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To cite this article: Bibiana D. Koh, JaeRan Kim & Ruth McRoy (2017) Exploring Adoption-Specific Curricula in Undergraduate and Graduate Degree Programs, Adoption Quarterly, 20:3, 252-265, DOI: 10.1080/10926755.2017.1349698

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2017.1349698
Exploring Adoption-Specific Curricula in Undergraduate and Graduate Degree Programs

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ABSTRACT

The systemic impact of adoption suggests the need to explore adoption-specific curricula in baccalaureate and graduate degree programs. Using a convenience sample, the present exploratory study collected data in two phases. Phase one included email requests for adoption syllabi to professional email lists and to identified faculty with adoption research and practice expertise. In phase two, 22 faculty members who responded by emailing syllabi were invited to participate in an online survey. Results only begin to unveil what we know about adoption-specific curricula in higher education. Suggestions for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Adoption curricula; adoption competency; adoption professionals

Accurate statistics on all types of adoption can often be difficult to obtain (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014; Pinderhughes, Matthews, & Zhang, 2015). For example, private infant adoption data are more difficult to obtain due to the lack of reporting mandates (Shuman & Flango, 2013) and different reporting sources.

An estimated 2 million (2%) of all U.S. children and young adults living with their parents are adopted (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). In the United States, children may be adopted from the public foster care system, from private agencies and through attorneys facilitating domestically born infant or stepparent/second-parent adoptions, or from private agencies that handle intercountry adoptions. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016) estimates that 119,514 children were adopted in 2012 and notes that 44% were public agency adoptions, 49% were “other” (i.e., private, stepparent, tribal, etc.), and 7% were intercountry adoptions. According to the most recent Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System report from the U.S. Children’s Bureau, in fiscal year 2015, 243,060 children exited the foster care system and 22%, or 53,549, were adopted (www.childwelfare.gov).

Current estimates and adoption statistics that report trends over time are only one way to consider the significance of adoption in the United States. Another
consideration is the systemic impact of adoption (despite statistical fluctuations) on Americans. The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (Harris Interactive for the Adoption Institute and Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2002) estimated that nearly two-thirds of Americans are impacted by adoption in some way—perhaps by an adopted family member, a family friend who is adopted, or maybe a family member who has relinquished a child for adoption.

Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) may help explain this systemic impact. At the micro-level, developing adoptees are at the epicenter of the ecological environment. Next, adoptees and/or their adoptive families—at the meso-level—intersect with microsystems including a larger kinship/adoptive family network and medical, educational, and social systems. At the exo-level, adoptees may be indirectly affected by legal, family, and work environment systems, etc. Finally, the macro-level brings in culture and society at large. Various professionals work with adoptees and their families across and within these interconnected and diverse meso- and exo-level systems (Schweiger & O’Brien, 2005).

The broad range of pre- and post-adoption meso-level services suggests that adoption is a lifelong journey for adoptees and their families (Brodzinsky, 2015; Festinger, 2006). The need for these services can reflect the numerous developmental issues (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014) and may include (but are not limited to) education/consultation (e.g., medical/psychological/neurological); assistance with the adoption preparation process; conducting home studies; counseling for birth parents, adopted, and non-adopted siblings and other adoptive family members; addressing issues associated with transracial or intercountry adoptions; trauma, grief, and loss; facilitating search and reunion processes; changes in types of contact between birth and adoptive family members; post-adoption support and education; and facilitating and securing permanent adoptive placements for children in the child welfare system (i.e., permanency planning; Brodzinsky, 2015).

