
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF REASONS GIVEN BY AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOPTION-SEEKERS REGARDING THEIR DECISION NOT TO ADOPT

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The extent to which African Americans are willing to adopt African American children has framed discourses associated with whether very many African Americans are willing to adopt, whether they adopt in large enough numbers to impact the thousands of African American children in the foster care system and believed available for adoption, and whether they are willing to adopt formally as well as informally. The purpose of this paper is to report the results of an analysis of the narrative responses of a group of African Americans regarding why, after pursuing adoption, they did not adopt.

The paper begins with an historical overview of the changes that were made to address earlier reports of low rates of formal adoption by African Americans. Literature is reviewed that describes 1) factors traditionally associated with adoption by African Americans, 2) barriers to adoption, 3) legislation aimed at eliminating these barriers, and 4) the current situation. The method by which participants in the present study were surveyed is described and results reported. Finally, policy and practice implications and recommendations are given.

Historical Background and Literature Review

Focus on the rates of adoptions of African American children by African American parents emerged in the 1970's in response to widespread perceptions that African Americans did not adopt (Herzog, Sudia, Harwood, & Newcomb, 1971). This perceived failure was cited as a rationale for the practice of transracial adoption. Others argued, however, that traditional adoption policies and procedures were biased against African Americans who frequently did not meet the income, housing, marital status, and other standards that qualified people for adoption (Day, 1979; Herzog, Sudia, Harwood, & Newcomb, 1971). While numerous exemplary programs and agencies were set up throughout the country to demonstrate African Americans' willingness to adopt (summarized in Hollingsworth, 1998), researchers continued, into the 1990's, to identify barriers to the recruitment of people of color as adopters (Gilles & Kroll, 1991; Rodriguez & Meyer, 1990). Recent federal initiatives and laws have been directed at further eliminating barriers for potential adopters (e.g., Adoption 2002, 1996; Section 1807 of the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996 — Adoption

Assistance, P. L. 104-188; and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997). However, none of these have been specifically directed toward the recruitment and retention of adopters of color and at least one placed restrictions on programs which sought to locate same race adopters for children of color (Section 1808 of the Small Business Job Protection Act — Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption, P. L. 104-188). [The latter Act strengthened earlier legislation (the Multi-ethnic Placement Act of 1994) that made it illegal for agencies engaged in adoption practices and receiving federal funds to delay or deny the foster placement or adoption of a child based on factors which included race and ethnicity.]

Most other studies of adoption behavior have been directed at identifying factors that predict adoption, adoption seeking, or propensity to adopt (Bachrach, 1983; Bachrach, London, & Maza, 1991; Bonham, 1977; Hollingsworth, in press - a; Leahy, 1933; Poston & Cullen, 1986). Studies that examined reasons people do not adopt have identified: 1) a woman's or a couple's desire for the woman to experience being pregnant and giving birth; 2) long waits; 3) legal barriers; and 4) the privacy that is provided by assisted reproductive technologies (Daniels, 1994). Of 850 women who gave valid responses to interviews recorded in Cycle 5 of the National Survey of Family Growth (1995), 716 (84 percent) listed their own situation as reasons for not adopting 82 (10 percent) cited the adoption process, and 52 (6 percent) listed both their own situation and the adoption process. When asked which reason(s) related to adoption caused respondents to decide not to pursue adoption, fees were listed 56 times, the lack of availability of children to adopt was given 24 times, the fact that the adoption process was too long or cumbersome 31 times, the birth parent(s)/family's decision to keep the child 15 times, having been rejected by the agency 8 times, and a variety of other reasons not shown separately was given 28 times. (There were 12 instances in which the respondent did not specify a reason.)

Purpose and Rationale

The current paper describes how a subsample of African Americans constructed their reasons for not adopting. The primary goal is further understanding of the adoption patterns of African Americans and to respond to questions in this regard.

The study involved a content analysis of written explanations by African Americans regarding their decision not to adopt, after they had inquired about adopting. Content analysis is a qualitative research method which uses the characteristics of messages to seek to make inferences (Krippendorff, 1980; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Allen-Meares (1985) described four ways in which content analysis could be used: 1) to study developments and trends in practice; 2) to evaluate the status of knowledge-building in a given area; 3) to redirect relevant policies; and 4) to establish accountability procedures in practice. All of these are relevant to this study.

Method

Participants

Ninety-two African Americans responded to a mailed survey regarding their experiences with adoption. Respondents had contacted one of three agencies, over a ten-year period, about adopting. Forty-four had inquired about adoption but had not adopted, and 48 did adopt. At the time of the survey, 85% of the sample were female, 86% were employed, 59% had at least a college education, 65% had incomes of \$30,000 or more, and 52% had incomes of over \$40,000. Forty-four percent were employed in professional, supervisory, management, or professional sales occupations, 93% designated an affiliation with a formal religious denomination, 54% were 39 years old and younger at the time of the survey, and 61% listed their marital status as married.

