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Adoption

Private Decisions, Public Influences

In the contemporary United States, 2.4 percent of families have been formed through adoption, and 2.5 percent of children under 18 years old are adopted (University of Oregon Adoption History Project website, <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/>). Why don't more families participate in this process? What is behind the decision of some parents to undertake the process of adoption? How have federal and state laws and policies affected adoption practices? One way to answer these questions is to look at the patterns of adoption today and in the recent past; those patterns make it clear that adoption is not a random process. The parents who adopt children often share important characteristics with each other, as do the parents who relinquish their children for adoption. Examining these patterns alongside of what we know about the children who are adopted illuminates contemporary societal norms and attitudes about families, parents, and children and clarifies the ways in which race, socioeconomic class, gender, and sexuality are interwoven with these social norms and state policies. In particular these attitudes and assumptions influence which mothers relinquish their children for adoption, which children are removed by the state because their parents are deemed unfit parents, which prospective parents decide to adopt and which of these are approved for adoption, and which children are, and are not, adopted. Adoption patterns reflect the larger society's norms and values as well as the laws and regulations enacted by the state, and all of these processes are influenced by the crosscutting influences of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and sexuality.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, social norms and public perceptions are not the only forces influencing the practices and processes of adoption in the United States. The state has become a particularly important player in contemporary adoption and more generally in families, children, and parenting. While all families are both private—involving intimate and seemingly invisible processes and events—and public—shaped by and connected to other social institutions such as the economy and the law—this dual position is often more visible in families formed through adoption. Adoptive families are deliberately, and often publicly and visibly, created; because a child’s physical characteristics (such as skin or hair color) may differ from those of the parents, outsiders are often aware or assume that a child was adopted. Perhaps more important, adoptions nearly always pass through public institutions, particularly the courts, and formal adoption must pass through government channels, sometimes at multiple levels. Tracing the ways these public institutions handle adoptions, a visible family-making process, illuminates and underscores the role of the state in supporting, creating, and dismantling all families, whether or not they have taken part in adoption. Laws and rules often reflect the norms and values of those living in the society; tracing adoption patterns also highlights how Americans feel about the attributes of families that are desirable or even necessary. At the same time, laws and social norms are not always in complete agreement. Laws sometimes break new ground and thus precede normative change; at other times, laws may reinforce or exist in sharp disagreement with wider societal norms.

In this chapter we take both societal norms and state laws into account as we try to understand the ways that adoption is reflective of wider social values in the United States. We first focus on the role of socioeconomic class in adoption, using what we know about the characteristics of those who adopt children, relinquish children for adoption, or are adopted as children. We then look at sexuality and how norms around the sexual orientation of adopting parents have changed. We then use these patterns to examine attitudes toward “best,” “acceptable,” and “unacceptable” families. Finally, we turn our attention to the state as an entity with increasingly extensive control over adoption and over family more generally. We draw on two other societies, China and Norway, as comparisons to the United States; examining the state’s role in adoption in other societies once again underscores that adoption—who adopts, who is adopted, and the process of adoption—is constructed, perceived, and monitored differently in different social settings and reflects differences in social organization that extend well beyond adoption itself.

Who Adopts? Who Is Adopted?

General statistics give us important information about adoption in the United States, but they do not immediately tell us about who adopts and who does not. In the following section we will discuss in more detail the characteristics of those women and families who adopt children or who have considered adoption. These patterns suggest that socioeconomic class is a significant influence on who receives children and who relinquishes children for adoption.

Socioeconomic Class: The Power of Money

Adoption is expensive. It involves a number of costs, including agency costs, the cost of a home study (in which potential adopting parents are screened for their ability to be good parents), travel costs if the adoption takes place outside of the local area (either domestically, in another state, or internationally, in another country), and others. The cost of adoption varies greatly, from \$5,000 to \$40,000, depending on a variety of factors. For example, in 2008, the cost of adopting a child from China was close to \$25,000 (www.adoptivefamilies.com). In addition, most agencies, both private and state, and most countries require that the adoptive parents have a minimum income and/or financial assets. These financial costs and requirements make adoption difficult or impossible for some families. Domestic adoptions through the U.S. foster system are sometimes subsidized by the state, with adopting families receiving regular funding for some costs, especially immediately after adoption. The state contribution helps to mitigate the cost of adoption, but recent budget cuts in many states put this funding in jeopardy.