Based on these types of services, adoptees and their families may work with numerous professionals including adoption agency staff, child welfare social workers, medical personnel, and/or mental health counselors. We define adoption professionals as the professionals who work in such settings with adoptees and their families. Systems theory suggests that both meso-(i.e., systems with direct contact with adoptees and their adoptive families) and exo-systems (i.e., includes indirect contact but direct impact) affect adoptees based on the system’s concept of “interdependency and interconnectedness” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

One meso-system that adoptees and their families are more likely to have contact with is the mental health system (Keyes, Sharma, Elkins, Iacono, & McGue, 2008). Adoptees are overrepresented in mental health settings (Brodzinsky, Santa, & Smith, 2016; Tan, & Marn, 2013), with higher rates of externalizing (Keyes et al., 2008), internalizing, and attention issues (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014). Thus, helping professionals including social workers, psychologists, and counselors are likely to provide direct practice and clinical services to adoptees, adoptive families,
and birth families at some point during the family life cycle (Brodzinsky et al., 2016). Clinical services related to adoption include mental health assessments and interventions through individual, couples, and family therapy.

Due to the potential clinical needs adoptees and their families may face (Keyes et al., 2008), adoption professionals providing direct or clinical services to members within the adoption constellation (i.e., birth, foster, and adoptive family members) should be knowledgeable about the intricacies of adoption—including the developmental processes that unfold across the life-span (Brodzinsky, 2015; Baden & Wiley, 2007; Greco, Rosnati, & Ferrari, 2015; Grotevant & McDermott, 2014). Thus, the education and training of adoption professionals should reflect the diverse and complex developmental issues in adoption and include both general and specialized knowledge that requires adoption-specific education and training (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014).

Being a adoption competent professional is important in providing direct practice and mental health services to adoptees and their families in various meso-level systems (Atkinson & Gonet, 2007; Grotevant & McDermott, 2014; Porch, 2007; Ramsey, Brabender, & Fallon, 2013; Siegel, 2013). An “adoption-competent practitioner” is defined as an educated, licensed mental health professional with the knowledge, skills, and experience to work in adoption (Atkinson, Gonet, Freundlich, & Riley, 2013; for more information on adoption-competent criteria, please see Atkinson et al., 2013, p. 166). Specifically, adoption-competent practitioners should be knowledgeable about developmental and clinical issues in working with adoptees and their adoptive/birth families (Brodzinsky et al., 2016; Stokes & Poulsen, 2014); they should also be knowledgeable of evidence-based approaches effective with this specialized population (Atkinson et al., 2013; Casey Family Services, 2003; National Child Welfare Resource Center for Adoption, 2007; Brodzinsky, 2013). Both adoptive parents and adoptees have underscored the importance of and the need for adoption-competent clinical professionals (Atkinson & Gonet, 2007; Atkinson et al., 2013; Brodzinsky, 2015; Ramsey et al., 2013; Riley & Singer, 2016; Wiley & Baden, 2005).

From a macro-perspective, recent statewide policies underscore the need to bolster the training of adoption competent professionals. A 2014 California Assembly Bill 1790 (AB-1790, California Legislative Information, 2014) specifically required the California Department of Social Services to convene a work group to identify barriers for children in need of specialized mental health services from adoption/permanency trained clinicians (http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov). In 2014, the Center for Adoption Support and Education (www.adoptionsupport.org) received a 5-year grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families (http://caseannualreport.org) to establish a National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative to promote and support adoption competency among child welfare and mental health professionals working with adoptive and guardianship families.
With ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as a backdrop, Kolb’s (1984) learning theory suggests that both theory (e.g., didactic) and practice (e.g., in the field) are important in the integration of knowledge. Kolb (1981) theorizes that different learning styles integrate didactic and practice experiences differently—with some styles favoring one over the other. Taken together, we propose that learning theory and macro-level policy initiatives underscore the need to better prepare adoption-competent professionals. Education—both undergraduate and graduate curricula—is a crucial element in their training and preparation.

**Adoption-specific curricula in degree programs**

The research on adoption-specific content in clinical and professional educational programs is limited (Weir, Fife, Whiting, & Blazewick, 2008). In a website review of courses at major public and private universities across disciplines (i.e., psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy [MFT]) that included adoption content (e.g., domestic and/or intercountry adoption, permanency planning, adoption research and/or policy, etc.), Ramsey et al. (2013) found only one adoption course that was offered in the Psychology Department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (Rudd Adoption Research Center).

