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Adjustment of international adoptees: Implications for practice and a future research agenda

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Abstract

Studies suggest that international (intercountry) adolescent adoptees have lower self-esteem and are at higher risk for developing severe mental health problems and social maladjustment than children of the same age living with their biological families in the general population. Although most U.S. studies report positive outcomes for international adoption, studies also report that many international adoptees are confused about their racial and/or ethnic identity and face difficulties in handling bias and discrimination. International adoptees may have a better adjustment if their adoptive parents are sensitive and appropriately responsive to issues related to their adopted child's race, ethnicity, and culture. This paper reviews the state of our current knowledge about how and why some international adoptees adjust better than others and suggests theoretically grounded avenues for future research. © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Social maladjustment; International adoptees; Intercountry adoption

1. Introduction

Recently, many American families have grown through international adoption. In 1991, the number of international adoptions by Americans was 8481. By 2003, the number of adoptions had more than doubled to 21,616 (U.S. Department of State, 2005). While China is the dominant relinquishing country for international adoption to North America, other major sending countries are Russia, Guatemala, Korea, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and

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India. The [Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect to Intercountry Adoption in 1993](#) recognizes that for full and harmonious personality development, a child should grow up in a family environment with an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding (Article 15, No. 1). The Convention acknowledges that intercountry adoption may offer the opportunity for a child to be placed with a permanent family when a suitable family cannot be found in his or her country of origin. According to the Hague Convention, the eligibility criteria to adopt internationally should include the central authority of the country of origin's judgment of the ability of an adoptive parent to undertake facilitating the child's identity development (Article 15, No. 1) including "his or her ethnic, religious and cultural background" (Article, 16, No. 1b). Thus, the presence of a loving home with caretakers who are sensitive and responsive to the child's needs related to his/her racial/ethnic identity is critical to ensure the child's optimal emotional and social adjustment as s/he moves from childhood through adolescence to adulthood.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Adjustment and international adoption*

2.1.1. *U.S. studies*

In the United States, studies addressing transracial adoption have primarily focused on transracially adopted African–American children, and few have focused on international adoption ([McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1982](#); [Simon & Altstein, 1992](#)). Studies addressing intercountry adoptees generally show positive adjustment of these adoptees when they are young, less is known about how they fare in their new country as they grow up ([Feigelman & Silverman, 1984](#); [Kim, 1977](#)). In addition, as compared to other Western countries, little research attention has been paid to the nature of the mental health status of intercountry adoptees in the United States. [Feigelman and Silverman \(1984\)](#), explored the long-term social adjustment of Colombian, Korean, and African–American transracial adoptees as compared with in-racially adopted Caucasians. Data were gathered in two phases. In 1975, the first phase in the study, 1100 adoptive families were surveyed with 737 of the families (67%) returning questionnaires. In the second phase six years later, out of the 737 original respondent families, 372 (50%) participated in the follow-up survey. Two-thirds of the adoptees were between seven and twelve years of age at the time of the 1981 follow-up study. Results showed better social adjustment as measured by the parents' overall evaluation of the adoption, and the frequency of emotional and growth problems for the internationally adopted children as compared to the African American transracially adopted children or the Caucasian children adopted domestically.

Another longitudinal study by [Simon and Altstein \(1992\)](#) assessed adoptees' relationships with their siblings and parents, as well as their school performance, friendship patterns, self-esteem, social activities, and future ambitions. The children were 3–8 years of age at the time of the first wave of the study (1971). The majority (77%) of the adopted children in the sample were African–American; others were Korean, Vietnamese, and Native American. The study reported that there were no differences between the scores of the adopted children and the children living with their biological families, and described

their overall social adjustment as happy and satisfying. Similar findings were reported by Kim (1977) in a study assessing the self-concept of Korean adoptees who had been adopted by American families. Adoptees in the sample were, on average, 14 years of age at the time of study. At the time of placement, children in the “Early Group” were one year of age at adoption and the children in the “Later Group” were six years of age or older. The study found no significant differences in self-concept between the two racial subgroups, i.e. full Korean and Korean–American children.

