

BARRIERS TO ADOPTION

by

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## ABSTRACT

Finding adoptive homes for children in continuing custody of child welfare authorities is a significant problem in child welfare. Previous research in this area highlights systemic barriers as the chief impediment to achieving permanency for children in care. Recruiting and retaining families figures prominently in the discourse.

This study explores barriers to adoption of children in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development in British Columbia from the perspective of adoptive applicant parents and from the perspective of social workers who work in adoption.

Results confirm that barriers to adoption of children in care exist. Social workers and adoptive applicants who participated in the study agreed that the recruitment and retention of families and resource issues are central to addressing the problem of waiting children. They further agreed that improvements in the adoption system in British Columbia are necessary to facilitate the movement of children from government care into permanent families.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iii
List of Tables .....	v
Introduction .....	1
Personal Interest .....	2
Chapter I: Literature review .....	4
1.1 Decline in Domestic Adoption.....	4
1.2 Increase in Intercountry Adoption.....	6
1.3 Existing Research on Waiting Children .....	8
1.4 Summary .....	12
Chapter II: Theory .....	13
2.1 Socio Political Context of Adoption.....	13
2.2 Systems Theory.....	18
2.3 Symbolic Interaction .....	21
2.4 Cognitive Theory .....	21
2.5 Conclusion and Research Question.....	25
Chapter III: Methodology .....	26
3.1 Methodological Approach.....	26
3.2 Sampling.....	26
3.3 Participants.....	27
3.3.1 Social Worker Participants.....	28
3.3.2 Adoptive Applicant Participants.....	29
3.4 Data Collection .....	30
3.5 Data Analysis.....	32
3.6 Approach to Validity.....	33
Chapter IV: Findings.....	35
4.1 Barriers Related to Children .....	35

4.1.1 Characteristics of Waiting Children .....	35
4.1.2 Representation of Waiting Children .....	37
4.2 Barriers Impinging on Families .....	39
4.2.1 Social Workers' Perceptions of Suitability .....	39
4.2.2 Recruiting and Retaining Families .....	43
4.2.3 Duplicity in the Approval Process.....	45
4.2.4 Matching Process .....	50
4.2.5 Waiting Families.....	52
4.2.6 Foster Parents .....	53
4.3 Barriers Related to Social Worker Bias .....	56
4.4 Organizational Barriers.....	58
4.4.1 Resource Constraints .....	59
4.4.2 Adoption Management System (AMS) .....	60
4.4.3 Regionalization.....	62
4.5 Barriers Related to the Legal System.....	64
Chapter V: Discussion.....	65
5.1 Recruiting and Retaining Families.....	70
5.2 Waiting Families: Waiting Children.....	72
5.3 Families for Children not Children for Famileis .....	75
5.4 Foster Parents.....	76
Chapter VI: Conclusions.....	78
6.1 Limitations .....	78
6.2 Policy Implications and Implications for Practice .....	79
6.3 Implications for Further Research .....	81
6.4 Summary .....	83
References .....	85
Appendices.....	90
Appendix A Interview Guide .....	90

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Social Worker Participants .....	27
Table 3.2 Adoptive Applicant Participants .....	28

## INTRODUCTION

Family has been long recognized as the preferred environment for raising children, and adoption an important family form for children who cannot be raised by their biological families. Despite the social and emotional risks associated with prolonged periods in foster care (Orme & Buehler, 2001), it is estimated that there are over 22,000 children in Canada who are in the continuing custody of child welfare authorities (Scarth, 2004). Speirs, Duder, Grove and Sullivan (2003) reported that in recent years only 10% of children in continuing custody were adopted every year. Scarth (2004) reports that the percentage of children finding permanent homes continues to drop, and in 2002 only 7% were adopted. The problem is compounded by the fact that these children already have, or are at risk to develop, a myriad of emotional and behavioral problems (Ambert, 2003; Orme & Buehler, 2001). It is also thought that foster care itself may pose a risk to some children, although the link is not well established nor the causal direction clear.

The failure to find permanent homes for the remaining 20,000 plus, often referred to as Canada's "waiting children", poses one of the greatest challenges facing child welfare today. Previous research in this area identifies the existence of barriers that impede the movement of waiting children into adoptive homes. This qualitative research project endeavored to explore the views of prospective adoptive parents, adoptive parents, and social workers about barriers that prevent some children from finding a permanent family through adoption.

## PERSONAL INTEREST

My interest in this research topic arises out of 14 years of professional involvement in the field of adoption. Currently, I am a social worker working for a British Columbia licensed adoption agency. My primary responsibilities include program management for adoptions from Asia, coordinating general services to adoptive parents and supervision of agency social workers. I also provide some direct services to birth parents and adoptive families. Prior to the advent of licensed agencies in British Columbia in 1996, I worked in the adoption reunion program area.

As a professional who works in the field of adoption, I think it is important to explore the reasons why so many children wait for families. In addition to my involvement with clients of the agency for which I work, I have almost daily contact with other British Columbia families seeking information about adopting a child. The options available to them include the adoption of a child placed for adoption at birth by the birth parent(s), the adoption of a child in care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development, or the adoption of a child from a country other than Canada. In discussing options with and for a particular family, many dismiss the option of adopting a child in care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development, sometimes as a result of information received from the Ministry or Ministry sources, and sometimes as a result of anecdotal information they received in discussions with others.

Many of these families join the ranks of Canadians who adopt an average of 2,000 children from other countries every year (Adoption Council of Canada,

2005). Logically these families are a potential resource for children in Canada who are in need of permanent homes. When considering the issue of Canadians choosing to adopt children from other countries while there are so many Canadian children available for adoption in Canada, the broader issue of waiting children arose. Why do we do such a poor job of achieving permanency for these children? What are the perceptions of social workers about barriers to the adoption for children in their care? What are the perceptions of families who have adopted, or are interested in adopting waiting children about barriers to adoption for children in care?



## CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

### DECLINE IN DOMESTIC ADOPTION

There is a growing body of literature chronicling the decline of interest in adoption as a family form in general. In both Canada and the US the overall numbers of adoptions decreased in the decades between 1970 and 1990 (Barth, 1994; Sobol & Daly, 1994). This decline is partially explained by the fact that fewer infants are available for adoption, resulting from wider availability of birth control, abortion and social acceptance of single parenthood. However, the decline in infant adoptions was also accompanied by a decrease in the number of adoptions of older, harder to place children. The decrease in adoptions of older, harder to place children may be partially explained by a trend to the use of private practitioners and agencies, instead of public agencies, noted by Sobol and Daly (1994) because older, harder to place children are usually in the care of public agencies. It is worthy of note that the trend to use private agencies for infant adoption was, at a minimum, tacitly encouraged by governments who intended to focus resources on older harder to place children.

Other explanations for the decline in adoption rates appear to stem from the view that adoption is a less legitimate form of family and that adoption outcomes are not favorable. March and Miall (2000) note that adoption is a family form in transition, due in part to changes in the profiles of adopted children (increased rates of intercountry and interracial adoption, and special needs

adoption) and changes in the family (higher rates of single parenthood, gay-lesbian adoption, and step parent adoption).

Ambert (2003) contends that there is a negative social construction of adoption due in part to the unique needs of adoptive families, and in part due to a cultural bias that suggests blood ties are the preferred family form. This idea is entrenched in historical records of Jewish law, which clearly show that both legal and family relationships with adopted children were not considered equal to relationships with biological children. Another example of the perceived superiority of blood ties exists in Islamic law prohibiting adoption (Pollack, Bleich, Reid, Jr, & Fasal, 2004). Dorrow (2002) writes eloquently about unwanted Chinese girls, rendered desirable through adoption by first world citizens. In her analysis of the social, political and economic milieu of adoption she notes the unjust and undeserved burdens both children and families endure as a result of naturalized ideas of belonging. Wegar (2000) concurs with these writers and adds that adoption practitioners are part of the problem. She states that, "not only have adoption practitioners continued to approach adoption from a psychopathological deficiency perspective, but they have also failed to recognize the impact of social stigmatization on adoptive family life" (p. 367). March and Miall (2000) agree. Although there have been significant strides in our understanding and knowledge about adoption, we still place adoptive families within the context of child welfare services, designating them as special cases in need of help.

In addition, the academic field also eschews the topic of adoption. Fisher (2003) used content analysis to examine 37 college-level textbooks and readers

in the sociology of the family published between 1998 and 2001. He concluded that adoption is a marginal topic in college-level texts and anthologies of the family. Seven of the texts made no mention of adoption at all, and of the 30 that did mention adoption, less than 1% of text space was devoted primarily to the topic. Moreover, the coverage of the topic "stressed the potential problems of adoption twice as often as its probable successes and rewards" (p.154). These included but were not limited to: behavioural and psychological problems among adoptees, restrictions on who can adopt, unavailability of healthy children, high costs, legal problems, adoption stigma, ideological and ethical problems, long waits, damage to the child in the past, excessive bureaucracy, and racial and ethnic barriers.

#### INCREASE IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION

Paradoxically, while overall numbers of adoptions in Canada decreased, the number of Canadians adopting from other countries increased, although they have remained steady for the past ten years (Adoption Council of Canada, 2005). However in British Columbia, intercountry adoptions continued to increase until 2002 when 262 children from other countries were adopted by residents of B.C., an increase of 80% over the 146 children adopted from other countries in 1997 (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2003). Recent statistics (Adoption Council of Canada, 2005) show intercountry adoptions leveling off in B.C. as well, with only 227 intercountry adoptions occurring in 2004.

Anecdotal evidence suggests a commonly held belief that the primary reason that people turn to intercountry adoption is that they believe they have a

greater chance of adopting a healthy child from another country than they do adopting a child in the permanent care of a child welfare authority. My experience leads me to suggest that this is true for many. It has been suggested that another reason families choose intercountry adoption is to avoid contact or involvement with the child's birth family (R. Sullivan, personal communication April, 2004), although this is a topic that has not been well researched. Other reasons for the choice of intercountry adoption have been put forward. Grand (2001) contends that intercountry adoption is pursued mainly because it is proving to be the most expeditious way to find a child. A survey conducted by Ipsos- Reid for the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (2004) supports this view. In a survey of 1,556 Canadian adults, 49% (on an unaided basis) cited "faster" and "easier" when asked to compare Intercountry adoptions with adoptions in Canada.

Hollingsworth (2003) offers that for some, intercountry adoption is an act of social justice. She states that some families would rather reach out to a child in need of a home, rather than compete for the small number of infants available locally; some see intercountry adoption as a way of solving the problems of child poverty and institutionalization, and a way of calling attention to these issues; and some want to provide an opportunity for traumatized children to grow up in a nurturing environment.

While there may be some validity to these lines of reasoning, closer examination must lead us to consider why these families are rejecting the choice of adopting a child waiting for a permanent home in Canada. First, there is a large body of literature that speaks to the "special needs" associated with

intercountry adoption, including health and developmental issues (Edelsward, 2005; Judge, 2003; Speirs, Duder, Grove, & Sullivan, 2003; Johnson, 2000); in addition, many of the children available for adoption in Canada are free for adoption and could be placed expeditiously if there were families waiting for them; and finally, the waiting children in Canada are no less in need of nurturing families. The answer, at least in part, lies elsewhere.

### EXISTING RESEARCH ON WAITING CHILDREN

The problem of waiting children then seems to stem from, or at least is exacerbated by, a decrease in the overall number of adoptions, and the move towards intercountry adoption. However, the causal relationships are not clear and research in the area is not plentiful. Canadian research, in particular, is notably scarce. Horner (2000) states that the field of adoption is a difficult area in which to conduct research, in part because it is difficult to isolate variables that can be attributed solely to adoption, and in part because adoption does not get the attention it deserves, given the seriousness of the issues and the amount of public resources devoted to children in care. His latter observation is in keeping with other writing on adoption.

Katz (2005) and Aiken (1995) speak to the high costs to society when permanency for children is not achieved, and call for changes in public child welfare agencies that will increase adoptions of waiting children. Katz focuses on the recruitment and retention of adoptive applicants and Aiken advocates for streamlining of court and child welfare processes. In the scant body of literature on the topic, three themes emerge as explanations for the large, and growing,

number of children in care who do not get adopted. The dominant theme is that systemic barriers to adoption are responsible for preventing children from growing up in permanent families (Katz, 2005; Scarth, 2004; Spiers, Duder, Grove, & Sullivan, 2003; Grand 2001; Speirs, Duder, Carin, Lacroix & Mayhew, 1999; Aitken, 1995). Other themes that emerge highlight the profiles of the children themselves (Scarth, 2004; Grand, 2001; Hobbs, Hobbs, & Wynne, 2000; Avery, 1997); and the lack of suitable adoptive families (Katz, 2005; Avery, 1999).