One may assume that adoption professionals (defined as adoption agency staff, social workers, mental health providers, etc.) might have received some adoption-specific instruction during their baccalaureate and/or graduate education. Yet according to a survey of 224 accredited programs in MFT (Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education), social work (Council on Social Work Education), and counseling (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs), adoption-specific curricula are scarce (Weir et al., 2008). According to this study, existing curricula are more likely to come from social work: 16.3% of responding social work programs offered adoption-specific content, compared to 5.2% of counseling programs and 4.8% of MFT programs (Weir et al., 2008).

This same study found that social work programs were more likely to offer classroom-based adoption-specific curricula, while MFT programs focused on field-based (i.e., practicums) adoption-specific training (Weir et al., 2008). Another study reported that 65% of licensed psychologists (N = 210) did not receive adoption-specific course work in their educational training, and 90% reported the need for more adoption-specific training (Sass & Henderson, 2007). Thus, the limited research suggests that adoption-specific curricula are needed in professional educational programs (e.g., social work, psychology, MFT, education).

**Post-degree adoption training programs**

Within the last decade, several post-degree programs have emerged including adoption competency training and certificate programs based at either academic institutions or adoption agencies. Many of these post-degree training and certificate
programs (e.g., Training for Adoption Competency; for a more comprehensive list of programs, please see Casey Family Services, 2003) have been developed to address the need for adoption-specific training. Various barriers such as time, location, enrollment requirements (including type of degree or licensure), and cost may limit the availability and accessibility of these trainings. In addition, not all adoption professionals seek or have access to additional post-degree training in preparation for their adoption-specific work (Sass & Henderson, 2007).

We argue that a comprehensive evaluation of the preparation and training for adoption professionals is needed and should include both degree and post-degree program curricula. More is known about post-degree adoption training programs, yet little is known about adoption curricula in higher education degree programs (Ramsey et al., 2013). The present study addresses this need.

Method

This study used purposeful convenience sampling in a two-step data collection process. First, email inquiries for adoption-specific courses were sent to the following professional email lists: (1) Baccalaureate Program Directors (BPD) for Council of Social Work Education (CSWE)–accredited schools; (2) master of social work programs (CSWE–accredited); (3) Title IV-E; (4) National Council on Family Relations adoption focus group; and (5) an adoption research email list managed by a psychology researcher. An announcement was also posted on the Rudd Center for Adoption Research (Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, University of Massachusetts Amherst) Facebook page. In addition, 12 adoption researchers from various disciplines (e.g., social work, psychology, family studies) were identified by the authors, emailed individually, and encouraged to submit syllabi. Adoption-specific courses were defined as classes that focused exclusively on adoption or included significant content on domestic and/or intercountry adoption, permanency planning, adoption research and/or policy, and other topics related to adoption.

In phase two, all faculty who emailed (phase one) syllabi were invited to participate in an anonymous online Qualtrics survey. Faculty ($n = 2$) who submitted more than one course syllabus were only invited to participate in the online survey once, resulting in a total of 22 eligible faculty members. Institutional review board approval was obtained from the first author’s institution.

Results

Phase one: Course syllabi

The phase one email list and adoption researcher inquiries yielded a total of 24 syllabi from 20 academic institutions (13 public, 7 private) and 7 disciplines (see Table 1). Data analysis of course syllabi was a multistep process. First, the first author categorized all syllabi according to course focus (based on the course
descriptions) resulting in four foci: (a) adoption only, (b) adoption and foster care, (c) child welfare focus, or (d) “other.” The two courses that did not fall into one of the first three categories were grouped as “other” (see Table 1). Courses were undergraduate, graduate, or both (see Table 1).

