“...You Don’t Get Everything”: Foster-to Adoptive Parents’ Child Preferences across the Transition to Parenthood

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Transition to Parenthood: Stressful

- All foster-to-adopters
  - Background checks, parent training courses, CPR, First Aid certification, homestudy (Mallon, 2004)
  - Children adopted via foster care: Higher rates of health difficulties, attachment disorder, ADD/ADHD, and cognitive and educational problems than children adopted through private/domestic agencies and internationally (Vandivere & McKlindon, 2010)

- Same-sex couples
  - Potential discrimination
  - Receive the message: they should be open to children who are typically less preferred (Goldberg, 2010; Mallon, 2004; Matthews & Cramer, 2006)

- This study: Examined child welfare adopters’ unmet expectations and how they adjust/cope during the transition to adoptive parenthood
Adoption from Foster Care: Preferences and Realities

- 108,000 children waiting to be adopted in the U.S. public welfare system (AFCARS, 2015)

- Parents’ preferences (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Brooks, James, & Barth, 2002; Evan B. Donaldson Institute on Adoption, 2005):
  - Same race as parents
  - Under the age of 3
  - Ok with behavioral challenges, but not significant special needs
Research Questions

- Are certain types of unmet expectations (about the child’s age, gender, race, and special needs) viewed by adoptive parents as more stressful than others? How? Why?
- How do adoptive parents adapt to unmet expectations? What conditions appear to facilitate and hinder parents’ perceived ability to adapt?
- How do adoption type and parent sexual orientation shape parents’ experiences of, or reactions to unexpected child characteristics?
Interviews

• 3 months after placement
  – What problems or surprises did you encounter with the adoption process?; How prepared did you feel for the adoption?; Explain
  – What is the [age, gender, race/ethnicity, special needs status] of your child?
  – Is this different from what you expected? If so, different in a negative, positive, mixed, or neutral way?
Sample

- Parents
  - 90 individuals (30 gay men, 30 lesbians, 15 heterosexual men, and 15 heterosexual women); comprised 45 couples
  - 38.18 years old, on average ($SD = 6.09$).
  - Mostly White ($n = 85$)
  - Annual median family salary was $120,000 ($SD = $82,000$)
  - Geographically diverse; Highly educated
  - 30 couples adopted via foster care; 15 couples adopted privately

- Children
  - Age range: newborn-15 years old (Median: 4 years old)
  - Racially diverse (57% White)
### Unmet Demographic Expectations by Adoption Type and Parents’ Sexual Orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Demographic</th>
<th>Adoption Type</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public (n = 60)</td>
<td>Private (n = 30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>30 (50%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>8 (13%)</td>
<td>17 (57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>18 (30%)</td>
<td>9 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Needs</td>
<td>21 (35%)</td>
<td>3 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of individuals who endorsed at least one unmet expectation</td>
<td>54 (90%)</td>
<td>25 (83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Demographic</td>
<td>Considerable Stress</td>
<td>Manageable Stress</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age (n = 31)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected younger</td>
<td>8 (26%)</td>
<td>4 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected older</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (n = 25)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12 (48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected female</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected male</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity (n = 27)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected a minority race</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected a different minority race</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Needs (n = 24)</td>
<td>11 (46%)</td>
<td>13 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adaptations to Unmet Expectations

- Conditions Contributing to Stressful Adjustment
  - Lack of support (both formal and informal)
    
    *I can’t tell you how many workshops and lectures, and classes, and anything you can think of...we’ve talked to you know, a bazillion therapists who deal with this. We get it, why she does what she does. What I keep going back to is, it’s different living with it. And I think a lot of people in this profession don’t get that, they haven’t lived with them.* - Jane, lesbian mom of a child with unanticipated special needs

  - Perceived inability to “mold” the child
    
    *I was really hoping for a younger child in order to affect their personality.* - Marcus, gay father
Adaptations to Unmet Expectations

• Conditions Contributing to Positive Adjustment
  • Sufficient support (both formal and informal)
    • “Stepped up to the plate”
  • Parents’ shift in perspective

  Based on my experience, from two to three on up, you’re just dealing with a lot of things that I just didn’t think we were ready or willing to take on. But, you know, experience has proved me wrong. -John, heterosexual father

• Conditions Contributing to Neutral Adjustment
  • Adequate pre-adoptive training
  • Priority was parenthood; not preferences
    • You know, that [our initial gender preference] was so secondary to having a baby. -Mandy; lesbian mother
Conclusions

- Importance of *pre-* and *post-* adoption support
  - Adoption from foster care has unique challenges
  - Ability to be flexible can be an effective coping mechanism
  - Support from agencies, therapists, physicians, schools, family, friends is important

- Same-sex couples: seen as “less desirable?”
  - Preferences de-emphasized?
  - Awareness and proactive approaches from agencies, social workers, and therapists may help decrease stress for same-sex couples