Given the expenses of adoption, it is not surprising that adoptive parents are more likely to be of higher socioeconomic status than other parents. Data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) give us some idea of who adopts and who has considered adoption. (NSFG is a nationally representative survey of women between the ages of 18 and 44.) Although we do not know whether the children were adopted because of a remarriage of one of the parents or the age or geographical origin of the child, this survey suggests that class plays a key role not only in adoption but also in whether adoption is even considered by a woman. Those women who live in households with relatively high incomes (150 percent of the poverty level or greater) are much more likely to have adopted. Women whose incomes are 300 percent of the poverty level or greater are much more likely

than poor women to have considered adoption. Because of the actual—and even the perceived—expenses of adoption, adoption is more possible for some families than others. Income likely has the same kind of effect on adoption as it does on births: Because of the expense of raising a child (whatever the costs of bearing or adopting the child), those without adequate resources might decide not to adopt. Moreover, because adoption agencies and authorities screen on income, a family must show that it has what is considered adequate income and savings to pay adoption expenses and support an adopted child. Even if a family believes it is ready to adopt and can handle the financial challenges of a child, the family may not be allowed to adopt. Thus, mothers and parents with higher incomes are more likely to meet the necessary requirements.

Socioeconomic class may be related to adoption in the United States in another way as well. Because infertility increases with the mother's age, and because women with higher education are more likely to delay marriage, we can expect that a higher percentage of educated women (who are also likely to earn higher incomes) will be unable to bear a child when they are ready to do so. Education and income are often related in the United States, and we might surmise that education would have an effect on adoption. In fact, the NSFG showed that those with higher education—a college degree—are much more likely to consider adoption as a means to create a family. But that survey also found no significant differences in actual adoption by educational level: Those who have a college degree are about as likely to adopt as those with less education. The survey also found that a major indicator of adopting is having had impaired fertility and/or using fertility services. These findings suggest that considering adoption as a route to family building is influenced by attaining higher education, but actually adopting a child is less likely to be tied to education because a larger influence is infertility. That explanation is consistent with the finding from another study that used an earlier version of the NSFG: that the percentage of those who had adopted was highest among women who were older, had fewer children, and were unable to bear children (Bachrach 1986).

Overall these patterns suggest that adoptive families share important economic characteristics and tend to fall in the middle and higher socioeconomic classes in the United States; with adoption costs rising, some researchers point to a widening gap between those who adopt and those who relinquish children (Pertman 2000:200). In this equation, it is important to note that families headed by single mothers occupy the lowest economic rungs in the American socioeconomic class ladder. Whereas

12 percent of all Americans are poor, more than 37 percent of single mothers live in poverty. Children who live in households with single mothers are nearly 5 times as likely to be poor as those who live in two-parent households (39 vs. 8 percent) (Moore and Redd 2002:2). While most single mothers do not relinquish their children for adoption, it is from this population that most adopted children come. Thus, it is not surprising that adopting mothers have different characteristics than birth mothers at the time of the birth of a child. As Table 3.1 indicates, adopting mothers indeed are more likely to be white, currently married, and older and to have a higher family income as compared to birth mothers. When birth mothers are divided into those who were married and those who were single at the time of birth, we see even clearer differences between birth and adopting mothers, with unmarried birth mothers much more likely to be poorer and younger than adopting mothers and to have fewer years of education than adopting mothers. Even when we compare adopting mothers with birth mothers who are currently married, we see that adopting mothers have distinctive characteristics. We can attribute some of those distinctions to the likelihood that women do not start adoption proceedings until they are older and married, thus maybe having more time to acquire higher family income.

