

Private Adoption and Nonprofit Studies

An Autoethnographic Perspective

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Abstract

Adoption is a complex process that includes multiple actors, including birth parents, adoptive parents, children, lawyers, and multiple nonprofit organizations. Using autoethnography, I explore the process of adoption from my experience. I then use this process to explore the ethics of adoption. To conclude, I explore the ways that nonprofit studies and public administration can contribute to adoption studies with our unique perspective. Through this study, we are able to see the complexities of adoption and discuss next steps for the field.

Keywords: *Adoption, nonprofit management, autoethnography*

Introduction

I come to this special issue as a researcher of nonprofit management, a social worker who has worked in foster care, a professor of nonprofit studies and ethics, and an adoptive parent of two. Specifically, I see adoption from two perspectives: as a parent who has benefited and a professional and researcher who understands the complex and cyclical nature which leads to people entering the world of adoption. Building on previous literature on adoption, this article uses autoethnography to explore the complexity of adoption and understand how nonprofit studies can better support the diverse interests within the field of adoption (Samuels, 2022; Wall, 2012). In this article, I will start by looking at adoptions and providing basic information about the structure of private adoption. I will then explore the ethical issues associated with adoption. To conclude this article, I will suggest areas of future research for public administration and nonprofit studies around the topic of private adoption.

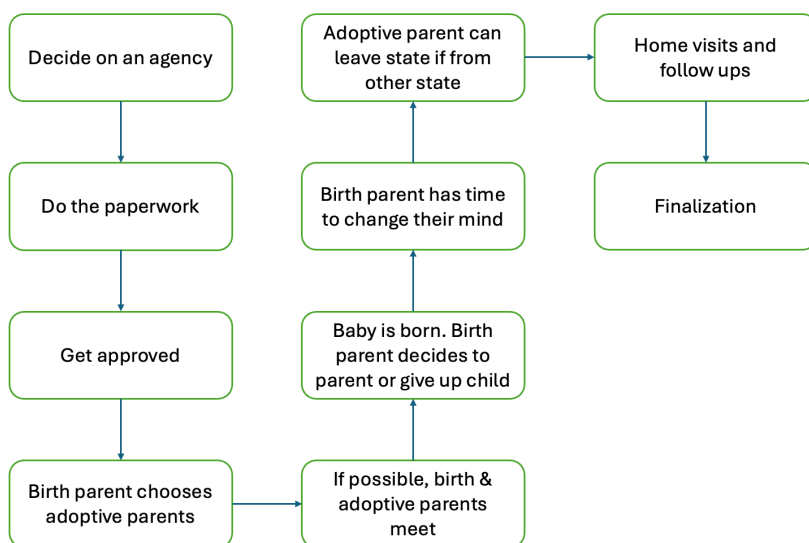
Private Adoption: An Introduction

In this article, I am looking specifically at private adoption. Private adoption is different from foster care; it is when a nonprofit organization coordinates an adoption between a birth parent and prospective adoption parents, either before the birth of the child or right after/shortly after the birth of the child.¹ These adoptions are approved by a judge in the state that the child is born in. These adoptions used to be closed, which means that the adopted child did not know information about their birth families and the birth families have no contact with the adopted child. Now, most adoptions are open, which is on a spectrum from the child being aware of the existence of birth parents to having continual contact with the birth parents.

The process of private adoption is not always understood. There are two different pathways: the adoptive parent and the birth parent path. To illustrate these pathways, I will be using my story as an autoethnography as well as an opportunity for education,² which means most of the focus will be on the adoptive parents' process. To start, I would like to explore the paths my husband and I took when adopting our children. Figure 1 provides a simplified version of the path of adoption in our case.

Figure 1

The Adoption Process



When my husband and I first decided to adopt, we interviewed with nonprofit organizations in the state where we resided at the time. When adopting, you usually start with an agency that is based in the state in which you live. Once we decided on

¹This article will focus mainly on domestic adoptions within the United States. International adoptions, where the adoptive parents are from a different country than the birth parents, have a unique set of ethical issues (e.g., Stuy, 2013; Wall, 2012)

²Please note, while I will be talking about my story, some of the parts of the story may be edited, changed, or left out. This is to protect the privacy of my children as well as their birth parents. In this autoethnography, I aim to focus on my story while allowing my children and their birth parents the opportunity to have their story as their own.

