The Effects of Adoptee Status on Identity Formation in Adolescence

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*"Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their
lives, power to retell it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as
times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts."*
- Salman Rushdie

<u>Introduction</u>

Over the past century, the practice of adoption has undergone many transitions that have greatly affected its implementation. Adoption was historically a matter of child welfare – more children were available for adoption than there were couples looking to adopt. Children were generally matched with couples by race, religion and sometimes even physical and intellectual traits. Although adoptive parents used to be able to be selective in terms of the characteristics they were seeking in a child to adopt, the tables have turned in recent decades so that birth parents, especially those going through private agencies, are often able to choose among several sets of prospective adoptive parents. Thus, children are not "matched" with families in the same way they were historically, which opens the door for a new range of potential issues for those involved in adoption arrangements (Nickman et al., 2005).

As of 2005, there are around 120,000 adoptions a year in the United States. International adoptions have doubled since the mid-1990s, with the current annual rate around 20,000. Thus, adoptees under the age of 18 comprise about 2% of the total population (Nickman et al., 2005). A greater variety of adoption arrangements exist such as single-parent households, homosexual couples, international adoptions and transracial adoptions. Additionally, adoptions now exist more commonly on a continuum of openness; that is, many adoptions are not at all or at least not completely confidential.

These new factors leave room for a new set of issues to emerge in the development of adolescent adoptees.

Developmentally speaking, identity formation is believed to be a primary task of adolescence, and requires achieving a definition of the self that is cohesive while also separating from the family (Erikson, 1968). Identity development during adolescence is also important because it is the foundation for adult interpersonal relationships and psychosocial development. Difficulties in identity formation adolescence have been linked with problematic behaviors later in life, thus this is a pivotal time in an individual's life. This is a particularly interesting issue for adoptees because the assigned components of identity – such as race, ethnicity gender, sexual orientation, and adoptive status – provide context for aspects over which adolescents have greater personal choice. Thus, adoptees may feel they are missing information from their personal history because of a lack of knowledge about their birth parents. This could, in turn, make the process of identity formation particularly difficult for adopted adolescence (Grotevant, 1997). Although there is no consensus on the overall impact of adoption on development, identity formation is a narrower topic, which may generate more concise results (Haugaard, 1998).

Overall Adjustment and Identity

Sharma, McGue and Benson (1998) attempted to draw comparisons between adopted adolescents and birth adolescents in terms of psychological adjustment, behavior and identity. They used data from a sample of 715 adoptive families in the United States, which accounted for 881 adopted and 78 birth adolescents. The families were mainly of

middle to high socioeconomic status, and were recruited from private and public social service agencies in Minnesota, Illinois, Wisconsin and Colorado. The majority of the birth adolescents were of European American descent, while the adopted sample contains a large proportion of Asian American internationally adopted adolescents, mainly of Korean descent. Each adolescent completed the syndrome and total problem scales of the Youth Self-Report and a portion of the Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors measure, along with a scale measuring identity. The researchers drew several major results from their data analysis.

First, in comparison to non-adopted siblings, adopted adolescents show lower levels of functioning on certain indicators of emotional and behavioral adjustments, and higher functioning on others. Adoptees were higher on indicators of delinquent behavior, licit drug use, and poorer school adjustment, while they displayed better functioning in social problems and withdrawn behaviors. Secondly, the differences are not large in a statistical sense, which may indicate that the effects noted account for the two to five times higher rate of clinical referral for adolescent adoptees in comparison to birth adolescents. Finally, variations in results on the identity measure by birth or adopted adolescent were not significant. However, this result could have a confounding factor, mainly that the birth youth were all in families where some children had been adopted. The results may have been different had a control group of adolescents with no adoption in their families were compared to adolescent adoptees. The authors offer some possible explanations for why adoptees function better on certain indicators: perhaps adoptive parents are more inclined to encourage prosocial behaviors, or perhaps adoptees feel grateful for being given a home and therefore wish to "give back" to society. Another

possible explanation is that adoptees may be more fearful of recurring loss and therefore

feel they must "prove their value" to avoid such abandonment. A major limitation of this

study is the lack of matched control group against which to compare the data provided by

the adopted adolescents. Additionally, the sample came only from those involved in

traditional confidential adoptions, so the possible effects of varying degrees of openness

were not addressed. Lastly, the sample was not very demographically diverse, with most

participants either being Caucasian or Asian Americans, which limits the generalizability

of the results in terms of more racially and ethnically diverse populations (Sharma,

McGue & Benson, 1998).

