



Parent and Child Perspectives on the Adoption Experience: Risk and Protective Factors

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Parent and Child Perspectives on the Adoption Experience: Risk and Protective Factors

Corinne Warrener and Hillary Mi-Sung Kim

Every year over 110,000 children are adopted in the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau reported 1.6 million adopted children in 2004, of which 13% were internationally adopted; this comprises 2.5 % of all children under 18 years old (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2004). For international adoption, there was a three-fold increase in annual international adoptions from around 7,000 in 1990 to more than 22,000 in 2005 (U.S. Department of State, 2006). In tandem, recent years have seen an increasing research focus in the area of adoption. Much of the existing literature and current dialogue about adoption focuses on adoptive child outcomes. The existing literature on international adoption also primarily focuses on issues concerning the adopted children, with some growing literature on exploitation of birth parents. Despite continued efforts in understanding the aspects of adoption from the children's and birth mothers' sides, there is a serious lack of information regarding the adoptive parents, such as pre-adoption factors for adoptive parents. Hence, the aim of this paper is two-fold: (a) to begin gaining an understanding of the adoptive parents' perspective, and (b) to incorporate perspectives from the adoptive parents and the adoptees. The purpose was to gain better insight into the adoptee and parental understanding of the process and how this relates the successful adoption for the adoptee as well as the adoptive family. The themes that emerged from the dual perspective of this study contribute to the understanding of risk and protective factors for successful adoption or adoption adjustment. We begin by examining literature on the adjustment of the adopted children and explore aspects of adoption from the adoptive parents' sides.

Literature Review

Some studies have shown the developmental and adjustment issues that affect adopted children, such as trouble with identity development (Soon & Reid, 2000) or mental development issues (Cohen, Lojkasek, Zadeh, Pugliese, & Kiefer, 2008). There may be difficulties regarding being part of an adoptive family in both transracial adoption and international adoption. Language barriers would be added to that in international adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007). Other adjustment problems include bonding, attachment disorders, lying, stealing, defiance of authority, and acts of violence (Smith, 2001) as well as suicide, psychiatric illness, and social maladjustment (Hjern, Lindblad & Vinnerljung, 2002). On the contrary, some studies evidenced that there were no significant differences in adjustment between adopted and non-adopted children (Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1998; Thomson & Plomin, 1988). Conflicting findings may be due to a selection bias (regarding such confounding factors as ages of adoption placement, types of adoption, parental characteristics, and family structures) or various outcomes among adopted children. Mohanty and Newhill (2006) also pointed out that little research attention has been paid to the factors that lead to positive or negative adoptee outcomes and call for more research in this area. Given the conflicting findings, the presence of adoption related issues may not mean that adoption inevitably leads to adjustment problems. Thus, the focus of research needs to be shifted towards describing factors that influence within-group variability in adoption adjustment (Brodzinsky et al., 1998).

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Understanding positive and negative outcomes goes beyond intrapersonal factors of an individual, as there are other influences from other systems. Theoretical basis of this study was Brodzinsky's (1990) stress and coping model of adoptee adjustment. This model holds three core assumptions: (a) that adoption is inherently associated with a variety of loss- and stigma- related experiences and hence is potentially stressful for children, (b) adjustment to adoption is mediated by cognitive-appraisal process and coping efforts, and (c) both biological and environmental variables influence person variables. Thus, adopted children who focus on their adoptive loss and appraise their adoption in a more negative ways are believed to experience heightened stress, develop fewer successful coping abilities, and experience more adjustment problems. On the other hand, adopted children who are more positive about their adoption and experience support and assistance within their family and community encounter less distress and demonstrate heightened coping abilities. This model was believed to be comprehensive enough to be used for this exploratory qualitative study in that it examines both contextual factors (e.g., social support, environmental factors) and intrapersonal factors (e.g., subjective perceptions) of adoptee adjustment. In addition, this stress and coping model may be expanded to explain adoption adjustment of the adoptive parents, as it provides a frame to examine both contextual and intrapersonal factors of adoptive parents. As Brodzinsky's (1990) stress and coping model suggested, it is difficult to separate the adoptee's adjustment from the adoptive parental factors and broader environmental factors. These factors include parenting practices such a cultural socialization, community influence, parenting stress, adoption factors, and adoptee characteristics.