Procedure

Three adoption agencies - two specializing in the recruitment of African American adoptive families - mailed surveys to African Americans who had contacted the agency, over the ten-year period preceding the mailing about adopting. Respondents completed items related to 1) their adoption-related beliefs, experiences, and actions prior to the decision; 2) their current life satisfaction; 3) their attitudes about racial identity and race relations; 4) current demographic information; and, 5) if formally married, their current marital satisfaction. Respondents then mailed their completed surveys back to the agency anonymously and in a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Results of other segments of the study are awaiting publication (Hollingsworth, in press - b). Of the 44 non-adopters who responded, 41 (93 percent) gave answers to an open-ended question in the survey that asked "If you did not adopt, what was your main reason for not adopting?"

Definition of Categories

Responses were coded according to whether the reason given for not adopting had to do with the respondent's own situation, the adoption process, or both. These categories were created independently although they are consistent with those used to categorize respondent reasons for not adopting in the National Survey of Family Growth (1995).

Coding

Two graduate students coded responses independently, according to the three categories (i.e., own situation, adoption process, or both). Intercoder agreement was 88%,

with a kappa statistic of 0.74 ($p < .001$). After intercoder reliability levels were calculated, the two coders collaborated to reach full agreement on what theme was best reflected in each response.

Results

Non-adopters differed significantly from adopters in three areas – marital status and household income at the time of the survey, and primary reason for having contacted an adoption agency initially. Non-adopters were more often never married, divorced or separated ($C2 = 4.71, p < .05$), had lower household incomes ($C2 = 12.53, p < .05$), and gave child-centered compared to parent-centered reasons as their primary reason for contacting an adoption agency initially ($C2 = 20.72, p < .05$).

Seventy-one percent ($n = 29$) of respondents attributed their failure to adopt to circumstances having to do with their own situation. Twenty-four percent ($n = 10$) cited circumstances related to the adoption process and 2 respondents (5%) cited both. Reasons given for not adopting were sub-categorized by coders. Twenty-seven percent ($n = 11$) of reasons were cost-related (e.g., “we could not afford the additional child care (day care) costs since both of us will be working soon). Fifteen percent ($n = 6$) were categorized as related to the female respondent or wife of the respondent having become pregnant after inquiring about adopting, or the individual or couple deciding to try longer for a pregnancy. Another fifteen percent of reasons given for not adopting ($n = 6$) were related to competing demands for the respondent’s time. For example, three non-adopters cited frequent travel or other time requirements associated with their job. Twenty-percent of non-adopters ($n = 8$) cited situations related to agency practice, such as not yet having been approved or notified. Two respondents (5%) based their decision not to follow through on the possibility that biological parents would change their mind, that unidentified congenital problems would show up in the child later, or that an existing child may be jealous or resentful of the adopted child. (The last two reasons were given by the same respondent.) Finally, seventeen percent ($n = 7$) of non-adopting respondents cited miscellaneous reasons such as having decided to become a foster parent instead, or simply not yet having taken action.

Discussion

Many reasons for not adopting that were categorized as personal reflect agency process and therefore may respond to intervention. For example, in the eleven instances in which cost factors were cited, respondents may have benefited from having a fee waived, having subsidies made available, or receiving tax credits for adoption expenses. Respondents who assumed they “didn’t have a large enough income” or “didn’t have enough space” may have benefited from information regarding current,

less stringent requirements for qualifying as an adoptive parent.

Agency follow-up with prospective adopters may increase decisions to adopt. Two separate respondents actually made a decision to go forward with adopting after receiving the survey, while another mentioned “want[ing] to get more information about it; still deciding; still interested.” Respondents who mentioned “horror stories” associated with negative adoption outcomes may have been educated about current practices, such as open adoption, that are aimed at reducing such experiences. Information about and from the experiences of other adoptive families may have been helpful to the respondent who worried about the effect of adoption on her biological child(ren). However, the agency could not have known about her fear without following up. One respondent sought more assertive follow-up: “I really don’t know why [she didn’t adopt]...would still like to try for a son. Maybe more coaching on my husband’s part....”

In addition to the benefits of agency follow-up with prospective adopters, timely agency decisions are also useful. In four instances related to the adoption process, respondents mentioned not yet having been approved. While it is possible that these respondents were currently awaiting action on their application, two of the four mentioned not having been notified in spite of having completed what they seemed to assume were procedures which would lead to a decision regarding their eligibility to adopt.

Although only one respondent expressed concern regarding bureaucratic procedures (i.e., “too much red tape”), the response is important because it coincides with researchers’ recommendations of personalizing the adoption process (Hairston & Williams, 1989) and “carefully explaining the purposes behind all questioning and interviewing done in relation to the homestudy” (Gilles & Kroll, 1991; p. 3). Potential adopters of color were willing to participate fully in the homestudy process when they received thorough explanations of the reason for it.

