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Theoretical Perspectives on Adoptive Families’ Well-Being: Which Comparison Groups Are Most Appropriate?

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ABSTRACT. In this article, we review alternative approaches to selecting appropriate comparison groups when assessing the well-being of members in adoptive families. We consider four theoretical perspectives, each emphasizing the importance of different features of families in determining relationship quality and well-being. The four theoretical approaches reviewed in relation to adoption research include stigmatization, socialization, biological, and family process models. Each leads to somewhat different hypotheses as to how adoptive family members’
well-being compares to that of families with two biological parents, single parents, and stepparents. We conclude that designs that permit researchers to assess family processes are crucial in allowing researchers to determine whether apparent family structure differences hold up after accounting for variance within family types.

In recent decades, profound demographic changes have reconfigured the structure of American families. The emergence of alternative family forms is due to several factors, including a rise in childbearing among unmarried women and an increasing proportion of adults who remarry after divorce (Bumpass, 1990). Changes in cultural norms and societal expectations typically coincide with such large, demographic shifts in family forms. Consequently, normative constraints and social attitudes opposing divorce and unmarried childbearing have weakened, and vast numbers of children are being raised in “nontraditional” families. Between 1970 and 1996, the proportion of children under 18 years of age who resided with two parents decreased from 85% to 68% (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996). Currently, more than one quarter of American children (almost 20 million children under 18 years of age) live in single parent, predominantly female headed households, and the number of children residing in stepparent families, mostly stepfather households, continually increases (Demo & Acock, 1996a; U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). Stepfamilies are the fastest growing family structure group in the United States (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Glick (1989) reported that almost 20% of all U.S. children under 18 years of age who resided in married couple families were in stepfamilies and predicted that 33% of all children would probably reside in a stepfamily before their 18th birthdays. Although not as rapid as the growth in stepfamilies, there has also been a rise in the number of gay and lesbian couples who are raising children (Patterson, 1992; 1997). Finally, it is important to note that many of these national figures for marital status and living arrangements vary greatly for different racial groups.

Despite such sweeping changes in the structure of American families, strong cultural norms about what constitutes a “normal” family persist. Lamb (1999) notes that “the traditional (family) norm is somewhat illusory, existing primarily in the conceptual models and assumptions of social scientists rather than in actual family structures.”

KEYWORDS. Adoption, socialization, family structure, theory
than in the societies and communities they observe” (p. 1). Nonetheless, two parent, biological families are embossed with a stamp of approval based, in part, on a cultural and social script that equates these families with the promotion of good psychological health, superior educational achievement, and high quality intrafamily relationships. To what degree can this cultural script be empirically validated? To what extent does a non-normative family structure influence family members’ well-being and the quality of family relationships? In this paper we review the published empirical literature exploring associations between different family structures and outcomes that include relationship quality and well-being for both parents and children. We do not intend to provide an exhaustive review of the literature but rather focus on key studies covering several areas. Our goal is to derive hypotheses about the implications for the well-being of family members in one type of non-normative family structure: two parent families with at least one adopted child.

From 1996 to 1998 the nationwide number of adoptions from foster care each year rose 29% (from 28,000 to 36,000); the increase was, in part, a response to the Adoption 2002 initiative implemented by the Department of Health and Human Services to meet the goal of more quickly placing children from the foster care system in adoptive homes (“President Clinton Announces,” 1999). Statistics on children, primarily infants, adopted through private adoption agencies are less prevalent, but figures from the National Survey of Family Growth show that 3.5% of women, between the ages of 15 and 44, have at some point in their lives sought to adopt a child (Bachrach, London, & Maza, 1991). At present, there are more than one million American children living in adoptive families and more than five million adults and children who have been adopted (Grotevant & Kohler, 1999). Psychological research on adoptive families has traditionally used two parent, biological families as a “natural” comparison group. However, we contend that hypotheses about adoptive family members’ well-being should depend upon the researchers’ theoretical position, and the particular theory espoused will, in turn, determine the appropriate family structure comparison group.