Existing literature provides some insight into cultural socialization, which refers to the ways in which parents negotiate the racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences within the family (Lee, Grotevant, & Hellerstedt, 2006; Johnston et al., 2007). The communication and transmission of racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences is related to the parents' own attitude and beliefs about race

and ethnicity. Parents who have a connection to the child's birth country and culture were more likely to socialize the child to the culture (Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater-Decker, & Petrill, 2007). Additionally, more frequent socialization is related to fewer externalizing problems in adopted children, but not connected to internalizing problems (2007). Furthermore, preparing a child for potential bias or discrimination slightly increased externalizing behavior (2007). It is likely that adoptive parents are increasingly aware of the importance of exposing the child to his or her birth culture; however, they do not tend to continue post-adoption support for themselves (Lee et al., 2006).

In the vein of parenting practices, open communication is a critical aspect of adoptee outcomes. David Kirk (1964) constructed the concept of "adoption open communication." Open communication about adoption is characterized by the acknowledgement of the inherent differences associated with adoptive family life from non-adoptive family life, which facilitates better adjustment in the adopted children than closed communication characterized by the denial of these differences (as cited in Brodzinsky, 2006). In support of Kirk's notion, it had been found that children between the ages of 8 and 13 years who reported more open communication about adoption in their families had higher self-esteem and better behavioral adjustment (Brodzinsky, 2006). The similar findings were also reported in a study of adolescents and young adults, in which open communication about adoption was associated with a more positive identity and higher self-esteem (Levy-Shiff, 2001). However, it had been also suggested that the construct of open communication should be refined since a number of studies (e.g., Kaye, 1990; Martin, Kelley, & Towner-Thyrum, 1999) showed that an open style of communication that emphasized and insisted on difference between adoptive and non-adoptive families was indicative of lower self-esteem, more family problems, and distant parent-child relationships.

Community perspectives are another area of influence for adoptee outcomes. One study looked at how social construction of the concept

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of adoption affected views of parenting and suggests that there should be more research on community perspectives as well (Miall, 1996). This study examined community perspectives on adoption and found that generally people were supportive of adoption and viewed parenting choices as more important than the origins of the child. From the social constructionist's theoretical perspective, these views should have an impact on adoptive families, but there is little research to suggest what kind of impact (Miall, 1996). Further studies show that heterogeneity in the wider community has a positive impact on adoptees, as does having siblings of the same race (Yoon, 2004). There needs to be better understanding of how community perspectives and other contextual factors impact an adopted child's outcomes.

Another area of study in the adoption literature is parental stress. A study by Judge (2003) found that the adopted child's behavior was the single greatest predictor of parental stress when compared to length of time in an institution pre-adoption, medical problems, and developmental delays; however, this and other studies fail to elaborate whether these problems are unique to adopted families or all families. There needs to be better understanding of the dynamic between the parents and adopted child from both perspectives.

Adoption and Adoptee Factors

The impact of the adoption process and pre-adoptive factors is not well documented, despite acknowledgement of the changing dynamics of adoption over recent years. Adoption has become increasingly international in the last forty years with a move toward open adoption (Lee, 2007). There is a greater push for protection of the child's well being and birth parents' right, but little focus on how pre-adoption factors such as economic and political climates might impact the adoption process and therefore child outcomes (Fieweger, 1991; Herrmann & Kasper, 1992; Quiroz, 2007), as the focus is primarily on how physical deprivation can impact health and development (Narad & Mason, 2004). There needs to be better understanding of pre-adoption factors, from areas such as the parents' racial or health preference (Lee,

2007; Quiroz, 2007) to how the United States legal framework contributes to the parents' and child's understanding of the sending country, birth parents' rights, or other contributing factors (Quiroz, 2007).

Although Brodzinsky's (1990) model of stress and coping was believed to be comprehensive enough to be used for this exploratory qualitative study in that it examines both contextual factors (e.g., social support, environmental factors) and intrapersonal factors (e.g., subjective perceptions) of adoptee adjustment, this model does not specify key constructs of each factor. Thus, this study could contribute to the sophistication of the model. In order to gain a more accurate picture of adoption, research must be comprehensive in every facet of the child's system. Research in this area must be continuous as legal and cultural situations continue to evolve in all countries (Lee, 2007; U.S. Department of State, n.d.). As previous research shows, parent-child interaction affects child outcomes, and therefore pre-adoption factors may play a crucial role in understanding outcomes. This study will take a wider look at the systems that influence adoption by exploring the experience of living as an adoptee, the process of adoption, and parents' perceptions and attitudes, while considering the context of wider global issues.

Research Goal

The primary goals of this study were to address the strengths and difficulties of living as an adopted child and to explore the experience and understanding from the parental perspective. The focus of the adoptee side was on the adult adoptee's experience of their childhood, living as an adopted child. The parental side focus was on the experience of the adoption process, their motivations, and perception of their adopted child(ren).

