

Adoption: Understanding Attitudes and Perspectives

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Introduction to Attitudes toward Adoption

Attitudes toward adoption represent a complex and multifaceted area of psychological and sociological inquiry, encompassing the beliefs, emotions, and behavioral predispositions held by individuals and society regarding the practice of permanently transferring parental rights and responsibilities. These attitudes are crucial determinants of adoption rates, policy formation, and the overall well-being of the adoption triad--the adoptee, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents. Understanding these attitudes requires acknowledging their dynamic nature, as they are shaped profoundly by cultural norms, legal frameworks, religious doctrines, and evolving scientific understanding of child development and family structure. For instance, the transition from closed adoption practices, prevalent throughout much of the 20th century, to the increasing acceptance of open adoption models reflects a significant shift in societal attitudes concerning privacy, disclosure, and the importance of origin knowledge for the adoptee. These attitudes are not monolithic; they vary widely across demographic groups and are often deeply intertwined with personal experiences related to infertility, family formation, and identity construction, necessitating a nuanced approach to their study and interpretation.

The psychological literature defines attitudes as lasting, general evaluations of people, objects, or issues, and in the context of adoption, these evaluations often revolve around perceived normalcy, legitimacy, and the potential risks or benefits associated with the process. Positive attitudes typically emphasize adoption as a selfless act providing stability for a child and fulfilling the desire for parenthood, thereby positioning adoption as a viable and commendable means of family building. Conversely, negative attitudes often stem from historical stigma, misconceptions about the genetic or psychological makeup of adopted children, or concerns regarding the ambiguity of non-biological family ties, sometimes leading to the perception of adoption as a secondary or less legitimate form of parenthood. Analyzing these attitudes allows researchers to pinpoint areas where intervention, education, and policy changes are necessary to mitigate existing biases and foster a more supportive environment for all members of the adoption community. It is essential to differentiate between explicit attitudes, which are consciously held and reported, and implicit attitudes, which operate outside conscious awareness yet significantly influence behavior and interaction within the adoption context.

Furthermore, the study of attitudes toward adoption must account for the intersectionality of various social identities. Factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation profoundly influence how adoption is perceived and practiced. For example, attitudes toward transracial adoption often reflect broader societal views on race relations and cultural assimilation, sometimes leading to heightened scrutiny or bias regarding the adoptive parents' ability to support the child's cultural identity. Similarly, the growing acceptance of adoption by LGBTQ+ individuals has required a recalibration of traditional attitudes that often narrowly defined family solely through heterosexual biological ties, pushing legal and social systems toward greater inclusivity. Consequently, attitudes

toward adoption serve as a powerful barometer of a society's willingness to embrace diverse family structures and challenge conventional definitions of kinship. The foundational understanding that adoption is a lifelong process, impacting development across the lifespan, underscores the necessity of continuous research into how attitudes evolve and influence the lived experiences of adoptees and their families over time.

Historical Context and Societal Shifts

Historically, attitudes toward adoption have undergone radical transformations, moving from practices rooted in necessity and child welfare to a formalized legal process focused on establishing permanent family bonds. In earlier eras, particularly before the 20th century, informal adoptions or forms of "kinship care" were common, often driven by economic hardship or the death of biological parents, and these arrangements frequently lacked legal protection or transparency. The prevailing attitude during these periods often viewed the adopted child as an object of charity or labor, rather than a full and equal member of the receiving family, leading to significant societal ambivalence about the practice. The standardization of adoption law, beginning primarily in the United States in the early 1900s, aimed to professionalize the process, prioritize the child's best interest, and introduce confidentiality, which ironically ushered in the era of **closed adoption**. This legal shift reflected a societal desire to protect the privacy of all parties and minimize the perceived stigma associated with illegitimacy or infertility, fundamentally altering public perception toward the institution.

The mid-20th century witnessed the peak of closed adoption, where secrecy was paramount, driven by the psychological theory that severing ties completely would allow the child to integrate fully into the new family without confusion. Societal attitudes during this period often treated adoption as a private matter, sometimes encouraging adoptive parents to conceal the fact of adoption from their children or the wider community. This pervasive culture of secrecy cultivated a complex set of attitudes: while adoption was lauded as a benevolent solution for childless couples, it simultaneously carried a shadow of shame, particularly for birth mothers who were often pressured to surrender their children quietly. The resulting stigma surrounding birth mothers contributed significantly to the negative attitudes associated with the "loss" aspect of adoption, framing it as a tragedy to be hidden rather than a complex family formation process to be acknowledged openly. This historical emphasis on concealment has had lasting repercussions on the mental health and identity formation of adoptees searching for their origins today.