Next, to ensure consistent analysis of all course syllabi, the first two authors independently coded them for themes (defined as categories of course content) and subthemes (defined as subcategories within the themes) using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Using constant comparison methods (Glaser & Strauss, 2012), the authors compared their identified themes and subthemes to discuss and reconcile any differences. The resulting themes included the following: clinical, legal/policy, ethics, context, theory, research, and practice/service delivery (see Table 2). The rationale for the agreed upon syllabi themes are consistent with the range of adoption topical areas covered in the literature (e.g., Grotevant & McDermott, 2014). All resulting subthemes are identified in Table 2.

Finally, triangulation of the data helped to check the reliability and trustworthiness of the coding (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Two doctoral students who had assisted with the teaching of an adoption course and were conducting research on adoption issues were trained to code by the third author. Under the supervision of the third author, they independently coded a random selection of 20% (n = 5) of the syllabi for course foci, themes, and subthemes. Inter-rater reliability was acceptable for the four foci (0.80), themes (0.71), and subthemes (0.65).

Among the course syllabi received (N = 24), 42% (n = 10) focused solely on adoption. Of these, five disciplines were represented: psychology (n = 3), family studies (n = 3), human services (n = 2), counseling/education (n = 1), and social work (n = 1). In three cases, the adoption-focused courses were interdisciplinary (counseling/human development/educational leadership, sociology/social work, and experimental/family studies). Each of the aforementioned disciplines

### Table 1. Overview of phase one adoption curricula course syllabi (N= 24).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Syllabi</th>
<th>Course Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>AO/A/FC/CW/O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>AO/A/FC/CW/O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>AO/A/FC/CW/O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family studies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>AO/A/FC/CW/O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human services</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>AO/A/FC/CW/O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>AO/A/FC/CW/O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>AO/A/FC/CW/O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. MFT = marriage and family therapy; UG = undergraduate; G = graduate; AO = adoption only; A/FC = adoption/foster care; CW = child welfare; O = other (i.e., grief/loss, identity/adoption).
*One of these social work courses was cross-listed in social work and sociology; it has been included as a social work course.
**One of these family studies courses was cross-listed in both experimental and family studies.
***This course was cross-listed in counseling, human development, and educational leadership.
Table 2. Summary of phase one adoption curricular course syllabi content (N = 24).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Adoption Only n = 10</th>
<th>Adoption/Foster Care n = 8</th>
<th>Child Welfare n = 4</th>
<th>Other n = 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clinical</strong></td>
<td>Referral processes, grief and loss, models/interventions, practice issues (4), psychological affects, counseling the adoption triad, adjustment (2), cultural competence</td>
<td>Role of family therapy, family involvement, psychological effects of adoption/foster care, preparing children for adoption/guardianship, assessment (2), interventions (4), prevention, grief/loss (4), cultural competence, practice, attachment (3)</td>
<td>Substance abuse (2), abuse and neglect interventions, assessment (3), intervention, problem solving, family violence, practice with social justice framework</td>
<td>Processes related to loss/grief, death/dying, divorce, interventions (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legal/policy</strong></td>
<td>Adoption law (4), birth parent rights and responsibilities, policy (5), advocacy (2)</td>
<td>Legal—processes, initiatives, issues (i.e., emancipation, termination of parental rights, guardianship) (4), policy (5), comparative policy (state, federal, global)</td>
<td>Legal definitions of abuse and neglect, policy (3), legal issues/processes (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethics</strong></td>
<td>Ethics (3), values (1)</td>
<td>Ethics (2)</td>
<td>Ethics (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context</strong></td>
<td>Types of adoption (6) (domestic, intercountry, kinship), understanding adoption in 21st-century, culture (2), race/ethnicity, identity (3), adjustment/outcomes, heritability, adolescent special issues, language in adoption, history of adoption (4), history of child welfare policies</td>
<td>Types of adoption (i.e., intercountry, kinship, LGBT, special needs, single-parent) (5), sociocultural context of adoption/foster care, impact of early childhood abuse and neglect, role of early adversity, openness, emancipated youth, adaptive functioning, disruptions/dissolutions (2), cultural competence (2), adaptive functioning, history of adoption/foster care (3), history of child welfare (3)</td>
<td>Effects of poverty (2), diversity, oppression, historical perspective</td>
<td>Cultural/spiritual aspects, identity, sociopolitical, diversity, race, culture, oppression, social justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theory</strong></td>
<td>Developmental considerations/issues (2), neuropsychology, adoption triad perspectives (7), life cycle perspective, theory (2), attitudes/assumptions about adoption, adoption triad dynamics</td>
<td>Attachment (2), developmental milestones, family life cycle, adoptive identity development</td>
<td>Systems theory, ecological theory, social justice perspective</td>
<td>Attachment, developmental perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research</strong></td>
<td>Adoption research (5), writing literature reviews, data analysis, research team</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practice/service delivery</strong></td>
<td>Child welfare, foster care, search and reunion, overview of adoption process, post-adoption support, disruptions (2)</td>
<td>Adoption/foster care (3), child welfare (3), permanency planning (3), independent living, service needs, aging out, abuse/neglect, family preservation, current issues in adoption/foster care, post-adoption services, relinquishment, special issues in adoption (i.e., reunification, disruptions) (4)</td>
<td>Overview of social services (2), child welfare with emphasis on protective services (2), permanency planning, abuse/neglect, child/family</td>
<td>Child welfare</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Unless otherwise indicated by parenthetical numbers following content area(s), curricular content areas appeared once. LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.
included content from these three areas: clinical, theory, and context. Curricular content by discipline varied by content area among the other courses.

