The Future of Adoption: Concluding Thoughts about Research, Practice, and Policy

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FOLLOWED BY COMMENTARY BY JENNIFER MUTÉN

This series of papers on the future of adoption has featured a strong focus on implications for research, practice, and policy. Participants in the 2018 Future of Adoption conference brainstormed about these implications at the close of the day, and the authors of each of the papers in this publication series also discussed implications of their work, highlighted at the end of each paper. We have considered all of this input in preparing the concluding statement that follows.

But first, we must review how our model of adoption has changed in recent years. In decades past, adoption was seen as a way to build a family by subtracting a child from one family and adding that child to another. With the growing acceptance of open adoptions (see Future of Adoption papers by Grotevant (2019), Neil (2019), Mallon (2019), and Farr (2019) for further discussion), adoption is now viewed as a "transformational experience" (Mallon, 2019), in which the child is at the center of a new adoptive kinship network, linking his or her families of origin and adoption. Even if the child and birth relatives have no direct contact, they are still psychologically present to one another. This transformation in how we think about adoption has significant consequences for how we consider future needs for research, practice, and policy.

Impact for the future of adoption can be maximized when the reciprocal links between research, practice, and policy are clearly articulated, as illustrated in the model below (adapted from Vanessa's Reflections from the Mind Lab, 2015).

Research informs practice (e.g., prevention or intervention programs) when there is evidence that programs "work" as intended; in other words, when the programs are evidence-based or evidence-informed. Conversely, practice informs research when professionals in the field identify gaps and ask new questions that need to be addressed.

Practice informs policy when effective programs provide a foundation for arguing that laws or policies (e.g., at agency, state, national, or international level) need to be changed or
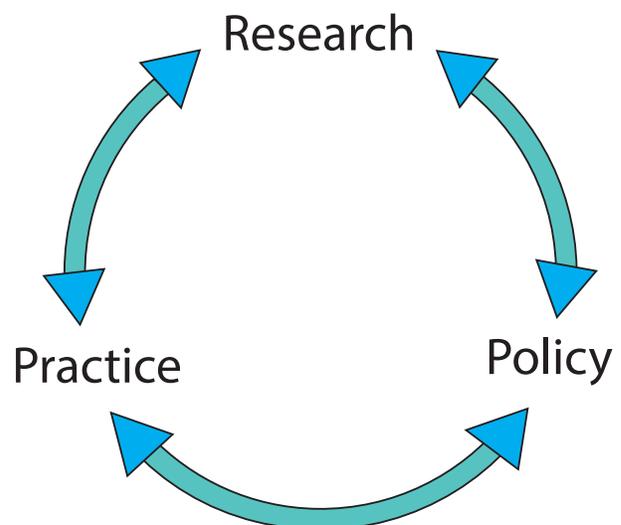
that public funding needs to be provided for a program. Conversely, policies (e.g., funding streams) may facilitate or limit implementation of evidence-based practices.

At the same time, *policy can influence research* by identifying questions that require systematic investigation, *which can, in turn, modify policies.* Adoption professionals often work in research, practice, or policy silos; graduate training tends to focus on one or perhaps two, but rarely all three aspects and their interconnections. Nevertheless, we argue that impact on the field of adoption will be greatest when the interconnections are clearly drawn out and barriers to promoting interconnections such as time, expertise, and disciplinary differences, have been overcome.

Research Informs Practice and Policy

Although the situations that bring children into adoption are incredibly diverse (Palacios et al., 2019), all adopted persons share one experience in common: a complex and paradoxical movement from one family to another that involves loss (of family members, community, and perhaps of culture and language) as well as gain (of and by a new adoptive family). As part of their journey, children may also have experienced extremely adverse situations (maltreatment, institutionalization) over short or extended periods of time. Taken together, these situations can create risks for cognitive, emotional, physical, and relational development.

Recognition of these risks led to the emergence of a genre of research that focused on differences (on average) between adopted and nonadopted persons, and typically portrayed adopted persons as having deficits by comparison. A decade ago, Palacios and Brodzinsky (2010) called for the research to move beyond such simple comparisons of outcomes for adopted and nonadopted children. Instead, they called for better understanding of the processes that affect developmental outcomes. Once the processes have been identified, prevention and intervention strategies can be developed to remediate the effects of adversities that adopted persons may have experienced. In addition, factors that protect against the development of problems can be identified.