Only five of these writers reached their conclusions through their own research studies. The others evidently drew their conclusions from personal and professional experience and other writing and research in the child welfare arena. Aitken (1995), a Canadian writer from Ontario, names resource constraints and legislative impediments as significant barriers to achieving permanence for children. Another Canadian writer, Grand (2001), identifies social workers' attitudes as a potential barrier to the adoption of older children, citing an attitude amongst workers that older children are poor candidates for adoption because their age precludes the possibility of successful attachment to the adoptive parents. Four of the five research projects noted are quantitative studies. The fifth has both a qualitative and a quantitative component. Three dealt with Canada's waiting children and two dealt with barriers to adoption in the United States.

Avery (1997) looked at a group of 77 children in the care of New York State who were available for adoption. Using in depth case file analysis and

questionnaires completed by the children's case workers, she concluded that lack of success in adoptive placement is more likely to be related to factors such as inadequate adoptive parent retention and preparation, lack of success in establishing realistic expectations regarding the adoptive relationship and the demands it places on the family, or factors such as inadequate post placement services and supports prior to legalization. Notably, caseworkers felt the characteristics of the child were the primary obstacle to placement for these children, and many believed the children were unadoptable. These same workers felt that a child's chances of being adopted might increase if there were more support and additional resources for adoptive families. The limitation of this study is that it looked at only those children who had waited the longest for an adoptive family – probably resulting in a sample of children in the system that had the highest levels of special needs, rather than a sample that was representative of all children available for adoption.

Speirs, Duder, Carin, Lacroix and Mayhew (1999) reported on a pilot project involving the implementation of permanency planning committees for children in care in Ontario. They concluded that such programs can work to help children achieve permanence, and when they do not work, resource issues are the crux of the problem. The authors point to a number of methodological weaknesses in the study; nonetheless other researchers in the field support their findings.

Two other Canadian studies used surveys conducted by the Adoption Council of Canada as data. Grove (2001) reported on two surveys conducted by

the Council which concluded that workers' attitudes and systemic problems in Canada's public adoption system are the greatest barriers to an adoption placement for children in care. While specific barriers such as lack of resources, and legislative impediments are identified, these studies are limited by the fact that the samples sizes were small, and participants were self selected. The first survey sample was drawn from a group of people who had responded to a publicity campaign about waiting children, and may not be representative of all prospective adoptive parents. The second survey sample is described as mainly professionals, but does not stipulate how the sample was selected. In neither case was the methodology used to analyze the data articulated.

Spiers, Duder, Grove, and Sullivan (2003) analyzed the data from the first survey conducted by the Adoption Council of Canada and found that the families who responded did not fit the stereotypical profile of families approaching adoption, i.e., families who are only interested in adopting a healthy infant. In contrast, they found that these families would consider older children and children with a range of special needs. They concluded that the barriers to adoption lay not in profiles of the children themselves, but in the agencies responsible for placing them. They augmented the data by conducting a focus group and distributing a questionnaire at an adoption conference. Triangulating these data, they concluded that systemic barriers are hindering many children from finding permanent homes. These barriers include resource constraints and funding issues, the high priority given to child protection over adoption, poor



collaboration between the private and public system and the inadequacy of post adoption supports.

The latest, and largest to date, study examining barriers to adoption for children in the care of child welfare agencies in the United States was conducted by Jeff Katz and colleagues from Harvard and the Urban Institute (2005). These researchers use data from multiple sources (interviews, focus groups and a national survey of state adoption agencies) to document general interest in adoption of children from foster care; the characteristics of adoptive applicants and the children they adopt; the experiences of adoptive applicants with the process of adoption; and factors that influence whether or not adoptive applicants receive a placement. They concluded that efforts to increase the numbers of children adopted from foster care must focus on improving recruitment of adoptive families as well as improving elements of the adoption process.

#### SUMMARY

In summary, all of these researchers agree that systemic barriers are the chief impediment to achieving permanency for children in care. Additional research is needed to analyze these barriers with a view to breaking them down and/or removing them.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORY

### SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF ADOPTION

From a theoretical perspective the problem of waiting children can be linked to the socio-political milieu of the latter part of the last century. Two significant shifts in adoption occurred between 1970 and 1990, a period Harvey (1990) describes as the end of the Fordist-Keynesian period and beginning of post modernism. The first shift was a decline in overall numbers of adoptions and the second was the proliferation of private practitioners and private adoption agencies. Socio-political and personal transformation associated with the era resulted in wider availability of birth control and abortion, and in increased social acceptance of single parenthood. All contributed to decreased numbers of infants available for adoption. At the same time, women who were placing their children for adoption were demanding a stronger voice in the adoption process and the cohort of potential adoptive parents was growing. Women were delaying having children until they were established in their careers and many found that they had waited too long. As a result, the cohort of potential adoptive parents was older, educated and more often economically advantaged (Sobol & Daly 1994). They too demanded a greater voice in the adoption process. In an era of decentralization, deregulation, and privatization, private practitioners and agencies found a niche for their services.

Unfortunately, both trends contributed to the commodification of children. Herrmann and Kasper (2002) note: "throughout history, they (children) have been

bought, sold and traded at the whim of adults" (p.46). Market model assumptions are integral to the shift from publicly funded to private agencies and supply and demand economics govern adoption services in the private sector. The demand for healthy infants far outstrips the supply and the proliferation of Intercountry adoption can be critiqued as an attempt to correct the supply and demand problem.

International adoption is also a striking example of late capitalism, a fundamental movement related to technological development that expands capital into previously uncommodified areas of the globe (Jameson, 2000). Technological advances brought the plight of children in third world countries into the living rooms of first world citizens – a phenomenon that dovetailed with the shrinking supply of infants domestically and the proliferation of private agencies ready and able to meet client demand for services needed to facilitate adoptions from abroad.

The welfare state as a remedy for or instrument of capitalism can also be criticized for processing children as commodities. Although adoption eliminates the cost of maintaining a child in foster care, cost saving benefits are not openly acknowledged and reducing the numbers of children in permanent government care (by increasing adoptions) is often promoted as a sign of governments' commitment to children and families. In addition, market place tactics are often used to profile children.

Adoption fairs and photo website listings are two recent examples of ways in which children are marketed to prospective families. Discourse of the ethics of

these approaches rests their justification on "the best interests of the child", a concept often incorporated into statements of legislative principle from the 1970's onward. The phrase stood as a mark of a paradigm shift that integrated developmental considerations into social policy and served as a precursor to the discourse on children's rights by forcing professionals to consider a child's sense of time in decisions affecting children (Swift, 1995). Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1973; 1979) examined the issue of separating children from family and emphasized the importance of the psychological parent, concluding that psychological parents could replace biological parents. Their work was highly influential in the child welfare arena, giving rise to the concept of permanency planning. When children are removed from biological parents, decisions about their future should be made as quickly as possible in order to allow children to establish continuity with new families.

Although permanency planning is now central to the way child welfare workers and the courts view decisions about children, Smith (1995) contends that actual practice does not necessarily reflect these beliefs. Adoption is often given low priority in child welfare services and is poorly resourced to deliver the sometimes controversial programs intended to achieve permanency (Scarth, 2004; Horner, 2000; Aiken, 1995).

Proponents of promoting individual children as candidates for adoption in public forums believe the end justifies the means but detractors decry the commodification of children and their potential exposure to predators when they are advertised in the media or through the Internet. The rationalization of "any

means" to achieve a permanent home for a child is a clear example of aesthetics over ethics, a concept Harvey (1990) associates with postmodernism.

The "best interests of the child" has also been used to rationalize the invalidation of children rights rather than establishing them as claims makers. This is evidenced in particular in the plight of Aboriginal children. Aboriginal peoples make up four to five percent of the population but a disproportionate number of Aboriginal children are in permanent government care (Scarth, 2004; Crichlow, 2003). While an in depth discussion of the devastation wrought by colonization is beyond the scope of this paper, Crichlow sums it up in the following quote:

The child welfare system is an excellent example of where Canada continues to fail Aboriginal people. This system is one that reflects white dominant mainstream ideals and has historically been used on Aboriginal peoples in ways that conflict or are inconsistent with Aboriginal people's values and traditions (p.91).

Armitage (1996) agrees and contends that the policies and provisions of the welfare state have features that contribute to institutional racism in Canada. He identifies residential schools as an example. Crichlow (2003) identifies the adoption of Aboriginal children into white families as another. Recognition of historic and present injustices to Aboriginal children is essential to the enshrinement of a child's cultural, racial, linguistic and religious heritage as components of a child's best interests. However, without addressing the "continued states of underdevelopment, a devastating culture of poverty, and a

marginal underclass" in aboriginal communities (Crichlow, 2003 p.91), the moratorium on the adoption of Aboriginal children by non Aboriginal families also fails them by denying them the right to grow up in a family.

Additionally, the shrinking welfare state and the rise of a conservative agenda in the 1980's created tension between social responsibility for the development of children and conservative ideals of least state intrusion into family matters. This was accompanied by economic change and uncertainty that precipitated a growing demand for state intervention. Child welfare authorities were caught in a dilemma. Governments targeted social welfare in their bid to deal with rising deficits because, as Armitage (1997) explains, in most economic literature social welfare constitutes a "burden on economic processes, an item of unproductive expense the economy has to sustain" (p.34). At the same time, increasing numbers of families were coming to the attention of child welfare authorities as a result of the shrinking public safety net. The association between the two is well documented in the literature (Speirs, Duder, Carin, Lacroix, & Mayhew, 1999). Decreased social spending results in increased numbers of children in care. Many of them are the children of single parents, as this group is the most likely to live in poverty and come to the attention of child welfare authorities (Swift, 1995).

Thus the stage was set for ever increasing numbers of children in care and an increased need for permanent homes for them. In order to find explanations for the failure to find permanent homes for these children, it is necessary to look to more specific theoretical models.

## SYSTEMS THEORY

Systems theory in particular offers a useful framework for examining the problem of waiting children in the context of adoption and broader child welfare services. Within this framework problems are seen "as embedded in a larger context which shapes and maintains them" (Robards & Gillespie, 2000 p.562). Contributing factors are interrelated and reciprocal, not isolated. They need to be understood in terms of their interaction. A basic tenet of systems theory is that a unit or system is made up of functionally related elements (Scott, 1995) and there is a high degree of organization, interdependence and interaction among members or elements of a system (Greene, 1999). Each system is itself a subsystem of a larger system and each element of a system is a system in and of itself. In these contexts, children, families, and adoption\guardianship social workers are the functionally related elements and subsystems of adoption services as a subsystem of larger child welfare systems. In turn, these child welfare systems exist as elements of another subsystem of provincial governments that also includes the provincial legal \court system.

Systems theory's emphasis on the interdependence and interaction among systems components and its interest in what makes social systems adaptive and maladaptive (Greene, 1999) lend to its usefulness when considering barriers to adoption. Another relevant principle of systems theory pertinent to barriers to adoption is that the usefulness of any element in a system is measured by its contribution to maintaining the system. The number of children legally free for adoption ensures that there are always enough children in the system, but the value of sufficient families to maintain the system is

incalculable because there are never enough families to adopt all of the children needing permanent homes.

Borgatta and Montgomery (2000) contend that in addition to the concept of interrelatedness, systems theory implies the operation of control as a system maintenance mechanism in that norms governing a system always include a set of values or objectives that may or may not be explicit. Discrepancies between objectives of a subsystem and those of the larger system – in organizations characterized by a difference between goals of individual departments and those of the larger organization – all seem to demonstrate the idea that the system objectives are more important than that of its subsystems.

This idea is central to the problem of waiting children. While a permanent home for every child in the continuing custody of child welfare authorities is the stated goal, the reality is that child protection and the day-to-day demands of guardianship for children in care dominate that system and take precedence over adoption. Resource constraints figure prominently in this discourse.

In British Columbia, the death of Matthew Vaudreuil and the subsequent release of the Gove Report in 1995 resulted in the refocusing of child welfare services to a more child-centered approach as opposed to a family centered approach. The unintended consequence of this philosophical shift was a sharp increase in the already burgeoning number of children in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that the proliferation of drug and alcohol misuse in society meant that more children who were coming to the attention of the Ministry were compromised by



prenatal exposure. These children exhibited a complex range of developmental, cognitive and behavioural problems, making it all the more difficult to meet their needs in placement.

In addition, the new Child and Family Services Act of 1995 and the Adoption Act of 1996 demanded significant changes in child protection, guardianship and adoption. In keeping with the tenets of system theory, all parts of the system were affected and the task at hand was the reestablishment of equilibrium, not an inconsiderable feat.