OVERVIEW OF ADOPTION RESEARCH

Historically, research on adoptive families is grounded in a deficit model, depicting adoption as a deviant family form and focusing on adoptees’ risks for maladjustment. The resulting literature offers mixed and contradictory evidence regarding the psychological and behavioral adjustment of adopted children. Numerous studies report an association between adoptive status and a heightened vulnerability for a host of negative outcomes, including academic
difficulties, externalizing problem behavior, and psychological maladjustment (Brodzinsky, 1987; Brodzinsky, Radice, Huffman, & Merkler, 1987; Deater-Deckard & Plomin, 1999; Haugaard, 1998; Wierzbicki, 1993). Deater-Deckard and Plomin (1999), for example, compared 78 adopted sibling pairs with 94 biologically related sibling pairs, ages 7-12. Both teachers and parents reported higher levels of aggression and delinquency among adopted children compared to nonadopted children. Further, many researchers highlight the higher rates at which adoptees are referred for psychological and special education services (Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994; Brodzinsky & Steiger, 1991; Dickson, Heffron, & Parker, 1990; Grotevant, 1997). It is, in fact, generally accepted that adopted children are over-represented in mental health facilities (Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994; Brodzinsky et al., 1987; Grotevant, 1997; Haugaard, 1998; Rosenberg, 1992). However, different interpretations of these findings are quite possible. Are adoptive parents, with their previous experiences in the social service system, more keenly vigilant about potential problems and thus more likely to refer their children for mental health services? Are parents, teachers, and mental health professionals more inclined to refer adoptees for services because of their own biases and negative expectations for adoptive family members? Or, instead, is adoption actually related to developmental complications and behavioral impairments? Some evidence indicates that the higher rate of adoptee referrals may be at least partially due to differences in the thresholds at which referrals seem necessary (Peters, Atkins, & McKay, 1999; Warren, 1992). Further, rates of psychological referrals are skewed by placing all adopted children in one homogenous category, including, for example, those children who struggled with medical complications like fetal alcohol syndrome and those who suffered years of abuse and neglect before their adoptive placements (Haugaard, 1998).

Relying on a sample of 260 adopted and non-adopted children, ranging in age from 6 to 11 years, Brodzinsky and colleagues (1984) conducted a study on psychological and academic outcomes that demonstrated an advance over the sample selection and methodological problems present in earlier adoption studies. Many of the early studies in this field relied on clinically based populations and typically lacked control groups or employed poorly matched controls, small sample sizes, and limited numbers of outcome measures with questionable reliability and validity (Brodzinsky, 1987). Additionally, many studies still do not control for the age at which adopted children were placed in their adoptive homes and the circumstances preceding the adoption (Haugaard, 1998). Brodzinsky and colleagues matched a non-clinical sample of adopted and non-adopted children on salient demographic and family variables and obtained adjustment ratings from both mother and teacher reports. These investigators found that mothers and teachers rated adopted children higher on
psychological and school-related problem behaviors as well as clinically significant symptomatology. Although these findings suggest a greater vulnerability to emotional and behavioral problems among adopted children, the authors urge caution against over-generalizing these results given that, on the whole, the majority of adopted children in the sample appeared well-adjusted (Brodzinsky et al., 1987; Brodzinsky, Schechter, Braff, & Singer, 1984).

Conversely, many studies report no significant differences between the adjustment and well-being of adopted and non-adopted children and adolescents on a number of different indices (Borders, Black, & Pasley, 1998; Brodzinsky, 1987; Haugaard, 1998; Norvell & Guy, 1977; Singer, Brodzinsky, Ramsay, Steir, & Waters, 1985). Most recently, one of the largest adoption studies, conducted by the Search Institute, surveyed a random sample of 1,262 parents, 881 adopted adolescents, and 78 non-adopted siblings (Benson et al., 1994). Seventy-four percent of the adopted adolescents in this study reported positive family dynamics, specifically parent-child relationship quality. Moreover, adoptees easily matched a national sample of adolescents in their assessments of family characteristics such as levels of warmth, communication, family harmony, and support. Further, Benson, Sharma, and Roehlkepartain (1994) found that 75% of the adopted adolescents in this study rated their own mental health as “very good” or “excellent” and 72% fell within normal ranges on the Achenbach Youth Self-Report scales of clinical symptoms. In conclusion, the authors note that “this study joins a growing literature that documents that adoption is not, in and of itself, a liability. Based on multiple indices of psychological health, we estimate that at least three-quarters of adopted adolescents are within the zone of positive psychological health” (Benson et al., 1994, p. 7).