Kohler, Grotevant and McRoy (2002) examined the connection between the

intensity of an adolescent adoptee's thoughts about his or her adoption and the adoptees

relationship with his or her adoptive family. The researchers hope to link this to the tasks

of identity formation that occur during adolescence. Participants were taken from a

sample of adoptive families participating in Wave 2 of the Minnesota-Texas Adoption

Research Project, which drew from private adoption agencies located in all regions across

the United States; 135 adolescents participated, 63 boys and 72 girls. Their ages ranged

from 11 to 20 years old, with a mean age of 15.6 years old. The adolescents were

interviewed and asked to participate in a family interaction task. The analysis of the

collected data indicates that a relationship between the level of the adolescent adoptee's

preoccupation with their adoption and their relationships within the adoptive family. A

connection was also found between the adolescent's level of preoccupation and gender,

in that girls showed higher levels of preoccupation with their adoption than boys.

However, little is known about the meaning of the gender difference. Greater attention to

the social context surrounding the development of an adoptive identity is necessary, and should include an examination of issues of ethnicity and social class, along with gender.

Contrary to the predictions, adoptees in confidential adoption arrangements were not shown to have significantly higher levels of preoccupation than adoptees in open adoptions. Further, the results partially support the connection between adoptive identity and higher levels of emotional distance between adolescent adoptees and their adoptive parents. This connection, however, is seen most clearly in adoptees classifies as having an extremely high preoccupation with their adoption, and was also linked to adoptees who have a lower level of trust in their adoptive parents. One explanation for this phenomenon that the researchers suggest is that a period of reflection may be necessary for adoptees that view their adoptive status as particularly salient, requiring an emotional withdraw from their adoptive parents. This study does have some shortcomings, particularly in that it only addresses identity formation in terms of reflective thinking about adoption, falling short of addressing other identity exploring behaviors. Additionally, only the adoptees were interviewed, not their adoptive parents, which would have added another dimension to the results (Kohler, Grotevant & McRoy, 2002).

Level of Openness

Koroff, Grotevant and McRoy (2006) conducted the first study assessing whether behavioral and emotional adjustment of adolescents adopted in infancy is associated with the level of contact between the birth and adoptive family members. For the purposes of this study, openness was defined as either *confidential* or *ongoing fully disclosed*. Confidential adoptions arrangements are those in which identifying information is not

shared nor is there any communication. In contrast, fully disclosed adoption

arrangements are characterized by a sharing of identifying information, as well as

relatively frequent contact between birth and adoptive families throughout the adoptee's

lifetime. Participants were taken from a sample of 177 adoptive families participating in

Wave 2 of the Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project, which drew from adoption

agencies located in all regions across the United States. From this pool, 92 adoptive

families were pulled because of their participation in either a clearly confidential or

ongoing fully disclosed arrangement. The families were primarily middle to upper-

middle class, Caucasian, and Catholic or Protestant. Nearly all of the adoptive parents

had completed high school, and a majority completed college.   To measure adolescent

behavioral and emotional problems taking place within the past 6 months, the adoptive

parents each completed a Child Behavior Checklist and each adolescent adoptee

completed the Youth Self-Report. In the analysis, the independent variables were

openness level and gender, while the dependent variables were externalizing behavior

and internalizing behavior.