A dramatic shift began in the late 20th century, fueled by adoptee rights movements and increased psychological understanding of the importance of genetic heritage. Attitudes began moving away from the secrecy model toward greater transparency, culminating in the rise of **open adoption**. This change was supported by research suggesting that knowledge of one's origins is vital for identity development and that ongoing contact, when managed appropriately, can be beneficial for

all members of the triad. This societal evolution reflects a modern attitude that values honesty, communication, and the recognition of complex family histories. Furthermore, changes in reproductive technologies, which have made biological parenthood accessible to more people, and the increasing visibility of international and transracial adoptions, have forced society to continually re-evaluate and broaden its definition of what constitutes a "normal" family unit. These societal shifts demonstrate a growing comfort with non-traditional kinship structures, though lingering historical biases related to biological essentialism remain a significant challenge to fully positive attitudes toward adoption.

Psychological Dimensions of Adoption Attitudes

The psychological underpinnings of attitudes toward adoption are deeply rooted in concepts of biological essentialism, attachment theory, and perceived risk. Many individuals hold an implicit bias toward biological relatedness, viewing it as the most natural or secure foundation for family bonds. This preference, often termed the "genetic imperative," can manifest in subtle but powerful ways, influencing the perceived legitimacy and stability of adoptive families. Research indicates that when adoption is viewed through the lens of biological essentialism, it may be associated with higher perceived risks--such as concerns about inherited psychological issues or the child's potential lack of loyalty to the adoptive parents. Conversely, when individuals adopt a more social and environmental perspective on parenting, emphasizing nurture over nature, their attitudes toward adoption tend to be significantly more positive, viewing the process as a successful mechanism for providing secure attachment and optimal developmental environments, regardless of genetic links.

Another critical psychological dimension involves the concept of **control and loss**, particularly relevant for prospective adoptive parents and birth parents. For prospective parents struggling with infertility, adoption represents a path to regain control over their family planning destiny, often leading to profoundly positive and enthusiastic attitudes toward the process, viewing it as a deeply desired resolution to significant personal pain. However, this enthusiasm can be tempered by underlying anxieties related to the adoption process itself, such as the fear of disruption or the perceived judgment from others regarding their inability to conceive biologically. For birth parents, the attitude often centers on the perception of adoption as a necessary, yet deeply painful, act of love and sacrifice. Their attitudes are frequently complex, involving elements of grief, empowerment, and a desire for the child's future well-being, highlighting the profound emotional labor involved in relinquishment. Societal attitudes often fail to adequately recognize and validate this complex psychological experience of birth parents, sometimes reducing their decision to simple abandonment rather than acknowledging the difficult circumstances and careful consideration involved.

The psychological well-being of the adoptee is perhaps the most scrutinized area influencing public

attitudes. Historical concerns about the "Adoption Trauma" or "Adoption Curse" have perpetuated negative stereotypes, suggesting that adopted individuals are inherently more prone to psychological distress or identity crises. While modern research acknowledges the complexities of identity formation for adoptees--especially regarding the integration of their adoptive and birth narratives--the prevailing psychological attitude has shifted towards recognizing adoption as a potential risk factor, rather than a deterministic pathology. Positive attitudes in this domain emphasize the resilience of adoptees and the critical role of supportive, communicative adoptive environments in fostering healthy development. These attitudes prioritize honesty about the child's history and the provision of professional support to navigate issues of loss, grief, and identity integration, moving away from the outdated notion that ignorance is bliss and embracing the psychological benefits of transparency.

Public Perception and Media Influence

Public perception of adoption is heavily mediated and shaped by its portrayal in popular culture, news media, and social discourse. Media representations often oscillate between two extremes: the idealized narrative of the "miracle baby" rescuing a childless couple, or the sensationalized story focusing on complex legal battles, emotional trauma, or the dramatic search for birth parents. The former portrayal, while seemingly positive, often sets unrealistic expectations for adoptive families and minimizes the real challenges inherent in forming an adoptive bond. It tends to reinforce the idea that adopted children are inherently grateful and that the process is purely one of seamless integration, thereby obscuring the ongoing emotional work required. The latter, sensationalized depiction, often contributes to enduring negative attitudes by reinforcing fears about instability, genetic predisposition to problems, and the potential for disruption, thereby increasing the perceived risk associated with adoption in the public mind.

News coverage, particularly regarding international or highly publicized domestic adoptions, significantly influences policy attitudes and public trust. When international adoption processes are marred by scandals, child trafficking allegations, or geopolitical conflicts, public attitudes toward the practice become highly skeptical, often leading to restrictive governmental policies and a decrease in adoption rates from those regions. Conversely, high-profile celebrity adoptions, while raising visibility, sometimes inadvertently trivialize the complexities of transracial or international family formation, focusing primarily on the humanitarian aspect without delving into the crucial need for cultural competence and identity support. An expert analysis of media influence suggests that the lack of nuanced representation of everyday adoptive life--the ordinary struggles and triumphs--prevents the public from developing mature, balanced attitudes that recognize adoption as a normal, albeit unique, way of building a family.