Table 3.1 Characteristics of mothers of adopted and biological children, by relationship to and marital status of mother: Children under age 18, United States, 1982

Characteristic	Adoptive mothers ^a	Birth mothers			
		Total	Never married	Currently married	Previously married
Total number of children (1,000s)	722	55,649	3,689	43,078	8,882
	Percentage distribution				
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Race of mother					
White	94.0	82.0	38.9	88.0	70.4
Black	(4.0)	14.9	59.2	8.7	26.4

(Continued)

Table 3.1 (Continued)

Characteristic	Adoptive mothers ^a	Birth mothers			
		Total	Never married	Currently married	Previously married
Marital status of mother					
Currently married	89.7	77.4	—	100.0	—
Not currently married	(10.3)	22.6	100.0	—	100.0
Labor-force participation of mother					
In labor force	50.8	49.9	35.2	48.3	63.5
Working full time	(27.7)	31.7	24.1	29.5	45.8
Not in labor force	49.2	50.1	64.8	51.7	36.7
Mother's education					
Less than 12 years	(1.7)	23.9	50.4	19.9	31.9
12 years	56.7	41.7	35.3	42.6	40.1
13 years or more	41.5	34.4	14.3	37.5	28.0
Mean years of schooling	13.4	12.3	10.7	12.5	11.7
Mother's age					
15–24	0.0	10.9	42.8	8.7	8.3
25–34	41.9	49.5	49.3	49.3	50.1
35–44	58.1	39.6	7.8	41.9	41.7
Mean age	36.0	32.5	26.5	32.9	33.0
Family income					
Below poverty level	(2.3)	18.8	61.9	10.8	39.8
100%–199% of poverty level	(19.9)	25.3	20.5	24.1	32.4
200%–299% of poverty level	(24.0)	18.8	9.7	20.8	12.8
300% of poverty level or higher	53.8	37.2	7.9	44.3	15.0

Source: Bachrach (1986:Table 4).

Note: Standard errors are not shown. Percentages with relative standard errors of more than .30 are enclosed in parentheses.

a. Includes unrelated adoptions only.

The Children: Characteristics of Adopted Children

Given the patterns and characteristics of those who adopt children in the United States, as discussed above, we would expect that families with higher incomes are more likely to have adopted than others. This connection is useful for explaining the findings of another study using NSFG data that the differences between adopted children and other children mirror the differences between adopting and birth mothers. When we compare the characteristics of children born outside of marriage living with birth parents with children living with adoptive parents, we find that among children born outside of marriage, those who had been adopted are less likely to be living in poverty. They are also more likely to have better-educated parents and more likely to be white than children living with their (single) birth parent (Bachrach 1983).

There is, however, very little systematic information collected about the characteristics of adopted children. One problem in sorting out characteristics of adopted and other children arises because when we write about many of the characteristics of children (e.g., socioeconomic status or religion), we actually interpolate their characteristics from those of their parents. When we talk about children in poverty, for example, we are assuming that children live in poverty when their parents' income is below a certain level. Moreover, at least one potential source of adoption information—the 2000 U.S. Census—does not distinguish between adoptions that occur after marriage or remarriage of parents and stranger adoptions. We know that when someone adopts his or her new spouse's child, the adoption follows a very different set of procedures—with marriage often the precipitating cause—than other, nonrelative adoptions. Thus, the groups of children identified by these sources as adopted most likely have quite variable experiences and relationships in part because of different circumstances and procedures.

A major change in adoption practices in the United States concerns which children are adoptable. In the past, only physically and mentally healthy children were considered adoptable. Until the mid-twentieth century, children were regularly screened to determine if they had any characteristics that made them unsuitable candidates for adoption. Today, all children are considered adoptable, although some children may bring to their new families special needs, and most adoption agencies (and those involved in the adoption) consider full disclosure of these special needs to be necessary to achieve the most desired adoption outcomes. In the past, children with developmental, physical, or mental disabilities were considered unadoptable and often remained in institutions for life. Both attitudes and practices have changed; most children never spend any time in institutions today, and most agencies strive to place all children, even those with special needs. With these changes,

special needs adoptions have increased, even in recent years; whereas such adoptions constituted 48.5 percent of domestic adoptions in 1996, that percentage increased to 60.0 by 2002 (NCA Adoption Factbook, <https://www.adoptioncouncil.org>, see p. 8). However, this category is difficult to interpret; it includes a broad range of characteristics, and not all states use the same definitions. Children are considered to have special needs if they have a physical, developmental, or emotional disability, but also, they may be considered to have special needs because of their race, ethnicity, or age or if they are part of a sibling group. Many children who are in the foster care system have one or more of these characteristics.