In spite of the potential usefulness of this information for adoption practitioners and agency policymakers, several constraints should not be overlooked. First, the instrument did not include an item regarding the year in which the respondent had inquired about adopting. It is possible that some current adoption incentives were not in place at the time of the inquiry and that their responses would have been different had their inquiries been more recent. Second, significant differences between non-adopters and adopters in household income, marital status, and initial reason for inquiring about adoption present the possibility that these reasons, and not factors related to agency process, may have been influential. Third, given the small numbers, the sample may not be representative of the African American population to which the researcher seeks to generalize.

In spite of these constraints, the use of multiple independent coders and the calculation of intercoder agreement add to the reliability of the themes identified. Moreover, similarity between the results of this study and the two cited earlier have implications for the external validity. For example, respondents in both the New Zealand study (Daniels, 1994) and the current one cited problems with obtaining a child, a desire to be pregnant, and having a biological child as reasons influencing the decision not to adopt. Legal barriers and negative experiences with adopting were also cited by both groups. Respondents in the National Survey of Family Growth (1995) listed fees, the lack of availability of the desired child, a lengthy and cumbersome adoption process, and birth parent(s)' decision reversal as reasons for not adopting, similar to the explanations given by respondents in the present study. A reason given often in both earlier studies, and only once in the current one, is the lack of availability of the desired child. This may be consistent with the desire of adoption-seekers for same-race children and with the fact that such children are more available to African American adoption seekers.

In summary, it is important that continued attention be given, in the case of African American adoption seekers especially, to misperceptions about eligibility to adopt, procedural barriers, and the potential seriousness of seemingly casual inquirers.

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Table 1. Reasons Given for Decision not to Adopt, by Attribution of Responsibility.

Category (Theme)	Reason given for not adopting
<u>Own Situation</u>	<p>Job Transfer.</p> <p>I am getting ready to retire from my job and decided to become a foster parent.</p> <p>I decided to wait until I married and was sure that my husband would be willing to adopt a child.</p> <p>I decided to wait until our oldest child was out of daycare.</p> <p>My reason was primarily financial - we are already spending \$15,000 a year on child care for the 3 children we already have. We may need to improve our budgeting process.</p> <p>We could not afford the additional child care (day care) costs since both of us will be working soon.</p> <p>Personal situation - my husband has taken a job which requires him to be away from home for long periods. Parenting an adopted child is a two-person job. We had planned to adopt an older, school age child.</p> <p>I unexpectedly became pregnant with a second child.</p> <p>I became pregnant although I would like to in the future once our income is adequate for three children.</p> <p>Financial.</p> <p>My husband wanted to keep trying to have our own.</p> <p>I decided to wait until I finish college and am better off financially.</p>

Table 1. Continued.

Category (Theme)	Reason given for not adopting
<u>Own Situation</u>	<p>I wanted to wait just a little longer but we are ready now.</p> <p>I really don't know why...would still like to try for a son. Maybe more coaching on my husband's part - scared of what is happening with the laws and biological parents stepping back into the picture to want the kids back.</p> <p>I didn't have enough space.</p> <p>My job requires me to travel a great deal.</p> <p>Friends and family made discouraging comments against adopting. The main reason was not knowing what type of child you're getting mentally due to all the crack babies and what the long term outcome may be and the effects it could bring upon family members. Also, the child we have now could hold resentment or jealousy.</p> <p>My (spouse) and I separated.</p> <p>At the time I looked into it I was just going back to school and was concerned it might be a bad time both financially and in terms of time.</p> <p>After a lot of consultation, I decided to wait a while - possibly until after marriage. I would also like to devote my time to my career right now.</p> <p>We still want to adopt but we were also trying to get pregnant so decided to wait awhile.</p> <p>I completed the paper work but didn't send it in.</p> <p>Financial reasons; purchased a new home.</p> <p>I got married; plan to adopt later.</p>

Table 1. Continued.

Category (Theme)	Reason given for not adopting
<u>Own Situation</u>	<p>I became pregnant.</p> <p>I became pregnant two months after inquiring.</p> <p>I never thought I had a large enough income.</p> <p>I became a foster parent.</p> <p>I was going to get back with the agency to see if I could adopt if I was on SSI and live in a Section 8 house. Sometimes I work part-time.</p>
<u>Adoption Process</u>	<p>I haven't been approved yet.</p> <p>The child has not come up for adoption yet.</p> <p>Cost of many private agencies.</p> <p>Haven't been approved yet.</p> <p>No one ever got back to me if I was approved for adoption. I finished my parenting class and got my certificate.</p> <p>Vague financial cost given - sent in application today.</p> <p>I was never notified after going through the home study and physical and questions and paper work.</p> <p>Shortage of available healthy children and negative experience with another adoption agency previously.</p> <p>Too much red tape.</p> <p>In the process of trying to adopt.</p>

Table 1. Continued.

Category (Theme)	Reason given for not adopting
<u>Both</u>	Wanted to get more information about it; still deciding; still interested. I do want to adopt.