Social media has introduced a new dynamic, allowing members of the adoption triad to share their lived experiences directly, bypassing traditional media filters. This direct access has been

instrumental in challenging outdated stereotypes and fostering more empathetic attitudes. Adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents use platforms to discuss the nuances of open adoption relationships, the complexities of identity searches, and the reality of navigating microaggressions related to adoption status. While this democratization of narrative can foster understanding and positive societal attitudes, it also carries risks, including the potential for public shaming, disclosure of sensitive information without consent, and the perpetuation of biased opinions within echo chambers. Therefore, the contemporary public perception of adoption is increasingly fragmented, reflecting a mix of traditional media stereotypes, personal testimonials, and ongoing advocacy efforts aimed at promoting **respectful language** and mitigating the inherent stigma.

Attitudes of Birth Parents and Adoptive Parents

The attitudes held by birth parents are typically characterized by profound ambivalence, reflecting a decision that balances the immediate needs of the child with their own capacity to parent. For many birth parents, especially birth mothers, the attitude toward adoption is rooted in a desire for the child's best possible future, viewing the adoptive family as providing resources or stability they cannot offer at the time. This perspective often frames adoption not as rejection, but as a selfless act of planning and provision. Their attitudes are highly sensitive to the level of openness in the adoption; those in open adoptions often report more positive attitudes toward the adoptive family and the decision itself, feeling greater peace of mind knowing the child is thriving and maintaining some level of connection. Conversely, attitudes among birth parents involved in closed adoptions frequently include regret, unresolved grief, and negative feelings toward the system that mandated secrecy and separation, leading to long-term psychological distress and difficulty in integrating the relinquishment experience into their life narrative.

Adoptive parents' attitudes are primarily driven by the fundamental desire for parenthood and the belief in their capacity to provide a loving, stable home. Their attitudes toward the adoption process itself are often overwhelmingly positive, reflecting the fulfillment of a long-held dream. However, their specific attitudes often differ based on the type of adoption pursued. Those who choose international adoption might hold attitudes influenced by humanitarian ideals, viewing themselves as providing rescue, while those pursuing domestic adoption might focus more on the desire for a newborn child and the possibility of maintaining contact with birth family. A key area where adoptive parent attitudes are crucial is their stance on disclosure and origin searching. Positive, healthy attitudes embrace the child's full history, viewing the birth family not as a threat, but as an essential part of the child's identity, fostering an environment of **transparency and acceptance**.

A significant challenge arises when the attitudes of birth parents and adoptive parents clash, particularly regarding the boundaries and expectations within open adoption agreements. Adoptive parents may struggle with feelings of insecurity or territoriality, fearing that the birth parents'

presence undermines their authority, leading to cautious or sometimes restrictive attitudes toward contact. Birth parents, conversely, may harbor anxieties about judgment or marginalization, feeling that their role is undervalued, which can lead to strained relationships. Successful open adoptions depend critically on mutual respect and aligned attitudes that prioritize the adoptee's well-being above personal discomfort. Education and counseling focused on developing empathetic attitudes toward the other party's loss and gain are essential components in mitigating conflict and promoting functional, lifelong adoptive relationships.

Perspectives of Adoptees

The attitudes of adoptees toward adoption are perhaps the most crucial yet often historically overlooked component of the research. Adoptee attitudes are inherently shaped by their lived experience, navigating the complexities of dual identity, loss, and integration. Many adoptees hold positive attitudes, viewing adoption as a foundational positive event that provided them with stability, opportunity, and loving family relationships. These individuals often emphasize the resilience and unique perspective gained from having a non-traditional family structure. However, even among those with overwhelmingly positive views, there is often an underlying psychological awareness of the primal loss inherent in separation from biological family, leading to attitudes that are characterized by a nuanced blend of gratitude and grief, often referred to as the "adoption paradox."

A significant dimension of adoptee attitudes relates to the issue of secrecy and access to information. Adoptees raised in closed adoptions often express negative attitudes toward the systemic denial of their origin story, feeling a sense of betrayal, fragmentation, or incomplete identity. Their attitudes frequently reflect a strong advocacy for truth and access to records, viewing this information as a fundamental human right necessary for psychological wholeness. In contrast, adoptees in open adoption arrangements often hold more positive and integrated attitudes toward their history, benefiting from continuous access to their birth family and a clear understanding of the circumstances surrounding their placement. However, even open adoption can lead to complex attitudes if the contact is poorly managed or if the adoptee feels burdened by the emotional dynamics between their two sets of parents.