Methodology

Parents

The parental portion of the study consists of interviews with nine individuals who have been through the international adoption process. The

researcher used a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling, starting with people already known to the researcher directly or indirectly. The interviews were all conducted by one of the authors, a licensed social worker and doctoral student. The interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants, over the phone, or in a location of the participant's choosing, such as a coffee shop. This was decided during a preliminary outreach to determine the participant's willingness to be involved in the study; the participant chose the location. The interviewer took notes directly on a computer during the interviews; the respondents were asked about their comfort with this prior to the interview and all expressed assurance of their comfort. The interviews were based on a structured questionnaire with open-ended questions. The questionnaire included statements such as "tell me about the events that led you to begin considering adoption." The respondents were given time to tell their story initially, and then more direct and iterative questions were used. The interviews took between 1 and 1 ½ hours to complete.

Of the respondents, 7 were female and 2 were male. Most of the respondents were married, with one currently beginning divorce proceedings and one a single mother who never married. Of the respondents, one man and one woman were married but interviewed separately. For the couple, redundant questions were omitted with the second interviewee, such as demographics and certain specifics of the adoption history. Some of the participants brought baby pictures of the adopted children or other documents to share during the interview. The participating parents fit the general demographics of American intercountry adoptive parents (Hellerstedt et al, 2008); they had middle to high incomes and at least college education. All of the participants live in either New York or New Jersey. Three of the families adopted from China, 4 adopted from Korea, and 1 adopted from Guatemala. Two families have one child, five families have two children, and one family has three children. The ages of the children at the time of the interview ranged from 2 to 28. The parents' ages (those interviewed and not) ranged from 32 to 60, with the oldest interviewee aged 57.

Adult Adoptees

Eight adults who were adopted as children served as the second group of respondents for the study. A combination of a purposeful and snowball sampling was used. Web posting at adoption chat sites at <http://forums.adoption.com> and <http://www.americanadoptions.com> as well as wall advertisements were used. Four participants responded to the web posting, three were invited by a referral of a participant, and one was invited by a referral of one of the researcher's friends. No one responded to the wall advertisement. One of authors conducted semi-structured interviews that were based on a specific set of open-ended questions. The interview was started with questions asking their background, but the order of questions was varied according to the flow of the interview. Six were interviewed in-person, one was interviewed by phone because of distance, and the other one was interviewed by email because of distance and a bad phone connection. The in-person interviews were predominantly conducted in public places such as restaurants over lunch or dinner or a train station food court over coffee. The duration of interviews was varied from 50 minutes to 2 hours and 20 minutes. All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. Once completed, the transcripts were sent to the participants for review, and at that time they were also given additional questions that were later developed by the researcher as the researcher transcribing the interviews. Four participants provided their review or answered to additional questions. The participants ranged in age from 22 to 65 years; three were males and five were females.

Analysis

Case analysis was used initially, and then cross-case analysis was conducted to develop themes. Various themes were identified through basic coding, and then axial coding was used to group these codes into more cohesive concepts. All of the participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Results

Parents

The questions asked to participants for this study were mainly about the process and events of the adoption, with focus on perceptions. The themes that developed from these interviews relate both directly and indirectly to the actual process. The main topics to be explored are: Overall Experience, Parental Concerns, Factors in the Decision Making Process, Relating to Traditional Families, and Parent Versus Child Attitudes. For these purposes, “traditional” refers to families with biological children.

Overall experience. The parents in this study expressed an overall positive experience. There are many facets to this experience, however. With regards to the agency, all except one expressed being very happy with the experience, and that one person still expressed satisfaction, just at a lower level. One individual who had adopted her children twenty years ago from Korea had a very positive experience with her agency. Recently she was in Korea and offered to bring babies back to the U.S. for the agency¹, as all children are escorted to the U.S. rather than having the parents travel to the country. She was excited about doing this and had a wonderful experience while in Korea, meeting the director of the agency on that end and viewing the facilities. She also said that it was emotional giving the child to the adoptive parents when she got back because it brought up all the emotions from when she picked up her children. Other parents’ responses were varied.

We had a great experience dealing with the agency.²

I have a hard time recommending the agency to

other people now. Our experience was good, I wouldn’t say great.

Support from family and friends had a mixed response, but generally was also a positive aspect of the adoption process for these parents. Friends were almost universally supportive.

My particular friends had all had fertility struggles and they privately might have had other feelings about it but to us they were very supportive.

Everybody was very excited for us. One of our friends decided to go through [our agency] too. Everyone was real happy for us.

