

DONALDSON ADOPTION INSTITUTE

ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS AMONG ADOPTION PROFESSIONALS: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT

DECEMBER 2016



**THE DONALDSON
ADOPTION INSTITUTE**

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INTRODUCTION

As The Donaldson Adoption Institute (DAI) embarked on *Let's Adopt Reform*, an initiative to better understand the state of adoption in America today and to identify the path to reform, it recognized there was a glaring gap. One group of critical voices had not been heard from in a meaningful way in a very long time. The real world experiences of professionals such as social workers, lawyers and clinicians were not taken sufficiently into account in discussions about adoption today. To rectify this situation, DAI commissioned Galileo Research and Strategy Consultancy, LLC, to conduct a series of focus groups to gather the perceptions and experiences of this workforce. The results of those sessions are found in this report.

I. BACKGROUND, OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

A. Background & Objectives

- The Donaldson Adoption Institute's initiative, *Let's Adopt Reform* aims to galvanize change within the adoption and foster care landscape. In particular, it seeks to evolve the process of attending to children and families in need from a series of short-term transactions to a more long-term, transformational approach, promoting healing and building stronger families.
- As part of this initiative, DAI has commissioned research to gain insight into the current level of understanding and opinion about adoption and foster care among the American public.
- In parallel with a large-scale quantitative study of the general population, Galileo conducted a qualitative study among professionals working within the adoption and foster care community.
- Objectives of this qualitative research were to understand the experience, perspectives and insight of these key stakeholders on a variety of issues within the adoption landscape today, in order to inform communications and initiatives moving forward.

B. Methodology

- **5 x 2-hour qualitative discussion groups**
- **3-4 participants per group**, with groups comprised of individuals with similar professional backgrounds. (Note that around two thirds of participants had a personal connection to adoption or foster care.)
- **Total sample size was 16 professionals**, broken out as follows:
 - 3 Foster Care Social Workers
 - 4 Adoption Agency Professionals
 - 3 Therapists
 - 3 Attorneys
 - 3 Academic Researchers
- **Groups took place online** to access a nationwide sample, using InterVu's video platform – all participants could see and interact with each other and with the moderators live, in real-time
- **Fieldwork was conducted on October 22-23rd, 2015** by Sarah Fitzharding and Ben Anderson of Galileo Research and Strategy Consultancy.

II. THE SAMPLE: PROFESSIONAL PROFILES

- To start our conversation each group was asked how they perceived the level of interaction among professionals in the field (if applicable), and asked to describe and their greatest satisfaction and the greatest frustration in their work.

1. Social Workers

- The Social Workers worked primarily in the public sphere of adoption or foster care. Although working at the executive director level, each of these individuals had deep and varied experience on the front lines of adoption or foster care and continued to either manage a team of case workers or actively handle cases on their own.
- This group gained their greatest satisfaction from seeing the impact of their continued hard work and dedication in transforming the lives of children and families. This **“transformation” was what drove them, and made their careers feel like more like a life calling than a job.**
 - “What drives me is the transformation that’s possible when kids are connected to families. It takes a very, very long time but seeing hope kind of creep in the kid who had long given up on themselves and who others have given up on, is what drives me.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “I feel like I cheat the system. I didn’t go to work for the last 10 years. I just get to do stuff that’s great: strengthening families and helping families. It’s super, super rewarding.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
- The key frustration described by Social Workers were the **harmful bureaucratic processes and poor policies that made Social Workers and Attorneys unwilling to fight for a child’s best interests.**
 - “On the foster care adoption side, the bureaucracy and the interaction with Family Court. Every rule and law is put into place to help kids, but then people are so worried about getting in trouble for those policies and regulations and laws. Everybody here should be focused on what’s best for kids and I don’t think that happens because there’s too much bureaucracy in the way.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “I agree about the bureaucracy. There’s an urgency about getting services for kids and parents but there’s not an urgency about the actual solutions, about getting them a permanent home – either that’s re-unifying them or another permanent family. It’s not a priority.” (Foster Care Social Worker)

- Out of all the groups, the **Social Workers expressed the greatest need for increased communication and interaction between adoption professionals**. The “siloed” system they described was less effective because it only came together during moments of crisis.
 - “I think there’s a great need for improvement in this area – a huge need. Folks are generally siloed. When they reach out, it’s usually reaching out in a sense where it’s crisis driven or driven by some type of thing that might be viewed as problematic. We need more assistance in bringing people together in a way that’s natural.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “There’s not good communication. You say “the adoption community” – I don’t really feel like there is an adoption community in NYC. There is no communication within foster care agencies between their foster care and adoption units, not between foster care workers, system care workers and young people. I think there’s a lot of room for improvement.” (Foster Care Social Worker)

2. Adoption Agency Professionals

- Adoption Agency professionals were employed by private adoption agencies but a few had extensive prior experience working in the public sphere as well. Although a couple had particular areas of focus (e.g. post adoption services or operations), all of them were knowledgeable about the entire process and interested in the latest ideas and research being done in the field.
- The Agency Professionals gained their **greatest satisfaction from building genuine human connections** between children and adoptive families; between adopted persons; and between those who had been adopted and their first/birth parents.
 - “Seeing adoption in action is my complete joy. Adoption is not severing families but increasing family size and connection. That to me is pure joy. Even with the challenges and the hurt in the families, there’s still joy if done right.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - “I find working with adoptees really, really rewarding. I find myself really happy and tragically upset at the same time when I get to speak to an adoptee who has never really spoken with another adoptee before.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
- As far as frustrations, Agency Professionals brought up a number of specific barriers to doing their jobs well.
 - A couple reported a **troublesome lack of consistency** across agencies and state lines that prevented best practices from being used. One example that was mentioned was the lack of standards around conducting home studies.
 - “In NY State, private social workers who just have an MSW and don’t have any particular expertise in adoption can certify a family, which is just ridiculous. We’ve seen families who are wholly inappropriate come to us with completed home studies approving them because there isn’t a standard looking to be met. I think that is one of the most frustrating things.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- A related frustration (which was repeated in other conversations and will be referenced further on) was **the lack of higher education courses or programs that specialize in adoption**, which made training, recruitment and best practices extremely difficult.
 - “It’s frustrating because there are so few colleges that I’m aware of that recognize adoption as part of the curriculum. Trying to find a skilled counselor, a skilled professional, both pre-adoptive and post-adoptive. It’s challenging.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- Agency professionals reported interacting most often with other Agency Professionals and Attorneys. Communication with other agencies was usually done when collaborating on a case that involved crossing state lines. **The level of interaction was considered by most to be satisfactory.**

3. Therapists and Psychologists

- Two of the three Therapists we spoke with had private practices that served adopted individuals, foster children and adoptive parents. The third member of this group was a psychologist who became an adoption advocate and worked primarily in the political world on adoption issues and laws. A couple had extensive experience working at adoption agencies.
- Therapists felt their **greatest satisfaction when they were able to help patients—foster children, adoptive parents or adopted persons—change their lives for the better** and form positive, meaningful connections with family. Facilitating that positive change gave them the greatest joy.
 - “I just love it. I feel very lucky. The moments that make me happiest are when you see change affected in a person or people.” (Therapist)
 - “That a [traumatized foster] child too will have a permanent family is what makes it rewarding. Seeing these kids who I would call ‘unadoptable’ become adopted is probably the biggest joy.” (Therapist)
- With what seemed like very high job satisfaction, **the Therapists could not report any major frustrations with their work.** All the Therapists agreed that this lack of frustration came from being able to work in private practice, away from the “confines” of a health care system or insurance company.
 - “I’m in private practice for myself so the sky’s the limit on the work I do. I can choose to do pro bono if I want to. I can take as long as I want to take a healing experience to its completion. It was a lot more frustrating to work within the confines of a system or a health insurance deadline.” (Therapist)
- Not surprisingly, **the Therapists were the most content with their interaction with other professionals in the field.** They reported what seemed like a high level of satisfaction with the opportunities for quality interaction among adoption and foster care professionals.

- “I find the professional community is quite close-knit and distance is not an issue. There are professionals world-wide and there is a real collaboration around doctors, psychologists, social workers. The exchange of ideas is open and nice. I’ve always felt that.” (Therapist)
- “I work with foster care. I work with judges, psychologists, social workers all the time. There’s quite a bit of interaction.” (Therapist)

4. Attorneys

- The Attorneys we spoke to represented different corners of the legal field in adoption. One dealt in the political realm, advocating for policy change in the foster care system at the federal level. Another was an experienced private Attorney whose practice specialized in adoptions and the third worked in academia as a professor, specializing in international adoption policy.
- Each of the Attorneys reported finding satisfaction in different ways.
 - The private practice Attorney felt good about the **positive impact adoptions and family building has on society**.
 - “We’re overall helping society. In the adoptions generally, it’s a good thing for everyone involved. Now with open adoption being very common place, it’s even better for everyone, including the birth parents.” (Attorney)
 - The Attorney who specialized in policy found creating **impactful changes in the law** the most satisfying.
 - “[It is] satisfying if you can get a system to recognize that some kids actually do need to be adopted and it is better for that to happen relatively early in their life so that they really have the chance to not have such a messed up childhood. That’s what I find satisfying – to get system change.” (Attorney)
 - The Attorney in academia said he finds **satisfaction in giving people who have been hurt by adoption a voice** in the process. One example mentioned was the increased presence of the voices of adopted persons.
 - “It’s been satisfying to see adoptees have a lot more voice. Now when I go to adoption conferences, they’re not complete without adoptee voices.” (Attorney)
- The frustrations the Attorneys brought up were actually issues within the system that they were trying to solve rather than barriers or frustrations in doing their jobs.
 - One frustration mentioned was trying to achieve **both permanency with adoptive families and a connection to birth/first parents** and family.
 - “My biggest frustration is getting towards the place where we have a way of getting what I call both/and model where we get sort of both permanency on the one hand and at the same time get connection. Children need family life; they need permanency but it’s also true they have these other connections.” (Attorney)

- Another frustration voiced was what they perceived as a **callous lack of urgency** in the foster care system and in the courts to find permanency for kids.
 - “There’s no sense of urgency. If the kid is not getting beaten up, then there’s no sense that a decision has to be made to get the kid a permanent family. It just goes on and on and on. The courts are a major part of that. That’s very destructive. You hear these kids talking when they’re 17 or 18, about to walk out of the system about how much they resent the fact that they never had a permanent family that they could trust.” (Attorney)

5. Academic Researchers

- Although the Researchers were professors and thought-leaders in academia, each of them maintained access to on-the-ground social work through various projects, practices and research endeavors. All three had prior or current experience in adoption or foster care casework, and one was a practicing Therapist.
- The **greatest satisfaction for the Researchers was their role in teaching** and training the next generation of Social Workers in adoption and foster care. Each of them reported feeling that this education was important because it could change the system and improve the experience for all those involved.
 - “Feeling as though that I have some impact on people who will be going out into the field – how they think about: ‘what is family? What is racial identity? And cultural identity?’ My greatest satisfaction is the work I directly do with my students.” (Academic Researcher)
 - “The teaching aspect has probably been the most rewarding. I think more recently I have had more opportunity to develop training for case workers in the field in the area of adoption and permanency. That really made me feel connected to both worlds – the research world and the practice world.” (Academic Researcher)
- The biggest frustration for the Researchers was a **lack of funding for projects** and what they described as the relentless time-consuming cycle of grant writing and teaching.
 - “Time and money. If funding was always there, I think you could make things happen and you could accomplish projects much more quickly.” (Academic Researcher)
 - “In order to articulate a more nuanced understanding of that family situation, we need research. Without the research, you can’t get money for research. It’s very challenging.” (Academic Researcher)

III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1. **Open adoption was embraced as a goal to strive for.** Though complicated, it was seen as ultimately benefiting everyone in the process, in all but a few extreme cases.
2. **Access to original birth certificates at 18 was considered a civil right,** and fundamental to adopted persons building a positive, integrated sense of identity.
3. **Foster Care Social Workers believed that ideally children would be placed with adoptive families of the same ethnicity.** Where transracial adoptions occur, most believed it important to consider an adoptive family's cultural and ethnic environment within the placement decision, in the interest of the child's adjustment, and saw a great need for more support services following transracial adoptions.
4. **Skepticism existed around international adoptions,** partly based on questionable motives of the parents who want to adopt internationally (e.g. seeking a "closed" situation) and partly due to the lack of adequate support for internationally adopted persons throughout their lives to help them build community and identity.
5. **Adoptions by LGBT people were universally encouraged.** Opinions diverged as to whether religious organizations should be allowed to deny services to LGBT people, with some considering this outright discrimination that should not be allowed, and others believing the most pragmatic course is to encourage dialogue and education with such groups.
6. **Most professionals believed that aspects of the adoption process would benefit from national standards** (in particular options counseling, home study, post-adoption support, and professional training.) However, there was concern about whether and how these could be implemented, with Attorneys particularly skeptical.
7. **Elected officials were not seen to understand the issues facing the adoption community.** Awareness-building and education were considered necessary in this sphere.
8. **Decision-making power in adoptions was perceived to reside with the birth mother in private adoptions, and the social worker in the public setting.** In the latter situation, professionals believed the children themselves should be given a greater voice.