an agency, we had a lot of paperwork to fill out. This paperwork was not only a background check, but we also discussed our lifestyles and what we thought parenthood would be like for us. Once the paperwork was done, social workers came to do home visits. During these visits, we went over our paperwork and discussed what we would be open to in terms of adoption. This can lead to difficult conversations about what you, as an adoptive parent, are willing to accept regarding race and ethnicity, attitudes toward a known or unknown birth father, your willingness for an open adoption, and thoughts on drug use during pregnancy. Lastly, you need to create an adoption book. This book is what is shown to the birth parents, which highlights the life that we have and helps the birth parent envision what the child's life will be like. The adoption book includes information on the adoptive parents individually, their parenting philosophy, and their friends and community. Once everything is done, the adoptive parents are put on a list. Sometimes, they will also work with other agencies as secondary agencies to expand the number of birth mothers who might see their book. To build our family, we went with an agency in a state other than ours for both of our adoptions.

When a birth parent(s) is interested in putting their child up for adoption, there are several ways they find an agency. This includes internet searches or recommendations from friends, families, or professionals, either before or after the child is born. Once the birth parent(s) contacts an agency, a social worker talks with the birth mother to learn about their background as well as what they are looking for in an adoptive parent(s). The social worker will, based on this conversation, show the birth parent several adoption books. The birth parent(s) will choose an adoptive parent based on the books provided (or they may ask for additional books if they do not connect with any of the parents provided). If possible, the birth and adoptive parents will meet either by phone or in person before the baby is born. This is not always possible, as sometimes the birth parents make the decision once the baby is born.

After the baby is born, it will go to the adoptive parent(s). That said, the birth parent may still decide to parent instead of giving the child to the adoptive parent(s). Before we had our first child, we were matched with a birth parent for three months. Following the birth of her child, she decided she wanted to parent instead of putting her child up for adoption. That was certainly her right, but for us, it was tragic. We, as potential adoptive parents preparing for three months, felt a loss. We spent time mourning the fact that we weren't going to be parents and the life we would not have with that baby. Two days later, our agency informed us of another baby who was just born and the mother thought we would be perfect parents for this child. We traveled across the state and, the next day, we met our son for the first time. In comparison, for our second child, the birth mother was very clear that adoption was the best choice for her, and once my daughter was born, the adoptive mother immediately called us saying, "Your daughter is born," and handed us our daughter as soon as she could.

Once the adoptive parent(s) has the child, there is still a revocation period where the birth parent(s) can change their mind. That period is different in each state and can last from four days to thirty days. For us, it was an incredibly tense time as we waited but continued to bond with our child. If the adoptive parent is adopting in a state different from where they live, once they have the baby, they can go home once paperwork between the state the baby is born and the state that the parents live in is completed,

also known as the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC), which can take anywhere from a few days to a month. For our first child, it was only four days, while for our second, it took two weeks.

Lastly, there is finalization, which can be complicated. For my second child, finalization included two lawyers and three adoption agencies from two different states to complete. Before finalization, the adoptive parents are considered foster parents, and the adoption agency is the legal guardian of the child. The finalization is usually a mere formality. But for many families, mine included, it is both a huge relief and a day that is celebrated yearly. It means that the adoptive parent(s) finally become the legal parent(s) and they are now legally a family.

Adoption is a complicated and emotional process for both the birth and the adoptive parents. As this is a short autoethnography, it only scratches the surface of the process. There are many stories; stories of adoptive parents, birth parents, professionals within the adoption process, and most importantly, stories of children who have been adopted. To create an honest, useful, and representative discussion within the field of nonprofit studies, all of these perspectives need to be taken into account. By seeing private adoption through the multifaceted lenses, we can start to explore the complex ethics that nonprofit adoption agencies, as well as all nonprofit organizations, need to consider in their field.

Ethics and Issues in Private Adoption

As ethics is one of the main pillars of public administration and nonprofit studies (Meyer et al., 2022a; 2022b), it is important to explore how ethics plays a role in private adoption. While there is a growing literature around adoption, ethics is not always central (Koh & Reamer, 2021). To create an ethical adoption process, there should be a focus on the protection of the most vulnerable in the situation, nonjudgemental respect, good faith agreements between the adoptive and birth parents, and honesty (Reamer & Siegal, 2007). This means an acknowledgement of the power dynamics that exist between an agency, birth parent(s), and adoptive parent(s) and creating policies and procedures which support all parties in an ethical manner.