Attention is limited to adoption services without losing sight of these interacting with the larger system and other subsystems. The Adoption Education Program (AEP) is an example of the impact of a change affecting the system. Advances in adoption knowledge led to a legislated requirement, under the Adoption Act, for a formal education component as part of the approval process for prospective adopters. The content posed no problem but delivering the program proved difficult. The design of the program requires professional facilitation for relatively small groups. In addition, scheduling constraints due to the work schedules of prospective adopters mean the program needs to be offered primarily on weekends or evenings, outside the normal work hours of adoption workers. As a result, the program is not always available when prospective adopters are ready to start the process. The home study itself cannot start until the AEP is completed, and this in turn affects the pool of approved families at any given point in time. At all levels of the system, interactions have immediate and ripple effects.

## SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Studying the interactions between humans through the lens of other theories that complement systems theory leads to a more complete understanding of the system because, from that perspective, behaviour is the product of the dynamic interaction among those who comprise a system. One such theory is symbolic interaction, a mid level theory that is useful in linking micro and macro social processes (Borgatta & Montgomery, 2000).

Symbolic interaction considers the person's social environment and the reciprocal nature of the relationships with others in that environment. Integral to the theory is the notion that it is the environment as it is interpreted that is the context, shaper and object of action and interaction. It shares elements with communications theory, offering a way of thinking in an organized integrated way about the reciprocal nature of meaning making. Symbolic Interaction "emphasizes communication, its development, limitations, distortions, significance, content, and symbolic nature." (Ephross & Greene, 1991 p. 204). One of the tenets of symbolic interaction theory is that people form a self-concept based on what they perceive others tell them about themselves or what they think others are communicating about them. They make meaning of their interactions with others based on these perceptions and interpretations and in turn are influenced to act, based on those meanings.

## COGNITIVE THEORY

At a micro level, cognitive theory with its emphasis on the effect of perception of the environment on learning and behaviour (Vourlekis, 1999) is

also relevant to discourse and decision making in the adoption arena. A person actively and continuously constructs knowledge and meaning from experience and his or her own cognitive capacities and knowledge. Behaviour is a response to those meanings, whether the thoughts and feelings are conscious or unconscious. The causal relationship between thoughts, feeling and behaviour is reciprocal with a change in one influencing the others. Thus, how a person thinks, feels or perceives influences behaviour and behaviour influences how one thinks, feels and perceives.

The interplay of these theories is evident in the literature regarding waiting children in so far as much of the research on waiting children highlights perception: perceptions about the children who are available for adoption, perceptions about families available to adopt, and perceptions about the process. These perceptions are sometimes closely held beliefs that shape practice, regardless of how well they reflect reality.

Perceptions about waiting children are rooted in the "special needs" label attached to them. The vast majority of children in the care of child welfare authorities have a plethora of challenges related to their prenatal or early life experiences – challenges that must be recognized and considered when planning for them. The term "special needs" came into popular use to describe these considerations. Unfortunately, over time the term became an image of the child, an act of labeling and stigmatization (Scott, 1995).

When professionals, and those privy to their language and meanings, use the term "special needs" they refer to the care requirements of a particular child.

To those outside of that system that is not necessarily the case. In a Derridian sense, we know things only by what they are not (Harvey, 1990) and when used as a label, "special needs" has come to mean "not normal".

Perceptions about families available to adopt are rooted in beliefs about the characteristics of the children they are willing to adopt. The prevalent notion is that families want to adopt predominantly healthy young children. Although research consistently demonstrates that there are families willing to adopt older children, who necessarily come with "special placement needs" due to previous life experiences and influences, a common refrain is the shortage of families to adopt waiting children. From a cognitive point of view, how did this come to be known as a truth in adoption? What influence does it have on how families are recruited or on how initial inquiries into adoption are handled?

Perceptions about the availability of families are also partly rooted in Bandura's social learning theory, as are perceptions about the process. This theory suggests that individuals learn not only from the consequences of their own behaviour but also from observing the consequences of others' behaviour. Observing and coding an event influences future behaviour. The central element is the idea of self-efficacy or competence. Expectations of self-efficacy stem from diverse sources of information including judgments of past performance and previous responses of others. These judgments of efficacy in turn affect the outcomes of situations and thereby confirm or modify existing cognitive structures (Ephross & Greene, 1991).

The literature suggests that families find it is faster and easier to adopt from other countries than from the child welfare system in Canada (Dave Thomas Foundation, 2004; Grand, 2001). Are these misconceptions or truths? From a cognitive or social learning theoretical perspective, the experiences families have approaching adoption, coupled with what they learn from the experiences of others, may lead them to believe it is not possible to adopt locally.

Constructivism, a post modern variant of cognitive theory, proposes that humans are active participants in their own reality and that reality is co-created between the individual and the external stimuli to which he or she is responding. Prior experiences, images, sensations, conceptualizations and associations mutually interact and collectively operate to affect each individual's brand of meaning making. The two different realities of workers and families can be seen as constructed realities. For workers the reality is that there are no families to adopt waiting children; for families the constructed reality is that there are no children to adopt.

In summary, all of these theories lend themselves to explaining the complexity of adoption for waiting children and contribute to my analysis of the data which suggests the interplay of systems theory with the construction of experience for both adoptive applicant participants and social worker participants.

## CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Finding adoptive homes for children in continuing custody of child welfare authorities is a significant problem in child welfare. Previous research in this area highlights systemic barriers as the chief impediment to achieving permanency for children in care. It also reveals differences in opinion as to what those systemic barriers are. Recruiting and retaining families figures prominently in the discourse.

The purpose of my research was to explore barriers to adoption of children in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development in British Columbia from the perspective of adoptive applicants and from the perspective of social workers who work in guardianship and adoption.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

“Qualitative research is best characterized as a family of approaches whose goal is understanding the lived experiences of persons who share time, space and culture” (Frankl & Devers, 2000, p. 214). It enhances our knowledge about complex events and processes because it seeks to understand rather than quantify experiences. It is thus well suited to the study of adoption, a complex, multifaceted process influenced by the myriad experiences of children available for adoption, families seeking to adopt, and social workers working in the field.

Given that the goal of this study was to describe the perceptions of adoptive applicants and social workers about barriers to adoption, qualitative research offers a useful platform to present the data.

### SAMPLING

An illustrative\evocative approach to sampling was utilized. This sampling approach is not intended to be statistically representative or its findings broadly generalizable but is intended to provide a flavour about the phenomena being examined (Mason, 2002). Sampling was purposeful and strategic in the sense that the goal of the study was to describe perceptions of social workers working in adoption and individuals who had applied to adopt a child in care.

The inclusion criterion for social workers was that they worked in an Adoption Unit for the Ministry of Children and Family Development. The inclusion criterion for adoptive applicants was that they had applied to adopt through the

Ministry, whether or not they had been successful in adopting. These criteria were selected because the Ministry of Children and Family Development is responsible for children in the continuing custody of the provincial government. My goal was to examine the perceptions of social workers and adoptive applicants about barriers to adoption.

### PARTICIPANTS

My study examined the perceptions of 10 participants – five individuals who had applied to the Ministry of Children and Family Development to adopt and five social workers. While not exhaustive of the voices of those populations, I felt that this number of participants would be sufficient to provide a flavour of the perceptions of adoptive parents and social workers. I recruited social worker participants by distributing an advertisement through their workplaces. Other participants were recruited through the Adoptive Families Association of British Columbia, by placing an ad in their newsletter, and by word of mouth.

Details about social worker participants are summarized in Table 1 and details about adoptive applicants are summarized in Table 2. Brief descriptions of all participants follow. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality for participants.

Table 1: Social Worker participants (N=5)

Participant	Role within MCFD	Years Working in Adoption
George	Adoption Worker	15
Martha	Adoption \Recruitment Worker	7
Samantha	Adoption Worker	12
Angela	Adoption \Guardianship Worker	3
Joanne	Adoption Recruitment Worker	4



Table 2: Adoptive Applicants Participants (N=5)

Participant	Marital Status	Adoptive Status
Andrea	Single	Adoptive parent
Barbara	Married	File Closed
Bob	Married	Adoptive Parent
Mary	Married	Adoptive Parent
Elizabeth	Married	Adoptive Parent

### Social Worker Participants

Social worker participants are either adoption workers who approve families for adoption and place children for adoption or guardianship\adoption workers. In addition to approving families and placing children for adoption, guardianship\adoption workers carry the duties and responsibilities of a legal parent on behalf of the province when the biological parents' rights have been terminated.

"George" began working for the Ministry of Children Family Development in 1993 and has worked in the same Adoption\Guardianship Unit of the Ministry since then. His previous adoption experience included five years working on a demonstration project for special needs adoption.

Martha began working for the Ministry of Children Family Development in 1995 as a child protection social worker. A year later she accepted a resource worker position that she held for five years before transferring to an Adoption\Guardian Unit. She worked in one unit for three years before moving to her current position one and a half years ago.

Samantha began working for the Ministry of Children and Family Development in 1991 as a child protection worker. For the past 12 years she has

worked as an adoption worker, spending seven years in one adoption unit and the last five years in another.

Angela began working for the Ministry of Children and Family Development in 2001 as a Community Living Services Social Worker. One year later she transferred to her current position as a guardianship\adoption worker.

Joanne began working for the Ministry of Children and Family Development in 1996 as a child protection social worker. Four years later she accepted a position as a resource worker that she held for one year before starting her current position as an adoption recruitment worker in 2001.

#### Adoptive Parent Participants

Andrea is a single adoptive mother. She applied to the Ministry to adopt in 2001 and her son Mark was placed with her in 2003.

Barbara is a married woman with one biological child. She and her husband applied to the Ministry to adopt in 2000. In 2002, after several proposals did not work out, the Ministry put Barbara and Harry's application on hold. The Ministry subsequently closed their file in 2003.

Bob and Mary are a married couple who have been foster parents for fifteen years. They adopted siblings in 2003. Andrew came into their care as a foster child in 1991 when he was 2 years old and Anna came into their care shortly after her birth in 1995. They initiated the adoption process in 2003 when Andrew was 14 years old.

Elizabeth is a married woman with one adopted child. She and her husband applied to the Ministry to adopt in 1990. They eventually applied to a licensed agency and adopted a daughter from Korea in 2001.

### DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected by means of audio taped interviews and notes recorded at the end of each interview. In addition, for participants who were adoptive applicants, a time line was used to record significant dates and time frames involved in their adoption experience with the Ministry. Interviews were conducted in the homes of adoptive applicants and in the offices of social workers, and were between one hour and one and one half hours in length. Audio taped Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

A two-part interview guide was used to interview participants. (See Appendix A - Interview Guide.) The guide included both open and closed questions designed to narrow responses to a specific topic area and then broaden the response to include the participants' views and perceptions of their experience. Adoptive applicant participants were first asked a series of structured questions that were designed to elicit information about time lines from the point of application to the point of being approved to adopt and/or having a child placed in their family. The second component of the interview consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit information about participants' personal experiences with adoption through the Ministry and to elicit their views about any perceived barriers to adoption for children in care.

Social workers were first asked a series of structured questions about their current adoption work, previous experience in the adoption program area, and length of time working for the Ministry of Children and Family Development. The second component of their interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit information about the children available for adoption through the Ministry and information about families that they, or their co-workers, had approved for adoption. They were also asked about their perceptions of any barriers to adoption for children in care.

Interviews are commonly understood as collaborative, communicative, interactive events (Ellis & Berger, 2003). In the postmodern tradition, eminently suited to qualitative research, boundaries between the interviewer and the person being interviewed are less rigid than in traditional forms of interviewing in which the interviewer remains detached from the process and attempts to elicit responses without influence. Accordingly, interviews are increasingly seen as sites for meaning making. Both the interviewer and the research participant are active participants in the construction of the data generated in the interview. As a result, the value of interview data lie both in their meaning and how that meaning is constructed.

The active view eschews the image of the vessel to be tapped in favor of the notion that the subject's interpretative capabilities must be activated, stimulated, and cultivated. The interview is a commonly recognized occasion for formally and systematically doing so (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000).

These premises are germane to this qualitative study. In particular, the researcher and social workers interviewed are peers and share understanding of many of the complexities of the adoption process and issues inherent therein. Additionally, two of the participants are a married couple who elected to be interviewed together. Their interchange resulted in a co-constructed consolidation of their family's experience with adoption. Interviews were conversational in tone.

### DATA ANALYSIS

"Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson, 1952, cited in Titscher, Meyer, Wodak & Fetter, 2002 p. 57). It is the longest established method of text analysis in qualitative research (Titscher et al, 2002) and is well suited to qualitative research because of its' flexibility (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In general, content analysis involves the organization of text into conceptual categories and the creation of themes that are then used to understand data. Neuman (2000) stresses the importance of developing thematic codes that capture the qualitative richness of the phenomena and are consequently useful in the analysis, interpretation and presentation of the research. Interpretation of findings was aided by considering a number of theoretical lenses through which adoption can be viewed. These included systems theory, symbolic interaction and cognitive theory.