Eight courses (offered in different disciplines) had a dual adoption and foster care focus; 50% of these courses \( (n = 4) \) were offered in social work departments/schools (see Table 2). For these courses, the discipline generally framed the course focus. For example, the four social work courses with a dual adoption/foster care focus had a child welfare systems focus, while the course offered in an MFT department had a family therapy focus. All dual-focused courses collectively covered all content areas (see Table 2).

Four courses had a child welfare focus (see Table 2). These social work courses focused on child welfare practice and services; once again, the discipline shaped the themes and subthemes. Each of the child welfare–focused courses had varying levels of adoption and/or foster care content. For instance, while each course focused on child welfare practices and foster care, permanency planning and/or adoption were addressed in one module of the course (e.g., in a module focusing on potential out-of-home placements resulting from child abuse and neglect).

Two of the interdisciplinary courses were categorized as “other.” One was a 3-credit, 10-unit course on grief and loss that had one unit that addressed grief and loss in the context of foster care and adoption. This course primarily focused on practice/clinical issues using a developmental, attachment lens. The second course examined education, child welfare, and diversity in a multicultural context. The primary focus of this course was on sociocultural and multicultural contexts; adoption was ancillary (see Table 2).

Finally, 58% of the courses \( (n = 14) \) had required textbooks. The remainder of the courses either recommended texts \( (n = 1) \) or used empirical journal articles for required readings. For those requiring textbooks, titles varied, but some courses texts were used in more than one course \( (n = 4) \). Other texts that were used in more than one course syllabi included *A Child’s Journey Through Placement* \( (n = 2; \text{Fahlberg, 1991}) \), *Outsiders Within* \( (n = 2; \text{Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006}) \), *To the End of June* \( (n = 2; \text{Beam, 2013}) \), and *The Child Welfare Challenge* \( (n = 3; \text{Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth, & DePanfilis, 2009}) \). A complete list of texts listed in all course syllabi is available upon request.

**Phase two: Online survey**

A total of 22 faculty members were invited via email to participate in an online survey. Sixty-eight percent completed the survey \( (N = 15) \). Just over half of the faculty \( (53\%) \) who responded were from social work programs. Other faculty participants came from a range of other undergraduate and graduate programs including psychology, family studies, and MFT (see Table 3).