Healthy relationships that are sustained and nurtured are at the core of what children need (see Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000, for a concise and timely overview of the irreducible needs of children). *Therefore, a key question for adoption research asks how we can promote the healthy development of children and families through strengthening relationship connections:* connections of the child within the family and community, connections between adoptive and birth family members, connections with important adults such as mentors and teachers, connections with peers, and connections between parents and others who can support them in their parenting roles.

The new conceptualization of adoption discussed above argues that we need to pay increased attention to helping children and families figure out how to create and maintain healthy adoptive kinship networks. Our publication series has highlighted some of the important research on this topic, but many unanswered questions remain. For example, we know some things about open adoptions in domestic infant placements (see Grotevant, in press, for review), but much less about contact in adoptions from the child welfare system (where the child may have experienced maltreatment by birth relatives), contact in kinship or informal adoptions (where family boundaries may be very ambiguous), or contact in international adoptions (where birth and adoptive

families may have significant gaps by geography, culture, and language.)

Child welfare professionals as well as judges have expressed needs for research that will guide their practice in terms of contact between the foster/adoptive family and the child's birth relatives. What kind of contact is in the child's best interest, and is most sustainable by the parents and caregivers in the family system? Since each case is unique, how can policies be developed to provide both guidance and needed flexibility?

Other more specific questions abound. For instance, in terms of supporting adoptive kinship network connections for families adopting internationally, how can technology be used in a positive way? When communication must happen across cultural, geographical, and linguistic boundaries, what are best practices for using social media? What kind of guidance do children need to establish "safe" online contact? In the absence of research evidence, agencies and practitioners are creating guidelines because clients are needing them. Once there is sufficient evidence accumulated, how can it be used to support optimal practice and policy guidelines?

Adoption Research Best Practices

Research is time- and personnel-intensive and relies on the generosity of participants who typically volunteer their perspectives. Therefore, research needs to be designed thoughtfully and deliberately, and ideally, in a programmatic fashion. We suggest the following as aspirational best practices for adoption research, both in terms of research design and interpretation of studies.

- The research should include diverse populations of adopted persons and adopters. Children enter adoption in different ways (through domestic agency adoption, adoption through the public child welfare system, international adoption, etc.), and their pre-adoption histories as well as the preadoption histories of the adopters set the stage for how they develop after placement.

- The research should be longitudinal whenever possible, recognizing that adoption is a powerful intervention whose effects must be examined over time.

- The research should include the voices of both adopted persons and birth / first parents, both of whom have been marginalized in the literature. They are the ones with the personal experience in question; but until recently, their views have not been consistently included. Their perspectives should be incorporated in both the design and interpretation phases of the research.

- The research should employ multiple methods and informants with complementary strengths, such as large-scale surveys, intensive interviews, and biomarker measures.

- The research approach and measures should be culturally appropriate for the diverse populations representing adoption, with careful attention given to formal testing of measurement equivalence across diverse groups.

- The research design should be grounded in an ecological approach, acknowledging the interconnections across individuals, families, communities, and broader society.

- The research should be guided by the best available theories of human development. At the same time, new theories acknowledging the dynamics of today's complex families need to be articulated.

Effective Practice Requires Adoption-Competent Professionals

A consensus is emerging that the parties involved in adoption present distinctive needs that are often unrecognized by professionals who might serve them over time (Sass & Henderson, 2002; Wilson, Riley, & Lee, 2019). The elements of adoption-competent preparation for mental health providers and child welfare workers have been articulated (e.g., Atkinson, Gonet, Freundlich, & Riley, 2013). Also, adoption-competency programs such as the federally-funded National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative at the Center for Adoption Support and Education are being developed and evaluated in order to meet the needs of these two groups of providers. This is an important first step; however, broader education is needed.

First priority is to educate, empower, and support adoptive parents. They know their child best; and if they are informed and supported, they can seek and advocate for the kind of assistance that might be most helpful at that time.

A second, but complementary priority, is to educate professionals about the distinctive needs of adopted children and adoptive families. Although the child's family provides the home base, children also have frequent contact with an array of professionals whose knowledge of adoption varies. Education specially tailored for the following professionals is urgently needed:

- teachers (early childhood through university);
- school personnel (guidance counselors, school psycholo-gists, administrators at all levels, coaches);
- health care professionals (physicians, nurses, front-line phy-sician assistants and nurse-practitioners, genetic counselors);
- attorneys and judges;
- legislators and policymakers; and
- clergy.

The content of training for these groups can be adapted from emerging adoption-competency curricula, but should be tailored to meet specific roles and needs. In addition, public awareness education focusing on assets and strengths rather than deficits is needed for the public at large as well as for those working in the media and entertainment industry.

