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Early Challenges of Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Foster-to-adopt Parents

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ABSTRACT:

The current study entails a qualitative analysis of 30 couples (10 lesbian, 10 gay male, and 10 heterosexual couples) in order to further understand the challenges identified by foster-to-adopt parents in the early stage of parenting (3-4 months post-placement). Research suggests that most families who adopt children from foster care have positive outcomes and form “forever families” (Reilly & Platz, 2003). However, these families may also face unique challenges throughout the adoption process compared to other types of adoptive families, putting them at risk for disruption. Research has begun to shed light on the factors that may be associated with adoption disruption in particular (e.g., agency factors, child characteristics; Smith, Howard, Garnier, & Ryan, 2006; Schmidt, Rosenthal, & Bombeck, 1988). Risk factors for disruption include special needs adoptions (which tend to include children with behavioral problems), parents not receiving accurate information about the child, and lack of post-adoption support (Reilly & Platz, 2003). Little research has provided an in-depth exploration of foster-to-adopt couples’ perspectives of the challenges associated with the adoption process in the very early stage of parenting – before any possible disruption has occurred. Identifying such challenges at this stage is especially important given that early identification of challenges and stressors may help to prevent disruption, and may also have long term implications for family development. Given that couples who work with more experienced and knowledgeable social workers tend to be less likely to disrupt (Schmidt, Rosenthal, & Bombeck, 1988; Smith et al., 2006), it is particularly important to understand couples’ perceptions of early challenges working with social workers and agencies.

The current study examines 30 lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples' perceptions of adoption-related challenges three months post-placement. Participants were interviewed separately from their partners during the immediate post-placement period (3-4 months after they were placed with a child). Preliminary results indicate that approximately half of the participants identified significant challenges in this early stage of parenting. Some couples encountered legal difficulties (e.g., having to obtain legal permission to adopt from Native American tribes; lack of clarity about the termination of birth parents' parental rights; other birth family members attempting to gain custody), while others expressed disappointment in the lack of support from their social workers. For example, some felt that the social worker had intentionally withheld information about the child (e.g., severity of emotional/behavioral problems). Several couples also faced difficulties with the children themselves, such as having a difficult time bonding with their child. Such findings suggest that couples identified stressors at multiple levels (legal problems, agency support, and child related difficulties). This study has implications for adoption agencies and other adoption professionals and sheds light on some of the specific areas that could be improved upon to support foster-to-adopt families early in their transition to parenthood.

References:

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