Although less attention has been devoted to exploring the functioning of adoptive parents, a number of challenging emotional hurdles are typically expected for these parents. Such challenges may include coming to terms with the psychological injury and pain of infertility, handling an often intrusive adoption screening process, coping with societal discrimination and stigmatization, and explaining adoption to one’s children (Benson et al., 1994; Brodzinsky, 1984; Brodzinsky, 1987; Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988; Rosenberg, 1992). Despite these hurdles, research demonstrates that adoptive parents are not more susceptible than other parents to negative adjustments and adverse family life situations (Borders et al., 1998; Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988; Rosenberg, 1992). In sum, “although adoptive parents would appear to experience increased stress in the transition to parenthood compared with non-adoptive parents, there is no evidence to suggest that this stress impacts adversely on family interaction and parents’ and children’s adjustment” (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988, p. 276).
A key question raised by previous research on adoptive families is which families serve as appropriate comparisons in examining whether adoptive families look better, worse, or about the same as others. Most research compares adoptive families to two parent biological families without considering other common family constellations. Such a strategy falls back on the rather questionable assumption that two-parent, biological families should be society’s ideal standard. Moreover, our review of four common theories about the consequences of different family structures—stigmatization, socialization, biological, and family process—reveals that each proposes a different comparison group for adopted families and suggests different hypotheses about the well-being and family functioning of adopted family members. A summary of the four theories, their basic assumptions, and implications for hypotheses about adoptive families are presented in Table 1.

**TABLE 1. Summary of Theoretical Perspectives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Perspective</th>
<th>Basic Assumptions</th>
<th>Hypotheses for Adoptive Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stigmatization as the key factor</td>
<td>Adoptive families face more stigmatization and discrimination than do other types of families.*</td>
<td>Members of adoptive families will have lower well-being and poorer quality relationships than will members of other family forms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization by two-parents as optimal</td>
<td>Two-parent households are vital for the socialization of children.</td>
<td>Two-parent adoptive families will not differ from other two-parent (all will have high well-being and better quality relationships than will members of single-parent families).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primacy of biological ties</td>
<td>Ties with two biological parents are necessary for children’s optimal adjustment.</td>
<td>Adoptive families will look worse than will single-parent and step-parent families, who in turn will look worse than two parent biological families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of family processes</td>
<td>Relational dynamics, rather than family structures per se, are importantly related to well-being and relationship quality.</td>
<td>Adoptive families will resemble other types of families to the extent that they share key family processes (e.g., conflict, warmth).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Other alternatives to this basic assumption are provided on page 92.
Adoption Research: Stigmatization as the Key Factor

One theoretical perspective gives saliency to the experience of social stigmatization. The discrimination and stigmatization faced by adoptees and their adoptive parents are pervasive in our society (Brodzinsky, 1987; Kressierer & Bryant, 1996; Miall, 1987). The high cultural value of biological family ties over adoptive relationships is evident in many of our social clichés, such as “blood is thicker than water.” Kressierer and Bryant (1996) argue that “the stigma of the adoptive relationship is largely based on the social norm that couples would, and should, rather parent their biological offspring than someone else’s child” (p. 404). March (1995) provides many illuminating examples of adult adoptees recounting the persistent discriminatory attitudes they frequently encounter. The message that they are “different” is unavoidable given the common queries others make about the situation surrounding their birth and eventual adoption. These issues can be even more salient and problematic for interracial and international adoptees. Adoptees whose physical appearances are markedly different from their parents may face many more unwelcome inquiries about their family relations. Often, adoptees must cope with people who question the strength of adoptive parent-child relationships and subtly reveal their own views that families based on biological kinship are superior to adoptive family forms. One adoptee explained, “I can see it in their reactions when they find out that I’m adopted. To them, I am different. To my family, I am family. But, I’m still not blood. It shouldn’t be important but it is. Not just to me but to everybody” (March, 1995, p. 656).