The respondents mostly stated positive feedback from their families. In one family there was a sister in law who was adopted and she was very happy that the family was adopting. The interviewee discussed at length how much it meant to her sister in law that they were doing this, and shared that the sister in law enlarged the first picture they received of the child (months before the child came home) from a 3x5 to a full page and immediately placed it on her kitchen cabinet so everyone who walked into the house would see it. However, not all the families were so happy, so families had mixed levels of support for this group of respondents.

My husband’s parents and my parents never really questioned us. They never said they didn’t think it was a good idea. They never really jumped up and down for joy, but they went along with it. My mother, for sure, just wanted us to be happy.

If it bothered them [that they were a different race], it was never said.

¹For this agency, people adopting from Korea do not travel to the country to pick up the child. The children are escorted by a chaperone on a plane to the airport where the adoptive parents receive the child.

²All quotations are taken directly from interview transcripts and therefore include some awkward phrases due to the conversational nature of the interviews.

My father in law never really accepted our kids. He never made them feel accepted so we just stayed away from him.

Everyone came the day he arrived, cousins and family, from all over.

My father would have preferred domestic adoption. Everything changed when [he] saw the kids.

Many of the parents also expressed the importance of support groups and other adoptive parents. A couple of respondents also noted that they wished for more help or better services with regards to dealing with certain adoption-related issues. Many noted that they read a lot of books along the way to help them prepare for the child and deal with issues after the child had come home.

[When offering advice to a potential adoptive parent] Look for support groups through the agency and the internet and attend meetings. Most importantly talk to other people to get their experiences.

There should be more support at the beginning about what it would be like and where to get help along the way. [There] needs to be more counselors just focused on adoption.

Amazing how supportive other adoptive parents are...these people would send gifts. They understand better.

When reflecting on the experience as a whole, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Many of the respondents stated before or during the interviews how excited they were to talk about their experiences because it was "such a big part" of their lives or because it is their "favorite topic."

There's a lot of anxiety but it's the best decision of your life.

It was the best thing I ever did in my life.

With us we had a great experience...Everyone should do it. I think it's so amazing. There's not one negative thing.

I have a really positive feeling about it because I have a family and two wonderful daughters.

Parental concerns. One of the questions asked in the interviews was regarding any concerns or fears that the parents had before adopting the child. Some of the respondents answered this by stating that they didn't have fears or concerns, although some of the concerns came out in different areas of the interview. One area of concern was about where the money was going, particularly for the people who adopted from China. These parents cited concern over having to carry large sums of cash in unmarked bills.

[When I picked up the child] there was literally a guy sitting at a desk in a dark, smoky room with piles of cash around him. It looked shady.

I wasn't afraid of having a child or anything like that. My fears were more while we were in China because we traveled to unfamiliar places and often had to carry large sums of cash, six or seven thousand dollars.

For parent who adopted from Korea, some concerns were also related to money:

You're so excited and so happy when they come, but with [our third child] we started thinking about where the money was going. Like they ask you to pay for the chaperone, but we saw the last time that not every child had a personal chaperone. Somebody's making money...The adoption agencies make money off of this, and that's a sad thing. It makes the kids feel bad because it's like there's a price on them.

Another parent from Korea gave advice to make sure "you know where the money is going" if you're considering international adoption.

On a similar thread, a couple of parents expressed concern about the genuineness of the stories about the children's background. In particular,

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one respondent said that when she adopted her girls 20 years ago, they were told that the birth parents were not married, and that the father could have adopted them but was too poor so the mother gave them up. When the girls were 18, the agency contacted them to say the birth father was looking for them, and the true story came out that the parents were married but did not want any more girls so they gave them up. The mother relaying this story believes that the agency tells everyone variations of the same story, though she thinks they have the children's best interest at heart.

For some parents there were concerns about parenting. Many of them read books before adopting and understood the concerns about attachment and identity issues among adopted children.

There was a certain degree of she's 14 months old, so she's not an infant right out of the womb. We were trying to troubleshoot in our minds.

I didn't really have any fears. But I used to say to [my husband], "what if she doesn't like me?" Up until my son decided to go to Korea, I...did have a fleeting thought of what if he goes there and doesn't want to come back. But he set me straight, I would always be his mother.

Another concern was about people's reactions, like one mother who had concerns about her Korean girls growing up in a very white town, looking different from her parents. Another talked about her concern about the effects of comments made by strangers "out of ignorance," for example asking the young children if they "are really brother and sister." For other parents, however, the greatest fear was that they would lose the child somehow, whether the mother would take the child back or the agency or government would halt the adoption.