The Parents: Marital Status and Sexual Orientation

A major change has occurred in recent decades in who is adopting. While only married couples were permitted to adopt through the mid-twentieth century, today many adopting parents are unmarried adults who may or may not intend to compose a family unit with a child (or children) and two heterosexual adults. Nearly all states allow single adults to adopt, and some states (such as Maryland) explicitly state that singles cannot be discriminated against in adoption because of their marital status.

Within this group of single parents who have adopted, special note should be taken of the increase in single men in particular who are now adopting. Where once it was believed that only a rare man could properly father a child, it is now widely accepted that men can be effective and important parents. In two-parent heterosexual families, the involvement of fathers with their children on a daily basis has positive outcomes for their children (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). This change in gender norms and expectations means it is increasingly possible for single or same-sex partnered men to adopt.

Perhaps even more significant and challenging to previously held norms about families has been the recent increase in adoptions by gay and lesbian parents, both individuals who are in long-term partnerships and those who are single. In recent years, public discussion and controversy have emerged around same-sex couples and their efforts to have their partnerships and families legally recognized. Arguments about whether lesbians and gay men should be allowed to marry are regularly in the news. By early 2011, only five states—Massachusetts, California, Connecticut, Iowa, and Maine—permitted same-sex marriages. (In California and Maine, voters later rescinded the law.) The situation has fluctuated rapidly, with several states wrestling with the question of whether to pass their own bills allowing such marriages and/or to recognize such marriages when they occur in other states.

Similar controversies surrounding adoption by gays, lesbians, and same-sex couples have developed, with states differing in their laws about same-sex couple and gay or lesbian adoption. For example, some states, such as Maine, California, New York, and several others, allow same-sex couples to adopt together. Nearly all states permit unmarried individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation, to adopt. Some states have created explicit restrictions on the marital status or sexual orientation of an adult who intends to adopt. For example, whereas the District of Columbia allows any adult to adopt, Utah does not allow someone in a nonlegal marriage to adopt. But laws have been changing across the country; in September 2010, the Florida State Appeals Court struck down existing state laws that explicitly stated that homosexuals are not permitted to adopt (<http://www.lambdalegal.org>). Moving in a different direction, a recent voter referendum in Arkansas, specifically aimed at preventing gay and lesbian adoptions, has made it illegal for any unmarried partners to adopt. Of course, some single or partnered gays and lesbians are raising children without having gone through formal adoption proceedings. A lesbian may have children from a previous heterosexual marriage; after the ending of that marriage, she might raise a child on her own or with a lesbian partner. There have been legal struggles around custody of some of these children as well; some states permit and other states do not permit the same-sex partners of these parents to adopt these children.

What Makes a Proper Family? Interpreting Social Norms

In spite of the historical changes and policy initiatives that have made adoption more acceptable across U.S. society, it is clear that the adoption process retains some earlier assumptions and beliefs. From looking at just a few characteristics—socioeconomic class, marital status, and sexuality—we can see that the process of adoption is closely tied to wider social norms about what makes a good or proper family and ideas about how to encourage some kinds of families and discourage others. Moreover, the significant changes over the past few decades in who is encouraged to, restricted from, and approved to adopt reflect changing attitudes of Americans toward families and toward certain groups, some of whom were previously marginalized. Even as there are fewer children, especially infants, available to adopt, the definition of an acceptable parent used by adoption authorities has broadened; thus, this change has occurred not because adoption agencies have felt it necessary to expand their pool of acceptable applicants to find places for children needing homes but because adoption agencies and the

people who work in these organizations are part of the larger changes and attitudes about families, parents, and children in the United States. One of the most obvious connections between adoption and the larger society is the way that adoption mirrors norms about family. We—the government, agencies, and the general public—do not want the “wrong” people to adopt, but how do we define the “right” family? These and similar questions are central to the adoption process because they are also central to the shape and structure of our society more generally.

