

THE MODERN ADOPTIVE FAMILIES STUDY:

Executive Summary

**THE DONALDSON
ADOPTION INSTITUTE**

David Brodzinsky, Ph.D.

Executive Summary

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Contemporary adoption practice has changed dramatically over the past half century. Whereas prior to the 1980s, most adoptions involved the placement of domestically born, healthy, Caucasian infants with infertile parents of the same race, over time, these types of adoptions have declined significantly.

For the past few decades, older children, racial minority children, children born abroad, children who experienced significant pre-placement adversity, and children with medical and emotional problems have been the primary focus of adoption placement professionals. This change reflected a shift in adoption policy from a focus on the needs of prospective adoptive parents to the needs of vulnerable children for family stability, safety, and nurturance.

This change was also accompanied by a re-examination of what constituted adoptive parent suitability, leading to efforts to “screen in” a much wider array of adoption applicants than ever before. Fertile couples, unmarried individuals, older individuals, racial minority group members, foster parents, disabled individuals, low-income couples, and sexual minority individuals -- all of whom were previously discouraged from applying for adoption or who had their applications routinely denied -- were now viewed not only as viable adoption applicants, but in many cases as individuals uniquely situated to meet the needs of children waiting for adoptive homes.

With the growing diversity in adoptive family life, questions have emerged among adoption professionals about the unique experiences and needs of different types of families and the best ways of supporting them, both during the placement process and in the post-adoption years. This has been particularly true for adoptive families headed by sexual minority individuals and couples. Although adoption by lesbians and gay men has grown over the past few decades, and, in fact, at a rate that

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is proportionately higher than for heterosexual individuals, there is still limited information on the unique experiences and needs of these families compared to those headed by heterosexual parents.

To address this issue, the author, in collaboration with the Donaldson Adoption Institute, developed and implemented the Modern Adoptive Families Study (MAF), a large scale national survey focusing on the experiences, perceptions, and needs of different types of adoptive families. Although MAF focuses primarily on questions related to adoption by lesbians and gay men compared to heterosexual parents, it is also structured to address questions related to other adoption diversity issues. This project is a continuation of DAI's commitment to explore and expand our knowledge about the modern adoptive family so as to better serve the needs of parents and children.

The purpose of this report is to introduce the MAF project to the professional community by describing its methodology, the type of questions and variables included in the survey, the demographics of the sample, and by highlighting some of the interesting research questions that will be addressed in future publications.

KEY METHODOLOGICAL POINTS

Our goal was to collect survey information from a large number of non-relative adoptive families throughout the U.S., without restriction as to type of adoption (e.g., foster care, private domestic placement, intercountry placement), age of children, or racial composition of the family. Because our primary goal was to examine the unique experiences and needs of families headed by lesbians and gay men compared to those headed by heterosexual parents, efforts were made to oversample from agencies, attorneys, and organizations known to work with LGBT families. A total of 1,616 surveys were collected online through Survey Monkey. Although the survey primarily addressed the characteristics, experiences, and adjustment associated with the respondent's oldest adopted child (OAC), additional information was collected on other children in the family, on adoptive parent preparation and support, on parental racial socialization and sexual orientation socialization beliefs, and on the family's adoption experiences in relation to the school, and with mental health and medical professionals.

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RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

- Respondents were predominately Caucasian (90%), well educated, and from diverse geographical regions in the U.S.; respondent's age ranged from 24 to 74 years, with a median of 45 years; 80% of families were headed by two parents
- 1297 respondents were heterosexual (83%); 160 were lesbian (10%); 106 were gay (7%)

DEMOGRAPHIC AND PLACEMENT CHARACTERISTICS FOR OLDEST ADOPTED CHILD (OAC)

- Age range of OAC was from one month to 29.6 years, with a mean of 9.5 years; 51% were girls; 33% of OAC were Caucasian, 17% were African American, 20% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 12% were Hispanic, 1.5% were Native American, and 14% were biracial/multiracial
- Nearly 57% of OAC were of a different race from both of their parents
- Adoption type for OAC included: foster care adoption (32%), private domestic adoption from an agency or independent practitioner (30.5%), intercountry adoption (37.5%)
- Age at placement ranged from birth to 17.5 years, with an average age of 2.1 years
- Nearly 75% of OAC had experienced one or more pre-placement adversities prior to entering their family; over half (57.7%) presented with one or more special needs at the time of placement

KEY ISSUES SURVEYED AND QUESTIONS TO BE EXPLORED IN FUTURE REPORTS

The primary focus of survey questions was on the characteristics, experiences, and adjustment of respondents' oldest adopted children. Key issues explored in relation to the target child included:

- Extent of contact with birth family prior to placement, following placement, and currently; if contact occurred, with whom; type of contact; quality of current relationship with birth family
- Current educational and psychological adjustment; history of treatment by a mental health professional and the nature of the child's problems; current parent-child relationship; parent's experience in raising their child

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- Quality of pre-adoption parent preparation in relation to their oldest adopted children and their most recent adopted child

Parents were also asked to describe the quality of post-adoption education and support they received over the years, the frequency of use of various types of post-adoption educational or support services, and their current adoptive parent needs. In addition, respondents provided information on their adoption related experiences in working with teachers and their children's schools, with mental health professionals they have consulted, and with their children's medical professionals.

The current report provides summary information on respondents' and children's demographics, as well as on many of the substantive issues noted above, allowing initial comparison of our sample and data from the National Survey of Adoptive Parents, 2007.

Initial publications from the MAF will focus on similarities and differences in adoption experiences, child outcomes, post-adoption service needs and service use satisfaction in families headed by lesbians and gay men compared to those headed by heterosexuals. Additional publications will examine other adoption diversity issues including correlates of:

- Adoption placement source (child welfare adoptions, private, domestic placements; intercountry placements)
- Inracial versus transracial adoption
- Family structure (single versus two parent families; family with only adopted children versus those with both adopted and biological children)
- Variations in openness with birth family

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The Modern Adoptive Families Study is one of the largest surveys of adoptive family life to date, and certainly provides the largest dataset of adoptive families headed by lesbian and gay adoptive parents.

We believe this project offers the opportunity to explore many interesting empirical questions about the experiences and adjustment of diverse type of adoptive families, and in so doing, to better understand the emerging complexity and needs of the modern adoptive family.

It is with great excitement that we introduce the MAF project to the professional community.