Effective Policy Requires National Standards and Commitment

National standards based on research evidence are needed to articulate best practices in adoption. Although, in the US, relevant policies are often based at the state, county, or agency level, we believe that policies articulating best practices should not change when one crosses a state boundary. Various professional organizations (e.g., Child Welfare League of America, 2013) have articulated their own policy positions, but such positions vary in terms of their grounding in research evidence and their comprehensiveness. National leadership for coordination is needed, and the gold standard should continue to be the best interests of children and aspirational documents such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Education and preparation of parents and professionals can only be worthwhile when professional services are *accessible*. This implies policy commitments: services must be *culturally and developmentally appropriate,* they must be *available locally,* and they must be *affordable*. Increasingly near-universal availability of the internet provides higher levels of access than we have experienced before. Accessible training is also needed to help broad audiences determine the most effective ways to find and evaluate information.

Determining how such services will be paid for remains a significant dilemma which requires a national policy conversation. Currently, training and services are supported by a patchwork of public (government) funds, philanthropic donations to charitable organizations, and direct pay by individuals. Eligibility for government-funded programs is often confusing and difficult to navigate, and depending on the specific program varies considerably from state to state. Significant gaps in funding make many services unaffordable to families that may need them the most.

More broadly, our society needs to demonstrate its commitment to the future by investing in our children. It has been demonstrated numerous times that investments in children's education and health pay off in the long run through prevention of significant problems that are much more costly to remediate than to prevent (e.g., Charles, Jones, & Lloyd-Williams, 2019; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). Furthermore, as new programs are developed, it is critically important that those with first-hand experience (adoptees) provide leadership in articulating best practices and supportive policies.

Conclusion

The experience of adoption has changed considerably in recent decades and will continue to change, as family forms have always adapted to circumstances throughout human history. Although there are noteworthy examples of how research has contributed to changes in

practice and how both research and practice have contributed to policy, there are excessive lag times between the completion of research, publication, and incorporation into practice and policy. Meanwhile, children's needs do not stand still. We need to re-think how to move forward in a more coordinated fashion, and this will likely require better connections among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Importantly, there is a generation of adoption scholars and practitioners eager to provide leadership for reform in the field. We believe that the coming decade has the potential to bring important changes that will benefit the best interests of children and adults personally connected to adoption, and we hope this publication series on the Future of Adoption will add significantly to the conversation.

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Commentary

BY JENNIFER MUTÉN

Adopted persons need to be at the forefront of research, practice, and policy. This is not a new idea and most of the field has acknowledged it as a necessity. However, in order to include these voices, education must take precedence, for adopted persons cannot appropriately advocate for themselves without adequate knowledge. As previously noted, the education of adoptive parents is typically the first priority, closely followed by that of professionals. However, the education of the adopted person has been neglected. This is understandable during the early years of the life course, wherein children are completely reliant on their parents. Yet, adoption journeys do not end there. The responsibility quickly shifts onto the shoulders of the adopted person to seek advocate for themselves. Yet, how can they fully advocate for themselves without a comprehensive knowledge of the adoption field?

Adolescents and adults continue to explore adoption as they age. A full vocabulary and knowledge of adoption research history could help many articulate their own thoughts. It can be assumed that properly educated and supportive adoptive parents would also educate their adoptive child, but that cannot be guaranteed. There must be a safety net for adolescent and adult adopted persons to learn about adoption. If adoptive parents and professionals are to receive adoption education, then it is only fair to require adolescents to receive education as well. Young children could learn of identity formation, developmental deficiencies, and race. Insight to the adoption world could provide vital context to a confusing time. At a young age, many could discover that some feelings, thoughts, and behaviors they exhibit could be a product of their adoption and not attribute it to a personal shortcoming.

If the adoption community wants to elevate the voices of adoptees, it must start by prioritizing the education of the youth so they can advocate for themselves. Parents know their children best, but adopted persons know themselves better.

Jennifer Mutén graduated from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2018 with a B.A. in Psychology and a minor in Education. She was an active member of the UMass Adopted Students Advisory Panel since 2016. Currently, she works as a Field Interviewer for the National HIV Behavioral Surveillance and hopes to stay closely involved with the adoption community. At nine months old, her Swedish father and American mother adopted her from Bolivia. Despite her high levels of melanin, she self-identifies as a white and brown Swedish-American. However, she claims that because race is a social construct that changes throughout space and time, her identity is always under construction and subject to change. She hopes that fellow adopted persons will work to ensure their voices are heard.