69%) said they had adopted because they had been unable to have a biological child.

However, as the study by Berry et al. (1996) also shows, a substantial minority of adoptive parents are motivated by altruism rather than by infertility; 27% of that same California sample gave religious and/or humanitarian reasons for adopting. They were what Feigelman & Silverman (1983, p. 60) call "preferential adopters," i.e., people who chose to adopt even though they had no fertility problems (most already had several birth children), and such persons often adopted "hard-to-place" or "special needs" children with significant physical and/or mental handicaps, or children much older than infants, or members of racial minorities.

In a more recent study, Goodman & Kim (1999) explored the motives of 70 American families who had adopted Indian children from Mother Theresa's orphanages in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Nearly half of these adoptive parents (47%) already had children by birth when they adopted, whereas 36% stated that they "couldn't have a biological child" as a reason for adopting (p. 16). The majority (53%) said that their primary motivation was that they "wanted to offer a home to a needy child" (p. 16). The woman who helped to arrange these adoptions had given these adoptive parents "grave warnings" that there were serious risks involved in adopting these children (p. 7). All of the children had been abandoned by their birth parents, and all of them had been institutionalized. Their ages at adoption ranged from 3 months to 12 years, and their physical conditions varied from healthy to seriously handicapped (with polio, cerebral palsy, and various cognitive and emotional difficulties). Nonetheless, these parents were not troubled by such risks, and more than 70% of them said it took "only minutes" (p. 25) to make a positive decision. Goodman & Kim assert that these parents "were not interested in parsing hazards or estimating odds," because their desire to go forward with the adoption was overpowering, because they "upheld an ethic that all people were of equal value and equally deserving of respect" (p. 10), and because they shared "a powerful motivation to be useful" (p. 25). More than a decade after the adoptions, the parents felt a great sense of gratitude that the adoptions had made their lives much richer, and only 10 of the 70 expressed any regrets about the experience. Goodman & Kim concluded that: "The story of these parents raises the possibility that the 'drive' for biological reproduction may be, in part, culturally induced, that at any rate it is a malleable drive which can compete with, and sometimes be defeated by, the drive to parent" (p. 9). It is essential to realize, then, that even though infertility is the most common cause of adoptions, many other adoptions are motivated by strong altruistic desires on the part of adoptive parents. This altruism appears to be especially important in motivating special needs adoptions, which account for more than one fourth of adoptions of unrelated children in the United States (Stolley 1993).

Thus far, much of the discussion of who adopts has been limited to adoptive couples. However, since the early 1990s, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of adoptions by single persons. By 2000, singles accounted for at least 15% of all adoptions in the United States and by some estimates as much as 20–25%, at least three times their proportion of all adoptions in 1990 (Haugaard et al. 1999, Pertman 2001). The vast majority of these single parents are women (Pertman 2001). Single parents now constitute more than a quarter of adoptions of children with special needs, 10 times their proportion in 1975. Moreover, nearly one third (31%) of all children adopted from foster care today are adopted by single women. (Only 2% are adopted by single men.) (Freundlich 2000).

Finally, in the past decade it has become increasingly possible—and, it would appear, increasingly common—for partners of the same sex to adopt children in the United States. The 2000 U.S. Census found that there were 594,391 households headed by a gay or lesbian couple (Associated Press 2001), and Stacey & Biblarz (2001, p. 165) provide a conservative estimate that about 1 million children under 19 (about 1% of all children) have at least one "lesbigay" parent. Abrams & Ramsey (2000, p. 369) argue, however, that the number of gays and lesbians who adopt is not really known, because many applicants for adoption may conceal their sexual orientation from agencies, courts, and survey researchers, for fear that revealing it would damage their chances of adopting a child. Some estimates of the number of children being raised by gay and lesbian parents are as high as 6–14 million (Johnson & O'Connor 2002), although others suggest these estimates may be too high (Stacey & Biblarz 2001). Regardless of which figure one accepts, it is clear that "struggles by non-heterosexuals to secure equal recognition and rights for the new family relations they are now creating represent some of the most dramatic and fiercely contested developments in Western family patterns today" (Stacey & Biblarz 2001, p. 159).

Adoption by same-sex partners generally occurs in one of two quite different situations. The prospective parents can, together and at the same time, adopt a child who is not related to either of them. Much more common are "second parent adoptions," in which the partner of someone who is already a legal parent of a child (by either birth or adoption) officially adopts that child.

In the United States, adoption is governed by state law, and there is wide variability among states, among counties within the same state, and even among individual judges, in the probability that same-sex partners will be able to adopt a child (Bell 2001). Laws in two states, New Jersey and Connecticut, specifically permit coparent adoption by two unmarried persons. Seven states and the District of Columbia explicitly permit second parent adoptions, whereas three states, Florida, Mississippi, and Utah, effectively ban all adoptions by same-sex partners (Goode 2002). In the remaining states, the law is silent on this question, so adoption by same-sex partners is neither expressly permitted nor prohibited but is determined on a case-by-case basis, according to what courts find to be in the "best interests of the child" (Appell 2001; Fitzgerald 1999). According to Fitzgerald (1999, p. 59), the use of the "best interests" standard "does away with any presumptions of gay persons' unfitness" (in such a case, the court cannot rule that the parents' sexual orientation per se renders them unfit to be parents), "but continues to state that custody can be denied if the parents' homosexuality can be proven to adversely affect the child."

WHO RELINQUISHES CHILDREN FOR ADOPTION AND WHY?