We didn't know how long it was going to happen, always concerned that it will be shut down on either end during the process.

Factors in the Decision Making Process. The decision to adopt internationally often came from a combination of factors. All of the respondents except for the single mother had fertility problems, and the single mother had endometriosis and was unsure of her ability to conceive. Not all the mothers went through in vitro, but some stated that it was a painful and humiliating process. While this aspect was a direct motivator for adoption, there was often another component of the parents not feeling strongly about having biological children.

We made the decision we wanted to have a family so we went through the normal [route and] tried to have kids on our own and then the fertility process. We had always in our minds had the view if the fertility process didn't work, we were going to pull the trigger and go the adoption route.

I never felt like I had to have my genes reproduced.

I felt that if it were meant to be it would happen, otherwise there were other means to have children.

It wasn't that important to [my husband] to have his own biological child. He was happy to have a child.

For many the decision to adopt internationally versus domestically had to do with the risk of the child being taken back by the mother, or the concern over trying to find the birth parents eventually.

Our main reason [for adopting internationally] was the children were already there; the babies were waiting. With domestic you make a contract and we didn't like that idea because it sounded almost like black market. You can put a lot of money in and not even get the baby.

I really didn't want to adopt out of the U.S. foster system because we had already been through some heartache with the fertility struggle. I didn't want to have somebody take their

child back.

The strongest pre-adoption attitude was an affinity for certain countries or sympathy for the children's plight. Some had started considering adoption years before, or even when they were children themselves.

I had always thought about [adopting] from the time I was little. Before I was 12, I always thought about children who had special needs or physical handicaps. I thought I could help them.

This had nothing to do with it at the time, but I went to nursing school and my baby brother passed away. I left school and picked up a job where lots of the children were oriental and I loved them.

The reason we picked China was they had a more compelling story, the lost girls of China.

I had, myself, heard the stories of the Chinese girls which spoke to me, and thought, "I'm going to do that, I'm going to adopt a child." If I'm not actually lucky enough to drop one. [My husband] and I, while we were dating, he was also aware of the stories of the Chinese girls. We were kind of on the same page with that. Even if we were able to have a biological child, we wanted to adopt.

Do I have a soft place in my heart for Asians?
Yes I do! I knew someone years before and thought I wanted an Asian baby. My son told me I'm an honorary Asian.

Relating to traditional families. Many of the parents related their experiences to that of a traditional family by describing certain events in relation to other families. Several of the respondents

related the adoption to pregnancy or birth.

My labor was driving to the airport.³

[When discussing fears] It's a lot like being pregnant. You want the child to be healthy. You imagine this beautiful, perfect child, but you wonder. But you don't know until you see the baby.

[When she told her parents she was adopting] Everyone was so excited about it. It was like I was pregnant.

[When she picked up her child] They put him in my arms and I was hysterical. My husband was so excited and passed him around. It was kind of like a birth.

Another connection to a traditional family was the use of the term "normal" and other comments that associated troubles as being typical of any family. One mother talked about how her family is like any other family, but that some people who have not adopted do not seem to understand that her family, though not typical in the traditional sense, is still a family and she loves her kids "like they were [her] own." She recognized that adoption is "not for everyone" and that some people would "rather not have a family than have children that aren't their own." Other parents brought up the matter of being "typical" as well.

[Talking about health problems of the child] She's normal, everyone has issues.

They're great kids, very typical 2 and 5 year olds, sharing issues. They go through the same baby stages as anyone, other than bonding in the beginning and the adjustment to a new place.

³For the individuals in this study who adopted from Korea, the agency they used had the children escorted to the United States by a chaperone from the Korean orphanage. The adoptive parents would pick up the children from the airport.

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We've had the same problems that every other family does: sibling rivalry, rebellious teenager. Some people can't understand that.

I know that there's going to be tough years ahead...but you know all teenage girls have difficult years!

Parent versus child attitudes. One final indignant concept that emerged from the data was the differences between adoptive parents who had older children (ages 20-28). Three of the families have adult children, and a common thread regarding attitudes towards the birth country and birth family was a greater interest on the part of the parents. All three of these parents described themselves as supporting birth country heritage but reported their children as having little or no interest in the birth country or birth family. One mother with twin girls stated that her girls declined to meet their birth father after he attempted to contact them. She also reported that her daughters never articulated an interest in their heritage. She made up folders with all of their adoption information and had put them in their rooms at a young age, but she is not sure whether her daughters ever looked at them, and they have never approached her about it. The other parents of the adult children repeated the idea of a difference in birth country interest. The first two quotes are from one mother, and the second two from another mother. They are separated because they came up at different points during the interview.