Especially in the 1950s, the model family was a nuclear one composed of a father, a mother, and children; gender roles were narrowly defined, with fathers charged with providing economic support and being the public voice of the family and mothers given the task of being at home and providing support for children and husbands. There were many deviations from this norm—families in which mothers worked, families without children, and single-parent homes (Coontz 1992). But the ideology of the family at that time ignored the reality of some families and was focused on a particular ideal. In this environment, as we saw in our previous chapter, adoption was seen as a solution for those unable to achieve the family ideal. Thus, matching of prospective parents and children was important, and only married couples were believed to be able to provide proper homes.

But the revolutionary social changes that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s altered many of the ideals and actualities of family forms and norms. Easy access to birth control, legalization of abortion, high divorce rates, new laws that protect civil rights—these and many other social factors were part of huge shifts in how the society viewed families and what a family should look like. Today, single parents in the United States adopt regularly, both transnationally and domestically. While many people might consider two parents to be better able to provide economic and emotional stability for a young child, most also accept single-parent families as a legitimate family form. These attitudes were vastly changed from the 1950s, when single mothers were pressured to give up their babies for adoption. These women were often told, by adoption authorities and by the family and friends around them, that a single mother could never raise a child successfully. State institutions reinforced this attitude. Most public schools banned pregnant girls from attending classes, making it nearly impossible for single parents to continue their education. In 1971, the Supreme Court struck down such laws, and most public school systems in the United States now attempt to accommodate the needs of young pregnant mothers, knowing that a successful life for children often depends on the educational successes of their parents.

A contributing factor in the new acceptance of single people’s adopting children has been a lessening stigma for single or childless women. While this

stigma has not disappeared in the United States, it has changed. In the past, women who were unmarried and were not bound to families were considered to be flawed, even dangerous to society. Even without the assumption that two-parent families were the only type of family configuration that should be considered for adoption, being single carried with it enough negative weight that unmarried women were seen as unable to be good (adoptive) parents. Related to the major social shifts of the 1960s and 1970s, and coming from the feminist movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and onward, attitudes about men as parents have also changed in fundamental ways, thus paving the way for single men to adopt children. And recent changes in attitudes about homosexuality have meant that gays and lesbians are less marginalized today than they were in the past and in most (but not all) states are seen as able to provide good family environments for adopted children.

As acceptance of alternative family forms has grown, so too has acceptance of the place for children with special needs within families. On the one hand, this increase suggests the belief that all children deserve loving, stable families and the recognition that loving, stable families may be configured in a variety of ways. On the other hand, these patterns reflect the strong belief that families are the best places for raising children. In other words, these changes reflect both a new tolerance and acceptance of difference and the recognition that a variety of kinds of social difference is a part of many families. At the same time, the belief that the family is the core social institution for shaping normative behavior continues. While we may track these changes and continuities in the attitudes among the general public and even among who adopts or is able to adopt, we also see these norms reflected in the role of government laws, regulations, and practices.

The Role of the State

As we can see from the patterns of U.S. adoption, norms play a large role in the changes in adoption, but the state is also involved in adoption and in the shaping of families. While not as overt and direct a role as the state plays in other countries, as we illustrate below in our comparative examples, the American government does play a major role in shaping not only who adopts but which children are available for adoption, which kinds of families are accepted as good families, and what happens to those who are deemed unfit. The state's more direct role in adoption is through laws and regulations that concern families, sexuality, and children. Here we can see places where the state's work mirrors societal attitudes and other places where state decisions and societal norms contradict one another. In the

United States, adoption law is generally decided state by state. Thus, the rules in one state are not necessarily consistent with those in another state, as we saw with laws allowing or prohibiting adoption by gay men and lesbians. Each state determines who is allowed to adopt and the actual procedures that must be followed.

Along with its direct role, the state plays an indirect role in influencing adoption. From the historical record in the United States, we know that laws about access to birth control and abortion have a significant effect on adoption. The legalization of abortion in 1973 changed adoption practices in significant ways. Women dealing with unintended pregnancies could opt for legal and safe abortions, and fewer children were born to parents who did not intend to raise them. Similarly, those laws that have been enacted since 1973 and place more restriction on abortion and, especially, on government funding for abortion, also play a role in adoption. Without federal and state funding for abortion, easy access to abortion is not universal. While most women who are unable to afford the cost of an abortion keep their children, we might expect that there are some children relinquished for adoption because of this restricted access.