Of the three parts of the adoption triad, birth parents have been studied the least (Edwards 1999, p. 18) and are probably the most diverse group. Fishman (1992, p. 42) notes that the birth mother "might be a nice college kid who made a mistake, a heartbroken Peruvian peasant who can't feed her family, or a crack addict with a predilection for violent boyfriends." Even the existing studies of birth parents have some serious limitations and must therefore be interpreted with caution. First, the small number of women who place children for adoption in the United States today makes it difficult to obtain samples of such women that are large enough and representative enough to make meaningful statistical analysis possible (Donnelly & Voydanoff 1996), and that number has fallen precipitously during the past four decades, as single parenthood among women of all ages has increased dramatically. In 1963, about 40% of the children born to unmarried white women in the United States were placed for adoption; by the end of the twentieth century that figure had dropped to 1.7% (Miller & Coyl 2000; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2000). (Racial minorities in the United States have historically been extremely unlikely to relinquish children for formal adoption and therefore did not experience the same drop.) Second, many studies of birth parents have used biased samples, for example, volunteers who have responded to an advertisement, or members of advocacy groups who have strong opinions about the advisability of relinquishing a child for adoption. For example, several studies have used members of Concerned United Birthparents, a group that, since its founding in 1976, has become increasingly critical of adoption, sometimes to the point of advocating its abolition (Modell 1994). Third, there is not very extensive literature on the behavior and legal rights of birth fathers, and due to space limitations the available literature on those topics will not be covered here (O'Neill 1994, Clapton 1997).

Despite these caveats and limitations, some useful insights have emerged from the available research on birth mothers and adoption. In studies that have compared unmarried American women who have placed their children for adoption with their counterparts who have decided to parent their children, "placers" have tended to be disproportionately white, from relatively advantaged backgrounds, and from intact families that are supportive of the placement decision. They are likely to have performed better in school and to have higher aspirations for the future, particularly of pursuing a college education and a career (Miller & Coyl 2000, Sobol et al. 2000, Stolley 1993, Sobol & Daley 1992). For example, Bachrach et al. (1992, p. 29) concluded their study of young birth mothers by asserting that "Women who make adoption plans may do so because they foresee economic opportunities with which childrearing would interfere."

The consequences for birth mothers of placing children for adoption are not entirely clear or consistent. On one hand, most studies show that there are "significant, measurable [material] advantages" of relinquishing (McLaughlin et al. 1988, p. 323). For example, Donnelly & Voydanoff (1996) compared "keepers" and placers in a group of 113 unmarried adolescent birth mothers in an industrial city in Ohio. They found that 2 years after giving birth, those young women who had placed their children for adoption (26% of the sample) had completed more schooling, were more likely to be employed, were less likely to be on public assistance, and were less likely to have borne another child than those young women who had kept their children; these differences remained even after differences in family background between the two groups were taken into account. McLaughlin et al. (1988) obtained similar results in a study of adolescents who had been clients of a pregnancy counseling service. They found that, one year after giving birth, young women who had placed their children for adoption (N = 146) had per capita incomes more than twice as high as those of mothers who had decided to parent their children (N = 123). Donnelly & Voydanoff (1996, p. 6) concluded of this body of literature, "These benefits [of relinquishing a child] are all pivotal dimensions tied closely to teens' subsequent life chances." However, two words of caution are in order here. First, many of these studies, like much of the existing literature on adoption, have small numbers of respondents, and their results are probably influenced by respondents' self-selection. For a helpful description of large, high-quality datasets that are available and that could be very useful in the study of adoption, see Feigelman et al. (1998). Second, Wegar (1997) rightly argues that it is important to view this issue as a structural problem, not just an individual or psychological one. She contends that the poverty that young unmarried parents experience is not necessarily inherent in unmarried motherhood (the experiences of most of the nations of Western Europe show that single parenting need not lead to poverty). Rather, she asserts, such poverty results in part from the failure of American public policy to provide adequate health care, child care, and income support for such women.

However, the evidence concerning the psychological effects of relinquishing a child is not so unequivocally positive. Some studies have found that birth mothers who place their children for adoption often experience both short-term trauma and long-term anguish. Edwards (1999, p. 21) found that the 56 women she interviewed over a 3-year period consistently described the adoption experience as "the most significant, most difficult thing they ever had to do." In their view, "The temporary material advantages of adoption did not make up for the multiple trauma and multiple losses of separation" they had endured (p. 23). These results might be partly attributed to the fact that these women were volunteers for the study; in fact, many of them were members of Concerned United Birthparents. Yet other studies with somewhat larger and more representative samples have found similar results. For example, Winkler & van Keppel (1984) studied more than 200 women who had relinquished their first child for adoption when they were between the ages of 15 and 25. The placements had occurred between 4 and 30 years before their study. They concluded that the effects of relinquishment on the mother were often negative and long-lasting. About half of the respondents said that their sense of loss had increased over time.

Yet not all studies have found these kinds of negative results. Donnelly & Voydanoff (1996) found that both groups of birth mothers in their study, i.e., both those who placed children for adoption and those who decided to parent them, were firmly convinced (2 years after giving birth) that they had made the right decision. Similarly, Kalmuss et al. (1992) interviewed 527 unmarried mothers within a year after they had given birth and found that both those who had placed children for adoption and those parenting their children were "comfortable with the pregnancy resolution decision" they had made; 78% said that they would make the same decision again (p. 89).

There is an alternative arrangement that may help to mitigate the distress that some birth mothers experience after relinquishing children for adoption. That alternative is "open adoption," in which the birth mother is able to influence the choice of the adoptive parents and in many cases have ongoing contact with the child after the adoption. In her reviews of the literature on this question, Freundlich (1998a) concludes that birth parents say they often think about their children, are very concerned whether they are alive and healthy, and find that the grief they experience because of having relinquished their children for adoption is made worse by the secrecy of traditional, confidential adoptions. Instead, she asserts, contact with the prospective adoptive parents "provides the birthmothers with the reassurance that adoption provided a better option for their children than what they themselves could provide and that the particular adoptive parents were the right choice for their children" (Freundlich 2001a, p. 80). Similarly, Grotevant & McRoy (1998), in summarizing a long-term study of adoption in Minnesota and Texas, asserted that the main advantage of contact that was mentioned by birth mothers in open adoptions was seeing that the child was loved and cared for. Moreover, apparently these positive effects for birth mothers in open adoptions do not come at the expense of adoptive parents and children, who also report high satisfaction with open adoptions (Haugaard et al. 2000, Sobol et al. 2000).