Hseih and Shannon (2005) identify three distinctive approaches to content analysis: conventional, directed and summative. Both conventional and directed approaches were used to analyze the data collected in interviews and notes I made after each interview was concluded. Data analysis began with the first reading of the completed transcriptions of interviews and the development of broad thematic codes based on previous research about barriers to adoption, a directed approach to analysis. Using a more conventional approach, additional themes were generated by the data itself.

I reviewed the transcript line-by-line, highlighting key words and phrases and making notes in the margins and adding reflective notes. These key words and phrases were coded by existing themes and used to develop additional themes. The third and fourth reviews of transcripts were used to further scan for codes and themes and to make connections between themes. This enabled the identification of areas of commonality among and between the two groups, as well as areas in which they differed - both in the essence of experiences and in what participants chose to share in the interview process. Subsequent analysis focused on selecting text to use as exemplifiers in the presentation of the data.

#### APPROACH TO VALIDITY

One of the most significant issues facing any researcher is potential threat to validity – i.e. alternative plausible explanations for the interpretation of the data. Due to the nature of qualitative research, validity cannot be established by objective measures. Maxwell (1996) identifies description, interpretation and generalization as three potential threats to validity in qualitative research. He

contends that recognizing and acknowledging these threats is the key to rigor in qualitative research.

I attempted to address threats to validity through decisions made prior to beginning data collection. Because the sample was self-selected and because selection criteria included only participants who are or were involved in Ministry adoptions, it is subject to response/non-response bias. In other words, adoptive applicants and social workers who feel the system works may not come forward or may have different views about barriers to adoption. The sample size is small, and although the participants' perceptions of the barriers to adoption of waiting children provide insight into their own particular experiences, their experiences are not necessarily representative of the experiences of all applicants who apply to the Ministry to adopt, nor necessarily representative of all MCFD social workers who work in adoption.

I used verbatim transcriptions of interviews to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data collected. Maxwell (1996) identifies reactivity, the influence of the researcher on the participant, as a potential threat to validity in qualitative research. In order to address this threat, I reflected on my own biases as I undertook this research project. In addition, I explicate the potential of my influence on the participants and on data generated. Findings were shared with participants to ensure that my interpretations resonated with their experiences. I used quotes, edited only for clarity and conciseness, from participants to enable the reader to assess my interpretations.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

All participants agreed that barriers to adoption exist and all indicated that they personally encountered barriers in their experiences working within the Ministry or adopting through the Ministry. Barriers that emerged from data collected in interviews are grouped under the following headings: (1) barriers related to children, (2) barriers impinging on families, (3) barriers related to social worker bias, (4) organizational barriers, and (5) barriers related to the legal system. The sub themes that emerged out of each subject area are presented with the broader theme.

These themes combine to highlight the enormous challenges the Ministry faces in adoption planning for children in care and the challenges for families applying to adopt. Not lost in the discussion is the plight of the children who never find permanent homes through adoption. Quotations are taken directly from transcribed interviews. As noted earlier, where necessary, quotations have been slightly edited for clarity and conciseness.

### BARRIERS RELATED TO CHILDREN

#### Characteristics of Waiting Children

All participants agreed that children in the care of the Ministry have, or are at risk to develop, special needs and social worker participants described waiting children predominantly in terms of their special needs such as prenatal alcohol and drug exposure, mental health issues, behavioural challenges and belonging to a sibling group. One social worker participant also noted that the majority of



children available for adoption are over five years of age, and harder to place as a result of their early life experiences including multiple moves.

The majority of the children have fairly significant challenges. They have prenatal exposure to alcohol or drugs, many of them... have suffered from detrimental parenting....many of the kids have been in multiple placements before we find the perfect home for them.. (George)

Only one social worker participant highlighted positive attributes of waiting children.

I think people have the notion that our children are all greatly damaged – have huge special needs – you know the scratch and dent kids – severely dented – these are the words you hear people talk about. They're not really... yes, there are some children who are extremely damaged. For the most part I find our children are strangely typical when you actually meet them – when you actually see how they are doing with their family they are actually relatively normal children. (Martha)

Social worker participants were unanimous in their belief that the characteristics and special needs of waiting children were impediments to their adoption. In contrast to social worker participants, adoptive applicants did not equate the special needs of waiting children to barriers to adoption, although two adoptive applicant participants felt that labels attached to children were barriers to their adoption and one felt that frequent moves exacerbated their placement needs.

...we have great difficulties finding actual adequate placements for kids who are older, children that have fetal alcohol syndrome, children that have significant mental health issues, children that have large sibling groups. (George)

They're afraid of the labels. (Mary)

They're afraid of the labels.... yet the real damage is probably done from moving kids around the system. (Bob)

Two social worker participants noted that, in attempts to describe children realistically, there was more attention paid to their problems than to their positive attributes, potentially discouraging potential adoptive parents. Two adoptive applicant participants agreed.

I think that we tend to—and we need to—focus, or give the information about the struggles that our kids have, but we tend to only list those when we talk to families new to adoption. (Joanna)

I think we haven't done a great job of explaining how great our children really are.... So I always try to have...that's why I have these (points to bulletin board covered in pictures of children) so when people come in and think that's all we have is three headed monsters, I like to point to my wall and say..."I've placed that child for adoption, and that child, and that child, and that child, and that child... great kids. (Martha)

As a side note, as I was sitting in Martha's office, I had thought most of the pictures on Martha's bulletin board were of her own children and the children of friends or relatives. This is indicative of a practice decision to present these children in the best light possible - as persons not problems.

These findings echo previous research on waiting children. Social workers are much more likely to emphasize the characteristics of the waiting child as a barrier to their adoption (Grove, 2001; Avery, 1997) than families interested in adoption (Spiers, Duder, Grove & Sullivan, 2003).

### Representation of Waiting Children

Profiles of children refer to descriptions of their attributes and special placement needs, prepared to assist in finding an appropriate match with a family.

Two social worker participants identified Resource Exchanges as an effective way to show waiting children in a more positive light, often resulting in matches that were not obvious using the standard matching process. Resource Exchanges are matching events at which videos of waiting children were shown to approved adoptive applicants. Both offered examples of placements resulting from Resource Exchanges to illustrate their point.

.... this particular placement came directly as a result of my couple sitting there and watching this little girl on video make pizza...on paper this kid is scary as heck ... she's twenty-four weeks gestation, was in the hospital for five or six months, had to be given oxygen for seventy-five days, has hearing and vision problems... and I think if my family had seen that first..... but what they saw was this real child.....and I think that a lot of our kids look way scarier on paper than they really are... (Samantha)

.... we show a video of the child, and that really helps people to see that this child is more than just a label. They think that if they are FAS, they're going to be sitting in a corner, you know, banging their head almost. Some people really don't know what it means, and so to actually see a live breathing kid, even on tape, does bring the kids alive for people and helps them to really understand that these are just normal kids in a lot of ways...(Joanna)

.... we had a family when we had our last one, who was only interested I think in under four or five, and they ended up adopting a 13-year-old, because they saw her there... (Joanna)

Three social worker participants identified the Adoption Bulletin, which contains brief biographical sketches (profiles) of waiting children accompanied by a picture, as another matching tool. One noted that the Bulletin was also a useful tool for bringing attention to a child when conventional matching methods did not work and reported that successful matches were a regular occurrence using the Bulletin. Another felt the Bulletin had limited usefulness because only the hardest to place children were profiled. She reported that only 156 children, out of the

nearly 1,100 registered for adoption, were listed in the Bulletin. A third social worker participant questioned the effectiveness of the bulletin and questioned how many actual matches were made out of the bulletin.

It appears that innovative matching techniques can result in matching children with families that may not have been obvious matches using the standard matching process. However, all social worker participants who spoke of Resource Exchanges and the Adoption Bulletin reported limited use of these tools in their regions citing workload issues as the chief impediment to consistent use.

Three social worker participants also spoke about Photo Listings, a technique used to profile waiting children on the Internet. All expressed mixed feelings about making children's pictures available in such a public forum. While they agreed that some jurisdictions were reporting successes with photo listing, they felt safety and privacy concerns were significant enough to warrant a cautious approach to the strategy. One felt it might be a workable if it were a secure site available only to waiting families who were already approved for adoption.

## BARRIERS IMPINGING ON FAMILIES

### Social Workers' Perceptions of Suitability

In addition to asking social worker participants to describe the children who are available for adoption, they were also asked to describe the families who applied to the ministry to adopt. Adoptive applicants were described as mainly falling into one of three groups.

The first group consists of infertile couples. The second group is made up of gay and lesbian couples, heterosexual single men and women, and single gay men and single lesbian women. The third group consists of foster parents, adopting children already in their care. These groups do not account for all adoptive applicants but all three groups figure prominently in the discourse about barriers to adoption. Although the groups are not mutually exclusive each brings different issues to the fore. They may or may not already be parents. The children they are willing to adopt cover the range of low to high special placement needs although social workers report that few are willing to adopt a child with a diagnosis of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

Social worker participants felt that each family type either posed or faced challenges in applying to adopt. Examples include querying the suitability and motivation of adoptive applicants, biases against single, gay and lesbian applicants, and financial barriers and suitability criteria for foster families applying to adopt. There also appeared to be an expectation that applicants have significant experience caring for children. However, this is potentially an unrealistic expectation for people who are not yet parents. I interpret the underlying concern expressed as relating to the potential for unsuccessful outcomes such as adoption disruption or breakdown if adopting parents are unable to meet a child's needs.

There has been a significant amount of research and writing about the characteristics of successful adoptive families. Howe (1998) reminds us, however, that the analysis and interpretation of adoption outcomes is neither

simple nor straightforward. In particular, evidence about outcomes based on experience of adopters is inconclusive. Nonetheless, there is consistency in the finding that for children who are placed at a later age, adopting parents with higher academic qualifications tend to do less well than adopting parents with high school education only. The explanation lies in the realm of higher parental expectations of children by more educated parents.

As a result, professional, childless couples can be viewed skeptically by social workers, particularly if they have little experience with children

.... they were working professionals, they had no children – infertility was the main reason they came to the Ministry... lovely couple but never actually had any hands on child rearing experience, of course they baby sat for nieces and nephews and he had worked at summer camps for kids but had no long term experience with children so my concern for them was what are their expectations? Are they realistic? Are they flexible? How much do they understand about the special needs of our kids and how much do they understand about attachment and parenting? And then of course, are they financially where they want to be... because I always worry that people who are real professionals – maybe they haven't attained professional goals yet. And they are still working on that but yet they want to parent – what's going to become the priority? Moving up professionally or focusing on the children that they get? I like to look for a balance – can they make that balance? (Angela)

Angela went on to report that this family was approved and ultimately adopted two related children through the Ministry. They are reported to be doing well.

Another social worker participant felt infertile couples (and singles) were overall more anxious as a group when they applied to the Ministry to adopt and some chose the Ministry for economic reasons raising concern about whether the Ministry was a good fit for these applicants.

...sometimes they can't afford a healthy newborn or an international and that's what they want ....they simply can't afford the 10-20-30-

40-50-60 thousand that it's going to cost.... so come to us and we're second best and they're never going to be satisfied.... (they) come here and settle for a special needs child because they can't afford a healthy newborn.... I feel really badly for those people because they're never going to be satisfied with us...I'm never going to be able to satisfy them and they are going to be settling for the child...(Martha)

All social worker participants spoke about problems single and gay and lesbian adoptive applicants face. There is a strong perception that these applicants face discrimination based on marital status and/or sexual orientation.

All social worker participants introduced the idea of social worker bias as an explanation for this phenomenon.

The reality is that sometimes some workers in our system are reluctant to choose same sex couples or reluctant to choose single applicants, and therefore they tend to wait longer than do traditional couples in our system. (George)

If you are anything but a heterosexual couple you've got to have a trump card – there's got to be something really special about you..(Martha)

Three social worker participants spoke about challenges, related to long-term involvement with the child welfare system, in working with foster families who decide to adopt. Their quotes illustrate the significance of the issues.

...they have been in our system so long as foster families ... we've created a dependency ....financially and emotionally...so when we... try to transfer the responsibility as well as parental rights – it's a challenge and all kinds of needs come out – from the children as well as the adults...(Angela)

...(sometimes) I have felt that the foster parents are probably not as skilled as other parents might be, or as skilled as other families I might be able to find for those children, but have made the decision that the connection that the child has in that family is more important than sometimes some of the parental skills we are looking (for). (George)

...how did we even make her turn into a restricted foster home – how did this even happen? But because we approached her (emphasis) we created this situation, we couldn't very well turn around and say you are not qualified to adopt these kids. We can't very well turn around and say "sorry you are not eligible to be their adoptive family... you are not good enough. (Angela)

As noted above, these groups do not account for all adoptive applicants but all three groups figure prominently in the discourse about barriers to adoption. Foster parent adoptions account for a significant proportion of Ministry adoptions each year and present issues unique to that population. They are discussed later in this report under Foster Parents. The following sections report on data related to all adoptive applicants, including foster parents.

