REDEFINING THE FAMILY POST-PLACEMENT: BIRTHMOTHERS AND KINSHIP THROUGH THE ADOPTION LENS

**Stephanie D. Harris** (Susan B. Hyatt)

Department of Anthropology

IU School of Liberal Arts

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

Indianapolis, IN 46202

Based on interviews with birthmothers in the Indianapolis area, this project seeks to ethnographically document the experience of women who have placed their children for adoption with the aim of capturing their highly individual experiences as well as what they make of their experience post-placement in both kinship and cultural terms. While most studies of adoption focus on the experience of adoptive families in reshaping the domestic unit, this project asks how mothers regard the children they have relinquished for adoption and examines their understandings of the role these children play in shaping existing family and kinship structures and articulating new structures entirely. Post-placement, do birthmothers think of themselves and their adopted children as biologically related? How are
birthmothers’ notions of kinship extended to incorporate children that are no longer physically present, or how are these biological relations severed when birthmothers no longer desire to or no longer can maintain a kinship bond with their adopted child? Put simply, what happens to women’s notions of kinship when they relinquish a child for adoption? This project situates birthmother experiences in the political, cultural, and social contexts of birth and pregnancy in the contemporary United States, providing a portrait of each birthmother’s life history and how their pregnancy and the subsequent adoption shaped that history. Interviews with these birthmothers will thereby provide a lens refracting larger cultural trends with regard to sexuality, birth, pregnancy, and adoption in the contemporary United States.