It is important to note that a sharply increasing proportion of adopted children are not healthy white infants who have been voluntarily relinquished by birth parents; rather, they have come through the foster care system. The number of American children in foster care has risen from 280,000 in 1984 to about 520,000 in 2000 (Maza 1999; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 2002). Most of these children enter the system because they have been abused or neglected by their parents (Goerge & Wulczyn 1998–99). A majority of the children will be reunited with their birth families within 12 months. Yet at any one time an average of 134,000 of them are eligible for adoption, and about 50,000 are actually adopted each year, more than triple the number of adoptions from foster care in 1988 (Barth 1999). Unlike adopted children who are voluntarily relinquished for adoption by their birth parents, nearly all foster children come from very poor backgrounds, about two thirds are either black or Hispanic, and about two thirds are more than 5 years old. Fewer than 2% of children adopted from foster care are infants (Spake 1998, O'Connor 2001).

The recent dramatic increase in adoptions of children from foster care has been spurred by two important changes in public policy. One was the passage of the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, which requires states to make "reasonable efforts" to reunite abusive or neglectful families. When children have been in foster care for 15 of the past 22 months, however, the law requires that states file a petition to terminate parental rights (Walsh 2000), putting foster children on a faster track for adoption. Second, state agencies that handle adoptions have been using a process called concurrent planning, which allows foster parents to begin the process of formal adoption. At the same time the state makes a good faith effort to work with the birth family to overcome the problems that prompted the removal of the child from their home; the birth family will regain custody of the child if they are able to solve those problems. However, if the birth parents do not solve the problems, the child will be ready for adoption by the foster family much more quickly than was the case before concurrent planning (Pertman 2001, p. 181).

Large numbers of adoptions through the foster care system have occurred only very recently. Therefore the outcome of these adoptions is still uncertain. However, some recent data show that a high proportion of such adoptions appear to be working out well (Festinger 2002).

In addition to the recent sharp increase in the number of American children adopted from foster care, there has also been a dramatic rise in the number of children that Americans have adopted from other nations. International adoption has been widely practiced in the United States since World War II, with South Korea sending a total of more than 150,000 children since the Korean War ended in 1953 (Enrico 1999). Altstein & Simon (1990, p. 3) say of this period, "For the first time in history, relatively large numbers of Western couples, mostly in the United States, were adopting children who were racially and culturally different from themselves." However, intercountry adoption is by its very nature a highly political practice that depends on the (often erratic) willingness of the "sending" nations to participate. In the 1990s, the government of South Korea severely curbed the number of children it made available for adoption, apparently in response to embarrassing publicity during the Olympics in Seoul in 1988, which highlighted its status as the world's leading "exporter" of children. Therefore, the number of Korean children adopted into the United States dropped sharply from its peak of more than 8000 in 1986 to 1770 in 2001. On the other hand, since the early 1990s both the People's Republic of China and Russia have made large numbers of children available for intercountry adoption, so that by 2001 they were by far the largest sending countries in the world, with 4680 Chinese children and 4279 Russian children being adopted in the United States that year (U.S. Department of State 2002).

Women in developing nations who place children for adoption abroad usually do so because they are disadvantaged by terrible poverty and/or by the stigma of illegitimacy. Pilotti's study (1993) of Latin American birth mothers who relinquished their children for international adoption found that those birth mothers suffered from overwhelming social disadvantages. They were poorly educated, were unemployed or working as street vendors, beggars, or prostitutes, and had come from neglectful or abusive home environments. The vast majority of these birth parents relinquished their children out of despair that they could not provide for them and with the hope of insuring the survival of their children in a different environment.

OUTCOMES OF ADOPTION FOR ADOPTEES AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Adoption is often perceived as a very risky venture, one that is likely both to frustrate the expectations of idealistic parents and to produce deeply troubled children. As shown later in the review, such portraits abound in the popular media. Opinion polls show that a substantial proportion of the American people share many of these negative views. A recent Harris Poll of 1416 Americans found that more than a third of the respondents believed that adopted children are more likely than their nonadopted peers to have drug and alcohol problems, medical problems, and problems at school; about the same proportion believed that adopted children are less likely to be well-adjusted, happy, and self-confident (National Adoption Attitudes Survey 2002). (It is important to note that much of the data about public opinion of adoption has been gathered by commercial polling agencies rather than by academic survey researchers.) Even some adoption experts (e.g., clinical psychologist David Kirschner) and political activists (e.g., Betty Jean Lifton) have argued that an "adopted child syndrome" exists; some of the symptoms of this supposed syndrome are pathological lying, shallowness of interpersonal attachment, academic underachievement, lack of impulse control, and defiance of both parental and public authority (Kirschner & Nagel 1988, Lifton 1986). Is there any empirical foundation for these disturbing claims?

If one looks at only clinical populations, that is, at people who are receiving psychological or psychiatric treatment, and particularly such patients who are in middle childhood or adolescence, then indeed one is likely to find a disproportionate number of adoptees. After reviewing this kind of research, Sullivan et al. (1995, p. 119) concluded that "The overrepresentation of adopted children and adolescents in clinical psychiatric samples has been a remarkably consistent finding in the literature." Sharma et al. (1995) stated that adopted children are referred for psychiatric treatment two to five times as often as their nonadopted peers, and they noted that these kinds of results have been found in a wide variety of nations, including Great Britain, Israel, Poland, Sweden, and the United States. Brodzinsky et al. (1992) stated that even though persons adopted by nonrelatives constitute only about 2% of the American population, they account for about 5% of all patients receiving outpatient psychotherapy, and between 10% and 17% of patients in residential treatment and psychiatric hospitals.