It's up to them if they want to try and find their parents. There's a camp for Korean adoptees... they never wanted to go. [My son] never wanted to be associated with being adopted...I wanted to keep that up but they weren't interested. None of [my children] are attracted to Korean people. I don't think any of them will marry a Korean.

It's like they're in denial. They just don't want to know about that sort of thing.

I have more interest in meeting their mothers than they do. ...As a child she wanted to know

what her mother looked like. I told her to look in the mirror. [My son] never asked any questions. He turned out to be the one, though he denies it, that has the inquisitiveness [about his background].

My daughter doesn't care, doesn't see herself as anything but Jennifer. She's American as apple pie. Whereas my son has gotten more in touch with being Korean, it doesn't really affect [her] in any way. People ask her where she's from and she says New Jersey...I don't think she sees herself as Asian.

The last two quotes were from a mother who went on to explain that although her son had chosen to study for a semester in Korea, he has never outwardly expressed an interest in Korean culture or his heritage.

Adult Adoptees

Five themes emerged from the adult adoptee interviews: I am special, Happy stories told, Adoptive parents' respectful attitudes towards birth parents, Open communication about adoption, and Who I look like.

I am special. Three female participants mentioned that they felt they were special when they were young, when I asked about personal meaning of being adopted. Those feelings of something special were salient in these two narratives:

OK, I thought it was something neat, you know, the kid, I go, "I'm adopted, I'm adopted...by... I'm adopted." Something special. It was a positive thing. It wasn't something sad or shameful. It was very positive. It wasn't a secret. Everybody, everybody knew I was adopted. And, my parents, I fit right in with them. I look enough like them. No one would look at us and wonder. You know, so, but, they were very open with me and supportive about that. So, that's one area that they did very good job. So, there was a kid we went to school with, he wouldn't believe that I was really adopted. He thought I was just saying it to get attention. [Laugh.]

I knew I was very special, um, my brothers even used to get jealous, you know, 'cause I have two birthdays, and... I was a daddy's girl, you know, you are a girl and you got two boys. And, so, I always got what I wanted. I remember, [...]. There is just different connection. My mother and father love my brothers, you know, but they are. You know, they worked harder to adopt me. [...]. What just adoption is really you are wanted so much, you know.

Happy stories told. Participants who discussed feeling special also reported happy stories told by family members. They provided happy stories as a part of the best memory of their childhood in addition to the memories that could be expected from non-adopted persons, such as playing a lot with their friends, going to vacations, and traveling.

My grandmother told me. It was a very funny conversation with her actually because it was just talking, and she started talking about how my mother was before she got me. And, she kind of forgot I was standing there, and just started talking, and said, "Thank God. She got that baby... Thank God. She got that baby. She was so bitter. She would see people with 5-6 children, who were mistreating them, and would be like, ah, "Why can't I get one?" You know, very hard. So when my mom got me, she was like so over the moon then. When I grew up, hearing the happy stories. Hearing now, when she got the call, she couldn't even work anymore, couldn't type. She threw her pocketbook in the garbage can by mistakes, instead of her coffee cup. It was so like, her co-worker said, "You'd better call John. She said, "John, who?" "John, your husband!" They picked me up two days later. Got the call, pick me up in a hurry. I always heard those happy stories.

I have two [younger] brothers, they were biological to my parents, and I am the only one adopted. My mother had a couple miscarriages before, so they are, she called me her good luck charm. [Laugh]. [...] They love tell the story

'cause I have two birthdays. I was born in October, but I wasn't adopted until December. So, my birthday to my parents is really December. That's my birthday to them. They tell me the story, you know about. Picked me up in Trenton, and you know so. It's, uh, heard over and over.

Adoptive parents' respectful attitude towards birth parents. This narrative was provided when one respondent reminisced her childhood feeling of something special, which may imply that her feeling of special was somehow related to their adoptive parents' respectful attitude towards her birth mother. Another participant also mentioned the "respect [for] the former situation," which may implicitly convey to the adopted child that adoptive parents are respectful to the birth parents as well as to the child.

So, let's say, they also were very respectful that there was a woman out there who went through something very hard to give them a baby. They always talked about my birth mother in a positive way, and um, encouraged me to look for her when I was ready. There was no like, they were afraid of what I would find. To me, I was too. Because you don't know what you will see, you know, a person who looks out person what kind of person they would be. But, they were always very positive and thankful to her. And, I think that helped me a lot, too. If they treat that person as like a piece of garbage or something, it makes the kid feel bad. You know. But, it was never like that.