9. **Most believed adoptive parents should be allowed to dissolve an adoption after it has been finalized, but maintained that increased pre- and post-adoption services should reduce the chance of this occurring.**
10. **They believed that a longer period than 72 hours would ideally be given before allowing a birth mother to sign an irrevocable surrender.** However, they also believed that more consistent options counseling would reduce the chances of this occurring and the birth mother feeling she had signed too soon.
11. **Not all professionals viewed the adoption process as too transactional.** Adoption Agency Professionals were most likely to, and this was driven by the potential adoptive parents who walk in focused on “sealing the deal.” These Agency Professionals saw this an opportunity for greater education. The shift toward openness in adoption was seen as working to alleviate such perceptions.
12. **The most significant factors perceived as leading a first/birth parent to consider adoption were abusive domestic situations, economic hardship and addiction.** Similar factors, (plus neglect), were associated with losing custody of one’s children, with an emphasis placed on addiction.
13. **Money was seen as playing a major role in shaping the adoption landscape.** It was considered to give adoptive parents more control and options, and to breed an entitled attitude toward the adoption process and professionals. Economic inequality combined with high agency fees was seen as segregating adoption into the disparate realms of private vs. public. International adoption was similarly viewed as functioning off economic inequality, even if poverty is not considered a valid reason for international adoption.
14. **Overall, the adoption industry was regarded as “too white,”** and insufficiently reflective of either the adopted children or the first/birth parents it serves.
15. **Social media was considered to present both dangers and opportunities in adoption.** Those cautiously embracing it saw it as “leveling the playing field” by allowing prospective adoptive parents to circumvent high agency fees and broadcast their search online. They observed a proliferation of support networks, and saw it enriching the open adoption experience through photo sharing and easier communication. Perceived risks included online scams by unscrupulous “brokers.”
16. **Adoption and foster care narratives were not seen to be part of mainstream media,** although *The Fosters*’ was frequently referenced as an example of positive progress. **However, pernicious misrepresentations were often seen lurking within news stories or TV/movie plotlines:** At one extreme, the over-rosy tales of effortless integration into a new family effectively erase the child’s personal narrative and history; at the other extreme, the “bad seed” trope perpetuates and sensationalizes negative stereotypes of adopted children.

17. **Adopted persons were believed to experience stigma, often characterized as an accumulation of “micro-agressions”** in their everyday lives. In addition, the “expectation of gratitude” was considered to marginalize and silence their voices. Stigma of transracial adopted persons was further complicated in adulthood, as they often experienced stigma as part of larger racial ethnic groups while also not feeling a full sense of belonging in those groups. Children in foster care were recognized as experiencing much harsher forms of stigma, as were parents who lost custody—seen as being publicly “shamed” by the removal of their children.

18. **A tremendous need was seen for increased support services. The most glaring needs were for continued life-long post-adoption support and for individuals who “age-out”** of foster care without ever being adopted. Additionally, they felt there should be greater urgency focused on getting foster children placed in permanent families sooner, and increased support offered to professionals working on the front lines in adoption and foster care.

IV. POLICY AND PRACTICE – KEY ISSUES & RESPONSES

A. Open Adoption

- **The professionals across all disciplines favored openness in the adoption process,** such that the first/birth parent(s) would have some degree of ongoing contact with the child and the adoptive family. This was seen to further the cause of making adoption an ongoing process of transformation, vs. a transaction that happens at a point in time and is then “forgotten.”
 - A lot of this in place [closed adoption] was for the needs of those who would be adopting and not with the thought of the child’s needs or the first parents’ needs. It was really to make it so this adoption was an event and then forget about it and let’s move on. [But] We know closed records have done so much damage and harm to individuals. (Foster Care Social Worker)

- **First and foremost, open adoptions were seen to benefit the child, by removing any sense of mystery, allowing the child a clearer sense of identity, and avoiding the need for eventual disclosure** that could potentially be traumatic. Several noted that children will inevitably want to know their history.
 - **According to one Therapist, not knowing the first/birth parent’s identity can lead to unrealistic fantasies** about that person, which can cause problems later if they make contact, and their illusions are shattered by a very different reality.
 - **This was even the case for those working with adoptions from foster care,** where maintaining an open arrangement can be especially difficult, and emotionally challenging for the adoptive parent.
 - A couple also observed that **it is also typically an easier process emotionally for the first/birth parent.**
 - “It takes away that mystery. They understand the what and why. It benefits the birth parents because they’re just not cutting a child adrift, not knowing what happens. I think everybody benefits tremendously for it.” (Attorney)
 - “I believe open adoptions are the way to go now. I’ve seen very few adults or children who were adopted who don’t want their history. It would make it easier on everybody.” (Therapist)
 - “When an adoption is closed, children have all kinds of imaginative ideas around the birth parent. They’re either mythic beautiful wonderful people or they’re mythic monsters, depending on the child. If you wait until the transformative ages of being a teenager to search, I think that’s high combustion and I don’t think the children can handle what they find because they’re looking for some kind of myth to be proved or eradicated.” (Therapist)

- **However, though open adoptions were universally agreed to be the ultimate goal, the professionals noted various layers of complexity** that surround the process and experience:

- **Therapists observed that it is more complicated, and can be more emotionally challenging for the adoptive parents, to create an open arrangement** at the start of an adoption, and have to manage the regular meetings with the first/birth parent, but felt it was ultimately more beneficial for the child.
 - It makes adoption much more complicated but in the end it serves the child the best. (Therapist)
 - Open adoption is much harder on the front end because you've got to raise a child with this interloper [i.e. the first/birth parent] who's showing up with gifts. It's really hard to raise a child when you've got a perfect person showing up once a month or twice a year. (Therapist)
- **An Attorney noted challenges that can arise from economic inequities between first/birth and adoptive parents**, and voiced concern that if a first/birth parent needs to enforce the provision, many cannot afford to pursue a legal challenge against the adoptive parents. As such, he saw "progress but incomplete progress."
- **International adoptions pose particular challenges to the question of open adoptions.** Adoption Agency Professionals explained that birth parents from some countries do not want to be traced, for example due to a strong culture of shame. Overall, however, they described a shift toward starting to create more open arrangements where possible in international situations, and explained the need to discuss this carefully with potential adoptive parents, since some favor international adoptions principally because they seek a closed adoption.
 - "In many cases, the reason they chose international adoption was because they didn't want to deal with birth parents" (Adoption Agency Professional)
- Also, Adoption Agency Professionals described **isolated domestic cases where a first/birth parent had a very strong cultural need for anonymity**, which complicates any measures aimed at requiring all adoptions to be open.
 - "We have had experiences where woman placing a child for adoption due to their family, religion, whatever, would be at great risk if they were to talk about their adoption or to be identified in any way, even with the adoptive parent." (Adoption Agency Professional)
- Because of the complexities involved in open adoption, the **need for stronger post-adoption support systems** was often raised.
 - "Let's deal with it early and say it's going to be an open adoption and then let people seek the services and support of these professionals they need." (Therapist)
 - **One Adoption Agency Professional suggested annual check-ins**, similar to a medical "well visit" to ensure all parties were coping with the arrangement.
 - **An Academic Researcher noted the particular complexities created when an adopted child is put in the position of having to manage demands from both the first/birth parents** (and in some cases extended biological family)

and also those of his or her adoptive family – in this situation support is especially important.

- “It’s a post-adoption issue that I would lump it in around identity – how do you manage multiple family membership, how do you support the adoptive parents and the biological family in doing that?” (Academic Researcher)

Summary Snapshot

1. The professionals believed that open adoption should always be the goal, and ultimately benefits everybody.
2. However, consideration should be given to unique circumstances in domestic adoptions where openness could be harmful to the first/birth parent.
3. The process with international adoptions is shifting toward greater openness but many layers of cultural complexity remain in some countries, hindering this process. The motives of potential adoptive parents seeking international adoption should be examined, and where the desire is based on a preference not to engage with the first/birth parents, the general benefits of openness should be discussed.
4. Open adoption will only work well and be sustainable if sufficient post-adoption support is in place for the birth/first parent, the adoptive family and the child.

B. Access to Original Birth Certificate

- **The professionals were unanimously in favor of allowing adopted persons unrestricted access to their original birth certificate upon reaching a certain age, for domestic adoptions.** They believed this should be the case across all states, with no differences.
 - “I feel unequivocally that there should be unrestricted access for all. I think it’s your civil right to know where you came from, to have an original birth certificate that reflects your actual birth.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “I definitely agree to one’s access to one’s birth certificate without doubt.” (Therapist)
 - “[I believe in] 100% open records, access to birth certificates – all that just needs to be done in all 50 states, like tomorrow.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “The fact that we’re still talking about this and it’s a state-to-state thing and you can and you can’t and you can in a limited capacity - I think it’s ridiculous. We need to unseal original birth certificates across the country and just proceed.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
- **A key reason they supported this policy was to enable adopted persons to build a positive, integrated sense of identity, built on accurate information.**

- Several described altered birth certificates as “fraudulent” or “false” and thus counter to the goal of healthy, authentic identity development.
 - “It’s just about knowing who you are, about integrating your being and understanding all the parts of you.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “Right now birth certificates of adopted kids are fraudulent documents. They literally take the adoptive parents’ names and put it in under birth mother as if you gave birth which is not true.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “Let’s do away with false birth certificates and let’s unlock all those and make it national and quit wasting time and money and energy to try and take away a person’s knowledge of who they are.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- **Only two concerns were voiced:**
 - One Therapist believed that **access should be granted at age 25, not 18**. Based on research suggesting that the turbulence of adolescence is still ongoing at 18, she held that such a major step should not be taken while a person is in a volatile emotional state
 - “I do agree [with this policy] but adolescence is super turbulent and adolescence goes through the age of 25 in terms of the poor executive functioning and the impulsivity... If it’s closed, yes, have your birth records but I would hesitate at the age of 18. That would be a turbulent time. I don’t think an 18-year old can manage, especially if they’ve been raised poorly attached to their adoptive parents. They’re hoping this is going to be the mother of their dreams and it’s not.” (Therapist)
 - **The other concern was for situations in which the first/birth parent did not want to be found.** In domestic situations, the Attorney who raised this point observed that it has not typically been a problem in practice. International situations, as noted earlier, are more complicated, since there are often powerful cultural reasons a first/birth parent would not want to be traced.
 - “My only concern [had been] on the retroactive application for people who had been promised confidentiality and anonymity, but in other states that have had this for a while, it has not been a problem.” (Attorney)
 - “The downside – which we see in a lot of international adoptions – there are certain international birth parents who do not want to be found... Most of the adult international adoptees who are trying to find birth parents recognize that that’s a real fact. When that happens, they just need support.” (Academic Researcher)

Summary Snapshot

1. All favored universal unrestricted access to original birth certificates within the US
5. Consideration should be given to the age at which this occurs, recognizing the “normal” turbulence associated with the teen years, which would be compounded by this information.

6. This policy may not be possible or desirable within international adoptions, since some first/birth parents do not wish to be found. In these situations, particular support should be offered to adopted persons who cannot trace their first/birth parents.

C. Transracial Adoptions

- **All the professional groups agreed that race is a major issue in adoption, and that transracial adoptions should not be entered into with a blindness to its importance.**
 - “Every time a person adopts across race or they adopt internationally, I know that you will have some folks who believe race is not an issue, is not important, culture is not important and I know that within 7-10 years, they may be saying, ‘Oh my god. Help me. I see it’s important.’” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “That ability to be able to adopt or foster care and not think that the racial or cultural identity of these children is not important is mind-boggling to me. They shouldn’t have that ability to say it’s not an issue; it should be that we know this matters and we know that we need to tend to it.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
- **Foster Care Social Workers and, to a lesser extent, Attorneys, were the most vocal about the difficulties of transracial adoptions, and the importance of an environment reflecting the child’s own race and culture.** They spoke with conviction about the importance of a transracially adopted child being placed in an environment that includes enough other people of his or her ethnicity. In their opinion, it is not enough for adoptive parents to simply be culturally educated and sensitive, if they live in an ethnically homogenous (white) area. Several maintained that the adoptive parents being the same race as the child is the ideal scenario.
 - Importantly, however, they also noted the difficulties of making this happen, and in particular the **need for greater efforts to identify potential adoptive parents within the African American community.**
 - “If you have a workshop on transcultural adoption and you have the ability to find same race, that is usually going to be better. The challenge is do we not look for enough African American families. It’s not saying that a white person adopting a black child is a terrible thing. It is saying could the system do a better job of nurturing the community the kid comes from.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “I do think in my experience and knowing many transracial adoptees that it is easier for children to be in a similar culture to their birth culture. It presents fewer issues. But I by no means think that should be an absolute barrier.” (Attorney)

- “[Just saying] we’ll go to the black museum—it’s such BS. Are you going to be willing to move into a community that’s more integrated? A white suburban family in a white suburban neighborhood with 90% of people who look like you and your child has one black friend, you didn’t do the job.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “There can be terrible transracial adoptions with families who are not open to the fact that there are both racial and cultural differences and you can’t just say oh we love you so they aren’t there. It’s the real world and people have to be sensitive to that.” (Attorney)
- **Adoption Agency Professionals shared similar broad opinions, though they were less likely to state them in a definitive way, and more likely to refer to the difficulties and concerns they have when making decisions in such situations.**
 - “You do have these amazing families who really can provide incredible resources to a child and they live somewhere in middle America and they bring home a child from the Congo and this child is the only black child for miles. It’s hard.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - “I think that more has to go into not just assessing a family based on who they are and the life they can provide to a child but really thinking about that child’s future adjustment, identity issues, mental health and all of the ways in which we know being in a transracial family can affect that. Am I saying we should not place African children in the middle of America where there’s not a lot of diversity? I don’t know that I have the answer but I know it’s a concern.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
- **The Academic Researchers discussed the critical importance of transracial adoptive parents fully engaging with the particular issues and needs that are likely to arise. They noted that legislation such as MEPA and IEPA obscures the complexities inherent in these situations because it precludes the possibility of making decisions based on nuanced circumstances and judgment.**
 - Moreover, they observed that the professionals working with adoptive parents considering transracial adoption are **hindered in their efforts to educate and discuss the critical issues with them by such legislation**, since it essentially mandates race-blindness.
 - “The legislation like MEPA and IEPA that allows this inattention to racial differences, it doesn’t nearly begin to address the complexities that exist in that issue. To make a generalized, very broad rule about how to handle those placements without attention to that is problematic.” (Academic Researcher)
 - “[According to MEPA] The way you avoid bias is to be blind to it, as opposed to really digging in there and finding out where there are biases and asking how do we engage families in real conversations that position them to be effective parents so they can *turn to* the biases that will be coming towards them as a family, and also biases that they themselves might have that might get injected in their parenting.” (Academic Researcher)