Perhaps the most common explanation offered for this pattern is that such adopted children are struggling with problems related to their having been relinquished for adoption. Smith et al. (2000, p. 558) argue that "problem behaviors are outward signs of underlying emotional problems that haven't yet been resolved, including fear of becoming attached, unresolved grief, poor sense of identity, depression, and strong underlying feelings such as anger and fear related to past trauma." Brodzinsky et al. (1992, p. 62) link such struggles to the child's realization (usually beginning in middle childhood, around the age of 8) that he is odd or different, and that there is "a flip side to his beloved adoption story—that in order to be 'chosen' by his adoptive parents, he first had to be given away by his birth parents." Several other key factors are associated with adopted children's difficulties. First, adverse prenatal experiences, such as exposure to alcohol or drugs, or poor maternal nutrition, may predispose children to problems (Yates et al. 1998). Second, inheritance of various genetic traits may place adoptees at increased risk for psychiatric disorders that their biological parents had, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression (Wierzbicki 1993). Third, experiencing abuse as a small child is "a potent predictor of later maladjustment," according to Verhulst's (2000, p. 36) study of 1538 adopted children. Fourth, living in an institution, particularly for longer than 8 months, can have serious negative effects on children's health, growth, cognitive development, and social and emotional development because institutions cannot provide the intimate, reciprocal, and consistent kind of contact that children need (Frank et al. 1996). Fifth, being adopted at an older age sharply increases the probability that an adoption will fail, from 1.9% for children adopted in infancy, to 5% for children adopted at ages 3–5, to 26% for those adopted at ages 15–17 (Berry 1997, Brodzinsky et al. 1998).

It is important to acknowledge candidly that the factors discussed above can put adopted children at greater psychological risk than their nonadopted counterparts. However, when examining and evaluating these data, it is essential to remember that only a minority of adopted children—Brodzinsky estimates about 25%, compared with 15% of nonadopted children—require clinical intervention (in DeAngelis 1995). Even adoptions of children who have endured the kinds of adversity discussed above turn out well in the great majority of cases, suggesting that most early damage done to children is not irreversible. Groza et al. (1998) speak of the many "resilient rascals" and "wounded warriors" adopted into the United States in the 1990s from institutions in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. Although most of these children showed significant developmental delays, their families have often reported, "with awe and astonishment," (p. 201) that about four fifths of their children made up for those delays, demonstrating that "timely placement in a warm, stimulating, and nurturing home can offset some of the effects of early biological and social adversity" (Brodzinsky et al. 1998, p. 114).

Moreover, when one looks at community studies, i.e., studies that compare adoptees and nonadoptees outside of therapeutic settings, the differences are much smaller. Wierzbicki (1993, p. 447), in a meta-analysis of more than 60 studies that made such comparisons, concluded that those studies revealed "small to modest" effects for those adopted, with adopted adolescents usually having school-related and behavioral problems more often than nonadopted adolescents and higher rates of acting out behaviors such as physical aggression. More recently, Sharma et al. (1995, p. 95), in a survey of more than 170,000 public high school students in 35 states, concluded that the 4682 adoptees in the study showed a "small but consistent pattern of overall lower level of adjustment" than their nonadopted peers, particularly on self-reported licit and illicit drug use, and on how well nurtured they believed they were by their parents.

The differences between studies of young adoptees in clinical settings and studies of young adoptees in community settings may at first seem puzzling. How can there be such striking overrepresentation of adopted children in the clinical studies, and such "small to modest" differences between adopted and nonadopted children in the community studies? Brand & Brinich (1999) used the National Health Interview Survey, a representative sample of nearly 50,000 American households, to try to explain this apparent contradiction. They found that the modest difference between adopted and nonadopted youth in the community studies was due to a very small number of deeply troubled adopted youth who scored unusually high on a Behavioral Problem Index filled out by their parents. The distributions of the two groups on this index were very similar, except at the extreme high "tail," where approximately 5% of the adoptees had scores more than 3 standard deviations higher than the mean, compared with 1.7% of their nonadopted peers.

Therefore, Brand & Brinich (1999, p. 1227) assert, the results were skewed by a small number of influential cases, and "a small and particularly troubled group of adopted children may be ending up in clinical populations," thereby accounting for the overrepresentation of adoptees receiving psychotherapy. They conclude "We believe it would be an error to interpret the differences we report here as suggesting that adoption per se puts children at risk for behavioral problems, since the vast majority of adopted children show patterns of behavior problems that are very similar to those of nonadopted children" (p. 1227). Therefore, Brodzinsky's (1987, p. 29) broader conclusion seems apt: "Most adopted children are well within the normal range with respect to behavioral, emotional, and academic adjustment."

Moreover, the results of studies of adoptees after they have reached adulthood are considerably more favorable than those of younger adoptees. Feigelman (1997) used the data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth to examine the lives of 101 adoptees, beginning when they were between the ages of 14 and 21, and following them to the ages of 23–30. Although the adoptees had had a higher incidence of problem behaviors during adolescence than their nonadopted peers, most of those differences had significantly diminished or disappeared by young adulthood. On most of the variables examined, such as recent use of drugs, educational achievement, employment success, asset accumulation, home ownership, and marital stability, the adoptees were much like persons raised in intact biological-parent families (Feigelman 1997, p. 199–200). Similarly, Haugaard (1998, p. 48) describes a British study of a cohort of persons born in 1958, which found that the greater adjustment problems that adoptees had shown in adolescence had shrunk to insignificance by the time the adoptees had reached the age of 23. Haugaard also describes a Swedish study of a cohort of 492 persons adopted in the 1950s that reached much the same conclusion: Problems in adopted children may be temporary. Less tentatively, Brodzinsky et al. (1998, p. 29) conclude their examination of this literature by declaring, "The higher incidence of psychological problems associated with adoption is restricted to children in the middle childhood years and adolescence."

However, even if adoptees no longer show higher rates of problem behaviors once they reach adulthood, the fact that they are adopted is something that they often confront anew at each stage of their lives. Drawing on Brodzinsky et al. (1992), Borders et al. (2000, p. 407) argue that "At each developmental milestone from birth to death, adoptees face unique challenges, as their adoptive status influences both the way they approach and the way they resolve each normal developmental task." Major milestones in adulthood often provide occasions for rethinking the meaning of one's adoption. For example, getting married, becoming a parent, and experiencing the death of one's adoptive parents can all "shake the very foundation of personal meaning" for adoptees. For example, giving birth prompted one adoptee to wonder, "Why would my birthmother ever have given me up?" So, Brodzinsky et al. (1992) conclude that, for the adoptee, the meaning of the experience of adoption does not stay the same; rather, adoption can take on fresh meaning (and bring fresh pain) as the adoptee moves through the life course.