The most important thing, I think, is that the parents are aware of and respects the former situation for their new child.

When I was young, we were talking about [my birth mother]. My mother, my adoptive mother would just say, "You know, she was young, she wasn't married." Even as a child, you know, like a, given that answer, the child, you understand, oh that's sad. [Lily gets emotional.]

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Open communication about adoption. All participants put an emphasis on open and honest communication about adoption in explaining what made them feel natural about the adoption, in answering the question of what they think is the most important in developing secure adoptive parent-adopted child relationships, or in providing advice to adoptive parents.

It's hard to say why just I and my sister feel so natural about being adopted, and other children don't. I think that one factor could be that my parents have always been so open about it and always answered our questions if we had any.

When defining adoption as having "a layer of just different dynamic" in parent-child relationships, Tony provided the following advice to adoptive parents:

Validate child's feeling, respectful to the child's thought, speak honestly, openly, and provide age-appropriate answers. If not, it cuts credibility to their parents after. Keep words going: One-sided means somebody over-dominates, and on the other hand somebody over-dominates. Thought is validated through two-way conversation and relationships. Adoption is a layer of just different dynamic. If child is dominated and not respected they will not have low self-esteem leading to a strained relationship that will be undermined. In hindsight I wish my parents had listened to me even asking questions about how I felt about things. This shouldn't be limited to adoption issues but life in general.

However, only half of respondents experienced open communication about the adoption with their adoptive parents. The other half felt that their parents did not want to talk about it, or their adoptive parents had a certain parenting style. The following provides a window to look at how the children felt and reacted to not being respected to their inquiries:

They followed advice of the times. So, you know it was never a secret. But, there, my mother, um, I don't know, I never feel like dismissed

it with my father. But, my mother what I would say, she didn't appreciate me asking my questions. You know that she was hurt. But, when I started questions at teens, she always would say, "You know, someday if you want to find her, we'll help you". But, me, um, but, you know her voice. You could tell she didn't want me to...So hard. You know it was just what I heard. Maybe she knew it did mean it, and I feel uncomfortable.

When I was 5 years old, a friend Brian told me, "You are adopted." And I told "Brian said that I am adopted" to mom, and she gave a chosen baby story, how I was chosen [...]. And, we never talked about it. [...]. It was a taboo to talk about it because it is about infertility. When I was in high school, my grade went lower. We went to a psychologist, and it was said that it was related to adoption. But, that's it. I felt disrespected because they didn't allow my feelings and thoughts. [...]. I felt as if I weren't important, I didn't count, [which] caused me to feel resentment towards my mother and I can remember being unable to respond to my mother when she told me she loved me. [...]. In 1945, adoptive mother, she was raised to keep feelings inside.

Who I am like? There were two layers of the meaning of who I am like: (a) physical similarities, and (b) psychologically or culturally inherited similarities. Most participants had questions of physical similarity first in their early childhood, and then some of them moved to search for psychologically or culturally inherited similarities and some did not. With respect to physical similarity, most participants reminisced that they had had some questions regarding who they look like at some point of their childhood. Their episodes of questioning about physical differences were reminisced when they answered to the question, "when was the first time conversing about the adoption with your adoptive parents?"

About 6-7 years old, I asked to mom, "Why don't I look like you?" She just told me that she was not my birth mother and explained what

being adopted means. I don't remember feeling anything special about it. I think I just said "ok mom" and I went out to play with my friends.

As they got older, some participants' memories of childhood showed that they moved to search for another layer of similarities (i.e., psychologically or culturally inherited similarities) and some searched both layers of similarities. One participant's childhood memory and her ongoing effort to overcome one of her adoption issues, searching her similarities to somebody, were shown by the following:

When I was a teenager, I wondered [if] anybody looked like me. You grow up and you don't look like anybody. And, then, I have three children. They don't look like me, either. They don't look like somebody. One looks like my husband. The other two, you just don't know. So. It is ok, besides medical.

And then she answered the following when I asked how she overcame the challenges experienced in her childhood:

I don't know. I'm doing to overcome now as an adult. [...]. I've been reunited with both of my biologicals. I finally see who I look like and find medical history. [...]. Three on my mother side, and two on my father side. And, uh, my two brothers on my father side are male version of me. Just meet, I've never met anybody who is like me before. Like, they don't look like me, but, um, you know, we learned we don't like the beach. None of us like the beach. Uh, you know, just a lot. We have a common sense of humor, ...just connected.