- “Psychologists and social workers are trained to be culturally and racially attuned, and then the particular policy tells you to be color-blind. It creates ethical problems for many case workers and clinicians who are trying to engage these conversations but have to do it in a policy context that’s incredibly punitive for bringing it up.” (Academic Researcher)
- “It’s hard to legislate something and provide a rule for something that requires judgments.” (Academic Researcher)
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- **Support services in transracial adoptions were seen as sorely lacking by the Adoption Agency Professionals.** They identified a **need for more universal (ideally standardized) “preparatory” services to increase the chances that the adoptive parents will be ready and equipped** to negotiate the many challenges likely to arise. They noted that without being primed to recognize moments when they should access support, adoptive parents are often reluctant to reach out for help, fearing that they will be judged as lacking as parents.
 - “When home study work doesn’t have that strong preparatory piece, then it really leaves it to chance just how good the family is at interpreting needs or researching it for themselves. Having standards that require that kind of thing at least gives you a chance to be ready. By having that solid pre-adoption [support], it allows you to feel more confident about hey, it’s OK. What I heard about, I’m starting to experience and now let me get some support...” (Adoption Agency Professional)
- **Additionally, they described the dearth of post-adoption support services for transracial adopted persons** seeking help as they struggle with issues of identity and community, and the tremendous need to fill this gap.
 - *[Is there room for improvement in the level of support services offered in particular situations?]* “There is so much room for improvement that it’s an understatement. We get calls from adoptees all over the country who are looking for support, who are looking to resolve some of these identity issues they have and we don’t even have anywhere to refer them to because those services simply don’t exist in their area.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

Summary Snapshot

1. All professionals agreed that transracial adoptions benefit from all stakeholders recognizing the additional layer of complexity that race introduces.
2. Most felt that ideally, children would be placed in a family, or at least an environment, reflective of their own race and culture. (Foster Care Social Workers were the most unequivocal about this.) However, this requires greater efforts to be made to encourage African American families to become adoptive parents.
3. Academics believed that legislation like MEPA does not allow case workers and clinicians the necessary freedom to acknowledge and engage directly with the specific challenges that often accompany transracial adoptions.
4. Academics also believed that such legislation is inherently misguided because it creates absolute rules where judgment is required.

5. Agency Professionals saw a tremendous need for increased support services for transracial adoptions, both pre- and post-adoption.

D. International Adoptions

- **Opinions on international adoptions were focused around three topics:** motivations for wanting to adopt internationally, the identity issues faced by international adoptees, and shifting global trends.
- **Foster Care Social Workers and Therapists voiced skepticism about international adoption, based on adoptive parents' apparent motivations.** As noted earlier, they observed that adoptive parents sometimes favor the international option because it is more likely to be closed, vs. requiring contact with the first/birth parent.
 - "I'm not a huge supporter of international adoption. I'm not clear what the motives are. Why must you go across the world to get a child when there are kids [in need] here? What is it? Is it a race issue? Is it a closed issue? Is it that you don't want to worry about contact with birth parents? You don't want a competition? All those things are in the end not good for kids." (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - "I'd ask people when they'd come to see me whether they want to do international or domestic and some people would say international because they wouldn't have to deal with the birth mother come knocking on their door. That was not a good reason to adopt internationally." (Therapist)
- **Focusing on internationally adopted individuals, issues of identity and the need for greater ongoing support and community were emphasized by Adoption Agency Professionals and Foster Care Social Workers.**
 - They noted the challenges and problems inherent in "ripping a kid out" from their cultural roots and removing them from any contact with possible sources of support and community in their own country, and how this **can exacerbate abandonment issues** for people who are adopted internationally.
 - "We firmly believe in always starting with their network first. Whether or not they have a birth family to go back to, they have people. They have people who love them. Maybe none of those people can parent them but ripping a kid out... I think it's dangerous to move kids from what they are familiar with or people who could be supportive in their lives." (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - "I was in a conference once where someone said a child who already feels abandoned and has abandonment issues... now my mom and dad didn't keep me, my grandparents couldn't keep me, my whole country couldn't keep me. I had to go across the world... just adds to the levels of feeling abandonment." (Foster Care Social Worker)
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- One professional who was also an international adoptee **stressed the need for systems and supports that would allow people adopted internationally to build a strong sense of community, that would allow a healthy identity to flourish.** Currently there was **not seen to be enough support** to facilitate this.
 - “I think the agencies and the industry as a whole need to figure out a way to support the adoptee through the life span.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - “I was just a cosmic whisper away from being raised in France or Australia but instead I landed on a farm in Iowa. It’s this system that’s just not conducive for creating the kind of supports that are really necessary for healthy adoptee identity development. A lot of that has to do with race and a lot has to do with privilege in the system as a whole.”
 - “If we were all placed in Oregon [say], the international adoptee community would look very different today. We’d have more political power. We’d certainly have a better identity and understanding of who we are. We’d have a stronger community. As it stands, we’re literally all over the world and it’s really difficult to come together.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- **Finally, the Attorneys pointed out ways in which the international adoption system appears to be changing.** One observed that while **numbers of international adoptions have fallen, this is the result of positive change, vs. increased dysfunction.** Another had a different opinion, and suggested that the **trend is toward children adopted by the US from other countries being older and/or having special needs,** making the US a “dumping ground” for these children.
 - “The context of intercountry adoption is its much wider world of poor children, orphans and vulnerable children. The international community is primarily focused on the subsidiary way of not only reuniting them with their own families and poverty alleviation but looking at building up family-type care in all these different countries. I actually think for the most part the intercountry system is making progress whereas most people in the US think it’s fallen apart since the numbers are down.” (Attorney)
 - “Nobody wants trafficking of children and there have been some scandals but other ones have been just fine. It’s the old throwing out the baby with the bath water. Whole country programs get shut down; children are being left in poverty, some becoming street urchins. What I’ve seen here is that it seems lately that many of the children who are coming here are older than they ever were with special needs. I hate to say it this way but when you get an international adoption, the US is becoming a dumping ground for foreign countries to get rid of their special needs kids.” (Attorney)

Summary Snapshot

- Some were skeptical of international adoptions because they felt the motives of parents wanting to adopt from other countries tended not to be in the best interests of the child.
- Foster Care Social Workers and Adoption Agency Professionals saw a great need for increased support services for internationally adopted individuals in the US, in order to help them build community together and forge positive identities.

- Attorneys observed trends such as an increase in internationally adopted children brought to the US with special needs.

E. Adoptions by LGBT people

- **Universally, the professionals were in favor of adoptions by LGBT people.** Several noted that this population represented a particularly strong opportunity for the adoption community.
 - “Here’s people who want to parent and here’s kids who need a parent. It’s such an obvious opportunity to find more families.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “The LGBT one is easy. I am in full 1,000% support of anyone who is a capable, willing, stable prospective parent to be able to parent a child who needs a family.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - “I think we’re being very blind about some of the enormous benefits that grow out of having LGBT families adopt children and the incredible devotion they can bring to some of these kids.” (Attorney)
 - “LGBT adoptions, I have done many of them. They are working just fine.” (Attorney)
- **A couple also noted the value of LGBT parents adopting children who identify as LGBT,** thus providing an accepting environment that would nurture their identity.
 - “We work all the time with LGBT. I think that’s a really important way for older kids. We work with LGBT parents. They adopt kids who are LGBT.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
- **Several, however, observed that LGBT adoptive parents, or prospective parents, experience shades of subtle discrimination or disadvantage within the current adoption landscape.** A Foster Care Social Worker, for example, described how a gay couple’s file just won’t be “put on top of the pile,” thus repeatedly prolonging their wait for a match. An academic noted that LGBT people often adopt special needs children, and thus face more challenges in parenting these children effectively, while another discussed the varied levels of inclusivity of LGBT adopters by different agencies.
 - “When they get a home study of 2 men or they get a heterosexual couple, they typically don’t put the two men at the top of the pile. We have to look at that. It’s not about the laws and the policies, but how does it play out on the frontlines of the agency.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “From narrative accounts, in the LGBT community, there’s this catch-22 where the children being placed have more severe special needs and then, if they seek help to deal with those special needs, they’re penalized for not being able to handle the special needs. It’s creating the dynamic that’s unfairly going to make them appear less capable as adoptive parents.” (Academic Researcher)

- “My sense is that there’s huge unevenness in terms of the experiences [of] individual gay and lesbian or transgender folks as adopters. [Some agencies] actively exclude LGBT adopters and others make a really concerted effort to be inclusive across the whole spectrum of potential adopters but I don’t think that’s the norm.” (Academic Researcher)
- On a related point, an academic **pondered how the changes in same sex marriage legislation would impact acceptance of adoptions by the LGBT community**, and noted the need for more research in this area.
 - “I think it’s interesting as we move more into our gay marriage legislation in different states and locales, the consequence it will have for growing a family through adoption and how people will rail against that in various ways or not. Again, this is not a place where there is a lot of research.” (Academic Researcher)
- **Transgender families were noted as presenting some specific issues, since a couple where one partner is transgender often presents outwardly as a typical heterosexual couple.** However, the Foster Care Social Worker who raised this emphasized the importance of transparency (at the appropriate juncture) with a first/birth mother seeking to place her child, and described the need for education in such cases.
- **There were conflicting opinions as to whether religious organizations should be able to deny services to LGBT people:**
 - **Some professionals felt strongly that this constitutes discrimination and should not be allowed.**
 - “It sends a message that we don’t value you and it’s a form of discrimination. I don’t approve of it.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “To me, there should be no exceptions. All families should be embraced by all agencies if we’re doing right by the populations we’re working with, and excluding one should not be allowed, period, end of story.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - “My personal bias is that they shouldn’t. That’s an incredibly bigoted practice. (Academic Researcher)
 - **Others, however, emphasized the importance of engaging with these organizations’ prejudices and encouraging dialogue and education, with the goal of promoting growth and ideological evolution.**
 - “You have to take the challenge of the religion and LGBT and try to have some more open dialogues and – I don’t like to call them trainings but more facilitated discussion so people can figure stuff out.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “That’s easy – yes [they should be allowed to deny services]. If people are intolerant, us being intolerant of their intolerance doesn’t get us anywhere.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 -

- One Foster Care Social Worker suggested that the **over-riding concern should be to avoid placing an LGBT child within a non-accepting home.**
 - “What’s most important to me from the kids’ perspective is that LGBT kids don’t get placed in non-affirming homes. The problem is you know that of a teenager, but you don’t know if a 2-year old is gay so it’s important to me that all families that adopt are affirming.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
- **Notably, this question also raised the need to standardize the requirements for adoptive parents, to remove all forms of bias,** since one Agency Professional pointed out that as well as denying services to LGBT people, agencies often discriminate on other grounds such as income or employment arrangements.
 - “There are agencies that put into place income requirements or that the adoptive mother must stay home for a year after the adoption or cannot work outside of the home. There are things that are required of families that are ludicrous. I think what we need to be looking at is: are you a good, stable family who can give this child what they need to grow up healthy and happy? So creating those standards would go a long way in taking that bias out of the screening process.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

Summary Snapshot

- All professionals in the sample supported adoptions by LGBT people.
- Subtle discrimination was noted against potential adoptive parents who are LGBT, compared with heterosexual couples.
- Opinion was divided over whether religious organizations should be allowed to deny services to LGBT people, with some vehemently opposing this practice as “bigoted” and others taking it as an indicator that education and dialogue is needed, vs. showing “intolerance of their intolerance.”
- Particular concern was voiced over the need to ensure that children who currently (or could in the future) identify as LGBT are not placed within a family environment that would be hostile to their emerging identity.

F. National Standards

- **Overall, the majority of professionals** (all disciplines except Attorneys) **felt it would be beneficial to institute some national standards within the adoption process.** Their opinions varied in terms of which aspects of adoption they felt were in greatest need of standardization across the US.