A final word should be added here. Most studies of adoption compare adoptees with their nonadopted peers on a variety of measures. Hoksbergen (1999a) suggests, however, that we should also compare the results of adoption to the likely results if adopted children had not been adopted but had instead remained in the settings of their birth. Fergusson et al. (1995) argue that adoption provides a greater range of childhood experiences and opportunities for the adoptee than would have been available without adoption, including a better standard of health care, access to higher educational opportunities, higher material living standards, fewer residential moves, and greater family stability, all contributing to a significant degree of upward social mobility. Maughan et al. (1998) and Brodzinsky et al. (1998) also note that adoptees fare significantly better than their counterparts who remain in negligent or abusive birth families, or in foster care or institutions.

This body of research, then, leads to generally positive conclusions about the outcomes of adoption. Indeed, as Brodzinsky et al. (1992, p. 9) conclude, "The vast majority of adoptees do perfectly well in all of the ways that society measures success." The great majority of adoptive parents report that they are very satisfied with their adopted children (Brodzinsky et al. 1998). Also, the available research shows that about 85% of adoption placements are seen, in retrospect, as "successful" by family members (Brodzinsky et al. 1992).

Moreover, these favorable conclusions about the outcomes of adoption in general still hold true when specific kinds of adoptions are examined: adoptions by single persons, adoptions by same-sex partners, and intercountry adoptions. There is limited research on the impact of single-parent adoptions on children, but the available literature is largely favorable. In a detailed review of this literature from the past 25 years, Haugaard et al. (1999, p. 73) conclude that "there is no indication in the research that adoptions by single-parent families are more problematic than adoptions by two-parent families." In studies in which adoptees in single-parent families have shown more difficulties in adjustment than children adopted into two-parent families, those differences disappeared once background factors that the children experienced before the adoption were taken into account, for example, older age of the child at the time of placement and/or deprivation and abuse in the child's birth family (Haugaard 1999).

With regard to the outcomes of adoptions by same-sex partners, there is a relatively small body of research, and there is a good deal of disagreement about the methodological merits of that research and the accuracy of the conclusions drawn from it. Stacey & Biblarz (2001, p. 165) state that "visible lesbigay parenthood is such a recent phenomenon that most studies are necessarily of the children of a transitional generation of self-identified gays and lesbians who have been parents within a heterosexual relationship," who then divorced, and who then joined a same-sex partnership. It is therefore difficult to separate the effects on children of having same-sex parents from the effects of the divorce of their original parents. Stacey & Biblarz (2001, p. 161) add that there are no studies of child development based on representative samples of such families; rather, most of these studies were based on "small scale, snowball, and convenience samples" that may have had a pro-gay bias. Moreover, Fitzgerald (1999) has argued that in studies of lesbigay parenting, the persons studied may respond in ways that portray themselves and their families in the most favorable light possible.

Nonetheless, although it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research, some serious and instructive attempts have been made to evaluate the existing literature. In 1995, a committee of the American Psychological Association headed by Charlotte Peterson issued a report that concluded that "not a single study has found children of gay or lesbian parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents" (Gibson 1999, p. 8). The conclusion that these earlier studies usually reached was that there were no significant differences in outcomes for children of same-sex partners and children of heterosexual parents. However, in 2001 Stacey & Biblarz examined findings from 21 studies conducted between 1981 and 1998, all of which included a sample of gay or lesbian parents and children and a comparable group of heterosexual parents and children, and which also included findings directly relevant to children's development. They concluded that "on some dimensions—particularly those related to gender and sexuality—the sexual orientations of these parents mattered somewhat more for these children than the researchers claimed" (p. 167). For example, in a study by Green et al. (1986), 53% of the daughters of lesbians aspired to careers such as doctor, lawyer, and astronaut, compared with 31% of the daughters of heterosexual mothers. Stacey & Biblarz (2001) also found that, as young adults, the sons and daughters of same-sex parents were more likely than children of heterosexual parents to have considered—and actually to have had—a sexual relationship with a same-sex partner, and to have a gay sexual orientation in adulthood. On the other hand, children of same-sex partners were not significantly different from children of heterosexual parents on measures of self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems. In short, Stacey & Biblarz conclude that "Children with lesbigay parents appear less traditionally gender-typed and more likely to be open to homoerotic relationships" than children with heterosexual parents (p. 176).

Stacey & Biblarz argue strongly that these kinds of differences should not be used to deny same-sex partners the opportunity to adopt. Rather, they simply argue that these differences ought to be openly acknowledged and not denied. Such denial, they contend, simply plays into the hands of critics of lesbigay adoption by accepting the assumption that these different outcomes for children are "bad."

A few final observations about adoption by same-sex partners are in order. First, as Savage (2001) has noted, "The real choice for children waiting to be adopted in Florida and elsewhere [where lesbigay adoptions are prohibited] isn't between gay and straight parents, but between parents and no parents," because "It is an open secret among social workers that gay and lesbian couples are often willing to adopt children whom most heterosexual couples won't touch: H.I.V.-positive children, mixed-race children, disabled children, and children who have been abused or neglected." Savage asks rhetorically, "What purpose is served in denying children like these the security of a legally formalized relationship with adults who want to raise them?"

Second, public opinion on this controversial issue appears to be changing in a direction more favorable to same-sex adoption. For example, in March 2002, in an ABC News poll of a representative national sample of Americans, a plurality (47%) of the respondents stated that they supported adoption by gays and lesbians, whereas 42% said they opposed it. That level of opposition has declined by 23% since a comparable survey was done in 1994. Moreover, various professional groups have been endorsing the policy of same-sex adoption; the American Psychological Association's favorable report was mentioned earlier. The American Bar Association (Gibson 1999) and the American Academy of Pediatrics have also publicly endorsed adoption by same-sex partners, with the latter group concluding its review of the pertinent literature by stating, "No data have pointed to any risk to children as a result of growing up in a family with one or more gay parents" (American Academy of Pediatrics 2002, p. 4).