In addition to the social stigma surrounding adoptive ties, adoptees are further burdened by discriminatory legal, social, and institutional practices. Although adoptive arrangements date back to antiquity, adoptees are still not assured non-discriminatory legal rights. For example, adoptees report receiving differential treatment from physicians and insurance companies if they possess limited knowledge about their biological relatives’ medical history (Kressierer & Bryant, 1996). Many adoptive parents similarly struggle with the legitimacy and authenticity of their parental roles. Adoptive parents face societal messages that denigrate adoption as a “second best” alternative and equate “real” parents with biologically related parents (Miall, 1987). Further, adoptive parents often miss out on the social sanctions accompanying childbirth, such as the sharing of pregnancy stories, baby showers, and “birth” announcements (Rosenberg, 1992). For many couples who adopt children, the stigma of adoption is compounded by previous experiences with the painful isolation and emotional injuries of infertility (Miall, 1987; Rosenberg, 1992). Although infertile couples who choose to adopt report being very satisfied with their decision, many couples feel compelled by family and societal pres-
sures to explore all medical treatments that may produce a biological child before turning to adoption (Abbey, in press).

As with all family types and structures, adoptive families represent a heterogeneous group. A caveat about generalizing on the experiences of all such adoptive families is thus warranted. In different contexts, cultural histories and values will alter the saliency and experience of adoptive family arrangements. For example, African American and Latino cultures may hold more open attitudes towards non-biological parental roles, stemming from a greater acceptance of extended family involvement, fictive kin, and madres de crianza (the mother who raises the child) (Smith, Surrey, & Watkins, 1998). Moreover, it is likely that the challenges associated with trans-national and trans-racial adoptive families are different from each other and from families adopting within race and nation. Unfortunately, the heterogeneity of adoptive families is rarely explored in research designs. More generally, comparisons to an ideal two parent, biological family have steered investigators exploring outcomes among adoptive family members towards deviance-based models of psychopathology, obscuring the social context and stigmatization confronting adoptive families (Wegar, 1995). Adoptive, single parent, and stepparent families are all likely to encounter degrees of social stigmatization since all of these family forms are somewhat “nontraditional.” The chronic prevalence of stigmatization may be most salient for families with adopted children. This view leads to the hypothesis that as the most stigmatized group, members of adoptive families will show lower well-being and have poorer quality relationships than will children and parents in other family forms. Alternatively, one might expect adoptive, single parent, and stepparent families to encounter similar degrees of stigmatization in society and therefore appear similarly well adjusted. A contextual framework creates the possibility for more theoretically grounded and complex predictions about family functioning. Assessments of the degree of discrimination experienced across family forms may, for example, predict consequent levels of well-being.

**Single Parent Research: Socialization by Two Parents as Optimal**

Socialization theories privilege two parent households as vital and necessary for the optimal socialization of children. Due to the relatively small number of single parent families headed by fathers, this section will mostly focus on single mother households. In the majority of single mother households, nonresidential fathers do not maintain a significant degree of contact with their children following a divorce (Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1999). Hence, according to socialization theories, members of single parent families, whether due to divorce or never marrying, are the most severely disadvantaged, at-risk
family structure group. Supporting this theory, Lindner, Hagan, and Brown (1992) found that children from single mother homes demonstrated difficulties with academic, social, and general adjustment, even five years after a divorce. Similarly, Spruijt and de Goede (1997) utilized data from over 2500 youth, ages 15-24, and found that young people from single parent families had the lowest indicators of mental health and relational well-being. From a socialization perspective, adoptive families with two parents would maintain an advantaged position in comparison to single parent homes. In general, this theory holds that two adults provide unsurpassed strengths for rearing children, whereas single parent families, in contrast, have deficient resources for socializing children.

Single parenting is also thought to have detrimental effects on the daily functioning and mental health of the parent. To date, most studies have focused on divorced, single mothers and relatively few studies, in contrast, have examined the prospects of continuously single or never married mothers. Demo and Acock (1996b) utilized data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to compare the psychological well-being of mothers across four family structure groups, including biological mothers in never married single parent households, in first marriages, in single parent households due to divorce, and in remarried stepfamilies. While controlling for several socioeconomic and demographic factors, single mothers reported lower psychological well-being compared to married mothers, and continuously single mothers had significantly lower self-esteem scores compared to the other three groups. Among a nationally representative sample of single parents, Amato (2000) reported that highly educated single parents experience fewer depressive symptoms and better physical health. Researchers have proposed several reasons to explain why members of single parent families have lower well-being scores across different areas of assessment. None of these rationales is generally applicable to adoptive families.