- **Areas where they spontaneously suggested** national standards included:
 - a. Options counseling
 - b. Home study
 - c. Post-adoption follow-up
 - d. Professional training
 - e. Philosophical approach of open adoptions being the ideal
 - f. Goals of placing foster care children in families

- At the beginning of the adoption process, **standards for options counseling for expectant mothers faced with an unintended pregnancy were suggested** by an Adoption Agency Professional. This was believed to be a critical need across the country.
 - “I also think standards around options counseling for expectant parents is a huge need. There are, as far as I know, no standards right now.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- **Much conversation, and some disagreement, was generated around the home study process**, in terms of both training and evaluation.
 - **Preparation/training for parents hoping to adopt** was suggested by one of the Adoption Agency Professionals as an area that would ideally be standardized, in terms of a required number of training hours. **However, others saw less value in training, and more value in standardizing a set of psychological criteria on which prospective adoptive parents are evaluated**, (such as how they themselves were parented.) Agency Professionals raised the issue of multi-ethnic placements, and suggested the need for standard requirements of diversity in the environment where a transracially adopted child would be placed.
 - “I would love to see a minimum number of parent preparation training hours, which we do not currently have, and it would be great if they were just consistent nationwide so if you have a family who lives in Kansas, they got the same training as a family who lives in NY.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - “The idea of adding workshops or training for people who want to adopt is tedious and misses the point. From the work that I’ve done, the most valuable insight into how an adoptive parent will parent is how they were parented themselves in terms of do they have an insecure attachment to their own family of origin, were they able to couple well themselves. That’s the piece, perhaps, would be most helpful if anyone was going to put any standards around it.” (Therapist)
 - “There need to be standards around the diversity of the population in which the child is being placed. I don’t know exactly what it would look like or how to quantify it but I do know that oftentimes, international adoptees are placed into racially hostile environments and it’s not good for the kids. The parents have met all the other standards – income, ability to provide the right kind of medical care. Yet they live in Bumblebee Wisconsin and it’s oftentimes minimized the challenges that that brings up.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- Although overall the professionals saw the benefit of standards within the home study process to guide evaluations, **there was general recognition that establishing standardized criteria was a thorny issue**, and some spoke more in terms of **“best practices” and “guidelines.”** Academic Researchers in particular pointed out the difficulty of establishing set criteria without introducing bias based on race or class, and still allowing room for judgment. “My vote is that there should be some uniformity. It would certainly streamline things... I’m thinking more on the front end when families are trying to qualify. That’s where we’ve seen the most frustration.” (Academic Researcher)
 - “It requires some pretty evidence-based information around what are the criteria and around [how] we decide that someone is not fit, and to make sure that that’s not about classism or racism or some other kind of –ism. How do we routinize that but make it flexible enough so the folks who are actually in the space can use their professional training and judgment to decide is this child right for this particular family given what we know, given their locale?” (Academic Researcher)

- **Several professionals called out the value of standardizing post-adoption services** to ensure they are provided, though they did not have answers in terms of what the standard requirement should be.
 - “I do think there would need to be a huge meeting of the minds to decide what is best practice and how much flexibility there is. It’s always so hard when you’re talking about standards. Is it 3 home visits after a placement and how many months in between and those kinds of things. It would really nice to have standardization nationally.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - “And also long term post-adoption follow-ups. What happens with our families is unless the parents feel that the child needs some post-adoption support, they tend to not come to us.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- **Across professions, participants observed the theoretical need for greater standardization in professional training** for work within the fields of adoption and foster care, to ensure professionals across the country are “on the same page.” **Academics noted that psychology and social work programs typically do not include a required curriculum on adoption**, and that even the 4E child welfare specialization can be met without a thorough training in the relevant issues.
 - “I definitely think there should be curriculum – reading, training, a course that is national [and mandatory]. Something to get people on the first page. Some real basic things. We need trainings that are national that we all get so we can be on at least the first ten pages. That would be extremely helpful to the profession, to the families, to the individuals, to the service delivery of great services.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “I think there should be some sort of credentialing. My impression is that most programs, definitely psychology and I’ve heard in social work as well, there’s no curriculum on adoption at all. All the training they get on this happen later. It’s not standardized.” (Academic Researcher)

- “The title 4E that subsidizes many of the child welfare training programs within social work at the BS and MS level, don’t do anything more than having a specialized field placement for those students. We desperately need to have a conversation beyond the 4E. You have a 4E for child welfare specialization but if you look underneath that it is a field placement and maybe a class on basic child development which I would say is woefully inadequate.” (Academic Researcher)
- **However, a couple of participants noted the challenges inherent in trying to establish national “credentials”** – for example, that it would take the form of a certification that would become commercially driven, or that it would add to the already significant hurdles that can hinder potential candidates from attempting to qualify.
 - “The concern with that is then it becomes a money-maker. I see that there’s a benefit that everyone has a base knowledge but then there’s a challenge that there are some really great people who can’t get credentials for whatever reason. Credentialing sometimes limits the opportunity for people.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “I think there’s some basic training clearly [needed]. Both home study and basic post-adoption services, trauma, a number of those kinds of things. However, when you talk about regulations, I think there are some real problems. One thing is we may go overboard with training ... we may cut the pool of available resources that we want to foster. [But] I’m not saying do nothing. I think it would be great to have some standards.” (Therapist)
- Related to this, one Foster Care Social Worker pointed out the **need to be recruiting professionals who mirror the communities they are serving**, and the need to reference the importance of this within training.
 - “The Multi-ethnic Placement Act – [states] that agencies should be recruiting people that mirror the community. That’s a big thing that many agencies still don’t do. We have an act that speaks to that but it isn’t operationalized. There’s something about embedding that in the training so people get that. They understand. What does your workforce look like? What does your staff look like? What are the foster parents and adoptive parents look like that you’re recruiting?” (Foster Care Social Worker)
- Though difficult to implement, Foster Care Social Workers expressed **desire for a nationalized effort to work toward the goal of maintaining contact between the child and the birth/first parents**. They saw this as fundamental to building strong families. On a similarly philosophical level, others working in Foster Care suggested a **standardized emphasis on ensuring that every child in foster care finds a family** (vs. positioning independent living as a goal.)
 - “[If you keep] your adopted child from their birth family, you harm the adopted child and parent relationship. Every adoption is a psychological open adoption. Every child thinks about both sets of parents. [I believe we should have] National standards and encouraging that, I guess.... everyone understanding that the child should always be the focus. It’s not the adoptive parent or the birth parent.” (Foster Care Social Worker)

- “I would like to see a push on the foster care side that every child would have to have a family. I would eliminate independent living, APLA – we should remove that in foster care. You can still do the workshops but it shouldn’t be the goal. The goal for my own children is independent living but not instead of a family, in addition to it. It’s valuable to teach kids skills to survive in the world but not instead of a family.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
- **The Attorneys, while agreeing that national standards would be beneficial in an ideal world, (and pointing out that they semi-exist internationally via the Hague Convention) did not believe this to be an attainable goal in the US.**
 - “On the one hand, having consistent standards state to state would be a nice thing. I think the reality of that ever happening – we’re not going to see that. They’re going to leave it to the states, at least for now.” (Attorney)
 - “It’s not going to happen. Why invest huge energy? Past efforts to create uniform adoption bills, well before my own time, floundered around fundamental disagreements. We do have national standards in the foster care system.” (Attorney)
 - “We do have standards for intercountry adoption because of the Hague to some degree.” (Attorney)

Summary Snapshot

- Most professionals believed that aspects of the adoption process would benefit from national standards (in particular options counseling, home study, post-adoption support, and professional training.) However, there was concern about whether and how these could be implemented, with Attorneys particularly skeptical.

G. Understanding by Elected Officials

- **The consensus among those asked was that the majority of elected officials do not understand the issues facing the adoption community.** They observed that occasionally an official who is part of the community him/herself may focus on a particular issue and effect change, but even these efforts are not necessarily aligned with the greatest needs of the community. In general, they felt that the community was hampered by a lack of awareness, and by the low “numbers” of children affected, relative to other social needs. They also observed that politicians’ focus tends to be on placement itself as the be-all-and end-all, which obscures the need to address adoption as a life-long experience.
 - “I doubt they understand unless they’re embedded in it because they’re an adoptive family. A lot of times [in these cases] they’re shooting from the hip by their own personal experience. Sometimes that works in the direction that many of us want it to go and other times it may not. It’s like a crap shoot.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “In Illinois, open records became possible because we had an elected official who is an adopted person.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- “There are a million kids in NYC public schools. There are 10,000 kids in foster care—1%. If I’m a legislator, I don’t worry about 1%. You have to worry about 99%. When you bring it up, you can usually get bipartisan support because who doesn’t want to help a foster child? [But] it’s getting people to pay attention.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “Politicians tend to focus on the placement, which is the adoption. There’s no long term thinking - the openness, the identity issues, the transracial family. You talk to politicians about that and you get this glazed-over face. Everyone, including our legislators, thinks of adoption as the goal but actually if you think of football, it’s one of the posts on the field but there is so much more to go—an entire lifetime to go. It’s impossible to get anybody’s attention for those pieces. That is actually where a lot of the work has to happen.” (Adoption Agency Professional.)
- Though the need for increased public funding was not extensively discussed, one Adoption Agency Professional spoke passionately about **the lack of funding to support adoptions from the foster care system**. She explained that families who foster receive support services, training and social worker visits, but once an adoption is finalized “everybody just disappears” and there is no support available. **Thus the system effectively “de-incentivizes adoption.”** Across the groups, a need for greater funding for support services was echoed.
 - “The lack of support services and counseling and just very basic education for the kids in the system, the case planners get very little professional development training. How in the world could they do this work when no one’s telling them what to do? The adoptive parents and the birth parents, by the way, also should get counseling and also should be able to resolve their life story and figure out what’s going on, so nobody’s getting enough services.” (Foster Care Social Worker)

Summary Snapshot

- Elected officials are not seen to understand the issues facing the adoption community. Increased awareness is needed, as well as education, to harness what is perceived as latent good will towards the cause.

H. Power Dynamics - Final Decision Making in Adoptions

- Foster Care Social Workers, Adoption Agency Professionals and Therapists consistently believed that the balance of **power in the “final decision” about who becomes the permanent provider for a child resides with the birth mother for private adoptions, and with the case worker or their supervisor for adoptions from foster care**. (Although they recognized that the family court judge is the legal gatekeeper, they maintained that the true decisional power is wielded long before the case reaches the courtroom.) Academics framed this differently, asserting that power is distributed

along a series of decisions at each step of the process, from families qualifying based on their home study, to the selection/matching process.

- “Whether it’s the worker or the supervisor, there’s a misperception that it’s the judge and family court who actually approve adoptions. By the time that gets to the judge, 99% of adoptions that are put forward by an agency get approved. It’s very rare for a judge to disapprove because you’ve already lined it up that way.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
- “We simply approve the families and the birth mother chooses.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
- **This power balance was regarded as appropriate by most of the Agency Professionals** and attorneys, as they believed in the importance of the first/birth parent feeling in control of her decision.
 - “What I’ve seen with birth moms, there’s always a lot of concern and a lot of guilt. For her own emotional well-being, the birth mother wants to participate in the placement, select the family so that she can say this is the best family in the whole wide world – look what I’ve done for my child. Yes, it helps the child but I think it helps the birth mother.” (Attorney)
- **The handful of different perspectives on the power balance included an Attorney maintaining that in typical foster care situations, “the one who yells most” tends to have the power** – meaning that the party who agitates and makes the strongest and most determined ongoing plea for the child is often successful (particularly when that is the birth family) in a context where it can take years to finalize an adoption.
- **In international adoptions, the locus of power was understood to be situated in the child’s birth country.** While the US agency approves families and shares their information, the authorities in the “sending country” make the match. One Agency Professional believed that ideally the first/birth parents would have more of a role in the decision.
- **The main change the professionals wanted to see – mentioned mostly in a foster care context – was giving more voice to the child.** This was raised by Foster Care Social Workers, Therapists and Academic Researchers alike. They recommended educating the children more on what was happening, to ensure they understood, and including consideration of their opinion on different options within the overall decision being made.
 - “I don’t think social workers give enough voice to the child’s reaction and opinion.” (Therapist)
 - “When children are old enough to speak, you should involve them in the process. We took the top 3 home studies we liked and showed them to two 11-year old twins and asked them which family they liked. Kids know it. They don’t pick the richest family or the biggest house. You can ask the right questions to help guide them.” (Foster Care Social Worker)

- “When kids are older, it should involve them and their opinion. Not that you do what they say but the decision should take into account how this young person’s is understanding and making a meaning of what’s going on and their excitement or not around that.” (Academic)
- **Academics also wished** (based on past experience as Social Workers) **that decisions made by case workers should require a threshold level of knowledge of all the psychological issues surrounding adoption**, besides just understanding the processes. Given the lack of specific training already mentioned, they felt this is currently lacking in some cases.
 - “Having someone on the team who has a knowledge of the life course of adoption. That is something that is missing. It’s largely that you have 22-year olds who are sitting at the table because they’re the workers [but they] don’t have the training. The trainings that do exist are very much about procedure rather than the issues that go in to adoption - how to accomplish tasks not the broader issues that underscore a lot of things like child development and identity issues.” (Academic Researcher)

Summary Snapshot

There was general agreement that the locus of power in the final decision making resides with the social worker (or supervisor) in foster care adoptions, and with the birth mother in private adoptions.

- In the foster care setting, professionals expressed a desire for children themselves to have more of a voice within adoption decisions.
- In international adoption decisions, there was a desire for first/birth parents to have more power.
- Concern was voiced that decision makers should include a professional with understanding of the life-process of adoption, vs. just process-based training.

I. The Right of Adoptive Parents and First/Birth Parents to Reverse Their Decision

- **The majority of professionals agreed, reluctantly, that adoptive parents should be allowed to dissolve an adoption after it has been finalized.** They felt that to deny this right was to apply unequal standards to adoptive parents vs. first/birth parents.
 - “If we have rights in this country that allow a biological parent to say I’m not capable of parenting this child, why would we have different standards for adoptive parents?” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - “You can’t make adoption more permanent than birth. Adoption is based on the severance of the original relationship so there’s something paradoxical about people so distraught about adoptive parents doing it while they accept birth parents doing it.” (Attorney)

- "It's not ideal when that happens, but yes, I do think that families should be able to change their minds. I don't want to child to continue in a home where they are not wanted." (Academic Researcher)
- **Only one professional—a Therapist—stated categorically that this should not be allowed**, believing that an adoption should be on a "forever" basis to avoid creating a persistent cloud of uncertainty for the child.
 - "For both adoptive families and birth mothers there would be zero rescinding of adoptions. [Otherwise] I think it's a sort of Sword of Damocles over a child's head. It brings the idea of being adopted closer to the idea of being born to the parents by saying it's a forever situation. I feel strongly about that just because I've seen what happens to kids when adoptions are rescinded. Their sense of hopelessness is profound." (Therapist)
- **Importantly, however, there was a consistent belief that if sufficient support services could be provided, both pre-adoption and post, this situation should never need to arise.** The adoptive parent would have adequate information and education to ensure they were not taken aback by the reality of the experience, and should have support systems to call upon if it proved harder than they anticipated.
 - "I see it way too often, with older child adoptions. It's because the parents were not given full information about a child at adoption. Even if they had some information, they were not given the support to deal with the initial trauma of the experience. I don't like it but it didn't have to happen that way either." (Therapist)
 - "You can't force a family that doesn't want to raise a child to raise a child. That's just the fact of the matter. But there ought to be a lot of scrutiny beforehand that people know what they're doing. None of these kids, particularly if they're a little bit older, are walking in carefree. They need periods of adjustment. So many states including NY do not have adequate post-adoption services. Every effort should be made to make sure the match was right and secondly to make the match work. It's so devastating to a kid to be rejected again." (Attorney)
 - "I would also go back to our earlier discussion about how do we make decisions about who's up for this in the first place. And how to make sure that we provide support to wrap around families, the kinds of resources they need so that after the honeymoon period goes away." (Academic Researcher)
- **This need for greater pre- and post-adoption support to avoid adoptions breaking down was perceived as even greater for international cases.** One Attorney noted that unlike the US foster care system, there is no 'trial period' for intercountry adoption. But because many of the internationally adopted children are older, there is a lot of transitional trauma and difficulty adjusting on the part of both the child and the adoptive family. However, there is no infrastructure to help manage that through to resolution, nor to deal with situations in which the adopting parent cannot accommodate and manage the demands of the child. This is especially problematic when there was insufficient information provided about the child to begin with, which is often the case from certain countries.