Berebitsky's (2000, p. 173) conclusion, then, seems apt: ". . . gay and lesbian adoptions, and especially two-parent adoptions, are already quietly—albeit slowly and against considerable odds—changing concepts of mother, father, and family."

Finally, there is a large and instructive body of research on the outcomes of international adoptions, and most of these outcomes are quite positive. In the most extensive review of the available literature on Korean-American adoptions, Simon & Altstein (2000) interviewed 168 Korean adoptees and their white American parents, whose names they had obtained from an American adoption agency. The children had been adopted in the late 1960s and early 1970s and were young adults at the time of the interviews. More than 85% of the families that Simon & Altstein were able to locate agreed to participate in the study. Nearly all of the adoptive parents (95%) said they "would do it again," and 90% said they would recommend adoption to other families (p. 96). More than 85% of the adoptees said they considered themselves either "very close" or "fairly close" to their adoptive mothers, and 76% said the same of their adoptive fathers (p. 102). Seven in eight adoptees (87%) said that they would urge social workers and adoption agencies to place Korean children in white homes; only 9% agreed with the statement, "Whites simply can't understand what it means to be Asian" (p. 104). Overall, Simon & Alstein declared, "The results show that these children feel loved, secure, committed to their adoptive families, and comfortable with their racial/ethnic identities" (2000, p. 141).

There is also an extensive body of research on more recent adoptees from other nations, especially the former Soviet Union and Romania. One representative study is by Miller (2000, p. 231), who evaluated 129 children from 22 countries in her pediatric clinic at Tufts University soon after the children had been adopted into American homes, and found that the children showed "amazing resilience as they recovered from early deprivation." Similarly, Abrams & Ramsey (2000, p. 732) conclude their overview of the empirical studies of international adoption by stating that it has "for the most part been extraordinarily successful in enabling even those children who have suffered extremely severe forms of deprivation and abuse in their early lives to recover and flourish."

However, these strongly positive studies of the outcomes of international adoption probably understate the significant internal tensions that many international adoptees feel, particularly if they are Asian and cannot "pass" as white. For such persons, Pertman (2001, p. 92) notes, "Color and ethnicity add layers of complexity to a process that is complicated to begin with." Meier (1999), in a study of 23 adult (ages 19–35) Korean-American adoptees living in Minneapolis-St. Paul, found that the most recurrent theme expressed in interviews was "not fitting in" (p. 27) and not feeling "a sense of home either in the U.S. or Korea" (p. 41). This feeling was particularly common in adolescence. One adoptee stated, "I hated being Korean because I was different... I tried as much as I possibly could to convince myself that I wasn't Korean" (p. 21). Even in young adulthood many of Meier's interviewees still felt that they had a "double consciousness." One interviewee stated, "In America I'm not accepted because I'm not white, and in Korea I'm not accepted because I'm adopted" (p. 32). In 1999 (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 1999), a group of Korean-American adult adoptees came together in Washington, DC, for their first "gathering" or reunion. In a survey of those 167 persons, all of whom were at least 21 years old and had been adopted between 1956 and 1985, two thirds reported having "pervasive experiences with racial discrimination" while they were growing up; race was given more than twice as often as adoption as the reason for discrimination they experienced. The respondents also stated that their views of themselves and their "Asianness," and others' views of them, had undergone a "critical developmental shift" as they left adolescence and became independent adults, particularly when they left home to go to college (Meier 1999, p. 43). While these adoptees were growing up, only 28% had considered themselves Asian-Americans; but as adults, more than twice as many (64%) identified themselves that way. A respondent in a study by Kryder (1999, p. 17) stated, "For the first time, when I went off to college, I felt as though I were in a minority, because I wasn't with my white parents." Meier (1999, p. 42) argues that most of his respondents had "to varying degrees" reached a stage of life in which they had achieved some acceptance of their dual identity, but for most of those same international adoptees, the tension was still very real.

IS ADOPTION STILL STIGMATIZED?

The preponderance of evidence that has been examined in this review shows that most adoptions work reasonably well. One might then expect that adoption would no longer bear nearly so much of a stigma as it did a half century ago, when all three members of the adoption triad—"the unwed mother, the bastard child, and the barren couple"—were often made to feel embarrassment and even shame (Brown 1992, 10). Goodman & Kim (2000, p. 6) suggest that this positive change has in fact been occurring: "The fairly consistent and steady streams of favorable reports [about adoption] are an important antidote to any remaining stigma against adoption." In October 1998, a front-page headline in *The New York Times* declared, "Secrecy and Stigma No Longer Clouding Adoptions" (Fein, p. 1). Moreover, national surveys have indicated that most Americans say they have high regard for the institution of adoption and those who are a part of it. A recent survey of a representative national sample of 1416 Americans age 18 and older concluded that there is "overwhelming support" for adoption, with 63% of all Americans saying that they have a "very favorable" opinion about adoption (National Adoption Attitudes Survey 2002, pp. 5–6) and more than 80% of respondents agreeing that "parents get as much or more satisfaction from raising adoptive children as from raising biological children" (p. 6). Miall (1996, p. 312) found similar results in a survey of Canadian respondents, with a great majority (85%) agreeing that "adoptive and biological parenting are essentially the same."

Yet several eminent sociologists, most notably Wegar (1997) and Miall (1994, 1987), have claimed that adoption is still a source of "stigma." How can this be so, if adoption is held in such high esteem by the public in North America?

The answer to that question depends in part on how one defines stigma. Goffman (1963, p. 3) defined it as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting," that "reduces the individual from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one." More recently, Link & Phelan (2001) have argued that stigma brings with it "disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination," in matters as diverse as employment and housing (p. 367).