First, one explanation assumes that single parents have, on the whole, fewer opportunities for parent-child interaction and offer children less parental supervision, support, and monitoring. Indeed, Dornbusch and colleagues (1985) reported that adolescents from single parent families were more likely to engage in deviant activities than adolescents living with two biological parents or those living in single parent families with an additional adult present in the home. Their study utilized a nationally representative sample and controlled for many possible demographic confounds. The authors interpreted their findings to be a reflection of the diminished resources for parental monitoring and supervision available to parents negotiating parental responsibilities alone. Another related explanation is rooted in psychoanalytic theory and attributes the difficulties experienced by children in single parent households to the ab-
sence of a male father figure (Kalter, 1990). Children, especially male adolescents, raised in single mother families may lack the presence of a psychologically available and consistent male role model to assist in the development of their own masculine identities.

Second, many researchers attribute negative outcomes experienced by children in single parent families to the large disparity in economic resources between single parent and two parent households. The drastic economic hardship and decline in living standards that typically accompany divorce are well documented, and single parents generally have fewer economic resources than married couples (Amato, 2000; Hernandez, 1997; Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1999; McLanahan & Booth, 1989). Almost half of all children living in single mother families are living below the poverty threshold (Demo & Acock, 1996a). Moreover, parents who are financially burdened tend to suffer from symptoms of psychological distress such as depression and irritability. Additionally and not surprisingly, economically deprived parents are more likely to use harsh, non-supportive, and inconsistent disciplinary strategies as compared to their more economically advantaged counterparts (McLoyd, 1990). Higher educational attainment and consequently greater financial resources among single mothers has been associated with better socioemotional functioning and academic performance for children (Amato, 2000).

Third, long-term single parenting usually coincides with a host of chronic stressors that include not solely financial strain, but also diminished access to instrumental and emotional supports. Single mothers are thus more susceptible to intense and burdensome role strain in comparison to their married counterparts (Thompson & Ensminger, 1989). Single mothers cannot rely on husbands to help with competing demands or to provide emotional support for difficult life events and daily hassles. As previously noted, among biological mothers in different family structures, Demo and Acock (1996b) demonstrated that single mothers tend to be more depressed than married mothers and to report feelings of lower self-esteem. These differences were not due to discrepancies in socioeconomic, racial, age, or employment factors. The multifaceted burdens of single parenting are thus likely to influence parenting behavior and children’s functioning in a number of areas.

Our goal in this paper is not to decipher the “best” theoretical approach. Rather, we wish to elucidate how different theoretical approaches for studying family structures result in different hypotheses about adoptive families. Nonetheless, in presenting studies that support a particular theory, we would be remiss not to make note of evidence that contradicts that theoretical paradigm as well. There is evidence refuting the general tenets of socialization theories and the privileging of two parent families. One explanation for the poorer adjustment of children in single parent homes rests on the financial disadvantage of
single parent households. However, children from divorced families have shown impaired functioning, relative to those in nondivorced families, even when income is controlled (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Demo & Acock, 1996a; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998), supporting the argument that finances do not explain all the problems experienced by single parent families. Moreover, although the socialization hypothesis would predict that children’s adjustment will improve with the addition of a stepparent, children in stepfamilies are not generally found to have higher adjustment scores than children from single parent families (Hetherington et al., 1998).

Another important caveat worth noting is that many researchers critique the deficit model upon which much of the research on single parent families is based (Rice, 1994). They argue that this research has narrowly focused on deficits rather than attempting to identify sources of strength and resiliency in single parent homes. Further, many studies present overly simplistic comparisons of single mothers and married mothers, ignoring important distinctions within each group (Amato, 2000; Demo & Acock, 1996b). For instance, the category “single mother” can include never married women, widowed women, divorced women who were in 20 year marriages, and divorced women whose marriages ended after only one year. More recently, growing numbers of researchers criticize prior claims that unequivocally predicted dire consequences for all family members touched by divorce. These researchers highlight the tendency to neglect the role that individual characteristics, such as temperament, developmental status, and gender, may play in determining the particular effects of divorce. In a longitudinal study of over 100 divorcing families with school age children, Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley, and Barenbaum (1997) question the popular image of divorce as catastrophic. Overall, the children in these families were not beset by psychological and behavioral impairments; moreover, they continued to show improved adjustment over time. Summarizing the conclusions derived by a group of experts convened by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Lamb and colleagues (1999) wrote, “Although divorce is a painful experience that increases children’s psychosocial vulnerability, the long-term effects of divorce should not be exaggerated. Despite the significant and troubling risks of maladjustment among children whose parents divorce, the majority of children in these circumstances appear, in the long run, to be developing within the normal range—without identifiable psychosocial scars or other adverse consequences” (pp. 127-129).