- “Without good matching and a good probationary system, it should be no surprise that we get these failed older child intercountry adoptions. We need to build a better system.” (Attorney)
- **When asked whether a birth mother should have to wait a specific length of time before being able to sign an irrevocable surrender, most professionals felt that she should**, and that 24, 48 or 72 hours was probably not enough. They did not feel able to suggest the optimal window, but felt that it should be long enough for the raging hormonal surge at childbirth to subside.
 - “Different states do have different amounts of time. Adoptive parents like to go to Texas because I think it’s 24 or 48 hours. That is definitely not enough time.” (Therapist)
 - “I’ve seen birth mothers in the huge hormonal swings of giving birth and your head is not screwed on properly and there’s a lot of sense of regret after they come out of that. I think there’s something to be said for giving birth mothers a window of processing this massive, life-altering decision for herself and her child.” (Therapist)
 - “I would err on the side of giving them more time. A lot happens when you’re giving birth to a baby. That’s such an emotional decision. They need more time than what they’re being given and they need freedom to have that from agencies.” (Academic Researcher)
- **Ideally, they felt the matter should be considered on a case-by-case basis**, though it was noted by an Adoption Agency Professional that an extended “limbo” period can make it challenging for the adoptive parents as they seek to form an attachment with the child.
 - “Is it right to look at every single situation the same? If there’s a situation where the professionals are seeing that the birth mother is really being bombarded by what her family is saying, is there a way to make an assessment that this is not something we should ask her to sign after 7 days or 12 days?” (Therapist)
 - “The way we talk about it is a woman may make a decision but once that baby is born, there’s a re-decision process. The reality is there might be a lot of indecision. But I would also say for a child’s permanency plan, there needs to be something that makes that clear so there’s not a limbo for the new parents and their attachment to that child, etc.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
- However, as with the question of the adoptive parents rescinding their decision, it was suggested that **adequate options counseling would reduce the risk of a birth mother signing a surrender and then changing her mind**.
 - “The conversation around standardizing options counseling for women really reduces the risk of changing your mind and creating all this heart ache for all the parties involved.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

Summary Snapshot

- While most felt an adoptive parent should be allowed to dissolve an adoption once it is finalized, professionals believed this situation could be avoided by adequate pre- and post-adoption support services. This need was seen as particularly desperate in international adoption situations.
- And though most agreed that a mother should ideally have to wait a longer period than 24, 48 or 72 hours before signing an irrevocable surrender, they also felt that consistent options counseling would make this window more satisfactory.

J. Is The Current Model of Adoption Too Transactional?

- **Not all professionals viewed the adoption process as too transactional.** Foster Care Social Workers were the least likely to see it this way, while the Adoption Agency Professionals found this concept the most resonant.
- **The Foster Care Social Workers simply did not see adoptions in this way.** While they presumed it might be more the case for those in private adoptions, their world did not operate like this.
 - “It’s easy to see it as ‘sign off that legal form’ but there’s more. It’s more than a transaction for sure. It’s not [transactional] in me being part of that part of foster/adoption community, the state area. I’m not in that private, money-making driven adoption industry. That’s not my area. I don’t know what that looks like.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
- **In contrast, those working at private adoption agencies recognized this idea more. They reported that would-be parents often walked in with a perception of the process as a one-time transaction.** They considered it a critical part of their job to educate such parents to help them move beyond this notion and grasp the true magnitude of what adoption means across a lifetime.
 - “It does feel a bit like commodity moving. I feel that way. Working in the industry, it doesn’t feel good a lot of times just hearing the jargon and the way children are talked about. It feels like we’re some kind of product.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - “Families coming into the process with service fees initially think of it as these are the steps I need to do. As a society, those are transactional things. Through their experience with agencies like the ones you are talking to now, they start to understand that it’s more than just a transaction, that there is a life, not just for the building of the family but the whole of it. When you see families start to really appreciate that aspect of it, that’s rewarding. We’re constantly guarding against transactional behavior.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- “There have certainly been families who have compared this to getting a mortgage or buying a car. That’s really an opportunity to educate and to help them reflect on what are you talking about. Also, it’s a good screening tool. If a family really can’t at some point make that leap to the emotional part of this is a human being, they’re not going to adopt from my agency.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- **A couple of professionals saw “transactional” as having positive elements**, either in terms of offering formalized protection, or definitive closure for the child.
 - “I think it’s good that there is finality and a judge with a gavel and a sense of lawfulness to adoption. It gives a child a sense of peace. As painful as the finality of not being with your original family is, it enables the child to make the necessary psychological jump to being now a child of another family. So there’s a positive for transaction.” (Therapist)

- **Overall, several were optimistic that the growing tide of openness in adoptions would necessarily make them less transactional** (in the negative senses of the word), since by focusing on ongoing relationships throughout a child’s life, the emphasis would be broadened, and could not remain focused on one moment in time.
 - “[The opposite of transactional] - That’s openness, isn’t it? Openness is it’s not goodbye and it’s not send a letter once a year with pictures. That’s what the new wave of openness is giving.” (Therapist)

V. Social Dynamics Related to Adoption and Foster Care

A. Circumstances and Reasons Leading to Adoption or Lost Custody

- The adoption professionals reported a range of circumstances that led birth parents into adoption. **The decision to place a child with adoptive parents was rarely viewed as a cut-and-dried choice**, even when it was ostensibly a voluntary decision made by the first/birth mother. Indeed, professionals across the industry agreed that most of these parents were facing extremely difficult circumstances that made them unable—but not always unwilling, especially in the case of parents of children who had entered foster care—to parent properly and provide for their child.
 - Notably, all the adoption professionals exhibited empathy toward first/birth parents. There was a genuine absence of judgment placed on parents in such difficult circumstances.
 - “For whatever reason, some people are born with mental health or addiction issues where they can’t raise kids. That’s how it goes. How can we not judge those people and figure out how to support them and their kids and figure out what’s best whether it be adoption or foster care or whatever.” (Foster Care Social Worker)

- Perceived factors that lead to voluntary decisions for domestic adoption included:
 - *Abusive partners and domestic violence*: violence in the home, including rape, forced sex, were cited by all groups as prevalent reasons mothers consider adoption for their child.
 - *Economics*: Attorneys, Agency Professionals and private practice Therapists saw economic hardship and a lack of family support as a common cause for adoption.
 - “I would say the birth mother’s economic status and her ability to work and provide for her child is certainly the overwhelming majority but we also do see women who have been raped or conceived out of incest – all these circumstances in which they find themselves in a very difficult situation.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - *Drug abuse and addiction*: one Attorney noted that voluntary routes into adoption from drug abuse were often taken in the context of addiction treatment programs, where mothers were not able to parent properly while fighting addiction.
 - *Shame*: the social and family-fueled shame around young, unwed mothers—while recognized as a traditional factor in adoptions—was seen as a declining reason for both public and private adoptions, mainly because of increased access to birth control and abortion. Notable exceptions to this decline were traditional family cultures among religious groups and certain first generation immigrant groups.

- Note: although a few participants mentioned youth and the age of mothers as a factor, it was treated **more of an observation of a common characteristic rather than a defining reason for considering adoption**. In fact, a couple participants mentioned that the age of mothers considering adoption seemed to be increasing.
 - “First people seem to think it’s the teenage birth moms. It’s not the teenage birth moms. Between birth control, abortion and TV shows which have glamorized being teenage moms, they’re not the ones who are placing a whole lot. It’s more women who are in their 20s, occasionally their 30s.” (Attorney)

- **The circumstances and reasons they had observed that had led parents to lose custody of their child were similar and centered around neglect, substance abuse and domestic abuse.** Often, after birth/first parents had exhausted their efforts at adequately parenting their children, the state had intervened and placed the child or children in foster care.
 - Drug abuse and addiction was cited as a growing problem and an increasingly common reason for the state to take custody.
 - “We’re seeing right now huge substance abuse problems. 4-5 years ago it was methamphetamine. Now it’s heroin. Substance abuse problems for the parent is the biggest reason we’re seeing children come in to custody.” (Therapist)

- The circumstances for international adoptions varied from the shame-focused adoption system in South Korea to the one-child policy in China to the economic hardships of countries such as India. With the exception of South Korea, it was agreed that **the root circumstance for international adoption was economic**. Wealthy Americans adopted healthy children from poor parents in developing countries.
 - “There are different reasons for the international adoptions. Some are political like China’s single child policy. The other [reason] is population in India where adoption is made very easy...where you put your baby in a basket and push it through a wall and you know your child will be adopted. South Korea is a first world country where there’s a lot of shame around being an unwed mother; she can’t even find work.” (Therapist)
 - One Attorney explained that while in practice the international adoption system functions because of economic imbalance, **international adoption policy does not recognize poverty as a valid reason for adoption**. The fundamental feel-good American narrative of international adoption—providing a poor child with love, economic security and opportunity—is at odds with a more complicated reality in which the children in most need are older, have mental issues or health problems and are therefore, because of Americans’ desire for healthy infants, not as desirable as potential adoptees.

- In international adoption, there was acknowledgement that “internet brokers” and **fraudulent networks for adoptions existed**, especially in countries where regulations are not enforced. It was understood that scandals could erupt when unknowing

American families or agencies ended up adopting children who were brought into the system in an unethical, fraudulent fashion.

- Professionals explained that some of this illegal activity preyed on cultural misunderstandings about the legal nature of adoption and its meaning. One example given involved a scandal in Ethiopia in which adopted children thought they were going to boarding school when they were actually in the process of being adopted internationally.
- When asked if they had observed situations where first/birth mothers had felt coerced into placing their children into adoption, a few Attorneys and Agency Professionals explained that **subtle coercive methods were still being practiced at less reputable agencies and law firms**, despite the prevalence and legal requirement (in some states) for options counseling.
 - In one case, an Attorney described how an agency would manipulate the grace periods and time limits to prevent a mother from changing her mind about adoption.
 - “I’ve seen lawyers and adoption agencies manipulate the 5-day wait in a number of ways. I witnessed another case where again they had some signed paperwork to keep the children and [the adoptive parents would] collect the child on day five. She [birth/first mother] called that evening and said, ‘I can’t do it.’ They said, ‘we’ll talk to you tomorrow’ but by “tomorrow” it was too late.” (Attorney)
 - Another described how the options counseling process was reduced to an empty formality by combining multiple sessions into a single day, which defeated the purpose of such sessions.
 - On balance, **subtle yet effective coercive tactics, rather than outright coercion, were sometimes seen to set the tables against a vulnerable mother** in extremely challenging circumstances from changing her mind about her decision for adoption.
- The few domestic cases of outright coercion mentioned by Agency Professionals and Researchers were stories of **family members forcing their pregnant daughters into adoption**.
 - “Expectant parents are a very vulnerable population. They’re typically in shock. They’re lost, confused, don’t know who to trust. It’s very easy to coerce someone who is in that situation. What we actually do see directly in our own practice is where a woman comes in for options counseling and her mom comes right there with her and says, ‘you’ve got to place this baby for adoption. You just have to do it.’ We have to work on the whole family system to make sure that this birth mom is making the decision that she wants and not what her mom wants.” (Adoption Agency Profession)
- Although outright coercion was rare, **regret and pain among birth/first parents was considered widespread**. It was reported that very few parents want to give up their children but do so because they feel like it is best for their child or their situation

demands it. In foster care, one Attorney described how the public system was set up in a way that made it difficult for first/birth to build meaningful, healthy relationships with their children in foster care, which exacerbated feelings of pain and regret.

- “I think some of those parents just walk away because it’s so awful for them and lose custody of the child or become very hostile to the agency and don’t benefit from services. One of the things we do in the public systems is we don’t really try to get the kids returned to the parents. We create this very adversarial situation. But we’re not really giving parents a chance. A lot of the so-called services available to these parents are really cookie cutter and very demeaning to people. As opposed to making decisions and counseling people and saying if you really want you kid back, you have to do 1, 2, 3 we’ll help you. And if you can’t do it in a reasonable time, we have to do what’s best for your kid.” (Attorney)

Summary Snapshot

1. Going through with an adoption is never a cut and dried decision for birth/first parents, even in private adoptions. Extremely difficult circumstances factor into the decision and professionals emphasized that all birth/first parents should be treated with empathy, sensitivity and understanding.
2. The factors that create the circumstances that lead to adoption were considered to be abuse, neglect, substance addiction, shame and extreme economic hardship. Substance abuse, especially in the foster care system, was reported as an increasingly common reason for mothers to go down the path of adoption while shame was seen as a declining factor.
3. Insidious coercive practices are still being used at less reputable agencies and law firms to prevent first/birth mothers from changing their minds about adoption.
4. Similarly, the system (policy and practice) is not set up to provide the proper counseling and services to first/birth parents, which was seen as contributing to widespread regret and grief.