#### Recruiting and Retaining Families

Recruiting and retaining families was identified as an issue of concern by three social worker participants. One noted that recruitment of families is a perennial problem in special needs adoption. The following quotes are indicative of the extent of the problem.

...we hardly have any homes applying right now. (Martha)

...we've tried to address the issue of not having enough families. I think that is always present in adoption of special needs kids. (George)

...and since 2001, when they had the big provincial campaign with television advertising and radio advertising...we got many families that came forward from that particular program. Since that time we've drawn back from doing the large advertising, and we are starting to find that there is now fewer families...stepping forward....(Joanna)

I think we have a woefully inadequate recruitment system right now. About four years ago we had....a big adoption recruitment campaign and we've been riding those coattails for the last four years, but that's dwindled down to nothing now – no one knows about us ... So we're not getting the homes. (Martha)



One adoptive applicant participant also felt that recruitment was an issue. She applied to the Ministry after seeing a recruitment poster in a grocery store in 2001. She reported that she had been thinking about adoption for years but, until she saw the poster, was uncertain that single people were eligible to adopt. She also spoke about her contact with others who were unaware of the opportunity to adopt through the Ministry or have misconceptions about the children available for adoption.

...people I've talked to in general don't know they can adopt through the Ministry. They think they need to go to a private agency and pay thousands of dollars...so I don't think there is...enough advertising to say there are all these children in care ...and here's who to contact to find out about them.... (Andrea)

Two social worker participants identified a secondary issue related to recruitment. They voiced the opinion that families who were either not interested in or not suited to special needs adoption were being studied as a result of the decrease in the overall number of applications.

.... people that want the so called healthy newborn homestudy (but) can't afford them – come in saying they want 0 to 2 (years of age) with drug exposure – we all know...we all know what they want (a low needs child) but... no one's knocking on our door –...so those people are going to be studied now – a couple of years ago when we had a backlog, they wouldn't be studied... (Martha)

One adoptive applicant participant, who had completed a homestudy in 2001, spoke about the issue from a different perspective. When her homestudy was completed, she was advised by her social worker to apply to an agency because there were no children in the Ministry that would be of interest to her and her husband due to the special needs of children available. She reports little discussion about what that meant in terms of the profiles of children and

registered immediately with an agency. Five months later they adopted a child from Korea. One social worker also noted the problem of families leaving the Ministry system and adopting elsewhere.

...sometimes the best families and the best homes...they get fed up and they go on to .....overseas or whatever. (Samantha)

### Duplicity in the Approval Process

Both adoptive applicant participants and social worker participants identified the approval process as being significant in the discourse about barriers to adoption.

Social worker participants agreed that, with few exceptions, families who completed the homestudy process were approved. They associated the high approval rate for those who completed the homestudy to the number of adoptive applicants who screen themselves out before the homestudy is finished. This screening out appears to be based on information they receive through the initial interview process, the adoption education program or through discussion with their social worker in homestudy interviews.

When asked if they or their colleagues ever approved families that were unsuitable for special needs placements, all replied affirmatively. The reasons cited are twofold. The first is that the low number of applicants applying to adopt translates into the acceptance of all applications. This was reported in contrast to a screening process that occurs when there are many applicants applying to the Ministry to adopt. The second reason cited for approval of families not suitable for special needs adoption was the lack of clear criteria in assessing families and their inability to find a concrete reason for not approving the family.

In the ensuing discussions, all social worker participants reported that this issue was dealt with in more indirect ways such as writing up the homestudy in such a way that another social worker reading the report would intuit that the social worker who wrote the report had concerns about the suitability of the family. That perception would then diminish the likelihood that a child would be placed with that family. The pervasiveness of this issue is evidenced in the following quotes.

.... it's sometimes very difficult to say, "Okay, you are not an adequate family to parent for this, this, and this reason." What does happen....they've been approved, but (the homestudy has) been written in such ways that nobody will ever accept them as adoptive families because there are enough issues identified in the study that people will not go forward and place children with them. (George)

...there is something inherent in the approval process I think where workers are not being honest enough with themselves or the family ... because there is such pressure – and you do see people's desperation to be approved and to have children and you see all their strengths and it is like that balance – well how do you balance it – do you not approve them because of one or two questionable things whereas they have 20 really good strong factors and they are going to lose out because of these one or two minor things – but then those one or two minor things to you can be huge to someone else looking for a particular child. (Angela)

I don't want to approve them... – so homes like that – you read them all the time – the last section of the homestudy is recommendation – at least the old way – and if I like the home – in my recommendation section, I will rave on about them – this family is this and that and so wonderful and (can accept) all of these needs and they are fantastic. If I don't like them, I will say: "home is approved for child as described in Section 9" period. (Martha)

And you read homestudies like this ...or you'll e-mail a social worker about a home and say – "hey – I read your homestudy about family X on the AMS and they are a potential match for my child." (they reply) ...don't think about it - don't touch ... (the family) with a ten foot pole.....So there are homes out there... and we know them...but we can't do anything about them. (Martha)

All social worker participants acknowledged that as a result, there are significant numbers of approved homes that are "unusable" in the sense that they are unlikely to be selected for the placement of a child.

Approval doesn't necessarily mean approval necessarily.... And that's because the workers who have the children on their case loads are the ones that have to read the studies and say this looks like a good family and a good match for my child. But they also, they are going to be calling the worker who wrote the study, and if the worker is telling them, "I've got this concern, that concern, that concern and that concern", the likelihood of them proceeding is not high. (George)

Two social worker participants mentioned the Systematic Adoptive Family Assessment (SAFE), a new tool recently introduced. Both expressed the hope that this tool will enhance the evaluation of families and present a more objective view of the family.

I'm hoping with the new SAFE model that we're going to be using that we're going to be able to show these homes that have problems more obviously. I'm hoping that it's going to catch some of these problems so it's not going to have to be subtle – it's going to be glaring...(Martha)

It is happening out there where workers are being challenged with their homestudies, and, you know what? Maybe the SAFE tool...maybe that's going to make a difference ...there is a level of sort of secondary approval and that kind of thing...(Samantha)

Two social worker participants also spoke about the contracting out of homestudies. One thought it was a good way to handle workload issues, the other felt it did not make the process go any faster.

...personally, I don't like the idea of us contracting out our homestudies, because I don't think we get to know the families very well. You can't read a study and really get a sense of the family well enough to represent them in a matching situation...you're going to spend three, four months getting to know that family... before you'll even start pushing for a placement for them. (Joanna),

All adoptive applicants expressed dissatisfaction with the length of time it took from initial application to approval. All reported time lags at every step of the adoption process. The adoption education program (AEP) is offered several times a year resulting in a waiting list for adoptive applicants ready to start the process. After the AEP is completed, applicants are put on a waiting list to have a social worker assigned to do their homestudy. The education and homestudy components each take about three months to complete but all adoptive applicants reported time frames of up to 15 months to complete both. Two social worker participants agreed that the length of time to complete the approval process was an issue.

Our process is a barrier... it takes most families, I'd say, a year to get through our approval process, and that's if timing goes well.  
(Joanna)

The approval time for the foster family, who had lived with one of the children from age three onwards and with one from birth (they were 14 and 10 respectively at the time of the adoption application), took two years. This included getting the approval of the children's Band in Alberta (a process they say was undertaken and completed by the 14 year old himself) and 10 months to conclude the homestudy.

And.... we're talking about kids who never lived anywhere else.  
(Mary)

Two adoptive applicants were approved for adoption approximately 15 months after submitting their application to the Ministry. Both felt that they were subjected to avoidable delays in having their homestudy processes completed. A lack of resources, i.e. social workers available to work with them, was the

reason cited for the delay. In the first instance, the applicant started and completed the required AEP (adoption education program) within three months of submitting her application to adopt. She waited another 12 months before the homestudy itself started. When a social worker was finally assigned to do the study, it was completed in six weeks. The second family waited for four months before an AEP that they could attend was offered. They completed the education program seven months after submitting their application to adopt and their homestudy started immediately thereafter. It took eight and one half months to complete. The last applicant waited for 10 years (from 1990 to 2000) to have the homestudy process started. Once started, it took 10 months to complete. This finding is consistent with reports in the literature of unnecessarily lengthy processes involved in the approval process. (Grand, 2001; Grove, 2001).

Three adoptive applicant participants spoke about the homestudy report itself. All were pleased with their final reports but one spoke about less positive experiences of other adoptive applicants.

We didn't recognize ourselves....we looked like Mary and Joseph on paper.....it doesn't look like us at all. (Mary and Bob)

It is interesting to watch how honest people really are in the homestudy because they want the truth on the paper but the reflection of what they said... that's another thing. I helped (social worker) write our homestudy.... she wrote her draft and I wrote all over it and we created a document that I read and said, I like this family...I've read other homestudies that are horrible....and they are mean.....the social worker makes the people sign them at the counter without taking them away ...they won't let them go away....they won't let them edit ....they won't let them change a word. They won't work together on something that represents that person. So that's happening too. That's sad... (Barbara)

Both quotes are significant in light of the comments made by social workers about homestudies being written to reflect how the social worker truly felt about the family.

### Matching Process

All participants spoke about the matching process. Social worker participants addressed the issue from two perspectives: finding a suitable family for a particular child and finding matches for families on their caseloads. All but one spoke about "finding families for children" not "children for families" as the guiding principle in matching. The other social worker participant did not believe they were mutually exclusive and as a family's worker, your job entails looking for an appropriate match for the family.

Additional comments from social worker participants highlight the complexity and subjective nature of choosing a home for a particular child.

...there has been some frustration...I've been challenged by colleagues about a family, and had to... go back and ask .... further questions about things in order to...convince this worker that they're a worthy, suitable family ..(Samantha)

...these children – we can't just send them off to anywhere – we have to find an ideally matched home and that in itself can be a barrier in that we are looking at the most ideal situation and sometimes the most ideal situation doesn't come up. (Angela)

I would love to just do forced matching. I would like to take social workers out of the equation in some ways – I would love to have someone look at all the profiles of the families and all the profiles of the children and match 4 families with every child and say to the guardianship worker – you *must* choose 1 of these 4 families. (Martha)

I think one of the biggest difficulties in terms of... selecting matches is around (the) mental capability of the children. A lot of families want to have the reassurance that the child will be independent as an adult, and in most cases we can't give that. It seems to cause a

lot of difficulties, finding the right family for some of the kids.  
(Joanna)

Supposedly we're not looking for perfect families, but I think that workers are still looking for perfect families, even though they don't exist. (Samantha)

I think then that it just goes back to the whole piece about the biases of workers, the realities of workload, options of what's a good match, you know, all of those things. (Samantha)

Most of my families end up getting placements eventually because I'm so pushy – you've got to be pushy or its not going to happen.  
(Martha)

Four adoptive applicant participants also spoke about the subjective nature of the matching process. All four felt the balance of power lay with the social worker in the matching process and whether or not a family received a placement was dependant on social workers.

In addition, two adoptive applicant participants spoke about their vulnerability in the matching process. Both had been informed on more than one occasion that they were being considered for placements – placements that did not happen because other families were chosen for the children. One referred to these as "honourable mentions". Both experienced stress during the process.

....and the social worker told her (the child's social worker) I was single and she said, "that's not what we want"....and if they were going to make that decision, it should have been made before the proposal was given to me. Because it was just like offering me the proposal and then "oh we've changed our mind" and taking it away. The proposal should never have come to me in the first place.  
(Andrea)

We were eventually proposed a 2-month-old baby girl. And were we proposed? No. She was an honourable mention ...I don't know if you have much experience with waiting parents... it's a real cycle of emotion and the up and down .... It was a really hard time when we were waiting to hear.... and then my social worker got sick .....we didn't hear anything for a long time and I was just beside



myself. So eventually when our social worker came back we heard that she (the baby) had been placed already with someone else. I was flattened. I was just heartbroken. I wrote letters. I was so upset. (Barbara)

### Waiting Families

In the first interview conducted with a social worker participant, it was reported that there were 300 homes approved for placement and 900 children registered for adoption. This individual expressed frustration that more matches were not being made. This information was introduced in subsequent interviews with social worker participants. Two accepted the figure as reasonably accurate. Two others thought the number of approved families was overstated and reflected a pool of families that were willing to accept children with low or minimal special needs. The following quotes highlight three social worker participants' perceptions about the pool of available and waiting families.