Advocates of socialization theories would not predict differences between adoptive families and other two parent family forms. The key determining aspect of this theoretical perspective is whether children are privy to the advantages of having two parents. Although adoption has recently become a viable
option for single adults, most adoption agency staff and birth parents maintain a preference for married couples (Grotevant & Kohler, 1999). Due to the high costs of adoption and rigorous screening policies, people who apply for adoptions tend to be couples whose earnings and assets fall into rather high income brackets (Bachrach, London, & Maza, 1991). It is therefore unlikely that two parent, adoptive couples will be systematically disadvantaged, in terms of resources, finances, or social support, relative to other two parent families. Hence, according to this perspective, the expectations for adoptive families are similar to the benefits attributed to all other two parent family forms.

**Stepparent Research: The Primacy of Biological Ties**

Similar to much of the research on single parent families, many studies explore the well-being and adjustment of family members in remarried and blended families by utilizing a deficit comparison approach. Similar to single parent families, stepfamilies are also considered to be deviant from the “norm” and therefore deficient (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Borrine, Handal, Brown, & Searight, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1998; Lamb, 1999; Rice, 1994). Based on a biological family composition hypothesis, the most well adjusted and high functioning children are expected to be those who are raised in homes with two biological parents. Thus, adoptive families would share a similarity with single-parent and stepparent families in that both parents are not biologically related to the children, and for advocates of a biological primacy perspective, all of these family types would show impaired adjustment in comparison to two parent, biological families. However, adopted families may fare worse than other families because in single parent and stepparent families there is at least one biologically related parent. Regardless of the differential degrees of disadvantage predicted, a biological perspective underscores the importance of having two biological parents and adoptive families are thus inherently inferior.

A large number of studies emerged from this theoretical perspective, documenting the deleterious impact of divorce on children’s well-being in remarried families. Children in stepfamilies evince a host of negative problem behaviors in comparison to children in two parent, biological families. Many studies indicate that in comparison to children from “intact” (i.e., biologically intact) families, children from remarried families are more susceptible to externalizing and internalizing problems, low self-esteem, clinical symptomatology, poor academic performance, relational difficulties, delinquent behavior, and substance abuse (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Garnefski & Diekstra, 1997; Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington et al., 1998; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Lindner et al., 1992; Mason, 1998; Solomon, 1995). In a longitudinal study of nondivorced, divorced, and remarried families, Lindner, Hagan, and Brown
(1992) found that children in the nondivorced group were viewed as more academically and emotionally competent compared to children in remarried households. The conclusion drawn by those favoring a biological perspective is that children function most adaptively when they are raised by two biological parents and a direct extrapolation to adoptive families predicts starkly diminished adjustment for children raised by adoptive parents where there is not even one biological parent in the household. Interpretations of these findings, however, vary widely and many do not attribute these results to biologically based explanations.

Some researchers, for instance, explain the above findings by emphasizing the difficulty of incorporating new parents and siblings into one’s home and family. Large family transitions, such as divorce and remarriage, initiate a period of disequilibrium in family systems; some have estimated that it may take as long as five to seven years for restabilization to occur in stepfamilies (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Many adults in stepparent positions cautiously navigate ambiguous insider/outsider roles within new family forms (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Hetherington, 1989; Solomon, 1995). Moreover, parent-child relationships, particularly in the early stages of stepfamily formation, are characterized by greater distance and conflict in comparison to relationships in nuclear families (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington et al., 1998). In comparison to younger children, adolescents, especially girls, have more difficult and strained relationships with their stepfathers and many adolescents simply disengage from their families, spending less time at home in family activities (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Yet other researchers explain negative outcomes for children as a result of the increase in parental distress associated with large changes in family composition; parental distress may, in turn, adversely impact children’s adjustment (Hetherington et al., 1998). Psychological distress is viewed as an understandable response to the unique stresses and challenges brought about by significant family life changes. Parental distress may then be manifested to children as depression, irritability, or anxious behavior (Hetherington et al., 1998). Parents who adopt children are also likely to undergo periods of relational adjustment and psychological distress—perhaps due to the emotional difficulty of infertility or the scrutinizing aspects of the adoption process. At certain times, negative functioning among members of adoptive families may therefore resemble other families without two biological parents due to experiences of psychological distress, rather than any lack of biological connections.