B. Who Gets to Adopt—The Role of Money and Privilege

- Regarding power dynamics in adoption, it was taken as fact that **money, entitlement and (white) privilege played an outsized role in nearly every facet of the adoption world**, including who is able to adopt; adoption policy; who is adopted; and who works in the adoption field. Although this locus of power was generally accepted as an understandable reflection of larger cultural power dynamics, inequality and entrenched racism in American society, it was hardly considered ethically acceptable. As will be discussed, many of the professionals we spoke to acknowledged a need for changes that “level the playing field,” even if imagining such change happening on a systemic level felt daunting at times.
 - Importantly, a couple of Agency Professionals also noted that questions of money, power, privilege and inequality were further complicated by the fact that

- adoption in America is fundamentally based on inequality and that economic imbalance is what currently allows the business model, especially for private adoptions, to operate.
- “I wish you’d take money out of adoption. If we all could operate from taxpayers’ money like we do in the state system, then we wouldn’t have to rely on other sources of funding to keep our programs alive, well and healthy. The reality is we’re all hardworking professionals who need a paycheck at the end of the week to sustain our own families. Where’s the paycheck come from? Primarily a lot of the money comes from our pre-adoptive family base.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
- At its most basic level, in private adoptions, **money was seen to give wealthy individuals and families more control and more options when it comes to family building.** For example, wealthy families will often have better access to younger, healthier babies than those with less means.
 - “When you have money, you have the option to adopt any which way you want. When you have cash or you have privilege because of something maybe political, you have options. Folks who don’t have money, they don’t have the various options of where they can adopt. But people with money have opportunities and options that people without money don’t.” (Foster Care Social worker)
 - “With power and privilege, it gives you the chance to be able to construct your family in you most desired way with your most desired child with the most desired path. The less power you have, the less you have negotiating power.” (Academic Researcher)
 - By extension, the corollary to the wealthy family seeking to adopt is the poor family whose child ends up being adopted. One Attorney made a disturbing comparison when he said that a poor mother with a drug addiction problem in a poor neighborhood will likely have a child end up in foster care or adoption while a rich woman with a drug addiction problem’s child will likely not ever enter foster care or be adopted.
 - “If you have a parent who has a drug problem and they’re living in the wealthiest suburb of Alabama, they’re not going to lose their kid. But if you have someone living in downtown Birmingham and they have a drug problem, they may lose their kid.” (Attorney)
 - Not including legal fees and other expenses, typical agency fees alone were described as costing between \$15,000 and \$50,000. Besides acting as a financial barrier to those with less money, these **fees have reinforced the segregation of adoption into two disparate realms: public and private adoptions.**
 - “The role of money is huge. From a certain type of family, a certain socioeconomic class of family being able to access better services. In NYC, you really see that most starkly with who adopts privately versus who adopts through the public foster care system.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- Private adoptions and the agency fees required were seen as **distorting the relationship between Agency Professionals and prospective adoptive parents by creating a client/provider dynamic**. One Agency Professional described how adoptive parents “with big jobs” treated her like an accountant or other service provider when she performed home checks. Rather than being respected as an independent authority whose judgment mattered in the process, she was simply seen as another person being paid to perform a task.
 - “I think also home studies get really complicated. The social worker’s job – my job – is to assess a family’s appropriateness to be adoptive parents. From their perspective, particularly those who are high-powered, have big jobs, they’re really used to controlling a lot of elements of their life, from their perspective you’re like a service provider to them, like a doctor or accountant. You hear a lot of “I’m paying you for a home study. Why are you getting up in my business? Just write the document and sign it.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- Agency Professionals and Foster Care Social Workers reported that the **privilege that wealth allows created a sense of entitlement for many upper middle class families who had trouble separating financial means and their suitability to raise a child**.
 - There were reports of wealthy people being surprised that they might not be able to provide the best environment for a child.
 - “Kids from foster care need more than a birth child maybe because they need so many resources and attention. If you don’t have what it takes or if you’re not open and affirming and if you can’t be open to the race issues, then there’s sometimes a sense of entitlement that I can do this when you’re not demonstrating the skills needed.” (Foster Care Social Worker)

- This form of **entitlement also played into upper middle class norms, particularly the emotional expectations of *having a baby***. One Therapist noted this strong desire among wealthy families for adopting healthy infants at a very early age. The age of the baby was important since these adoptive parents wanted to internalize the baby as their own, and raise it as if it were theirs from the start—a desire that brings up a host of complex issues around parenting perspectives and the pressures of family-making for the upper middle class.
 - “I think it’s true for families seeking healthy infants, healthy white infants or infants from countries that produce healthy babies like South Korea. It’s hard for families to think about outside the box in taking an older child or a child out of foster care because so many people feel they want that infant experience so they can internalize that this child is theirs.” (Therapist)
 - “Another thing with money and the access and the privilege is they also get to choose the age of the child. Meaning if they want a new-born baby, someone with money will make that happen. Someone without, who knows?” (Foster Care Social Worker)

- **The role of money and power in foster-care was described in completely different terms**, largely due to a different compensation model and policy. Whereas parents adopting privately pay for access to healthy babies, **foster care parents often take in older children with special needs (mental and physical), and are compensated for their care**. The result is that foster care parents were described as consisting of lower-income, often minority, women and extremely unique middle families who sought out older children with special needs.
 - Interestingly, the **process for approving a foster care parent was described as extremely strict** and entailed an arduous process that “weeds people out.” This trying process for a low-income prospective foster parent taking in an older child with special needs could be viewed in stark contrast to the high-income prospective adoptive parents who pay for the privilege of a privately adopting a healthy newborn.

- As discussed previously, in the international adoption sphere, **money and economic imbalance are at the root of the system**, even if poverty is not considered a valid reason for international adoption.
 - White privilege was brought up by one Agency Professional as a persistent factor within the adoption system in that children of color are still often placed far from their communities with white families, despite calls by black communities and American Indian nations to insist that their children stay with their communities. Within international adoptions, even though international adoptees and countries of origin are increasingly critical about removing children from their birth/first parents’ cultures, it is still happening partly because of the privilege and power enjoyed by wealthy, often white, Americans.
 - “White privilege has continued to persist and bust through both of those stands taken by people of color, communities of color. I would argue that the international adoption community is reaching kind of that same point where adoptees...are saying very clearly through research and through professional means that transracial international adoption is challenging.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- The subject of race sparked an interesting conversation among Agency Professionals. They agreed that **the industry as a whole was far too white** and did not reflect either the adopted children or the birth/first parents.
 - In a moment of reflective criticism, one agency professional questioned why people of color and especially adult adoptees were not interested in joining the adoption field as Social Workers. What about the industry or experience was making it unattractive to all the qualified Social Workers of color?
 - “When you look at the professionals, at the people who run the agencies, when you look at the people who are doing the home studies. I’ve been to adoption conferences. I think there were 300 people there and at some point, I thought to myself let’s look around and see what’s happening in this room. I could not find a single person of color in that entire auditorium.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

Summary Snapshot

1. The role of money was seen to be distorting and dividing the system into public and private spheres with the latter serving the wealthy and former serving poorer families.
2. The key distortion is that money provides wealthier families with choice in how they construct their families, namely giving them access to the healthiest, youngest babies.
3. Inequality reinforces a sense of entitlement that pervades the system. For example, Agency Professionals are sometimes perceived and treated as just other service providers—like a lawyer or accountant.
4. In international adoptions, there is a fundamental conflict in that international policy does not recognize poverty as a reason for adoption but in practice, most agree that inequality is at the root of all international adoptions.
5. While it was agreed that the underlying business model of all private adoptions depends on economic imbalance between birth/first parents and adoptive parents, there was a desire for ways to even the playing field so that money did not have such an outsized influence in the process. Although systemic change was not considered realistic in the short term, small changes such as reducing fees or using social media, were called out as ways to potentially curtail the influence of money.
6. The role of money in the foster care system and public adoption was equally influential and acted to further segregate the system into public and private spheres. Whereas private adoptions give wealthy privileged families access to choice, in public adoptions, poor, minority families are compensated to care for older children with special needs.
7. White privilege was seen as reinforcing entitlement in both domestic and international adoption. Interestingly, the adoption field itself was seen as far too white and not an adequate reflection of the communities being served.
8. There seemed to be a desire to reform the models for both systems so that the process was more centered on what is best for all children.

C. The Role of Social Media in Adoption

- Social media in adoption and foster care was accepted as a new, powerful force that had yet to be completely defined or integrated into existing systems. Most adoption professionals described both **exciting opportunities and great dangers**.
 - “We’ve been putting a recruitment list for our survey of birth parents and just in creating a list, we’ve come across 60, 70 groups that are online alone. That’s not counting individual chapters in individual cities. Of support groups and places where parents can reach out. It’s something that has exploded.”
(Academic Researcher)

- From one Attorney’s point of view, **the drawback of social media was the lack of safeguards against “scams”** that could leak through the system even though all adoptions have to pass through legal systems.

 - “Then it also opens the door for possible scams. We have to watch that very, very closely. You still have to go through all the legal hurdles of adopting.” (Attorney)
 - “What we have run up against is the internet broker who is advertising services. Rights and responsibilities about birth parents is really not their aim. Their aim is to identify that mom for purposes of that baby and may promise that baby to several different families. You have women flown to deliver where birth father rights are not as strict. She doesn’t know what she doesn’t know.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- One Therapist pointed out that the danger of social media was that it **made the process of adoption too “seductive”** because it showcased “gorgeous” children available for adoption only a mouse-click away. She likened it to the transactional nature of Tinder, suggesting that it was base, diminished and superficial, and at odds with what she thought should be a deeply emotional and genuine process.

 - “It’s seductive. Like anything on the internet, you can go and browse and click through gorgeous pictures of children and I think it takes away from the reality of what adopting is. It has a dangerous and seductive component. People can represent themselves in any way they want, sort of like Tinder and dating. It’s so visual. There’s something transactional about it that I don’t like. You can click a mouse to get a kid to be perfectly grotesque about it. It’s bit cowboy.” (Therapist)

- **However, many also saw the positive impact of social media.** Attorneys described one of the key ways in which social media had disrupted the adoption system in a positive way was by **leveling the economic playing field for private adoptions.** Families wishing to adopt and potential first/birth parents were using social media to connect with one another and thus bypassing adoption agencies and the expensive fees they charge.

 - “There are a couple of companies that specialize in it. You just post. That’s fine. I’ve had people who have matched using Facebook. Believe it or not, Craigslist. They’re not out there selling babies but people are looking to do this – the adoptive parents particularly – to avoid the cost of paying a placement fee, which is very high.” (Attorney)

- **When asked about the use of social media by families to advertise themselves as potential adoptive families, there was hesitancy to fully embrace the practice,** even if most admitted that advertising in some form—either through your network or in a newspaper ad—had always been the way many families were able to adopt.

 - “Before, the only way you had an adoption was through an agency or word of mouth or an ad in a newspaper. Today, people are posting rather than in newspapers are putting their profiles on various internet billboards.” (Attorney)

- "I've had to take a while to get OK with it. It's not something that I love but then when I thought about it, that's how adoptions have been happening forever. Whether it's an ad in the Pennysaver or what people did in the 60's who quietly let their friends and family know they're looking to adopt and do they know anyone." (Adoption Agency Professional)
- Social media, including adoption specific forums and social networks, were also seen as **providing access to larger pools of both expectant mothers and potential adoptive parents**. Suddenly a family did not have to rely solely on their network or an agency.
 - "The positive to so many families being online is birth parents, if they're getting good options counseling they do have the ability to connect with such a wider, more diverse group of potential adoptive parents rather than who is in their community or who their agency says they have to be matched with." (Adoption Agency Professional)
- In an interesting contrast to the Attorneys—who saw social media as a way to avoid high agency fees—Agency Professionals saw it as **preserving or increasing "socio-economic disparity** among families doing private domestic adoption." It was agreed that better standards and oversight could alleviate some of these concerns.
 - "Where I get uncomfortable is when you look at the socio-economic disparity.... You've got families who have lots of resources who have spent thousands of dollars building beautiful custom websites, SEO key word optimization. It just has a weird feeling to it. They're running an operation to find this baby. I wish there were some standards around what would be OK or maybe a cap on how much they could spend to level the playing field to make it not just that the wealthiest families with the most technology are able to connect with birth parents." (Adoption Agency Professional)
- **Agency Professionals saw the potential in using social media as an informal forum of support for both adoptive parents and birth/first parents**. One Agency Professional explained that positive **comments on posted photos have created good feelings, fostered new connections and created a sense of community**.
 - Social media was also seen as playing a role in enriching the open adoption experience by **creating open avenues of communication between birth/first parents and adoptive parents**. One story about a connection made between a adoptive father and a birth/first parent illustrated the potential of social media in adoption:
 - "One of the things literally that we do is we post a picture of the family with the child they've adopted. We had one dad who got all this positive feedback and he wrote, I want to thank my son's birth mother for her. It's just so nice and so respectful. Then you have people piling on about that, in a positive way. To me that spoke to the importance of openness, the importance of birth families presence in not only their child's life but the adoptive parents as well." (Adoption Agency Professional)

Summary Snapshot

1. Social media was seen as a new force in adoption that posed dangers and opportunities.
2. One danger of social media was its seductive visual nature, with its images of beautiful babies up for adoption. One Therapist likened it to Tinder and thought it diminished what should be a rich emotional process.
3. As families used social media to connect with potential children to adopt, there was agreement that more safeguards and oversight was needed to prevent abuse and create a safe system to continue to operate.
4. Social media was seen as a new opportunity to level the playing field because prospective adoptive parents could use it to avoid expensive agency fees.
5. Agency professionals saw social media as a way of creative stronger support networks and relationships within the adoption community. This potential was also thought to apply to strengthening the relationship between birth/first parents and adoptive families and adopted children.