If we accept these broad definitions of stigma, then it would probably be difficult to argue that adoption is a stigmatized status. For example, this author has not seen any evidence in the adoption literature that persons in adoptive families encounter discrimination in employment and housing. However, Link & Phelan (2001, p. 365) also offer a more limited definition of stigma that is useful in the evaluation of adoption. That definition is "a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context." If one looks at actual behavior regarding adoption, and not just at general attitudes, adoption appears to remain a source of stigma by this definition. Despite the laudatory things that people say about adoption, one can argue that it is devalued in the sense that it is widely regarded as "not quite as good as having your own child," a statement with which half of the respondents to a 1997 national survey agreed (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 1997, p. i). Paradoxically, over the past three decades, Americans' self-reported attitudes toward adoption appear to have become more favorable. At the same time, however, substantially fewer Americans (with the exceptions of same-sex partners and single persons) have actually been adopting children, especially children not related to them by blood. And dramatically fewer white American women have been relinquishing children for adoption. The number of children adopted in the United States has declined from a peak of about 175,000 in 1970 to about 140,000 today (Freundlich 1998b), and the number of adoptions of children by nonrelatives has dropped even more sharply, from about 90,000 in 1970 to about 60,000 today (Stolley & Hall 1994, Abrams & Ramsey 2000). If one looks at behavior rather than attitudes, then, one can infer that adoption may still be a "devalued status" in the sense that Americans regard it as "a last alternative" to having biological children (and, if one has a child while unmarried, a last alternative to keeping one's biological child) (Freundlich 1998b, p. 32), and it is a status that most Americans appear to go to extraordinary lengths to avoid. It is not just a last resort for many infertile persons, but in many cases, it appears that it may not be regarded as an option at all, as only a small proportion of women who have been treated for infertility—15% in one large (N = 10,019) national survey—have ever attempted to adopt (Hollingsworth 2000).

As far as prospective parents are concerned, adoption is a possibility that is often considered, but seldom chosen. Four in 10 Americans say that they have considered adoption at some point. Yet, according to the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, only 1 out of 50 women had actually applied to an adoption agency (Freundlich 1998b). Furthermore, fewer than one third of women who say that they have taken steps to adopt actually do adopt (Chandra et al. 1999).

Similarly, it can be argued that relinquishing one's birth child for adoption has become increasingly stigmatized, a "devalued identity" for a birth mother, at the same time that raising a child born outside of marriage has become far less stigmatized. Adoption is rarely chosen by pregnant teenagers as a resolution to their pregnancy. Freundlich (1998b, p. 32) argues that increasingly, American society's message has been that "it is 'unnatural' for birthmothers to give their children away," a message affirmed in the venerable feminist book *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1992). As was noted earlier, the proportion of unmarried white women who relinquish their birth children for adoption has dropped from about 40% in 1960 to about 1% today (Chandra, 1999). Daly (1994) cites a study that found that only one in five adolescents who placed a child for adoption felt that their peers favored the idea of adoption. In Daly's own research, she sent letters of invitation to 300 high school students in a mid-sized city in Southern Ontario; 175 of the students (58%) responded. When asked whether they would make an adoption plan if they or their partner were to become pregnant, only 6% of the respondents said that they definitely would, 17% said they probably would, 36% were unsure, and 40% said they would not (the answer most frequently chosen). The most commonly cited reason for not wanting to place a child for adoption was "feeling that I would be abandoning the baby" (p. 338). However, Daly notes, "Adoption was seen much more favorably when respondents were asked how *others* [emphasis added] should resolve a pregnancy" (p. 339). Nearly half of the respondents thought that if a friend were pregnant, "that person should resolve the pregnancy by placing the baby for adoption" (p. 339), out of a "sense of moral obligation" (p. 340). Daly concludes "These data suggest that at the level of attitudes, adoption is a good idea. However, these positive attitudes were at odds with [the students'] own projected behavior if they were to get pregnant, as few indicated that they would choose adoption" (p. 346). In the United States, the journalist Paula Span, writing in *The Washington Post*, argued that American high school students held adoption in even lower regard than their

Canadian counterparts: "Once described as an unmarried mother's most selfless, loving act, it has acquired a stigma of its own among young women—if they consider it at all" (in Creedy 2001, p. 97). Both for persons considering becoming adoptive parents, and for persons considering relinquishing children for adoption, then, "Adoption is at once second best and the right thing to do—for someone else" (Creedy 2001, p. 88).

Why does this apparent gap between attitudes and behavior exist? Why do most Americans voice such positive sentiments about adoption but so seldom use it? There are several plausible answers. The first explanation has been suggested by Miall (1996, p. 315): Social desirability effects may be operating in much of the survey research on adoption, "in the same way that respondents are loath to publicly express racist or sexist statements." Yet even though this may be true, surely it is only a partial explanation and does not acknowledge the genuine ambivalence that many persons feel about adoption.

A second explanation is that even though Americans have favorable attitudes about adoption at a general level, at the same time they have specific and serious doubts and fears about it. In fact, the same Harris survey that reported the positive findings mentioned earlier also found that respondents named several potential problems of adoption as "major concerns." Eighty-two percent feared that birth parents would try to regain a child, even though this seldom happens. One in two respondents cited the cost of adoption as another major concern, even though inexpensive domestic adoptions of children from foster care are available, and even though there is now a $10,000 federal income tax credit for adoption. Additionally, 44% of the respondents cited "dealing with unexpected genetic or medical problems" as a major concern (National Adoption Attitudes Survey 2002). As one of Miall's (1996, p. 313) respondents stated, "Adopted kids come from unstable backgrounds. Adopting is like playing with loaded dice." Even though these concerns and fears are often greatly exaggerated, they are nonetheless powerful and probably deter some persons from considering adoption. Moreover, such negative images of adoption are often reinforced and made worse by media treatments of adoption. Waggenspack (1998) argues that popular media in the United States, both news and entertainment media, "skew coverage [of adoption] toward the dramatic, the sensational, and the exploitative" (p. 59). Because the general public is given a distorted and unbalanced image of adoption by the popular media, the public is unable to "put a positive 'face' on adoption" (p. 59). For example, she cites a survey of articles published between January and July 1997 in *The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *USA Today*, which found that, aside from articles on policy issues like the adoption tax credit, negative outcomes of adoption were mentioned more than twice as often as positive ones. Waggenspack acknowledges that the media should not gloss over the very real problems that sometimes occur in adoption. She maintains, however, that viewers need to be given some context for understanding news about adoption, so that they will know that problems like fetal alcohol syndrome and attachment disorders are not at all typical of adoption.