The following excerpt was derived from a participant's reminiscing of his childhood, answering to the question about the difficulties in the childhood. While the narratives above were rather implicit, his narratives explicitly articulated his search of psychologically or culturally inherited similarities:

There was a period I was really confused, and uh not comfortable. There was something wrong, but I couldn't figure out what it was. That was maybe with teen years, maybe with 13, none up. That's one real conflict occurred. Early one, it was very care-free. And, but, as I got older, the questions started to build in my mind. [...]. I guess it was just consumed by wondering what I was, where I came, why I become available for adoption. [...]. Finding my family of origin is not replacement of mom and dad that raised me, it's a, a finding out who I am, what was my heritage. I was raised with a business man, uh, had a household, and it turns out I'm a farmer's boy. My [birth] mother was raised on the farm. So, and then, not have that cultural heritage.

Discussion

The results of this study were organized by the themes that emerged from the two separate sets of interviews. For the purposes of discussion, these themes are discussed in terms of risk and protective factors for adoptees.

Understood from both the adoptee and parental side, open communication appears to be an important factor in the adoptee's psychological well being. Generally, the relationship between the adoptee and the adoptive parents appears to be critical, emphasizing the importance of the parents' attitudes toward adoption and the adopted child. Parents need to be open about the adoption and respectful of the child's developing comprehension of what it means to be adopted. A related issue from the parental side is many of the parents in the study saw themselves as very normal and not different from traditional families. These families did not focus on pathology in any way, and instead were inclined to attribute problems to normal development rather than adoption. Generally the parents seemed to think that all families have issues, and the issues in their own adoptive families were not worse, but just different from those of traditional families.

Additionally, pre-adoptive factors may also play a role in the adoptee's success. Parents in this study typically had a desire to adopt prior to

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taking action, whether or not they encountered fertility problems. Many also had concerns for children who needed homes, and the concern continued through the adoption process through apprehension that children might be exploited through the financial side of adoption.

The issue of support is also important. Many of the parents reported that support was crucial, identifying specific friends and family members who either supported them or did not. A few expressed distress over people who were outwardly unsupportive of the adoption. Many, when asked for advice for future adoptive parents, answered that talking to other adoptive parents and counselors was necessary. They also cited specific books as resources.

The theme regarding 'Who I look like' could be considered a risk factor as it can be a source of stress for both the child and parents. However, given the presence of other protective factors, the negative impact of this factor could be reduced. This theme could be related to the loss of biological families, which may lead the adopted children to experience heightened distress and develop lower coping abilities. On the other hand, if the protective factors function well, the stress of loss would be reduced and further lead the adopted children to be able to appreciate the fact that they have two families without being distressed.

Limitations

An important limitation of this study is the sample. With only eight adult adoptees and nine parents, the themes in this paper are not necessarily representative of the wider adoptive experiences. In addition, the respondents expressed great eagerness about participating, indicating that this might be a sub-sample of people who had a particularly positive experience. Also the respondents were predominantly female, and future research should be sure to emphasize the father's voice in addition to the mother's. Finally, the parents and adult adoptees were not from the same families. Future research should attempt to triangulate interviews with parents and adoptees from within the same family unit. Furthermore, the parents in the study all went through international adoption, whereas

the adult adoptees were both internationally and domestically adopted.

Conclusions

This study contributes to our understanding of risk and protective factors contributing to the adoption adjustment and to the psychological well-being of adopted children. While the sample could be seen as a limitation of the study, the sample could very well be providing a much needed subgroup of successful adoption stories. From this subgroup, social workers and professionals can gain understanding of how to promote long-term success in adoptions. The salient themes of this study suggest that certain factors will promote positive outcomes in adoption. Open communication between parents and the adoptee is critical. This needs to begin at an early age and continue throughout the child's development. Pre-adoptive attitudes are important to consider, because they can provide insight into how the parents might struggle or adjust to adoption. A positive attitude toward adoption (not seen as a last resort) and toward helping children may be a protective factor. Support is another critical area. Parental support toward the adoptee is important in fostering self esteem in the adoptee. Parents also need support from other adults to help with this unique transition in their lives. By focusing on these protective factors, professionals can help promote successful adoption.

More research is needed to explore the results of this study beyond this small sample. The most important result of this study is that for some, adoption is not a negative part of life and can be a quite positive thing for both adoptive parents and children. Future research on adoption should focus on the positive and successful aspects of adoption in order to inform future efforts, rather than focusing on pathology and problematic adoptions, which so often get the attention. Adoption will continue to be a part of life for the foreseeable future, and every effort must be made to protect the well-being of all parties involved.

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