Further, many studies of stepfamilies are limited by their cross-sectional nature. By examining families at only one point in time these studies may miss crucial information about the long-term adjustment of individuals in such families. In fact, longitudinal studies illuminate the positive functioning that oc-
ocurs among stepchildren with the passage of time (Amato & Keith, 1991a; 1991b; Mason, 1998). In two large meta-analyses, Amato and Keith (1991a; 1991b) report that recent, methodologically sophisticated studies reveal only weak associations between prior family divorces and the long-term well-being of children and adults. They caution against over-interpreting the consistently negative outcomes found for stepchildren by underscoring the large degree of overlap generally existing between the scores of children in stepfamilies versus “intact” families (Amato, 1994). Focusing on central tendency differences provides a rather negative picture of child outcomes following divorce, but attending to the dispersion of outcome scores typically reveals that negative developmental outcomes are not a foregone conclusion. “The overlap in outcomes reflects, to a large extent, the variability in children’s circumstances within family types. Some children grow up in dysfunctional, intact families in which they encounter abuse, neglect, poverty, parental mental illness, and parental substance abuse. Other children grow up in well-functioning stepfamilies and have caring stepparents who provide affection, effective control, and economic support” (Amato, 1994, p. 84).

Critiques voiced against a biological primacy perspective will also inform our thinking about adoptive families. Individual and family characteristics are also likely to play a role in the adjustment of adoptive family members. Moreover, relationships in adoptive families will undoubtedly change over time and a cross-sectional snap shot of adoptive family functioning may be similarly misleading. Although advocates of biological primacy theories will view the absence of biological ties as the greatest disadvantage for adoptive families, adoptive family members may appear different from biological, two parent families for reasons that are completely unrelated to the absence of biological similarity. Finally, in privileging the biological, two parent family form as normative, the biological primacy perspective typically overlooks family process variables—factors that may be important determinants of children’s well-being in all families.

Quality of Family Relations Research: The Influence of Family Processes

Investigations of family functioning have rarely included comparisons of adjustment among family members across different types of family structure (Borrine et al., 1991). As illustrated thus far, most studies focus on the effects of adoptive status (Haugaard, 1998), single parenthood (McLanahan & Booth, 1989), or parental divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991b) on child development, as compared to the “normative” development of children in two-parent, biological families. This standard approach completely circumvents more complicated theoretical questions regarding within family relationships across
different family types. Only by grappling with these theoretical questions can researchers assess whether family structure merits attention at all, as an important predictor of child and parent functioning. Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, and O’Connor (1998) illustrate this point with their finding that the adjustment of older children did not differ by family type “when the psychosocial status of the mother, the quality of the mother-child relationship, and a variety of social risk indicators were simultaneously taken into account” (p. 1093). The emphasis in a family relations approach is placed on the quality of family process variables and relational dynamics within families—rather than more globalized family structure differences. This theoretical perspective presumes that consistent and significant differences across family structure types will simply not emerge and adoptive families will not, as a whole, differ significantly from other family types.

Recently, more investigators are relying upon a conceptual framework that attends to the importance of family processes when assessing family members’ well-being and the quality of family life within and across different family structure types. Process variables include such things as emotional expression, family conflict, problem solving, and controlling behavior. For example, among adopted adolescents, Benson and colleagues (1994) reported that the most robust predictor of adolescent mental health was adolescents’ ratings of family warmth. Moreover, a number of studies indicate that the degree of family conflict is an important predictor of children’s well-being and adjustment in any family situation (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Barber & Lyons, 1994; Borrine et al., 1991; Demo & Acock, 1996a; Gohm, Oishi, Darlington, & Diener, 1998; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Children who are in high conflict families, irrespective of family structure and divorce status, experience more problems in psychological adjustment (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Demo & Acock, 1996a; Hetherington et al., 1998; Stewart et al., 1997). Based on longitudinal prospective studies of divorce, researchers conclude that divorce is, in fact, beneficial for children who are consequently removed from families with highly contentious marital relationships (Hetherington et al., 1998).