Transracial adoption, which is when one of the parents are of a different race than the child being adopted, represents over 50% of all adoptions in the United States (Pinderhuges et al., 2021). There have been many books (e.g., Hall & Steinberg, 2013; Roodra, 2015) and articles (Boiven & Hassan, 2015; Castner, & Foli, 2022; Luyt et al., 2021; Samuels, 2022) exploring transracial adoption, meaning there are fertile avenues for the field of nonprofit studies to better understand the impacts of transracial adoption. Considering the complex ethics involved in transracial adoptions, public administration should consider how to guide nonprofits through public programs and policy making. This includes making sure that transracial parents are prepared for supporting the needs of their family (Goldberg et al., 2016). Research on transracial adoption is limited and mostly focuses on the adoptive parents (Luyt et al, 2021). Though adoption is sometimes identified as a trauma (see also Brodinsky et al., 2022, and Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2016, for views of trauma in adopted children), Samuels (2022) suggested that transracial adoptees may have unique traumas from the injustices which come at the intersection of “adoptee” and “mixed race.”

There are also legal aspects to consider around transracial adoption, specifically concerning the adoption of Native American children due to the history of

Native American children being stolen from their homes and given to White families (Haskins & Jacobs, 2002; Jones et al., 2008). Due to the Indian Child Welfare Act, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Haaland v. Brackeen* (2022), when children with Native American birth parents are up for adoption, preference will be given to Native Americans from the child's tribe or Native Americans in general (National Indian Law Library, n.d.).

Understanding the ethics of adoption is an important route for nonprofit studies. Ethics is a central part of our field; when exploring the field of adoption, we should be no different. As mentioned in the introduction to this special issue (Irizarry et al., 2025), when talking about adoption within marginalized communities, there are unique ethical issues to consider. In this article, we explored specifically transracial adoptions, but the ethics of working with LGBTQIA+ adoptees or adoptive parents, individuals with disabilities, children with special needs, or single parents, among other communities, may lead to a more fully thought out and representative literature around adoption and nonprofit studies. Creating an ethical framework means that nonprofit studies should critically examine what adoption means and exploring best practices have been identified in fields like social work (e.g., Featherstone et al., 2018) and nursing (Castner & Foli, 2022). The unique experiences of adoptees should be central to the conversation of managing organizations which facilitate adoptions and work with adoptive parents, birth families, and adoptees.

Continuing the Discussion

This essay, and this special issue in general, is not meant to be an be-all, end-all around foster care and adoption. Instead, it is aiming to start a much-needed conversation, especially amongst those working in adoption (Featherstone et al., 2018; Featherstone & Gupta, 2020). Nonprofit studies can fill a niche in adoption studies by exploring the unique needs of the management of adoption agencies and service delivery to adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth families at various stages of the adoption process. Considering the focus on ethics within nonprofit studies with conflicting stakeholders (e.g., Chapman et al., 2025), the field has a lot of opportunities to shine light on the ways that adoption agencies are managed. Building a future research agenda can include many avenues including:

- **Ethics in adoption:** Nonprofit studies can explore the unique ways that adoption agencies manage the complex ethical issues which are inherent in the adoption system. Bringing a nonprofit management approach, nonprofit studies can support the models of adoption ethics.
- **Race in adoption:** Much has been explored about the complexities of transracial adoptions (Bolvin & Hassan, 2015; Pinderhughes et al, 2025). Nonprofit studies can continue to build on the understanding of the complexities of how race impacts adoptive families. Building on the guidance for transracial adoptive families (e.g. Hall & Steinberg, 2013; Roodra, 2015), nonprofit studies can help provide nonprofits with tools on supporting transracial families. Though not always at the forefront of nonprofit studies (davis & Chikoto-Shultz, 2025), having honest conversations about race within adoption can help create a stronger perspective from nonprofit studies into adoption management and lead to better outcomes for all of the parties being supported.

- **Support for adoptees:** Nonprofits can explore how to support adoptees, both adoptive nonprofits and all nonprofits which work with children in general. As most adoptions in the United States are open, understanding the way that openness impacts adoptees (e.g., Nelson et al., 2025) can help build supports and services that go beyond adoption agencies.

These are just a few avenues which are available for the future of the intersection of adoption and nonprofit studies. By building up a research agenda around adoption, nonprofit studies can merge our interdisciplinary perspective on nonprofit management and ethics to provide unique perspectives on supporting adoption organizations, professionals, and families.

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