Reports by adoptive parents demonstrated no evidence of adjustment differences

by level of openness, while reports by adoptees suggested higher rates of externalizing

behavior in confidential as opposed to ongoing fully disclosed situations. The data

suggest that ongoing fully disclosed arrangements, compared with confidential ones, pose

no additional risks to adoptees in terms of externalizing behavior as perceived by

adoptees and their adoptive parents. This research supports legislative moves to facilitate

voluntary openness agreements that accommodate situations on a case-by-case basis.

Although this study assesses overall mental health, more extensive research is needed to

examine the balancing of identity formation in openness arrangements. Some limitations to this study were the focus on all Caucasian adoptees and adoptive parents, the relatively small sample size and the lack of random assignment, which constrain its generalizability (Koroff, Grotevant & McRoy, 2006)

Racial and Ethnic Variations

Vroegh (1997) presents the results of the fifth phase of a longitudinal study of the outcomes of transracial adoptions. The subjects were originally recruited in the early 1970s through two private agencies. The sample consists of 42 Caucasian families and 45 African American families who were all adopting children of African American descent, which is defined for this study as a child having an African American parent as one or both of his or her biological parents. This phase of the study was particularly aimed at assessing identity issues through general adjustment, racial identity, self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. Fifty-two adolescents agreed to participate at this stage from both the transracial and inracial adoptions, although this accounted for only of 40% of the original inracial participants and 81% of the original transracial participants. The adoptees were asked questions designed by the author over a 90-minute period to explore issues of adoption, race, identity, adjustment and interpersonal relationships.

Analysis of the data reveals that the adoptees, with few exceptions, appear to be doing well; they display development that does not appear to be out of the ordinary. In terms of adjustment, neither the transracial nor inracial adoptees displayed disturbances in any greater frequency than in the general adolescent population. The data were also analyzed to examine racial issues, particularly in terms of identity. The research suggests

that the adolescent adoptees involved both in transracial and inracial adoptions identified themselves as the same race they had been characterized as when they were placed as infants, indicating that the transracial adoptees had developed identities with which they were comfortable. Although this was not a complete study of the matter, it provides initial indications that adoptees in transracial adoptions do not face greater adjustment or identity problems than those placed in households identifying with the same race. There were, however, several limitations to this study. First, the initial sample size was fairly small, but of more concern is that there were differential rates of drop out from the study: 60% of the inracial participants dropped out, while only 19% of the transracial participants did. Additionally, the participants were not randomly selected, nor were certain variables controlled for, such as family size, skin color in terms of lightness and location of the family's residence. All of these factors could have had an influence on the results of the study, but were not taken into account. Additionally, the author makes allusions to the generalizability of the results to all transracial adoptions, but the sample only looked at one combination of racial groups – African Americans and Caucasians. To make these results more significant, other minorities, such as Hispanics, Asian Americans and Native Americans, would need to be evaluated (Vroegh, 1997)

Conclusions

        The current research on the issues of identity formation in adolescent adoptees has provided a base of information about the effects of adoption on this important developmental process, but further research is needed into the matter. It seems that most adolescent adoptees adjust in ways similar to their non-adopted peers, and have not

shown significant differences in their identity formation. However, subgroups within the

population of adolescent adoptees in the United States deserve particular attention, such

as international adoptees, transracial adoptees of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds,

and adoptees in open or semi-open adoptions versus traditional closed adoptions. A

recent article on Chinese adoptees in the United States raised several other potential

factors that may influence the identities of adolescent adoptees such as the diversity of

their neighborhoods and the way in which their culture is introduced and integrated into

their lifestyle by their adoptive parents. Additionally, there is some indication that

support groups for internationally adopted adolescents may be helpful to identity

formation, although it has not been empirically studied (Clemetson, 2006). Although

some research has been done regarding identity formation in these groups, many of the

studies suffer from problems of small sample size, high attrition rates, and a lack of

racial, ethnic, geographic or socioeconomic diversity. Research has likely been more

limited in this area due in part to the delicate nature of adoption relative to many other

issues. It would be beneficial for future research to be conducted about the development

of adoptees. In particular, a longitudinal study examining the relationship between the

identity formation of adolescent adoptees and their later adjustment in adulthood would

add greatly to the research in this area.

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