A third explanation of the gap between expressed atttitudes and actual behavior concerning adoption was mentioned earlier: Children available for adoption today are increasingly older (not infants), members of minorities, or handicapped, whereas most prospective adoptive parents today are looking for the same thing their counterparts were looking for 40 years ago, i.e., healthy white infants, which have been in decreasing supply. Again, however, the willingness of same-sex partners and single persons to adopt such children are noteworthy exceptions.

A fourth and final explanation of the gap between Americans' expressed attitudes regarding adoption and their actual behavior is that infertility, the most common factor prompting adoption, has become "medicalized," as more sophisticated treatments for infertility have been developed. (The first baby born as a result of in vitro fertilization was born in England in 1978; the first such child in the United States was born in 1981.) Each year more than 1 million patients seek fertility treatment in the United States, compared with 60,000 adoptions of unrelated children that are finalized each year (Nelkin & Lindee 1995). Miall (1994, p. 413) argues that, whereas in the past infertile couples were likely to regard infertility as "fate" and to proceed with adoption, today they are more likely to regard their condition as "brought about by [their own] failure to undertake all available diagnostic and treatment procedures." Medical personnel, she continues, "rarely make a final diagnosis of absolute sterility or permanent infertility" (p. 413). Therefore, those being treated for infertility are likely to regard themselves as "not yet pregnant" (Greil 1991) and to continue doggedly with treatment, even with very low probability of success [21%, by one estimate (Freundlich 2001b)] and great expense [the average cost of a live birth from in vitro fertilization is more than $40,000 (Freundlich, 2001b)]. In a typical comment, a female respondent in Modell's studies of adoption and infertility declared, "Infertility is like alcoholism. You don't quit [trying to conceive] until you've hit bottom" (1994, p. 95). Greil (1991) asserts that "infertility patients are surpassed only by cancer patients in their willingness to subject themselves to costly, painful, and sometimes hopeless medical procedures" (p. 98). So, in such cases, adoption is chosen only when the patient has reached a state of utter desperation, if then. [Apparently this is a point that women ordinarily reach before men do because men are more reluctant than women to give up the pursuit of biological parenthood (Williams 1992)].

In their illuminating work on infertility, Lasker & Borg (1987, p. 30) conclude that "People who are able to adopt despite the many obstacles usually discover that a biological connection is not so important after all." One such respondent asserted, "Once we adopted a baby, I fell in love with her. All of a sudden I wasn't interested in pursuing in vitro any more" (p. 30). But, as we have seen, it appears that most infertile persons do not reach this point.

Despite the warm sentiment surrounding adoption, then, it would still appear to be a stigmatized institution because "society still sees it as second best" (Creedy 2001, p. 97). Regarding the future of adoption, Freundlich (1998b, p. 32) concludes "To the extent that adoption continues to be overlooked, seen in a conflicted light, or viewed as a last and extremely poor alternative [to biological parenthood], it is likely to play a diminishing role," both in how young unmarried people resolve their pregnancies and in how prospective parents attempt to achieve parenthood.

In much of her work on adoption, Wegar (1997, p. 60) has argued that social scientists studying adoption have "neglected the impact of the social stigmatization of adoption" on the members of the adoption triad. By not examining the ways in which negative community attitudes toward infertility and adoption affect the experience of adoption, she contends, researchers have "decontextualized" adoption. Wegar notes that the difficulties adoptive parents face have often been attributed to psychological pathologies, for example, to their inability to resolve the frustration and humiliation of their infertility, when in fact those difficulties may be caused by negative societal attitudes about adoption. ["Adopt knowing that you may be getting a potential Charles Manson," an admonition made to the audience by a guest on "The Maury Povich Show" in 1995, is an extreme but instructive comment not atypical of media portrayals of "lurid adoption tales" (Waggenspack, 1998, p. 75).] Freundlich states that "there have been no systematic studies of the impact of stigmatizing attitudes on adoptees' sense of self" (2001a, p. 26). Surely this is a topic that should be placed on the research agenda of sociologists of the family. A related topic about which the author has seen very little empirical research is whether adoptees themselves choose to become adoptive parents when they reach adulthood, or whether it matters a good deal to them that they have biological children. The reasons that adoptees give for making these decisions could produce valuable insights about whether they have regarded being adopted as a stigmatized status.

In this review, then, we have examined the available empirical research on adoption, much of it done by persons in disciplines other than sociology. This literature shows that most adoptions seem to work reasonably well for the three parts of the adoption triad. However, despite these generally favorable outcomes, adoption still appears to be a devalued status, one that most Americans—with notable exceptions among single and gay persons—profess to admire in the abstract but usually avoid, in part because of exaggerated fears of negative outcomes. Moreover, we have seen that, with a rather small number of eminent exceptions, sociologists have done relatively little to inform the public regarding adoption in a way that might address those fears, and they have done little research on why and how those fears come to exist and on the effects of the stigma that may still be attached to adoption. In a recent study of college texts and readers in the family, Fisher (2003) found not only that those books made scant mention of adoption, but also that the books contained an average of two negative points about adoption for every positive point, exactly the same degree of imbalance that Waggenspack (1998) found in portrayals of adoption in the mass media. Moreover, many of those negative points about adoption in the texts were not supported by citations of empirical evidence. It would appear that sociologists too often fail to provide critical examination of negative societal assumptions about adoption, and may even help to reinforce those assumptions. Surely our discipline can be more thorough and evenhanded in its treatment of such a profoundly important topic.

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A much longer version of this chapter, including extensive treatment of the influence of race on adoption, and a longer list of references, are available from the author upon request, or online at [http://www.public.coe.edu/docs/sociologyofadoption.htm].

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