I haven't checked the stats recently, but it's less than two hundred (families). (George)

Probably about half of them are really only looking at under two, so are very limited and may never get placements. (Joanna)

... about half of the approved families are approved for a very low range of special needs. (Angela)

It's quite a distorting figure, I think, to just look at these families who are waiting. You have to take a look at what kind of children they're actually looking for.... (George)

Now there are some families that I think sort of do get lost a bit in our bureaucratic shuffle, and there are some families that we probably could find placements for if the workers would push a little harder or work a little harder, but when you look at any family that steps forward and says they will take a child up to age twelve who has fetal alcohol syndrome, has mental issues, those families don't wait a long time, they get placements. (George)

A subsequent check of statistics on that day showed 286 waiting families, with 146 categorized as approved for high special needs (Ministry for Children and Family Development, 2005a). This suggests one of two things: families who are not thought suitable for special needs adoption are approved for special needs placements or, alternatively families are not correctly coded for the placement needs they are willing to accept.

### Foster Parents

All social worker participants and two adoptive applicant participants spoke of issues for foster parents when adoption became the plan for a child who had lived with the family for a significant period of time. All agreed that finances were a significant issue for foster parents considering adopting a child in their care.

...so the financial barrier, I think, is a huge one, and that financial barrier is even more evident in situations where people have been fostering and receiving money to care for the kids that often enough becomes a set part of the family income. Even though it's not supposed to, it does in reality...(George)

Foster parents get the maintenance amount. ...\$700 or \$800 per month for each kid, and then they have a service payment if they are of different levels—Level 1, 2 or 3. And so they get a certain amount of money on top of that as compensation for their time... so you lose the service payment..... from \$350 to \$2,900 per month...it's a lot of money to ask to people to say, "Chop that off because you love that kid and you want what's best for them". (Joanna)

Another issue that emerged is that many foster parents had no expectation of adopting when children were placed with them and are faced with a difficult choice when the plan for a child is changed from foster care to adoption. However, many develop significant attachments to a child or children in

their care and express a desire to have them live with their family permanently. Furthermore, two social worker participants and two adoptive applicant participants reported that some foster parents have been promised (by social workers) that a particular child will *never* be moved and that child or children would remain in the foster home until they reached the age of majority.

...they were told they couldn't adopt those kids, so they never thought about it, and now all of a sudden, they're getting workers coming up and saying, "Well, we've got this CCO and we're going to place those kids for adoption. Do you want to adopt them?"  
(Joanna)

If a child is not registered for adoption, social workers can fail to register the child to ensure the child remains in foster care. If the child is subsequently registered for adoption, foster parents are faced with a difficult choice. If they do not agree to adopt the child themselves, they risk losing the child.

This raises the question: why move a child who is well settled in a home with a family who intends to provide a permanent home for the child, even though they are not the legal parents? Two social worker participants spoke of why adoption becomes the plan for children who may seem well settled in a foster placement.

There are lot of wonderful foster parents who will commit and who will be there and who will invite those kids for Christmas and birthdays and everything for the rest of their life, but that's a smaller group than... the ones that are coming into it thinking—initially, anyway—that this is a way to earn a living. (Joanna)

...some (guardianship workers) aren't able to...see beyond a foster family saying ... we'll keep them 'til they're nineteen but we're not willing to adopt them, and then be okay with that. And as we all know, a lot of those kids end up moving anyway...foster families don't have the level of commitment that an adoptive family does.  
(Samantha)

...they're all committed when they're little, it seems, but when they're 14 and 15 that's when you really see the difficulties come out, and some families aren't willing to stick it (out) at that point. (Joanna)

Berrick, Needell, Barth and Jonson-Reid (1998) speak eloquently to the issue. They report that 46% of infants, 60% of toddlers and 68% of children under school age have had at least three placements. They also report that 31% of children who entered care as toddlers, and 37% who entered care as preschoolers had five or more placements in six years. "These data make it clear that we should not allow inertia or sentiment to interfere with a child's need for a permanent exit from foster care by permitting long-term foster care to be a permanent plan. Long-term permanent foster care is an oxymoron." (p. 73). Social worker participants agreed.

Two adoptive applicant participants who were also foster parents saw the inherent wisdom in this position but personally experienced the threat of losing children they had been promised would remain with them permanently as foster children. They subsequently adopted them. They also reported witnessing devastation in other families when foster children in their care were moved against the family's wishes.

A third issue that emerged is that historically foster home approval was less stringent than adoption home approval. This becomes a significant problem when adoption is the plan and the child's social worker does not feel the foster family has the requisite skills to be approved for adoption. The decision to approve the family for adoption or move the child is a delicate one. The determination must be whether it is in the child's best interest to allow them to

remain with a family they are connected to or move them to a family that might provide a more stimulating environment.

All social worker participants spoke to this topic and reported recent changes in foster parent training and approval, which they hope will diminish the occurrence of this dilemma. The Adoption Education Program and Foster Parent Training have been combined into an Integrated Caregiver Education Program (ICE). The same approval process for foster and adoptive homes is also being implemented. The intent of these initiatives is to sensitize foster parents to the need for permanence for children and, that, if they decide to adopt a child in their care, the approval process will already be largely completed.

#### BARRIERS RELATED TO SOCIAL WORKER BIAS

All social worker participants introduced, and spoke at length about, the concept of biases against single and gay and lesbian applicants. Although all were able to cite examples of placements that were made to single men and women and gay and/or lesbian couples, all felt there was widespread systemic discrimination levied against them as a group. The following quotes indicate the extent to which they felt these biases exist.

...biases against certain kinds of applicants, single applicants being an example, I think gay and lesbian applicants experience the same biases that single applicants do. I'm going to be doing a homestudy for a single gay man...I'm just going to be honest with him...I think he's going to get biased against because he's single and he's gay.... (Samantha)

Well, there's the whole issue of single females, or single anybody applying..... the single women don't get chosen, and there are very few single men, and if they ever come forward, I think they would *rarely* get chosen. (Joanna)

...there is a level of sort of secondary approval and that kind of thing...it just goes back to the whole piece about the biases of workers..... (Samantha)

...biases about what that perfect family looks like in their minds; biases against certain kinds of applicants, single applicants being an example; I think gay and lesbian applicants experience the same biases that single applicants do...(Martha)

...and I think about guardianship workers biased in not picking homes, but you know, I'm sure there's a level of adoption worker bias in not approving homes. (Samantha)

... if you are just garden-variety single or garden-variety gay couple, it's going to be pretty tough ...(Martha)

...I think part of that comes with being around for a while...people perceive me as a very experienced worker. I'm a trainer, and.... if (I) approved a family ...they're probably a pretty good family. And, you know, that's kind of nice to be at that point, because it's pretty frustrating when you're (challenged)....(Samantha)

I think the single female applicants are the ones that wait the longest. It has been my experience in the last couple years and a major frustration on my part. (Samantha)

All social worker participants reported attempts to raise awareness amongst their colleagues about the issue.

I recently sent out an all adopt – that's a way we have of sending adoption emails out to the entire province – to all the adoption workers... I described a family to them in gender neutral terms – a perfect family, a wonderful family, willing to accept all these high, high needs – one stay at home parents, tons – tons of experience and I said: this family is waiting and then I left about a paragraph and I said, this is a same sex family – does that change how you feel about them? Got lots of interesting feedback from that e-mail – never got a match for the family – but I made a lot of people think – because everyone wanted that family until they realized they were lesbians. (Martha)

So...raising people's awareness and challenging people around that.....a lot of us are constantly... challenging people... well...so is this child not going to get placed period? Because you've got a

bias against (a) single...Or they're in a single foster home, single female foster home, but yet she doesn't want to place them in a single female adoptive home, well those kinds of things...so that was one way of trying to address it... challenging people.  
(Samantha)

### ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS

A number of organizational barriers to adoption were identified including the amount of and complexity of paper work involved in getting a child ready for adoption and team organization.

...there have always been changes ...Every time a change has come it's added more paper, it's added more bureaucracy, and therefore it becomes a significantly more difficult task for workers ... to get all that paper done and processed ..... (George)

This is also noted in the literature. Dudder (2005) highlights the increasing amount of time spent on paperwork as a troubling theme in child welfare in general.

Four social worker participants spoke about team organization as a barrier to adoption. The separation of intake, family services, guardianship, and adoption services was described as an impediment from the standpoint of forethought when a child first comes to the attention of the Ministry. Social worker participants believed that integrated teams allowed for better coordination of efforts to ensure that by the time a Continuing Custody Order (CCO) is granted, the necessary information has been accumulated and an adoption plan under way.

...the way our services are organized.....it's intake, it's family service. Once the child is CCO then it goes to a guardianship team. I think that that is a barrier to timely adoption planning,  
(Samantha)

One social worker participant felt that guardianship workers who were not part of an adoption team were at a disadvantage because they were not part of the adoption culture. Another social worker participant felt that guardianship\adoption teams are most effective when their duties were separate and the adoption worker worked in conjunction with guardianship workers rather than assuming guardianship responsibility for kids.

...guardianship workers that have a full caseload...and they have two or three kids that they are planning adoption for ...they don't know the process very well...(and) don't have the day to day support.... (Joanna)

And if you've got thirty, thirty-five kids on your caseload you can't do adoption properly for kids.... There are too many guardianship responsibilities and crises ...on a daily basis to be able to do the level of work and (have enough) involvement to get a kid ready for adoption. (Samantha)

...I worked with 8 social workers who had kids on their caseloads. I was responsible for helping them plan for adoption and also for studying homes that wanted to adopt ... So I knew all the children but I didn't need to worry about them...I didn't need to worry about the little day in and day out minutiae of child guardianship – I just had to focus on the adoption. (Martha)

### Resource Constraints

All participants identified resource issues as barriers to adoption. Without exception, adoptive applicants interviewed felt insufficient staffing levels in adoption services were an impediment to the timely movement of children. They reported lengthy waiting periods at every step of the adoption process and believed these were directly related to a shortage of social workers to do the work

In contrast, some social worker participants did not comment on staffing levels for adoption social workers, although those that spoke to the issue



reported adequate staffing levels. However, all felt caseload size on family service and guardianship teams was an impediment to long range planning and, as such, a barrier to adoption for children on those caseloads. They equated large caseload size to a lack of resources.

They further described the lack of information collected when children came into care, due to workload issues and mandated priorities of child protection, as a significant barrier to the timely movement of children to adoption. When children become continuing custody wards there can be significant time lags in transferring their files to guardianship and adoption teams for long term planning because of missing or incomplete information and paperwork. Three social worker participants offered that intake workers needed to be trained to think long range when children first come into care and diligently collect information such as birth family history for future use.

Additionally, social workers interviewed believe that insufficient assessment services slow down the adoption process, whether they are needed before or after a child is registered for adoption.

Although adoptive applicant participants and social worker participants did not hold common views about where the problem lay, all agreed that resources issues are significant when considering the problem of waiting children.

#### Adoption Management System (AMS)

The Adoption Management System (AMS) is a computerized database of children registered for adoption and families approved to adopt. It is a tool used

to find suitable matches for children with families based on their coded placement needs. Families are likewise coded according to the characteristics of the child or children they are willing to adopt. This automated system, available to all adoption workers, replaced a centralized matching system in 2004.

None of the social workers interviewed felt that the Adoption Management System (AMS) was working well.

...before (AMS).... Nobody really knows how that worked, but we thought it would be good to get the control into the workers' hands, but we don't do what's needed in order to make the matches work properly. The system is a little wonky....I've tried matching (more than once) for the same kids and come up with totally different families (each time). (Joanna)

AMS – great idea ..but it basically doesn't function...It's not just training – it's (social worker) resistance to working with the system. (Martha)

The problems they noted included problems with coding the needs of children and attributes of families and the lack of computer competence amongst social workers. All agreed that the automated system was a good idea but needed further development to be fully functional. All stated they have no confidence in the current program.

Children available for adoption may not be on the system or may be incorrectly coded, causing a family's social worker to look past a particular child as a match for a family. Similarly, there may be waiting families who are not on the system or who may not be considered for a match due to incorrect coding. One social worker participant noted that no one seemed to know who was responsible for data input.

...you may be missing out on families that are sitting on AMS, that maybe aren't coded properly ...(Samantha)

...nobody seems to be responsible for keeping it up to date.... in theory it's a good system but in practice it needs to be tweaked – it's not fully functional. (Angela)

In addition, one social worker participant suggested that the number of families approved for high special needs was overstated, probably due to miscoding.

### Regionalization

One social worker participant felt that a centralized adoption system was the preferred model and the move to regionalization regressive. The reasons cited were differences in policies and procedures between regions and competition for resources based on performance. In particular, this participant noted discrepant policies in the Post Adoption Assistance Program that would affect families adversely if they moved from one region into another that was more stringent in the application of criteria for type and level of payment. This participant also spoke about the competitive dynamic that arises as a result of attaching regional funding to placement statistics.