According to survey participants, their course enrollment ranged from 2 to 25 students. Frequency of these course offerings varied. Nearly three-fourths \( (73\%) \) of
the courses were electives and were offered either every quarter or semester (with the exception of one course). As shown in Table 2, one-third \( (n = 6) \) of the courses are no longer being offered; these courses were in psychology, family studies, and MFT. The social work courses \( (n = 7) \) were the only ones still currently being offered. Among these, the courses are offered a minimum of once a year (e.g., only once a quarter or semester). In two cases, one of the seven social work courses was offered based on student interest; in another case, the course was being offered for the first time.

Responses varied regarding the reasons courses were currently offered or had been discontinued. For courses that were no longer offered \( (n = 6) \), the reasons varied and included the following: (a) one-time only course offering \( (n = 2) \), (b) course was no longer a Title IV-E requirement \( (n = 1) \), and (c) no other faculty member had the adoption background to teach it \( (n = 3) \).

Findings on course development and course delivery indicated that instructors had strong ties to adoption. For instance, the courses were developed by faculty (including adjunct) and graduate students (at both the master’s degree and PhD level) who had multiple roles including instructor, adoption researcher, adoption professional, and adoptee. In addition, instructors who taught the courses had a connection to adoption such as being an adoptive parent \( (n = 4) \), being a birth parent \( (n = 1) \), being an adoptee \( (n = 4) \), being an adoption researcher \( (n = 4) \), having an adopted family member \( (n = 5) \), and/or having an adopted friend \( (n = 9) \).

Faculty respondents \( (n = 13) \) indicated that the adoption course feedback was positive and enlightening. For example, one faculty member stated that the course “opened their eyes to the complexities of adoption and families.” This respondent continued, “In general (it) heightened their awareness of how stigma (adoption[-]related, race, social class) underlies many dynamics and how, in turn, [it] affects the life trajectory of adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive families.” Another instructor wrote, “Students said that they had never thought about the negative and social issues surrounding adoption and foster care. Many assumed that it was all ‘rainbows’ and love after kids are adopted.” Yet another instructor commented that the course helped with understanding the unique needs of adoption triad members. Only one instructor (out of 13) had received negative feedback and

**Table 3.** Summary of phase two online adoption curricula survey \( (N = 15) \).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Credit Hours</th>
<th>Elective</th>
<th>Current offering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Courses</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage and family therapy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* UG = undergraduate; M = master’s degree.
noted that a student felt the course was “too much work” and “too negative regarding adoption.”

**Discussion**

In response to recent initiatives to better understand and develop adoption curricula in the context of preparing adoption competent professionals, the present exploratory study examined existing adoption-specific curricula in baccalaureate and graduate programs. While a previous study of clinical training in accredited programs involved an examination of both classroom and field training (Weir et al., 2008), the focus of this study was on didactic, classroom-based learning.

Overall, this exploratory study only begins to unveil what we know about adoption-specific curricula in higher education. Educational institutions are important exo-level systems in the environment of adopted individuals and their families. In particular, three of the major study findings raise important questions about adoption curricula and future training initiatives for adoption professionals.

Consistent with the literature (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014), the present study revealed that adoption curricula come from a wide range of educational disciplines that underscore its interdisciplinary nature: social work, psychology, MFT, family studies, human studies, education, and interdisciplinary studies. The broad scope of other curricular content found in this study supports the interdisciplinary nature of the adoption field. In the case of master’s degree-level professional disciplines (i.e., social work, MFT, and counseling), our study findings are similar to those of Weir et al. (2008). For instance, of the disciplines represented in our study, social work dominated: 46% of the courses were offered in social work programs.

At the exo-level, adoptees may be indirectly affected by adoption professionals educated in a wide range of disciplines.

A second important finding in the present study is that while nearly half of the syllabi received were from social work programs, courses that focused solely on adoption came from undergraduate psychology and family studies programs. Notably, neither undergraduate degree program is a stepping stone to the professional licensure (e.g., licensed social worker) that may be required for adoption professional positions (e.g., child welfare; see Kim, 2011). Indeed, this finding highlights important links among professional studies curricula (i.e., accredited degree programs that prepare and qualify undergraduate or graduate degree holders to take a professional license exam to practice), professional licensure, and the requisite credentials necessary for adoption professional positions.