D. Portrayal of Adoption in Media and Pop Culture

- Most agreed that **adoption and foster care narratives were not part of mainstream entertainment or pop culture in any significant way**. When entertainment media did try to employ an adoption or foster care story, it ranged from poor representations that perpetuate stereotypes to well-researched and thoughtful representations.
 - Several mentioned *The Fosters* television show and those who had watched thought it a decent attempt to capture some of real issues of adoption and foster care, even if it was still recognized as part of Hollywood.
 - “I think the truth is that some shows do really good research, created a show *The Fosters* so they’re trying to do the right thing. They put the foster kid or adopted kid on and they try to do it right. Other shows do it terribly. There’s such a range. I would suggest when people do it, they do better research and consult people to portray it in a more fair and open way rather than it’s all good or all bad.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “I watch *The Fosters* every week myself. It is very realistic and it certainly deals with all issues as well as legal issues. I think *The Fosters* has done a lot to encourage fostering and the support of foster kids.” (Therapist)
 - “I didn’t want *The Fosters* for a long time but then some of my team was watching it and I started watching it; I think they get a lot of things right. Obviously it is still Hollywood and the long lost birth father has a yacht. There are a lot of things there that they do right.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - For a few, the **poor representations of adoption and foster care in entertainment media ignore the “human trauma”** and the on-going emotional journey of adoption by painting an overly pleasant and easy portrait of the process. One important result of this rosy portrait is that the adopted

- child's personal narrative and history is erased as he or she enters the benevolent adoptive family. One Agency Professional describes how this misleading erasure happens in the show *Parenthood*.
- "This family says, 'let's adopt a baby!' Then 2 episodes later, they get placed with an older child, like a 9-year old. They just become a normal family. He fits right in. They don't address the fact that he's a different race. They don't address the fact of where he's been. What happened to him in the past 9 years of his life? Shouldn't he just shut the hell up and be grateful? It does not represent the human experience of the trauma and the loss and the grief that comes with what that is like." (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - This type of **misrepresentation also exists in news media**, where TV specials and articles present an overly positive view of the process that perpetuates an unrealistic pop culture storyline of adoption. One Agency Professional described how an annual CBS special is a nice celebration of adoption but glosses over reality.
 - "You have that thing around the holidays – that adoption special on CBS. It's an enormous celebration of adoptive families and how to find families for these waiting children but there's no reality to it. It's all just poof and happiness and glitter and that's great. I have no problem with glitter but it doesn't represent it well." (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - In contrast to this unrealistic positive portrayal of adoption, **media was also blamed for sensationalizing the false narrative that adopted kids were "bad seeds" or somehow lesser because of the challenging circumstances from which they came.**
 - One Therapist told stories of clients that came to her crying after they saw how adopted children were represented in a popular film.
 - "There's sort of the bad seed genre. Adoptive parents would come to me in tears because of the films that were out...beware-of-the-child kind of films." (Therapist)
 - **This sensationalism was more often observed in news media**, which would present adoption or foster care as crucial information in a news story about a criminal act or abuse scandal when it was in fact irrelevant. Using adoption and foster care as negative framing was seen as perpetuating the narrative of adopted children as deficient or as one Therapist called it "second-best" families.
 - "[The media] needs sensationalism. They need to over-report on the one case where some horrible thing happened. A few years ago, there was a mass shooting at some army base and every single thing you read about it was that this particular person was adopted. Irrelevant to the story." (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - "There's still an attitude that a normal family is a family that you're genetically connected and adoptive families are second-best." (Therapist)
 - This destructive **sensationalism of news media was noted as misrepresenting foster parents as well as adopted children.**

- “In the news, there’s always the sensationalism of terrible foster parents doing horrible things to children or mothers sending boys home to Russia on an airplane with a note pinned to his jacket. Or adopted children who are sociopathic and you can’t trust them in your sleep. It doesn’t do anyone any favors honestly.” (Therapist)
- Similarly, media’s treatment of international adoption was seen as ranging from positive representations that obscured reality to myopic specials that focused on one perspective (e.g. parents waiting for a child) to sensational coverage of scandals.
- One Attorney believed that there was a **lack of coverage of adoption in general** and pointed out the opportunity for adoption and foster care to be a more important local issue. Quality local journalism, he believed, could help provide fair and positive coverage to the public systems of adoption and foster care.
 - “My perception is that there is relatively little coverage of the system at all. We need more coverage of that. That requires more your local journalism. You need good local journalists who care about the public system in NY or Alabama to dig in deep.” (Attorney)
- Overall, in reaction to both the sensationalism of unfair negative stereotypes and the “glitter” of overly positive portrayals, **there was a desire for more “tastefully done” narratives of adoption and foster care** within news and entertainment media. There was a sense that there would be value in telling the true story of adoption and foster care in all its emotional richness and detail.
 - “It would be nice if something could be done tastefully around these topics. I think that’s missing. There might be a little bit but not enough tastefully done.” (Foster Care Social Worker)

Summary Snapshot

1. Adoption was not seen as a part of mainstream media and there was a desire for more tastefully done, well-considered representation of adoption and foster care in media.
2. One false representation in media consists of overly positive, rosy view of adoption as a benevolent force that creates new families. This portrayal was considered incomplete and not realistic to the complex emotions of adoption.
3. Another false representation of adoption centered on the sensationalized depiction of adopted children as “bad seeds” that come from “bad” parents and homes. Considered reinforced by news and entertainment media, this view was thought to be destructive.
4. A few recognized better portrayals of adoption in media. For example, *The Fosters* was mentioned as a harmless, mostly positive representation of adoption and foster care.
5. Overall there was a strong desire to build positive realistic narratives about adoption and foster care in entertainment media and in news coverage.

VI. Stigma within Adoption and Foster Care

A. Stigma of Adopted Persons

- **The professionals concurred that adopted persons do experience some level of stigma.** This was most commonly **characterized as the cumulative effect of persistent “micro-aggressions”** that they felt in their everyday lives. These interactions happened daily in conversations with others about family, filling out medical histories and going to school.
 - “There are a million unintentional, tiny little things that happen daily that are insulting to the parents, insulting to the kids and the whole family system and not all families talk about it because it’s so much a daily part of life.” (Academic Researcher)
 - “I have trouble with the word stigma. I don’t think there’s an out and out bias although that does exist. I think it’s a slow build.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- One Agency Professional articulated how the **“expectation of gratitude” that society applies to adopted persons both marginalizes them as outliers** and silences their voices, which prevents productive discourse about adoption by adoptees from forming.
 - This marginalization often occurred either when people (strangers, friends and acquaintances) told adopted children they are “lucky” to be members of their family, or when people praised adoptive parents for their kindness and goodwill in taking in a child.
 - “I think there is a socially sanctioned stigma around adoptees, any adoptee, here in America with this idea of an expectation of gratitude. That expectation of gratitude then creates a really closed space for adoptees to express to others experiencing adoption. If adoptees are expected to be grateful – which they are – then anything they say that may critique the system...they’re marginalized, often times cast away as an outlier...because of this stigma around being adopted and being lucky that they were adopted, they aren’t able to voice their opinions.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - Besides being a source of alienation for adoptees, unwarranted praise for adoptive parents was cited as making adoptees **undergo a thought process where they think of their origins and birth/first parents as “deficient.”** This “unspoken” stigma is internalized over and over again as these interactions build upon themselves.
 - “I think adopted parents are congratulated on a regular basis for the kind and good they’re doing – that they’re rescuing children, that they are selfless. How does that impact the children? They internalize it and they agree that their parents have done a wonderful thing and rescued them and then they tend to look at their birth origins, whether it’s country or racial group or cultural group, as deficient and not optimal. Sometimes some feel alien.” (Academic Researcher)

- For kids who grow up where people are making very public, in an unavoidable way, the unusualness that they are, there is an unspoken stigma to that. It sends these silent messages that you are from something less; you are from something bad. Or 'thank goodness, you're so lucky! Isn't this amazing, you're in this portal to another world.' As kids get older, they start to think about it, 'What does that mean?'" (Therapist)
- One Academic noted that **most adoptive parents had experienced this unheeded public praise and were aware of its dangers** to their children's sense of self-worth and identity. It was agreed that there was a need for greater counseling or services to help adoptive parents deal with these situations and protect their children.
 - "Coming up to strange families and asking these questions, it doesn't serve a kid. It's actually mean to a kid to do that. Helping parents to be protective of their children and to figure out how to convey that and how to unpack what just happened with your kid." (Academic Researcher)
- The Academics and Adoption Agency Professionals reported that **race, especially when manifested within transracial adoptions, intensified feelings of stigma and otherness**, because its visible nature provokes more direct and frequent social micro-aggressions.
 - "If it's a transracial adoption, anyone is up for grabs. You're in the supermarket and someone says you're a lucky little girl." (Therapist)
 - An Agency Professional described how in transracial adoptions, even when a white family works hard to insulate their child from feelings of alienation, this protection often proves temporary because **when the child grows up he or she is not prepared to gain membership or belonging among their racial group**, creating an inverse alienation.
 - "An African American who was adopted...lived in a rural community, was the only black person. She was pissed at the world for being in that family. She loved her parents but did not like the circumstances of her environment. She went to college down south. She gets there with not an idea how to be black. She was completely out of her element. She still is a lost soul, trying to find her identity, trying to find her way." (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - It was explained by an Agency Professional that **a transracial adoptee might feel the full impact of more dominant forms of stigma and prejudice** once they leave the relative protection of their adoptive family.
 - "You have a transracial adoptee. They go to college, they move, they get a job and suddenly they're exposed to the racial biases that the general population who share their ethnicity have but they didn't grow up in a family that taught them how to cope with that. It can be very painful to find yourself in your 20s and suddenly realize people are judging me on my skin color. I never experienced this in such an outward, overt way before." (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - **A similar feeling of alienation is experienced when internationally adopted persons return to their birth culture** and experience otherness or have trouble relating culturally.

- "I find it interesting when international adoptees return to the country of their birth and the stigma they face there within their birth culture." (Adoption Agency Professional)
- Interestingly, as one Therapist pointed out, these feelings of silent alienation are not just felt in social situations. They are **further internalized and reinforced by policy**, especially in states where it is against the law to have records opened to learn about your birth parents.
 - "The stigma is internalized in adults. In NY state, it's against the law to have your record open so you can see who your birth parents are. The idea which has been described by adult adoptees in the groups I run is 'I feel like an alien. I feel like a political prisoner. I feel like I'm being denied my right of identity.' There's a huge internalized stigma that the world collaborated against me to deny me my very basic essence. That lasts a lifetime and is very painful." (Therapist)

Summary Snapshot

1. Stigma against adopted persons exists in the cumulative effect of direct and indirect micro-aggressions faced on daily basis.
2. An "expectation of gratitude" is a potent dimension of this stigma where adopted persons are made to feel grateful toward their adoptive parents for "saving" them. This expectation silences and marginalizes adopted persons by leading them to think of themselves as coming from inferior origins.
3. It was explained that part of this marginalization takes place when society offers unwarranted and misplaced praise on adoptive parents for their acts of kindness. It was agreed that greater support services are needed to guard against this form of aggression.
4. Stigma for transracial adopted persons was considered acute because its visible nature made micro-aggressions more frequent.
5. Transracial adopted persons also faced inverse stigma when trying to integrate into their birth culture or ethnic group. While many were hopeful that open adoptions might alleviate this issue, there seemed to be consensus that more life-long post-adoptive support services were needed to manage this issue.
6. It was agreed that more could be done at the policy level (e.g. access to closed birth certificates in certain states) to help adopted persons gain rightful access to their origins.

B. Stigma of Children in Foster Care

- Nearly everyone **agreed that foster care children experienced harsher, more outward and more culturally acceptable forms of stigma than adoptees.**
 - Although one Academic explained that she preferred not to have any “Oppression Olympics” conversations where one stigmatized group is compared to others.
 - “Oppression Olympics. There’s a policy question there about who has needs and how do we allocate them. ...I think it’s difficult and not perpetually useful from a practical standpoint to say one group has more or harder struggles but they all have struggles that manifest differently based on a ton of different variables.” (Academic Researcher)

- **Nearly all of the adoption professionals expressed empathy for the harsh treatment and difficult circumstances that foster children have to endure.** It was “heart-breaking” to see how these kids were being treated and how they were being perceived by society, medical professionals and teachers as “stupid” and “bad” kids when their circumstances were never their fault.
 - Agency Professionals and Academics explained that the system had failed to protect them; support their families; and care for them in their time of need, leading to children who were often highly medicated and traumatized.
 - “It is heart-breaking. These kids are seen as bad apple, bad kids. There’s something wrong with them. They’re mentally ill. They’re way over-medicated so sometimes they are zonked out because they’re being sedated essentially. They do poorly in school because the trauma of their lives doesn’t allow them to create space in their minds for learning. But then they’re seen as stupid. It’s just layer upon layer upon layer. You have so many medical professionals, mental health professionals who I think consciously or unconsciously make judgments about these kids and their capacities and write them off.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

- **The lack of permanency with foster families** (which was seen as a fault of the process and system in most participants’ opinions) also **creates a debilitating sense of suspended identity** as foster children are withheld from developing full membership with their foster families. **The constant threat of another traumatic removal was considered to cause extreme anxiety** for foster children.
 - “The stigma is also internalized because it’s like being – you’re not with your family; you’re with a new family. A transient family perhaps because if you misbehave, you might get moved again. A sense of suspended identity. It’s so hard on the kids. They don’t know where they are and it creates terrible anxiety.” (Therapist)

- One Academic identified **the underlying logic that society uses in judging foster children so harshly and unfairly.** She explained that foster children are viewed as defective mentally because they often express a desire to be with the birth/first parents

who put them in danger in the first place. To an indifferent outsider, this desire is “ridiculous.”