I think we should centralize...We need to have consistent rules throughout the province... so that families are free to move and we are free to matches throughout the province...another thing that happened when we went to regionalization was that we started counting the amount of placements that you received or made in your region....(that) translates into FTE positions – and it used to be that it didn't matter. So ... we stopped placing in other regions ... started placing in our own region so that we would double up our numbers. So if one of our workers places a child in my home we get two points- a child point and a home point...so much for matching children with the best home for them – it's about matching them with the best home in your own region... and that's not doing anyone any good. (Martha)

Martha also spoke about resultant tensions between social workers in different regions that compound the problem.

And there is a region where people just won't place – there is a region I'll never place with again.... (Martha)

Another social worker participant noted different practices in different regions but felt that the two regions she spoke about achieved similar results in the number of placements made, despite significantly different approaches to screening new applicants.

We'll study everybody.... But one of the other offices in another region screens people out right from step one. If you're not willing to look at drug and alcohol exposure, then...just the complete opposite of what we do... and really comes down and really grills people right from the start. "Are you prepared for this? Are you prepared for this?" Almost this hard sell approach, and they do still get families coming through.... taking kids at the same rate... as we are. So...I don't know why our outcomes are almost the same. (Joanna)

The pendulum swing between centralized and decentralized services has continued for decades. The latest swing to decentralization of child welfare services in British Columbia followed similar shifts in other jurisdictions, based on a perceived need to contain spending, a perceived need for greater accountability, a preference for ecological models, and greater autonomy for the Aboriginal community. It is also driven by a desire for increased reliance on communities because of strained capacity and over inclusion. Under centralized systems, service orientation can be seen as too authoritarian and unwieldy (Canadian Child Welfare Symposium, 2002).

## BARRIERS RELATED TO THE LEGAL SYSTEM

The legal system was identified by all social worker participants and by three adoptive applicant participants as a significant barrier to the timely placement of children. In particular, all believed that there are unnecessary delays in the termination of parental rights when the Ministry seeks a Continuing Custody Order.

...it often takes years for children to become continuing custody wards, and therefore they are not eligible for adoption..... and we have tried a couple of times to approach the court system about figuring out ways that they can actually follow through with the time frames that are in the legislation, but it's been a very very difficult thing to do because our courts still look at giving the family many many opportunities to show they can parent their child.....before they issue continuing custody orders...it certainly does impact our ability to find homes for kids if it takes three years to get a CCO, so instead of being a sibling group of two and three, they become a sibling group of five and six... (George)

It is important to note that these participants are relating the legal system as a barrier to adoption to children who are not yet in the continuing custody of the Ministry and not to children who are legally free for adoption. However, there is a well-established link between the age of the child and likelihood and timing of an adoption placement. The younger the child, the easier it is to find an adoptive home. In this way, the barrier posed by the legal system can extend well beyond the time it took to obtain the continuing custody order.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to describe the views of a small number of adoptive applicants and social workers about barriers to adoption for children in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Findings confirmed the existence of barriers and highlighted the complexity of adoption practice in planning for children in care.

Both adoptive applicant participants and social worker participants agreed that barriers to adoption exist. Findings were grouped and presented under the following headings: (1) barriers relating to children, (2) barriers impinging on families, (3) barriers relating to social worker bias, (4) organizational barriers, and (5) barriers relating to the legal system. In this chapter, themes that emerged from the data will be discussed in further detail.

Findings focused more on the data collected in interviews with social worker participants, and their views may appear to overshadow the views of the adoptive applicant participants, because social worker participants have substantially more knowledge about the inner workings of the Ministry and specific factors that influence the adoption process for waiting children than do adoptive applicants.

Before continuing, I think it is important to make a distinction between children in the foster care system in British Columbia who are registered for adoption and those who are not, even though all are in the continuing custody of the Ministry, i.e. parental rights have been extinguished and the Ministry is the

legal parent. Children who are in the Ministry's care without a continuing custody order, especially if continuing custody is being sought, comprise a third group. Barriers to adoption are different for each group and failing to differentiate between them when discussing barriers to adoption has the potential to mask some of the issues. That is not to say that there is no commonality regarding barriers if we view custody, continuing custody and adoption as a continuum for children who come into care. Barriers encountered at each stage have a significant impact on the ensuing stages.

At the time of writing, there are over 9,000 children in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Approximately half are in continuing custody. Of these 4,500 permanent wards of the government, approximately 24% or 1,100 are registered for adoption. Over 45% of children in care are Aboriginal. An analysis of the unique issues associated with planning for them is beyond the scope of this paper but I think it is reasonable to assume that the barriers to adoption that exist for the general population of children in care exist and are intensified for Aboriginal children.

In the past five years Ministry adoptions ranged from a low of 165 in 2000 – 2001 to a high of 348 in 2002-2003. In the last fiscal year (2004-2005) 308 adoption placements were made (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2005b), a placement rate of approximately 30% of all children registered for adoption. This compares favourably with the 38% placement rate for foster children in the United States (Katz 2005). However, these figures are misleading about overall adoption rates in that they include only those children who are

registered for adoption, not the total number of children free for adoption. When the whole population of children legally available for adoption in British Columbia is considered, the actual placement rates drop to under 7%.

This study largely reports on barriers to adoption for children who are registered for adoption. However, findings also offer some insight into barriers to adoption for children who are in permanent care and not registered for adoption or who are likely to come into permanent care through a court process terminating parental rights.

The most significant finding of this study is the degree to which it supports previous research that identifies three themes as explanations for the large, and growing, number of children in care who do not get adopted. The dominant theme is that systemic barriers to adoption are responsible for preventing children from growing up in permanent families (Katz, 2005; Scarth, 2004; Spiers, Duder, Grove, & Sullivan, 2003; Grand 2001; Speirs, Duder, Carin, Lacroix & Mayhew, 1999; Aitken, 1995).

Although this theme is evident throughout the findings, it is perhaps best exemplified when considering the group of children who are in temporary care and likely to come into permanent care, and best understood from a theoretical perspective using systems theory.

From a systemic point of view, the interdependence and interaction of the legal system and the child welfare system has an enormous impact on the provision of services to children. While both systems focus on the best interests of the child, as defined and as understood by each, the rights and interests of



biological families sometimes appear to be in competition with the long term safety and development needs of children. All social worker participants, and two adoptive applicant participants who were former foster parents, spoke about how delays in terminating parental rights affect planning for children. Uncertainty about the outcome of continuing custody applications can affect placement decisions and obviously affects the length of time the child waits for permanency. It is well established that the longer children are in care the more likely they are to have multiple moves and that multiple moves exacerbate their placement needs (Berrick, Needell, Barth and Jonson-Reid, 1998).

Other issues associated with court processes are the amount and complexity of the paper work involved and the staff resources required to do the paperwork and participate in court processes. All social worker participants pinpointed resources as the most critical factor in completing the paperwork necessary to register children for adoption. The fact that only one out of every five children legally free for adoption is registered for adoption is indicative of a system that is failing to meet the long term needs of a very significant number of children. It is clear that this has something to do with internal processes and as such presents a significant systemic barrier to adoption.

For children who are registered for adoption and waiting, there are also a number of internal processes at play that, from a systemic perspective, pose barriers. Social worker participants spoke about team organization and workload issues in particular as impediments to the timely movement of children.

Workload issues were related to both caseload size and the amount and complexity of paperwork, both ultimately resource issues.

In addition to systemic barriers, previous research highlights the profiles of the children themselves (Scarth, 2004; Grand, 2001; Hobbs, Hobbs, & Wynne, 2000; Avery, 1997), and the lack of suitable adoptive families (Katz, 2005; Avery, 1999) as significant barriers to adoption for waiting children. All acknowledge that there are not enough families available. (Katz, 2005; Spiers, Duder, Grove & Sullivan, 2003; Grove, 2001; Barth 1994; Daly and Sobol, 1993). Some contend that families are not willing to adopt older or special needs children, i.e. the profiles of children are the problem. Others disagree and suggest that it is not a lack of families willing to adopt these children but rather systemic barriers including resources constraints that are responsible for the lack of available families.

This research supports both positions. Social workers participants were unanimous in their belief that the profiles of children presented a barrier to their adoption, although they also identified systemic barriers and resource constraints as factors contributing to the burgeoning number of waiting children. Adoptive applicants identified more closely with the latter position, and opined that resource constraints and systemic barriers were the culprits.

Regardless of which position participants supported, this research strongly suggests that families who come forward to adopt children in the care of the Ministry face formidable challenges proving themselves worthy and capable of taking on the task of adopting a waiting child. While not exhaustive of the issues,

I will discuss issues related to families from recruitment through the approval and matching process.

### RECRUITING AND RETAINING FAMILIES

All social worker participants and three adoptive applicant participants believed that insufficient attention and resources are devoted to recruitment of adoptive families. This is also a recurring theme in the literature about waiting children (Katz, 2005; Umbach, 2004; Scarth, 2004; Speirs, Duder, Grove & Sullivan, 2003; Grand, 2001; Grove, 2001). All lament the lack of effective recruitment strategies and contend it is the single most significant barrier to adoption for waiting children.

Reference was made to a successful B.C. recruitment campaign in 2001 that resulted in a sharp increase in adoptions in the subsequent two fiscal years. Adoptions increased from 165 in the year of the campaign to 244 the next year and 348 in the following year before leveling off. Adoptions decreased in the last two years and placement rates for the first five months of the current fiscal year fell to 2001-2002 rates for the same period (Ministry for Children and Family Development, 2005b).

Although there could be other explanations for the drop in numbers of adoptions, the drop appears to be directly related to the cessation of the campaign as families who were recruited during the campaign would have completed the approval process and received placements or would now be part of the pool of waiting families. Two social worker participants spoke about the

backlog of applicants waiting for approval during and after the campaign and lamented the lack of current adoptive applicants.

The literature highlights a number of recruitment strategies that involve making profiles of waiting children available to potential adoptive parents. Adoption fairs, fashion shows and Internet photo listings are a few that have garnered recent attention. Some are restricted to families who have been approved to adopt. Others like Internet photo listings may be available to the general public. Opinion is mixed about the ethics of profiling children publicly. Proponents believe the end justifies the means and finding a permanent family for a child outweighs any risk involved. Those who are against such tactics decry the commodification of children and point to the potential of exposing children to predators by putting their pictures in public places.

In 2003 the province of Alberta launched a website featuring pictures, biographies and video clips of waiting children (Ferguson, 2004). In the first year it received 3.5 million hits and increased placement rates 30 %, from 216 adoptions to nearly 300. Ferguson (2003) reports that the sheer advertising power of the initiative convinced many observers of its merits. However, in recent years, other provinces including British Columbia also increased adoption placement rates by 40% or more through aggressive advertising campaigns including T.V. and print media. In 2002 New Brunswick launched a special adoption project and recruitment campaign, the thrust of which was an awareness and recruitment drive accompanied by the hiring and reassignment of social workers to work in adoption (Clute, 2005). Clute reports a four-fold

increase in placements of special needs and older children between March 2002 and January 2004.

This would seem to suggest that it is not the campaign itself that is the determinant of success; it is the fact that there is a campaign in place that counts. While password protected photo listings limit the risks associated with wide public access, the debate about Internet photo listings as a suitable recruitment tool rages on.

Crediting the 3.5 million website hits as solely responsible for the increase in adoption rates in Alberta is probably optimistic and simplistic. Alberta's booming economy and the resultant influx of families into the province may well be factors that have influenced placement rates. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that additional financial resources were allocated to adoption services at the same time in order to handle the expected increase in interest in adoption.

Another point to consider is that at least 99% of the 3.5 million hits did not result in a placement (although it could be argued that they may result in future placements). This should cause pause for anyone who is wondering whom, other than those interested in adoption, was accessing the site.

#### WAITING FAMILIES: WAITING CHILDREN

Paradoxically, there are waiting families as well as waiting children. Despite the lament that there is a lack of families to adopt special needs children, in British Columbia we have significant numbers of families waiting for placements. This research suggests that there may be two explanations for this phenomenon. The first is that families who are not suitable for special needs

placements are approved. The second is that the way families and children are matched is not working. Both pose significant barriers to adoption for both waiting children and waiting families.

The problem of approving families who are not suited to special needs adoption is a practice issue that may be compounded by social worker bias reported by all social worker participants.

The Adoption Management System as a tool to assist in the matching process has not lived up to expectation. Social worker participants reported little confidence in the system and suggest it is not accurate, not up to date and largely ineffective. The other and perhaps most significant problem with the current matching system is the level of social worker bias reported by all social worker participants.

Notwithstanding the lack of evidence that non-traditional families are less successful at parenting (Coates & Sullivan, 2005; Dorrow, 2002), all social worker participants felt that they had less chance of being selected for a placement than did heterosexual couples. Despite the fact that this issue was reported as well acknowledged throughout the Ministry, all social worker participants reported limited success in changing it.