Using a nationally representative sample from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), Demo and Acock (1996a) conducted a study of adolescent well-being that extended across four family groups: (a) two parent, first married families, (b) divorced, single parent families, (c) stepfather families, and (d) continuously single parent (never married) families. On the whole, their results demonstrated that differences in adolescent well-being across these four family structures were less pronounced than the differences within family types, as reflected in family process variables. Across all family types, the most consistent predictor of adolescent well-being was the degree of family conflict, particularly mother-adolescent disagreements. Likewise, Vandewater
and Lansford (1998) also analyzed a large sample of NSFH families and found that parental conflict affected children’s well-being irrespective of family structure type. Similarly, Borrine and colleagues (1991) studied the effects of adolescents’ perceived level of family conflict on the adjustment of adolescents in “intact,” divorced, and blended family configurations. Their results indicated that parental marital status was not related to adolescent adjustment; rather, it was perceived family conflict that significantly predicted adolescent adjustment. These findings further support the contention and empirical results of other researchers that family structure does not, by definition, adversely impact family members’ well-being (Demo & Acock, 1996a; Ganong & Coleman, 1993; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998).

Divorce and remarriage do not necessarily disadvantage and hinder the functioning of children and adolescents. Based on the family process perspective, adoptive families would not be expected automatically to differ in systematic ways from other types of families, and the key to understanding differences in relationship quality and well-being outcomes among all family types rests upon greater and more detailed investigations of family process factors. This theoretical approach allows for the vast heterogeneity found among adoptive families. It may be, for instance, that those adoptive families with high parent-child conflict will resemble single parent, two biological parent, and remarried families with similarly high levels of conflict. In contrast, another hypothesis may propose certain family level processes that are remarkably similar across many adoptive families, and such processes may or may not influence family members’ well-being. For example, many families in the early stages of welcoming an adopted infant may experience high levels of family cohesion—a characteristic of family relationships that may be specific to many adoptive families at a certain point in time. In sum, a family relations perspective facilitates the development of many different testable hypotheses about adoptive families and various comparison family groups.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper reviews four conceptual approaches that each yield different expectations for the well-being and relationship quality of adoptive family members. We directly address the often neglected question regarding which families should serve as appropriate comparisons for research on adoptive families. The stigmatization perspective posits that adoptive family members will have relatively poor well-being and relationship quality due to the severity of discrimination they encounter. Socialization theories propose that two par-
ent families are most optimal for family functioning and the socialization of children; hence adoptive families would not be expected to differ systematically from other types of two parent family structures. Biological theories depend on the primacy of biological ties between parents and children. Since adoptive parents have no such connection with their children, in contrast to the other family forms in which at least one parent has a biological tie with each child, adoptive families are viewed as the most disadvantaged family form. Evidence that contradicts the hypotheses emanating from each of these theories has been noted.

The fourth perspective highlights the potency of family process variables in predicting individual well-being and family functioning. Among several family types, including adoptive, single parent, two parent biological, and stepfamilies, family conflict and warmth have emerged as important predictors of family members’ mental health. Thus, we conclude that research designs permitting researchers to attend to family process variables are essential in accurately determining how adopted families may resemble or differ from other family types and more importantly, whether family structure per se is important at all. Indeed, it is our contention that variance within family types may emerge as the most robust predictor of family functioning and family members’ well-being.

Regardless of researchers’ specific predictions, however, this review highlights the importance of revoking the usual tradition of routinely comparing adoptive families to two parent, biological families. Future research with adoptive families must take care to identify the theoretical perspective underlying the authors’ hypotheses and to justify which family comparison groups will be used on the basis of the theoretical perspective specified. Moreover, research that incorporates an analysis of several family structure forms (adoptive, single parent, two parent biological, and stepparent families) over time is ideal. Although costly, the value of longitudinal studies that do not simplify family functioning to a single, perhaps turbulent, moment in time cannot be underestimated. Additionally, there are a number of specific characteristics among adoptive families that should be considered when assessing family members’ well-being. These include such characteristics as age of adoption, health of child at time of adoption, extended family support for adoption, inter-racial adoptions, open versus closed adoption status, and racial differences in physical appearance between adoptees and their parents. Thoughtful and carefully designed future studies will answer many important questions about the well-being of adoptive family members.