The state is involved in other indirect ways as well. For example, restricting adoption to married couples has a different outcome in a state where same-sex marriage is allowed than it does where such marriages are illegal; in the latter, of course, restrictive marriage means that gay men and lesbians are not allowed to adopt. In fact, the 2008 voter referendum in Arkansas that prohibits unmarried couples from adopting was primarily motivated by an interest in keeping gays and lesbians from adopting, and such a measure was seen as the best way to do so. Some of the loudest voices protesting that referendum point not to the restrictions for gays and lesbians but to the increased difficulty in finding homes for children now that they cannot be placed in those of unmarried couples (even heterosexual couples).

The government also influences families through its role in the foster system and fostering generally. In 2005, there were over 500,000 children in the foster care system (childwelfare.gov). Some of them are there temporarily; half of the children who enter this system stay in it for less than a year, but some stay in this system for longer periods of time. Most of the children in foster care have been removed from their families because the government has deemed the parents—either temporarily or permanently—unfit. But the standards of fit and unfit that are used are controversial and vary from one state or county to another, even from one social worker to another. In addition, some groups are targeted differently in this process. For example, poor households are particularly subject to government interventions; these households are more heavily scrutinized than others partly because they are

more likely to have had contact with government agencies in their search for outside support (e.g., in the form of supplemental income or food or housing subsidies). Once that contact is initiated, the government is better able to scrutinize children's conditions and parental involvement than it is in middle-class households that have less regular contact with government agencies. Thus, the foster care system is heavily populated by children who have been removed from poor households, partly because poor parents struggle to raise children in such environments but also at least partly because these households bear more state scrutiny.

The plight of children who end up in the foster system is both disturbing and encouraging. Foster care is not usually stable, and children often move from household to household. One child in the foster system describes his experience with these words:

I was 3 years old [when first placed]. I have been at 36 different places. I was in lockdown, juvenile hall, group homes, residential and treatment centers and foster homes, some good and some bad. I was homeless many times and ran away several times. Between times, I was in kin-care, with my grandmother. (Morris 2007:423–24)

Another young man states simply, “I was so tired of moving. I had moved over 30 times. I did not unpack my bags anymore because I would lose my things” (Morris 2007:424). It is because of the effects of such instability on children's lives that the government and authorities are eager to get children into stable families. To this end, the government's passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 helped to encourage more adoption of children in states' fosterage systems. This act mandated that birth parents lose parental rights over children who have been in state custody for 15 of the preceding 22 months; it meant that those working with foster kids began to place a greater emphasis on finding suitable homes for children, including children who are hard to place because of special needs or age, and less emphasis on family reunification. Indeed, after the passage of the act, there were some changes in the outcome of fostered children. In 2005, 54 percent of children in the system were reunited with their parents (down from 57 percent in 2000), and 18 percent were adopted by nonrelatives (up from 17 percent in 2000) (childwelfare.gov). More than half (56 percent) of all adoptions that occurred in 2002 were processed through state agencies. While there were over 24,000 nonrelative adoptions processed by public agencies in 1997, this number increased to nearly 43,000 in 2002, a 76 percent increase (NCA Adoption Factbook, <https://www.adoptioncouncil.org>, Figure 2.7). Many of these changes are attributed to the passage of the 1997 act.

But even as some celebrate this increase in adoptions out of the foster system, others lament the growing numbers of children who are placed in foster care after being removed from their families. This concern reminds us that even as adoption is often the beginning of a new family and new family ties, it is at the same time the destruction of a family, as we discuss further in Chapter 4. Adoptions through the foster system often occur because one set of parents have been found to be lacking and another set to be worthy of raising a child.

One of the most important and far-reaching ways that the U.S. government is involved in adoption is in regulating how families in general are supported through government funding in the United States. Most Americans believe it is the responsibility of the parents to provide economically for the children in the family; government subsidies are seen as emergency, short-term solutions to difficult or crisis situations (Grubb and Lazerson [1982] 1988; Secombe 2006). Such aid is miserly because it is given to families that have failed to adequately provide for their children; it is seen as a gift—or as charity—and not something the families or the children deserve.