Furthermore, adoptees' attitudes toward adoption are strongly influenced by how society and peers treat their adoptive status. Facing frequent intrusive questions, microaggressions ("You don't look like your parents," "What happened to your real mother?"), or stereotyping leads many adoptees to develop guarded or defensive attitudes about disclosing their status. Negative societal attitudes force adoptees to constantly educate or justify their family structure, contributing to feelings of difference or alienation. Conversely, when adoption is normalized and celebrated within their immediate and extended social circles, adoptees develop attitudes marked by confidence and integration. Adoptee-led organizations and advocacy groups have played a vital role in shifting the

narrative, promoting attitudes that center the adoptee voice and challenge the historical tendency to frame adoption primarily around the needs and desires of the adults involved.

Challenges and Stigma Associated with Adoption

Despite significant progress, adoption continues to grapple with persistent challenges and deeply entrenched societal stigma, which profoundly influence attitudes. One major source of stigma stems from the association of adoption with **infertility and loss**. For adoptive parents, the inability to conceive biologically can sometimes be perceived by others as a failure, positioning adoption as a second-best option, rather than a first-choice path to parenthood. This bias is reflected in common societal language that often prioritizes biological ties. For birth mothers, the stigma is often harsher, frequently involving moral judgment and the perception of abandonment or irresponsibility, rather than acknowledging the difficult, often traumatic, circumstances that led to the relinquishment decision. These negative perceptions contribute to secrecy and shame, reinforcing negative attitudes across the entire adoption triad.

Another significant challenge is the ongoing stigma associated with the adopted child themselves, rooted in outdated fears about inherited traits or psychological damage. While psychological research has debunked many of these myths, the public attitude often retains a residual suspicion that adopted children are inherently "damaged" or at higher risk for behavioral issues than their non-adopted peers. This lingering bias can manifest in educational settings, healthcare interactions, and social environments, leading to unfair labeling or lower expectations. This stigma is particularly pronounced in transracial and international adoptions, where children may face additional challenges related to racial identity, cultural assimilation, and the complex process of navigating a world that often views them as foreign or inherently different from their parents.

Legal and governmental structures also reflect and perpetuate certain negative attitudes. Historically complex and non-uniform adoption laws, particularly those restricting adult adoptees' access to their original birth records, reflect an outdated attitude prioritizing the privacy of birth parents and the state's control over the adoptee's right to identity. While many jurisdictions are moving toward greater openness, resistance often comes from those who hold the traditional attitude that birth records must remain sealed to protect the adoptive relationship. Overcoming these challenges requires not only legal reform but also extensive public education campaigns designed to dismantle the persistent myths surrounding biological essentialism, mental health, and the legitimacy of non-traditional family structures, ultimately fostering attitudes of acceptance and normalization.

Contemporary Trends and Future Directions in Research

Contemporary attitudes toward adoption are heavily influenced by several major trends, including

the increasing dominance of open adoption, the rise of specialized foster care adoption, and the evolving legal recognition of diverse family forms. The widespread acceptance of open adoption reflects a positive shift in societal attitudes toward transparency and the importance of origin knowledge, moving away from secrecy and toward relational complexity. Future research must focus on the long-term outcomes and relational dynamics within open adoptions, particularly how attitudes toward contact evolve over the lifespan of the adoptee and how birth parents and adoptive parents manage boundaries and conflict resolution in these complex, continuous relationships. Researchers are increasingly utilizing longitudinal studies to capture the dynamic nature of these attitudes, moving beyond cross-sectional snapshots.

The increasing focus on foster care adoption, particularly of older children and sibling groups, presents a unique set of challenges and requires shifts in public attitudes. Traditional attitudes often prioritize infant adoption, leading to less positive perceptions of adopting older children who have experienced significant trauma and loss. Future directions in research must address how to cultivate more positive and realistic attitudes toward adopting children from the foster care system, emphasizing the importance of trauma-informed care and providing robust post-adoption support services. This shift requires public education to counter the tendency to blame the child for behavioral issues and instead recognize the systemic failures and historical trauma that necessitate such placements, thereby fostering more compassionate and supportive attitudes toward these vulnerable populations.

Finally, research is increasingly focusing on the intersection of adoption attitudes with broader social justice movements, particularly concerning LGBTQ+ adoption and transracial adoption. Future studies will need to examine how implicit biases related to race and sexual orientation affect placement decisions, adoption outcomes, and the psychological well-being of adoptees. The goal is to develop standardized measures that assess and mitigate bias among adoption professionals and the judiciary, ensuring that positive attitudes toward diverse family structures are translated into equitable practice. By integrating sociological, legal, and psychological perspectives, future research aims to generate knowledge that supports attitudes viewing adoption not as a solution to a problem, but as a valid and respected pathway to permanent family formation in an increasingly diverse society.