As our study findings suggest, adoption curricula are interdisciplinary and come from a broad range of academic disciplines. Yet it is unknown whether those working in the adoption field graduated from degree programs that reflect this broad range. Anecdotally, adoption professionals have indicated that social workers may be the primary frontline workers in adoption. If so, this may explain, as our study revealed, that nearly half of the course syllabi reviewed came from social work.
programs. Yet without knowing more about the educational programs that adoption professionals complete, it is difficult to know how future research should examine the role of adoption curricula in preparing adoption professionals. Thus, future research should employ a large-scale needs assessment survey to gain a systematic understanding of what adoption professionals, adoptees, and adoptive families need regarding adoption information.

A third important finding from the present study revealed that adoption-only and adoption/foster care course syllabi collectively covered curricular areas important to adoption professionals. For instance, all four types of syllabi (i.e., adoption only, adoption/foster care, child welfare, and other) included developmental theory (i.e., family life cycle), consistent with the recognition that adoption is a lifelong journey that, for some, may start with infertility (Freeark et al., 2005).

Limitations, future directions, and recommendations

Given the dearth of research on adoption-specific content in meso-level social service programs, this study is consistent with an exploratory approach in the context of social science research (Greenstein, 2006). Because the present exploratory study utilized a convenience sample that drew from professional email lists and adoption researchers (identified by the authors), the findings are not generalizable to the academic disciplines not fully represented in this study. For instance, our phase one small, nonrandom sample included only one psychology-managed adoption researcher email list; it did not draw from other general psychology email lists. This is a study limitation. A random phase one sampling frame that drew more comprehensively from multiple disciplines would have strengthened the generalizability of our findings.

Our small sample may also reflect that there may be a limited number of faculty with the specialized adoption knowledge and qualifications to teach an adoption-specific course. Phase two results noted that most courses were taught by instructors with personal connections to adoption, but participants were not queried on their preparedness; future research could explore this.

Based on our findings, we believe that the next logical steps to inform adoption training initiatives are interconnected in a sequential series of survey-based research aimed at gaining a broader meso- and exo-level systemic understanding of adoption content. First, surveying a nationally representative sample of adoption professionals currently in the workforce regarding their undergraduate and graduate degree programs would help us understand the academic disciplines and professional licensures of current professionals. We suspect that these findings might reveal that some adoption professionals may come from a wide range of disciplines that extend beyond social sciences programs to, for example, medical programs (i.e., nursing, family medicine). Next, a systematic study of academic disciplines should be conducted to obtain a comprehensive, descriptive understanding of the adoption-specific curricular content currently offered in these disciplines. Finally,
a survey of adoption professionals’ knowledge of other educational venues that may serve to expand their adoption knowledge should be conducted. These venues include pursuing post-degree training programs, utilizing peer-reviewed adoption journals (e.g., Adoption Quarterly and Adoption & Culture: The Interdisciplinary Journal of the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture), and attending national adoption conferences (e.g., the biennial Adoption Initiative Conference, the annual Rudd Adoption Conference the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and the annual North American Council on Adoptable Children Conference).

We recommend a two-pronged, two-level approach to the education and training of adoption professionals: (a) both classroom- and field-based learning in baccalaureate and/or graduate education and (b) both degree and post-degree training. Regarding the former, we suspect that future research may focus on professional disciplines that provide a pathway to professional licensure. To adequately prepare adoption professionals, field practicums should be supported by classroom-based curricular content in professional studies and higher education. Expanding adoption curricula in academic settings will help educate and train our next generation of adoption professionals who, at the exo-level, have an indirect impact on adoptees and their families.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Boston College doctoral students Adeline Wyman Battalen and Christina Sellers, who assisted with coding under the supervision of Dr. Ruth McRoy. The authors also thank the reviewers for their substantive feedback, which contributed to an improved manuscript.

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