Genetics and the Culture of Child Adoption in America
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with the guidance of Dr. Tom Segady

Key Questions

What attitudes, historically, has American society held toward the adoption of children by unrelated adults? What attitudes do Americans hold today?

- How have popular ideas about familial inheritance affected the ways we think about child adoption?
- How might future advancements in genetic thought and technology affect the practice of child adoption? Will these effects be novel, or will they reflect historical trends?

Key Findings

Historically, adoptive families faced societal pressures to conceal the lack of blood relations. This led to the careful matching of children to adults based on traits perceived heritable. Formalized scientific thought was used by some (e.g. eugenicists) to delegitimize adoption.

Today, adoption is viewed as a positive social phenomenon. Adoption culture still faces challenges; for instance, special-needs and older children are often passed over by potential parents in favor of “normal” babies.

Potentially, advancements in genetic technology could undermine adoption by further narrowing the pool of desirable children and by introducing alternatives for attaining children that may be more attractive to adults who presently adopt out of necessity.

Flash card used by eugenicists to demonstrate that “feeble-mindedness” was a real, heritable trait—one that plagued unwed mothers and orphan children in particular.

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