As we will see below, attitudes about family aid differ remarkably between the United States and other industrialized countries; these differences are related to how different societies see the responsibility for children. In some societies, raising children to be good citizens is the responsibility of the entire society, and parents are given help in that societal responsibility (Rainwater and Smeeding 2003). In the United States, the family is considered private, even as the state regulates much of family life from marriage to sexuality to whether children can work in the labor force. In this kind of situation, any state aid given to families is meant to help families do their jobs better, to meet their responsibilities as parents. But when families are unable to provide for their children, these families—often from marginalized groups because of poverty or race—are seen as failures, failures that the state then has the right to step in and take control of. The irony is that in the United States, the government is as likely to remove a child from his or her family (of origin) and place the child with another, unfamiliar family as it is to give the family of origin the kind of support it would need to keep the child within it.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 subsidized adoption, and after its passage, 80 percent of the states underwrote adoption subsidies. That meant that a single woman raising her own child might not get any financial help from the state, but if she put that child up for adoption, the adopting family would get a subsidy and/or tax break of about \$3,000 (Solinger 2001:133). In a similar way, foster parents are given money to raise children, the same children who may have been taken away from birth

parents because they did not have enough money for their children. As one New York judge described this system, “the further the child is removed from his family, the more we are ready to pay for his support” (Solinger 2001:185). Another researcher went further to make clear the outcomes of such differentials in child support:

That means some good people who could have become responsible parents, if only they had a little more help, will lose their sons and daughters. But that’s a sacrifice society has decided is worth imposing in an effort to unlock a cruel trap that has confined generations of children. Besides, as a result of the nation’s new laws and standards, the scales are increasingly being tipped in favor of people who want to adopt. (Pertman 2000:182)

The resources that middle-class families have available mean not only that they are able to avoid government intervention and scrutiny but that adoption laws that favor certain restrictions such as family forms or a particular definition of financial stability also favor middle-class families over poorer, less resource-rich families. And as we will elaborate in the next chapter, because race and socioeconomic class are so closely linked in the United States, minority families, individuals, children, and parents are more likely to be disadvantaged in the adoption process—such families are more likely to be subject to the removal of children by government agencies, and they are less likely to qualify for adoption of a child.

Comparative Perspectives on Government’s Role in Adoption

What other kind of role might the state play in adoption? The contrast between the role of the government in the United States and the role of the governments in China and Norway allow us to see the different ways states play a role in these family-making processes. In both China and Norway, the state’s role is more direct and immediate than it is in the United States, but state involvement produces different adoption outcomes in each society.

Adoption in China

In recent years, Western news media have highlighted the plight of abandoned girls in China. Partly because of the number of previously abandoned girls who are adopted transnationally, there is sometimes the assumption that adoption is not accepted within China. In addition, because China is

known to be a society that favors sons, some people assume that Chinese couples do not want to adopt girls in particular. But these understandings are not completely accurate. While there has been some reluctance to adopt in the past, today many couples in China are willing to adopt children, especially the abandoned girls who end up in state institutions. However, the Chinese government has made domestic adoption difficult for most couples.

In the past, adoption was not uncommon in China. There were legal restrictions on the process of adoption, restrictions that limited who could be adopted and what the resulting relationship would be. In addition, Confucian tenets emphasized the importance of continuing the blood line from father to son (the patriline). But these restrictions were regularly circumvented in practice (Johnson 2002), and while many adoptions were within the patriline, there were many others that occurred outside it. In fact, while Confucianism influenced the emphasis on the patriline, it was also this philosophy that provided support for adoption: “Confucian emphasis on upbringing and cultivation as the key to character provides further support for ties built on nurture and social relationships rather than on biology and heredity” (Johnson 2002:384). Because the only formal adoptions recognized by the early Chinese state were those of boys for the purpose of providing an heir for a family, we do not have systematic records of the adoptions of others, including girls. But it is clear from the records we do have that adoptions were frequent and included the adoption of both boys and girls. Some girls were adopted as *tongyangxi* (future adopted daughters-in-law); they were adopted at a young age and raised by their future husbands’ families, eventually marrying their husbands. That practice was outlawed in 1950. Other girls were adopted and brought into their adopted families not for their future roles, but for the immediate contributions—economic or emotional—that they could make to their adopted families. In other situations, girls were adopted because some people believed that adopting a daughter might “lead in” a son—making it more likely that a woman’s next birth would produce a boy.