- The result is that even the natural desire to be with one’s parents is taken away from foster children and deemed pathological.
 - “I think kids in foster care are pathologized even more in some ways. If they still want to be with their birth families, then people will find that ridiculous because they should be aware of all the things that happened to them. They become less understood and more targeted in terms of mental illness and other things because they’re trying to reconnect and seek a relationship when, if they were sensible, they would have given up on that. (Academic Researcher)

- A Therapist pointed out **that policies are not set up to help foster children feel like they are full members of a family** or normal members in a community. In fact, in some states, the law used to prevent foster parents from making normal parenting decisions without a formal approval from the state.
 - [Stigma] also comes from policy. We’ve just passed national policy last year with is in effect right now that’s called Normal Improvement Parent. That is to allow the foster parent to make the daily decisions about education, cultural or enrichment activities that any other parent would be allowed to make. Before, they would have to get permission from the state. Kids couldn’t even spend the night on a Friday night without getting permission, which you never get in time as a social worker because kids come up with it at 3pm Friday afternoon. (Therapist)

- One Foster Care Social Worker believed that the stigma against foster children was so entrenched that he had started **training young Social Workers to coach foster children to be their own advocates** and stand up against bullying or judgment.
 - “I think foster kids have to advocate for themselves and not be uncomfortable Yeah, I’m a foster kid but I’m not a bad kid. I might have some problems and I’m sure you do too. Turn that around. I’m resilient. You know what – my family has some stuff going on. Don’t pick on me because of that because I’m sure your family does too.” (Foster Care Social Worker)

- Although there was general agreement that foster care children felt harsher and more consistent stigma than adoptees, it is interesting to note that one Academic described how she was shocked to learn that in the groups she runs, **adoptees from middle class families and foster care children who “age out” without getting adopted experience very similar emotional issues in adulthood.** Both groups struggle with their origins, issues of belonging and identity. This similarity, it was explained, suggests that more should be done to understand these issues in the context of a foster child or adopted child’s development, including the of role that adoptive families, health professionals and educators can play in it.

- I find there's an incredible overlap in work that I'm doing – half of my work is adoption where people were adopted at birth and never experienced any kind of abuse, neglect and then another group of kids who grow up in the foster care system, age out and never get adopted. I am stunned by the similarity of some of the struggles lifetime around making sense of origins, making sense of belonging, making sense of identity. It serves us better to understand what are the unique and nuanced ways in which these questions' developmental trajectories unfold. How we have to be prepared as parents, teachers, community members, social workers and psychologists, adoption workers – to have a heads up about that to make sure adults and people in their environment can be supportive so they're resilient across their development.
(Academic Researcher)

Summary Snapshot

1. The stigma against foster care children was considered harsh and heart breaking; they were branded by society as the “bad” and “stupid” kids with hopeless problems. There was a desire for more respect and care for these children in policy, practice and perception.
2. It was reported that foster kids live often live in state-imposed limbo, without permanency, which creates a suspended sense of identity as they live under the threat of removal.
3. It was explained that culture judges foster children's as pathologic because of their desire to connect with the birth/first parents who could not take care of them in the first place. The cultural judgment was cited as one of the roots bias against foster children.
4. It was noted by Therapists that despite the differences, middle-class adopted persons and foster children who aged out of the system without a family shared the same psychological issues as adults.

C. Stigma of Parents with Children Placed in Foster Care

- Although conversations about stigma focused on the children, a few of the Therapists and Academics reported that **birth/first parents also experienced stigma**. This shame was described as being most potent when it came from the state. Institutions were observed as making birth/first parents feel inadequacy and shame in a very public way. Tellingly, one Researcher called the permanency process a long, expensive, drawn out “**shaming ceremony**” of **birth/first parents** that ends when the state takes “your kid from you.”

- “The whole permanency process and the court is absolutely a shaming ceremony against women who have failed and chosen men or drugs or whatever over their children. They get very little support from the get go. It’s pretty remarkable. Of all the things, there’s incredible stigma...it’s more insidious psychological shame in foster care. Very public shaming with many, many professionals involved over a long period of time with the parents whose parenting goes so low that you have to have some institution come in and take your kid from you.” (Academic Researcher)

Summary Snapshot

1. The long drawn out shaming ceremony of birth/first parents whose children are put into foster care was viewed as an inherently unfair and insulting state-led process where the birth/first parents received little support or voice in the process.

VII. PERCEIVED AREAS OF GREATEST OPPORTUNITY FOR SUPPORT

- **When asked what they considered to be the greatest areas of opportunity and need for support services, the professionals offered many suggestions.**

- **The greatest consensus was generated around the need for increased post-adoption services, for the children, the adoptive family, and the birth parents. This need was seen as symptomatic of a system that focuses on adoption as a point in time, rather than a lifelong process.**
 - Across all disciplines, the professionals observed a **need for ongoing support stretching for many years after the adoption. The teenage years were identified as a particularly difficult time**, since puberty and social and hormonal turmoil calls identity into question in a more heightened way. Adoptive parents are often ill-equipped to deal with the extra layer adoption loads onto their children at this already-turbulent time in their lives
 - “The teenage years. It’s so tough because the children are changing visually; girls are getting their periods which is a trigger for remember their birth mother. Children are turning into adults and not looking like their adoptive parents. Childhood traumas, if a kid has come from an orphanage, sometimes surface at this time. The internet’s bringing half siblings into the picture ... that’s usually when reunions come banging into place. That’s really when the adoption and professional community [should] come in and help all members of that triad.” (Therapist)
 - Several also spoke of the **need for support in adulthood, including therapy and financial support to access it**. Peer support was also mentioned.
 - “It’s post placement. The need extends well into the 20’s, particularly for the older youth we’re working with. There’s a great need to support and pay for more non-traditional alternative support. Not necessarily paid for by Medicaid. There’s definitely more peer support needed.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - “To me it’s post-adoption. The problem is that adoption has been looked at as discrete events and it’s not. If you treat it like it’s discrete, you’re not going to have services 2 years, 10 years, 20 years afterwards. Down the road, when people have forgotten about the adoption, when all is going well then suddenly they reach the teen years and all goes to hell in a hand basket. So much of my [therapy] practice is entirely made up of people 20, 30, 40 years after their adoption and they’re trying to figure things out.” (Academic Researcher)
 - Besides support for the adopted persons themselves, **they believed that increased support was needed for the adoptive family, to avoid adoptions breaking down. The birth/first parent, too, was identified as lacking services** to help her process and deal with the trauma of her separation.

- “There’s also a need for the adoptive parents, that can go a long way to help preserving those placement when they are starting to break down. It’s not just getting the kids services but getting the parents the support they need, giving them the break that they need. Respite care keeps coming up as the one adoption need in several different studies. Having a break can go a long way to restoring the ability to continue.” (Academic Researcher)
 - “Post-adoption support for birth parents. When I do research on birth parents, we can never say how many of them have presented for therapy around their birth parent status because that’s not why they go to therapy, at least not what they articulate. That doesn’t mean there is not a need.” (Academic Researcher)
- **Specific support and service needs were identified within foster care.**
 - The need for **increased and improved services to get children placed in permanent families more quickly was considered a paramount concern.** Several discussed how arduous the process is to adopt a child from foster care, and were dismayed at the years that pass without arrangements being finalized. As one Attorney put it: “these kids are spoiling.”
 - “In the foster care system in this country, we have a tremendous lack of urgency about what’s going to happen to these kids. These kids are spoiling; they don’t just stay in the same state – they get damaged. After a little while, you see kids who are close to psychotic, which is a normal reaction to what they’re experiencing. You have to intervene and to intervene effectively and quickly and make decisions so they have permanent homes. That sounds simple-minded but there is so little attention paid to that nationally. I think we’re wasting a lot of money as well as children’s lives.” (Attorney)
 - **Individuals who “age-out” of foster care without ever being adopted were identified as a particularly underserved group,** for whom Attorneys and Social Workers believed services should be provided.
 - “There should be services that pick up that whole group of fosters who age out. Individuals who never were adopted, who were living independently. There’s a whole group of human beings who don’t have anything for them out there once they hit adulthood. The pre and post adoption services are in place, not good enough but they’re in place to be built upon. But here’s a population that don’t get any services.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
 - When kids age out of the foster care system, it is a complete disaster. I look at my children, all of whom are adults now, do you think when turned 18 or 21, they were ready to fly on their own? Absolutely not. These kids have nobody to turn to and no services. That’s something that needs to be dealt with.” (Attorney)
- **Increased support for the professionals on the front lines of adoption and foster care was also seen as high priority** by Foster Care Social Workers, with the end benefit of creating a more effective system that can better serve the families.

- “We focus on families and kids, which of course should be the underlying focus, but I also think there should be more support of the people doing the work. When we have constant worker turnovers, that’s what affects the families in such a negative way. [We need to be] supporting the people in the system so they can do a better job supporting the families. Support is different from training. Training is a one-time thing. Support is ongoing.” (Foster Care Social Worker)
- And related to this, one of the Academics expressed a wish for **greater sensitivity training around adoption across all professionals who interact with children and families.**
 - “I think all the way along there are opportunities for professionals who are actually involved to be more sensitive – teachers, doctors, pediatricians -- to be trained around child development and how do we interface with families who are created through adoption. For example, how many times do I have to tell my doctor, ‘I don’t know my history.’ I say it each year to the same person and I’ll get it again. Doctors and pediatricians aren’t trained to go outside the typical [paradigm where] your parents know all about you.” (Academic Researcher)

Summary Snapshot

1. **The professionals saw many greatly-needed opportunities for increased support services, in particular:**
 - a. Continued life-long post-adoption support
 - b. Support services for individuals who “age-out” of foster care without ever being adopted
 - c. Greater urgency focused on getting foster children placed in permanent families sooner
 - d. Increased support offered to professionals working on the front lines in adoption and foster care.

VIII. THEIR IDEAL FUTURE VISION

- **A few participants were asked what changes they would like to see in the adoption system in their ideal world – if they could wave a magic wand. Their responses echoed the themes heard throughout, and a simple story emerged:** Start by fighting the roots of poverty and racism, to give families greater support and reduce the need for adoptions born from inequality. Within adoptions that do take place, strive above all for openness and inclusivity, in the best interests of the child. And then provide support throughout that child’s life, and raise greater public awareness of the adoption community, in order to help him or her forge a positive identity, find community, and ultimately become socially, culturally and politically empowered.
 - “I would end poverty and racism. I say this jokingly but some of these things are core to how people come to be available for adoption or how families come to be vulnerable. That’s not a wish to say adoption will never happen but for me it evens the playing field that people come to adoption from a true place of choice.” (Academic Researcher)
 - “Across all 3 systems, I would want to move toward what I call additive understanding. Do adoption in a way where everyone understands from the front end that even after we do adoptions, the adoptee throughout the course of his or her life, is related in significant ways to their family of origin. Make everybody understand that those relationships are life long significant parts of the relationship and the adoptive relationship does not have to be built upon the denigration or destruction of the birth family.” (Attorney)
 - “Finding a way to bring that community together has incredibly positive impacts for society in that you have people who can find their people and can find their place and work out their identity rather than having the negative implications that anyone struggling with those issues will have if they go on unresolved.” (Adoption Agency Professional)
 - “I picture a strong adoptee people, a strong ethnic group in a sense, where they’re a special-interest group so politicians would have to listen to what they had to say. Where the general public recognizes the adoptees as its own people, its own ethnic identity, to where their census reports would have a check box for adoptee. I think that’s really important. It’s such a critical part of one’s identity but it’s just not recognized in the way that it needs to be.” (Adoption Agency Professional)

IX. Key Questions and Thought-Starters

1. In what ways can greater interactions between different professional groups in the world of adoption, and especially Foster Care Social Workers, be encouraged?
2. What would need to happen to enable universal access to original birth certificates at 18?
3. What initiatives would help encourage African American and other ethnic minority families to consider becoming adoptive parents?
4. Similarly, how can more people of color be encouraged to consider work in the adoption world, to better reflect its constituents? What are the key reasons these professionals are not entering the field?
5. How can understanding be increased of the difficult adjustment children face when they are adopted into the US from other countries, and how can increased support services be generated to help them build community and identity?
6. How can the discourse around LGBT adoptions be evolved, to demonstrate the value of this to all adoption organizations, even those guided by religious principles?
7. In considering national standards, where are likely to be the most constructive intersections between what is ideally needed, and what is realistically possible?
8. What messages would most effectively resonate with elected officials, to harness their latent good will and attune them to the needs of the adoption community?
9. Will increased openness in adoption necessarily alleviate perceptions of it as a transactional process, or are specific communications initiatives necessary to combat this perception and help shift perceptions toward adoption being a lifelong experience?
10. Should it be a goal to find ways of reducing the role money plays within the adoption equation?
11. How should social media be harnessed to enhance the adoption experience for all parties, potentially reducing the economic inequities that exist, while ensuring sufficient safeguards are in place?
12. Could a Media Task Force be created (if it does not already exist) – similar to GLAAD for the LGBT community – to monitor depictions of the adopted community within the media, and educate and work with media decision makers to integrate more positive narratives and role models?

13. What is the larger cultural narrative that the adoption community wants to portray in mainstream media?
14. How can greater sensitivity training be implemented among all professionals (e.g. teachers, doctors, counselors) who interact with the adoption community, and particularly those who interact with children, to combat the daily “micro-aggressions” that can subtly undermine a positive sense of self?
15. What is required to galvanize energy and funding behind increased adoption support services?
16. How could academia and its benefactors be engaged to create funding and support for more adoption-focused curricula and courses at the University and post-grad level? What is the first step in creating this more robust curriculum?