A thorough examination of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there are a few points worthy of consideration. It could be argued that the fact that single and gay and lesbian applicants are routinely approved for adoption dispels the notion of discrimination against them. However, as noted above, families not thought suitable for special needs adoptions are approved

and furthermore, approval does not guarantee a placement. Although both traditional and non-traditional families make up the body of waiting families, there is a persistent belief among social workers interviewed that single and gay and lesbian single and coupled applicants are discriminated against based on their marital status and sexual orientation. According to Coates and Sullivan (2005), although British Columbia stands out as a progressive jurisdiction for gay and lesbian parents, "the backlash regarding our increasing social legitimacy remains steadfast" (p. 104).

Findings also suggest social worker bias extends beyond single, gay and lesbian applicants. In the struggle to identify families who will do well with children who have special placement needs, there appears to be a level of subjectivity inherent in the approval process that is strongly suggestive of bias.

Social worker bias was also reported as playing a role in whether or not children were registered for adoption. The reason cited was reluctance on the part of some guardianship workers to move children who were doing well in their foster placements. As noted in the previous section, this is unacceptable practice and clearly presents a barrier to adoption.

Although they did not relate this to bias on the part of social workers, all adoptive applicant participants perceived social workers as having a significant amount of discretion in the matching process and believed that whether or not a family received a placement was contingent on the family's relationship with their social worker.

From a theoretical perspective, symbolic interaction and cognitive theory are germane to the issues of social worker bias relating to the approval of families and matching them with waiting children.

It does not seem reasonable to accept that social workers in general are biased. Education, training and codes of ethics for social workers all emphasize the intrinsic worth of the individual and respect for the client and for process. One possible explanation for the apparent bias emerging from this study is that these social workers are affected by stigma by association. In planning for children they may be unknowingly projecting biases they know or believe to exist in the general population, and in particular in some birth families of waiting children. Finding an ideal family for a particular child potentially assuages and legitimizes their removal from their birth family that was less than ideal.

As noted earlier, perception plays a significant role in the literature regarding waiting children. It is clear from this data that the social workers interviewed believe that, in general, families do not want to adopt children with significant special needs. Families on the other hand did not appear to believe that a child's special needs were a barrier to adoption.

#### FAMILIES FOR CHILDREN, NOT CHILDREN FOR FAMILIES

The philosophical expression: "We don't find children for families, we find families for children" came up at least once in every interview with social workers. It is an expression that is in common use in the adoption field and also appears with regularity in the literature.



The underlying principle in the expression confirms the child as the primary client in adoption services. However, one social worker participant felt the expression has become rhetoric and has limited use in current practice, particularly for social workers working with adoptive families as opposed to working with children. I suggest that this is true and may be an example of what Harvey (1990) calls aesthetics over ethics, giving the appearance of being correct without considering the alternative hypothesis. The essence of the child as the primary client in adoption services is about finding a family that can meet the child's needs. This does not preclude identifying a child for a particular family as long as the family can meet that child's needs. The expression "We find families for children, not children for families" has the potential to be exclusionary by suggesting that there should be no personal interest in an adoptive applicant's motivation to adopt. It also downplays or denies the reciprocal nature of appropriate matches.

### FOSTER PARENTS

In British Columbia, foster parent adoptions account for approximately 30% to 35% of adoptions of children in care each year. Last year that figure reached 41% (Anne Clayton, Personal Communication September 23, 2005). Katz (2005) reports that in the United States, foster parents accounted for over 75% of adoptions in some states and less than 50% in others. It would appear then that foster parents are a significant resource as a pool of potential adopters.

However, as noted in the findings, all social worker participants and two adoptive applicant participants identified a financial barrier for foster parents

considering adopting children who live with them. Although most are eligible for the Post Adoption Assistance Program, funding under that program is not commensurate with fostering rates and services provided while a child is in care may cease after adoption.

Despite the significant number of foster families who adopt children in their care, Katz (2005) cautions against over reliance on this pool of prospective adoptive families. This research supports this opinion. While foster families in British Columbia may be resources for many waiting children, it is simply not possible for foster families to adopt all the children who need permanent homes.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

### LIMITATIONS

While this study reports on barriers to adoption as perceived by the adoptive applicants and social workers who participated in the study, it is important to recognize its limitations.

Despite the fact that the data supports previous research on the topic, the sample size is small. As a result, the views of participants are not generalizable. The experiences of adoptive applicants who participated may vary in significant ways from other adoptive applicants and social workers who participated may hold views not shared by their colleagues.

Another important limitation of the study is that it may not adequately reflect the complexity of the work involved in planning for children in the care of the Ministry. Specifically, it does not address the issue of planning for Aboriginal children in care, arguably the most notable challenge faced by the Ministry. Additionally, the structure of the interview guide for social workers may have elicited responses that emphasized the characteristics of children and families as barriers as opposed to eliciting more general responses about barriers.

A final issue to consider is my involvement in the field of adoption and the impact that may have had on all participants. Several of the participants know me in a professional capacity and their responses may have been influenced by views they know me to hold. Although my knowledge of adoption contributed to

the richness of the data, another interviewer who had no vested interest in the topic may have elicited different responses.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The problem of waiting children in British Columbia is multi-faceted and as such requires attention at a number of different levels within the Ministry of Children and Families. The legal system appears to be a significant barrier to adoption when parental rights are not terminated in a timely manner. It is well documented that the placement needs of children are exacerbated by longer periods in care. The extent to which the legal system is responsible for prolonged periods in care needs to be recognized before it can be addressed. At a minimum, greater communication and cooperation between the Ministry and the legal system is required.

The two groups of children legally available for adoption, those not registered for adoption and those registered, pose different challenges. The failure to register children for adoption when they are legally free to be adopted is a significant problem. Evidence suggests that resource and organizational issues are at the heart of the problem. The solution lies in a political will to make a permanent family a reality for every child who needs one. Funding and necessary organizational adjustment should follow a greater political commitment to permanence for waiting children. In particular, registering children for adoption, once a Continuing Custody Order is obtained, should be the first priority in the child's plan of care unless it can be clearly demonstrated that adoption is not a suitable plan for the child. In addition, time lines for registering

children for adoption, once a Continuing Custody Order is granted, should be established

For children who are registered for adoption and waiting for families, this study highlights a number of issues. These include the need for ongoing and sustained recruitment of families to adopt them, the need to assess and approve families in a reasonable time frame, and the need to reconsider the way in which families are selected for placements.

Recruitment of families could be enhanced in a number of ways. The most obvious is the reinstatement of funding for a public awareness campaign, such as the one undertaken in 2001, to stimulate interest in waiting children and increase the number of adoptive applicants. This needs to be accompanied by a strategic response to inquiries from potential adopters about adoption through the Ministry. Specifically, sufficient attention must be paid to helping families assess whether or not they might be a resource for a waiting child. In the face of too few families applying to adopt, anecdotal evidence suggests that families are discouraged from applying to the Ministry because they believe there are no children for them to adopt or because the process is not user friendly. There are several strategies that could be employed to deal with these issues, including making changes to how children are profiled to potential adopters and changes to the approval process.

One approach that could be effective is converting the Adoption Bulletin to an electronic format and ensuring that all children who are registered for adoption are included. Interested families could peruse the bulletin in a variety of secure

locations, such as MCFD offices, the Adoptive Families Association, SNAP and licensed adoption agencies. This strategy would address the concerns associated with Internet Photo Listings while offering families an opportunity to really see the children available for adoption.

The approval process could be streamlined by making the Adoption Education Program available on line. Families could complete the required AEP in their own time and be homestudy ready without having to wait for courses to be offered. The significant personnel resources currently directed to providing the program in a classroom setting could be directed to completing homestudies.

Another issue that requires attention is waiting families who have been approved to adopt. Having families waiting for placements while children wait for families is an enormous waste of resources. If families are approved, they should have a reasonable expectation that they will be successful in having a child placed with them, based on the range of needs they are approved for. Problems with the Adoption Management System should be addressed and attention directed to the way matching is done, including articulating objective selection criteria for placements.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study largely supports the findings of earlier research on the problem of waiting children. In addition, the notion of social worker bias emerged as a potential problem in the adoption process, both in the approval process and in selecting a family for a child. Additional research is needed to determine if social worker bias exists, and if it does, what causes it.

On a broader scale, considering the importance of the topic, there are a number of additional areas in which further research is warranted.

The legal system has been identified as a barrier to the timely placement of children when the Ministry is seeking a continuing custody order. If the delays in terminating parental rights were eliminated, what would be the impact on family preservation and other approaches leading to these delays?

Concurrent planning (planning for a child to return home and planning for adoption at the same time, in the event that the child does not return home) has been heralded as an answer to timely placement when a continuing custody order is ultimately obtained. Is concurrent planning being used? Does it work?

There appears to be an increasing reliance on foster families to adopt children in their care. To what extent do financial considerations impact foster parents' ability to adopt? An analysis of the cost-savings benefits of subsidized adoption could be useful in determining if reliance on this pool of families is warranted or if farther reaching recruitment strategies for adoptive families makes more sense.

In his recently released report on B.C.'s child welfare system, Hughes (2006) notes an unmanageable amount of change in the system including a shift between child protection and family support as well as deep budget cuts. What impact have these had on permanency planning? Can the effects be tracked?

The socio-political context of adoption also offers a wealth of opportunity to study and understand adoption. The decline in both infant adoption and overall adoption rates and the proliferation of private practitioners and agencies between

1970 and 1990 were significant shifts in adoption. To what extent did these shifts contribute to the growing problem of waiting children? Is there a relationship between the greater acceptance of single parenthood and the increase in the number of waiting children? What role does poverty play in relation to the population of waiting kids?

The notion of the commodification of children through adoption warrants further examination. The risk of commodification exists simply because adoption is a cross class transaction, particularly in Intercountry adoptions when first world citizens adopt third world children. The risk of commodification also exists for waiting children as evidenced by the trend to Internet Photo listings and events like adoption fairs.

Another topic worthy of exploration is why prospective adopters chose not to apply to the Ministry to adopt.

While not exhaustive of aspects of adoption that could be researched or studied, these areas of analysis have the potential to enhance our understanding of adoption and improve outcomes for children waiting for permanent homes.

## SUMMARY

The findings of this study, although limited by sample size and scope, support the identification of the number of children in care who are waiting for families as a significant problem in child welfare. Overall adoption rates are unacceptably low when the whole population of children legally free for adoption is considered. A child with a Continuing Custody Order in British Columbia has



only a one in fifteen chance of finding a permanent family through adoption. The findings confirm the existence of barriers to adoption for them.

Although a permanent family may not be a reality for every child in the care of child welfare authorities, there is ample evidence to suggest that permanent homes for many more waiting children is an achievable goal.

Increasing and sustaining public awareness of the plight of waiting children may be the necessary first step to the commitment of adequate resources to address the problem.

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## Appendix 1

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

For Social Worker Participants:

1. Tell me about the work you do in adoption.
2. Have you worked in the adoption program area before or in any other jurisdiction? If so, what differences do you notice here?
3. Tell me about the children in the Ministry's care that are free for adoption.
4. Have you had any difficulties in placing children for adoption? Can you describe them for me? What can you do about them?
5. Tell me something about the scope of your practice in resolving this.
6. Have you approved families for adoption of children in care in the past year?
7. Tell me about those families.
8. Were children placed with these families? If not, why not? If you perceive a problem what can you do about it? If the family has not received a proposal, have you discussed this with the family? If so, can you tell me about that discussion?
9. Do you ever approve families that you and/or your supervisor do not think are suitable candidates for a special needs placement?
10. Do you perceive barriers to adoption of children in care? If yes, can you describe them to me? Have you discussed them with your supervisor? If so, can you tell me about that or those discussions?

For Adoptive Applicant Participants:

1. How long ago did you apply to the Ministry to adopt?
2. Have you started or completed a homestudy? How long did it take you to complete the documentation process after you applied to the Ministry so they could start your homestudy?
3. If you had a homestudy started or completed, how long did you wait, after completing the documentation process for your homestudy to start?
4. If your homestudy is completed how long did it take to complete? If your homestudy is in process, how long has it been in process? What are the issues and/or outstanding requirements?

5. If your homestudy is completed, have you received a proposal of a child? Had a child placed with you? How long did it take?
6. If you have not received a proposal, how confident are you that you will be matched with a child? Have you discussed this with your social worker? Can you tell me about those discussions? If you haven't discussed this with your social worker, why not?
7. How long do you think it will be before you receive a proposal? What will you do if you do not receive a proposal?
8. Are you satisfied with the pace of progress? Why or why not?
9. Has the process been satisfactory for you? Why or why not?
10. Do you perceive barriers to adoption of children in care? If yes, can you describe them to me?
11. Have you applied to adopt in the past? Tell me about that application.
12. If you adopted through the Ministry in the past, why did you return to the Ministry?
13. Have you adopted outside the Ministry in the past? If so, what were the differences in the process?
14. Would you apply to adopt through the Ministry again? Why or why not?
15. If you withdrew from the process at which stage did you withdraw and why?