

**Violated Expectations across the Transition to Adoptive Parenthood: A
Mixed Methods Study of Age, Race, Sex, and Special Needs Preferences among
Foster-to-Adopt Parents**

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Parents often form expectations of their ideal child and family. Violations of those expectations can cause parents feelings of anger, unfairness, guilt, and loss (Hugger, 2009). When parents adopt, they often experience additional loss because their expectation was for biological children. Adopting from foster care may increase the likelihood that parental preferences for their future family will be violated. Whereas the pool of prospective adoptive parents in general tends to be White and seeking infants, there is a disproportionate number of racial minority children in the public system and the average age of foster children is 9.6 (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), creating the potential for violated expectations. Research examining adoptive parents' preferences regarding race, gender, and age is limited (Brooks, Jones, & Barth, 2002; Goldberg, 2009a, 2009b) and rarely focuses specifically on the preferences of couples adopting via foster care, or experiences of violated expectations. Increasing our understanding of adoptive parents' initial expectations and the effects of violated expectations may help to improve training and post-adoption support for foster-to-adopt parents.

The current study examined foster-to-adopt parents' expectations for their future children (i.e., expected age, race, gender, and special needs) and subsequent violations of those expectations. Our analysis included 37 couples (19 lesbian, 9 gay male, and 9 heterosexual; 74 individuals) who adopted through foster care across the U.S. Sixty six (89%) were Caucasian, 2 were Latino, 2 were Filipino, and 1 participant each was African American, Multiracial, South African, and Asian American. Parents were individually interviewed at two time points: prior to adoptive placement (Time 1), and 3-4 months after (Time 2). Prior to adopting, they were asked about their age, race, gender, and special needs preferences. At Time 2, parents were asked whether their expectations were met and how they felt if they were unmet.

Preliminary analyses focused on the frequency of and feelings about various types of parental expectations violations. At Time 2, 40 (54%) participants described violation in age

expectations for their child, with 55% of these being placed with a child older than they had preferred. Twenty-four individuals (32%) expressed gender expectation violations, with 54% of these expecting or hoping for a girl but placed with a boy, and 46% expecting a boy but placed with a girl. Twenty-six individuals (35%) had violations of race/ethnicity expectations; of these, 15% preferred a Caucasian child and were placed with an ethnic minority, 65% expected a minority child and were placed with a Caucasian child, and 19% expected one ethnic minority and adopted a child of a different ethnic minority. Finally, 14 (19%) discussed special needs expectations violations, whereby 57% adopted children that were healthier than expected and 43% adopted children with unexpected special needs. Qualitative analyses are underway to further explore the parents' adaptations to their violated expectations, and their feelings about the violation.

This study has implications for clinicians preparing parents for adoption through foster care. In addition, clinicians working in post-adoption support will benefit from these findings.