Today, son preference is widespread in China, and it is that preference, coupled with the strict birth-planning policy of the government, that has led to the abandonment of millions of girls. But while many families, and perhaps most families, prefer to have at least one son, most would ideally like to have a son and a daughter. Many researchers working in China have found that couples want to have a gender-balanced family (Greenhalgh and Li 1995). Chinese couples may be less reluctant to adopt girls than boys who are unrelated because girls’ relationship to their families and family lines are and can be more ambiguous than are boys’. But the government generally restricts the domestic adoption of abandoned girls to those couples who

have no children and who can prove that they are physiologically unable to have children.

Thus, the number of abandoned girls in Chinese institutions has continued to grow as parents abandon daughters to try to have sons. The government restricts adoption because it is concerned that parents will try to circumvent the birth-planning rules through adoption (e.g., abandoning their daughter to have a son, knowing they can adopt a girl at a later time). Even so, of those who adopted girls between 1980 and 2004, less than 50 percent were childless. Many of these couples adopt girls because girls are much more available than are boys, but some adopt a girl hoping that this process will lead in a son, who will be born later. Others, of course, specifically desire daughters: 31 percent of the adoptions of girls take place in families that have only sons and desire a daughter (Zhang 2006:315). Although in recent years the government has stated its goal of increasing domestic adoption, the difficulties of and restrictions placed on domestic adoptions have dampened interest among Chinese couples and decreased the numbers of potential adoptive parents. The centrality of the birth-planning policy and the government's care in keeping the policy in place may mean it continues to be the major force in limiting domestic adoption. Far from mirroring societal values, the state has kept those values in check through its tight control over who is allowed to adopt.

Adoption in Norway

Comparing U.S. practices with those of another industrialized Western country is also instructive. In Norway, the state takes a very active role in adoption. First, for couples unable to conceive a child, there are important restrictions on alternative routes to making a family. Sperm donation is permitted, but neither egg donation nor surrogacy is allowed by law. Thus, many such couples turn to adoption. Adoption is restricted to married couples only and only to those couples unable to bear a child biologically (Howell 2006:23). Thus, the state has a strong hand in adoption in Norway.

State involvement influences adoption in indirect ways as well, and these may have just as much significance as legal restrictions on who can adopt a child. Unlike in the United States, where we saw that adopting parents tend to be wealthier than others, in Norway, we see no socioeconomic differences between parents who do and do not adopt. That is likely the result of the fact that the government subsidizes the costs of adoption in Norway (Selman 2006). With adoption costs relatively low, adopting parents represent a wide range of socioeconomic statuses. In addition, there are virtually no children relinquished for adoption in Norway. Part of the reason may be

that, in contrast to the United States, birth control and abortion are legal and funded by the government. When a child is born, it is nearly always a wanted child, resulting in very few infants' being available for adoption in Norway. In addition, again in contrast to the situation in the United States, the Norwegian government is not likely to need to remove a child from a household or family for financial reasons: In that country, any parent—single, adopting, or one of a two-parent biological household—is entitled to state subsidies to help offset the costs of raising a child. These regulations and laws suggest a different set of norms in the United States and Norway. While most Americans believe that parents should be able to care for their children and thus state support is either weak or nonexistent for struggling families, most Norwegians believe that raising children is the responsibility of the entire country and that the state should play a direct role in making it possible for families to stay together and prosper.

Conclusions

We can see that while adoption seems at first glance to be a random process equally distributed across the U.S. social landscape, in fact there are clear patterns in who adopts and which children get adopted that reflect large societal patterns. Adoption has changed as American society has changed. No longer do only white, middle-class, heterosexual, married couples, adopt; parents now include people from many diverse social groups. The adoptions that result do not necessarily resemble a biological family, nor is that an important goal for most. The many types of adoptive families in the United States today reflect the ways that American families more generally have changed and become more varied; at the same time, some people are more restricted than others in the adoption process, and these differences reflect their different status in the overall society and the ways their families resemble or differ from accepted norms. When we compare adoption patterns in the United States with those in China and Norway, we see that the patterns reflect wider norms about what we expect the government's role to be in adoption and in families more generally.