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Breaking the Silence: Advancing Knowledge About Adoption for Counseling Psychologists

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- **Major Contribution**

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Unfortunately, while society has begun to talk about adoption, particularly about postadoption issues such as search and reunion, the behavioral sciences have remained largely silent. This silence includes both academic researchers and practitioners in the applied areas of mental health.

—D. B. Henderson (2002, p. 132)

Research indicates that 6 in 10 Americans have had experience with adoption (i.e., either they or a family member or close friend was adopted, placed a child for adoption, or adopted a child) and that one third of all adults have considered adopting a child (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997). It is estimated that between 2% and 4% of American families have adopted, and there could be as many as 5 million adoptees in this country (Mosher & Bachrach, 1996; Stolley, 1993). Recent changes in adoption policies and practices also have contributed to the prevalence of adoption. International adoption, for instance, has risen dramatically from approximately 8,000 adoptions in 1989 to more than 19,000 adoptions in 2001 (U. S. Department of State, 2001). Given the prevalence of adoption triad members (i.e., adoptees, birthparents, and adoptive parents) in the United States, the silence of the mental health community about adoption issues is surprising.

Adoption experts argue that it is important for practitioners to understand the complexities of adoption practice as well as its psychological impact to

better serve adoption triad members (Barth & Miller, 2000; Okun, 1996; Pavao, 1998). Unfortunately, adoption issues are rarely addressed in doctoral training programs in psychology (Post, 2000), despite the fact that 90% of a sample of doctoral-level practicing psychologists stated that they needed additional education about adoption (Sass & Henderson, 2000). Moreover, therapists sometimes are unaware of the adoptive status of their clients as was noted in a study of adopted children in residential treatment centers (Miller, Fan, Grotevant, Christensen, Coyl, & van Dulmen, 2000). Perhaps more disturbing is that therapists often discount the role of adoption when providing therapy to adoptive family members (McDaniel & Jennings, 1997). The growing literature on adjustment to adoption suggests that all members of the adoption triad face challenges and opportunities that complicate psychological adjustment, developmental tasks, and family interactions (Smith & Howard, 1999).

Until recently, the limited psychological research on adoption focused narrowly on negative outcomes in adopted children (Wegar, 2000) with less attention being given to the breadth of experiences of adoption triad members (Brodzinsky, Smith, & Brodzinsky, 1998). Moreover, psychologists have been relatively inactive in pursuing programmatic work on adoption despite their expertise in clinical interventions and research methodology that could be used to advance knowledge regarding developmental and adjustment processes associated with adoption (Brodzinsky et al., 1998). Counseling psychologists, in particular, have not as yet made extensive contributions to the adoption field even though they have much to offer. Counseling psychology's emphasis on developmental tasks and models, healthy coping skills, prevention approaches, adjustment to life transitions, and multiculturalism, among other things (Gelso & Fretz, 2001), are particularly relevant to understanding and therapeutically responding to the challenges faced by the adoption triad.

The silence of the mental health community on and psychology's relative lack of research attention to adoption issues compromise empirically based knowledge on adoption. Furthermore, there is evidence that while most Americans have a favorable attitude toward adoption as an institution, they may lack accurate information and harbor biases against and skepticism about aspects of adoption practice (Freundlich, 1998). For example, half of those surveyed in a large study of adoption attitudes believed that adoption is inferior to having a biological child, and a quarter felt that it is harder to love a child who is not biologically related (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997). Popular media reinforce negative messages about adoption (Waggenpack, 1998), and many negative myths and stereotypes abound regarding adoptive families (e.g., they are second best, parents aren't real, children have profound emotional and behavioral problems; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997; Leon, 2002; Wegar, 2000) and birthparents (e.g., they are uncaring, promiscuous, living in poverty; Leon, 2002; Winkler,

Brown, van Keppel, & Blanchard, 1988). Moreover, researchers have noted that members of the adoption triad often experience social stigma associated with adoption and that the stigmatized context of adoption is a significant and detrimental factor in adjustment to adoption (Leon, 2002; Wegar, 2000).

Given the prevalence of people affected by adoption, the lack of knowledge regarding adoption among researchers and practitioners, the inattention to adoption research by psychology, and the negative myths about and stigma faced by adoptive triad members, the Major Contribution will have the following as its purposes: (a) to increase awareness of the psychological and sociocultural issues involved in adoption and provide useful frameworks for clinical and research efforts in this domain; (b) to promote an understanding of empirical research (i.e., findings, strengths, and limitations) regarding two nontraditional populations that are rarely attended to in psychology (adoptive families and transracial adoptees); and (c) to identify future theoretical, research, and practice directions for the study of adoption to which counseling psychologists can make valuable contributions.

The Major Contribution consists of an overview article describing the practice of adoption and two detailed reviews of recent empirical literature related to adoptive families and transracial adoptees. The overview article provides an historical perspective on adoption including adoption definitions, statistics and trends, relevant legal developments, current research regarding the adoption process and outcome for adoptees and birthparents, and theoretical models of adoption (see Zamostny, O'Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003 [this issue]). The second article consists of an integrated review and commentary on empirical research regarding adoptive families. O'Brien and Zamostny (2003 [this issue]) highlight research findings, critique the literature, and provide recommendations for future research and practice with adoptive families. The third article includes an integrated review and analysis of transracial adoption research. Lee (2003 [this issue]) describes the history and research regarding domestic and international transracial adoption in the United States, and he proposes a model of cultural socialization to assist in understanding the psychological and cultural factors affecting transracial adoptive families. It is our hope that these articles will contribute to efforts to end the silence of mental health practitioners and researchers on adoption issues.

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