2.1.2. Studies conducted in other western countries

Although the U.S. studies of intercountry adoptees have shown generally positive findings on measures of social adjustment, findings from other Western countries are more mixed. For example, a Swedish study by Hjerm, Lindblad and Vinnerljung’s (2001), a Canadian study by Westhues and Cohen (1997) and a Dutch study by Verhulst, Althaus and Versluis-Den Bieman (1990) raise concerns about the outcomes for international adoptees. Hjerm et al. (2001) assessed mental health status and social maladjustment in adolescence and young adulthood in 11,320 intercountry adoptees as compared with 2343 Swedish-born siblings, 4006 immigrant children, and a general population of 853,419 Swedish-born residents. Seventy-four percent of the adopted children were 0–1 years old at the time of adoption. The study found that the intercountry adoptees were three to four times more likely to have serious mental health problems such as completed suicides, suicide attempts and psychiatric hospital admissions than children of the same age from the general population. After controlling for age and sex, the odds ratio for having poor mental health was significantly higher in the adoptee group than in the general population, the siblings, and the immigrant group. This is the only study that has used multiple comparison groups and has studied an entire national cohort.

Westhues and Cohen (1997) assessed social adjustment of international adoptees by looking at the quality of the child’s family integration, self-esteem, peer relations, comfort with racial background, comfort with ethnic background, and school performance. The sample size was 126 families. Most adopted children were 2 years of age or younger at the time of adoption. At the time of study the mean age of the intercountry adoptees was 17.3 years. The study found that intercountry adoptees fared well on measures of social adjustment, but there were differences in adjustment between intercountry adoptees and their native born siblings, with siblings, on average, showing more positive adjustment on measures of self-esteem, family integration, peer relations, and comfort with racial and ethnic background than the intercountry adoptees.

Verhulst et al. (1990) compared the adaptive functioning of 2148 international adoptees aged 10 to 15 years with a same-aged sample of 933 Dutch children from the general population. About fifty percent of the adopted children were 0–24 months at the time of placement. The study found that parents reported more problem behaviors, especially externalizing behaviors such as delinquent behavior and hyperactivity, with the adopted children versus the nonadopted children. The study also found that children placed within the first 6 months of their lives had higher scores on measures of problem behaviors than children placed at 7 to 24 months. Overall, boys were reported to have more problem behaviors than girls.

Discrepancies in the findings on international adoptees' adjustment across the various studies may be a result of the use of different methodologies and samples. For example, researchers have used different designs and measures, and the children studied have been of different ages at adoption and at the time of the study. Thus, it is difficult to arrive at definitive conclusions about the social and mental health adjustment of intercountry adoptees on the basis of the current body of research.

2.2. Ethnic identity and international adoption

Though past research in the U.S. generally shows positive outcomes with regard to children's social adjustment with international adoption, studies also report that many international adoptees are confused about their race and ethnicity, and face difficulties in handling racial/ethnic bias and discrimination (Triseliotis, 1997). Kim (1977), for example, reported that Korean children adopted by white parents had relatively little "Korean" identity. These children appeared to be extremely concerned with their physical appearance and tended to reject their racial background (Kim, 1977). Feigelman and Silverman's (1984) study also reported that Korean adolescents adopted in the States often experienced a sense of discomfort about their appearance. However, the authors found that Korean children who reported more pride and less shame about their Korean racial and cultural heritage showed better levels of social and psychological adjustment.

Altstein and Simon (1991), whose studies on international adoption suggest good overall adjustment on measures of self-esteem, found that some children reported experiences of racism and discrimination. Over a third of the adopted children "recalled problems during the preceding three years involving children calling them names and making fun of them because of their racial background" (p.37). Almost a third of the adopted children said that "the fact that they looked different from their parents and siblings had caused them some problems" (p.43).

A Canadian study by Westhues and Cohen (1997) found that intercountry adoptees, as compared with their native born siblings, were significantly more likely to have had an unpleasant experience because of their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Cederblad, Hook, Irhammar and Mercke (1999) reported that a substantial number of adopted children, as compared with nonadopted Swedish children, felt ill at ease when they were teased because of their foreign looks. However, Andujo (1988) found that same-ethnic adoptees, when confronted with racial prejudice and ethnic stereotypes, were more likely to respond to such incidents by employing "survival techniques" as coping mechanisms than were transethnic/racial adoptees. Such survival techniques included feeling pride in their ethnic group membership and ongoing contact with the Mexican–American community. In sum, studies show that although international adoptees report good adjustment overall, they often reported unpleasant experiences because of their race, which might be a risk factor for developing problems in social adjustment as they get older.

For international adoptees, ethnic identity is a critical developmental issue because what children hold as their self-identity as adolescents may differ from what others believe they are (Wilkinson, 1995). Ethnic identification and pride have been reported to play an important role in the development of positive self-esteem and overall psychological adjustment (Phinney, 1991; Phinney and Alipuria, 1990), and serves as a protector for

behavioral problems with adolescents of color (Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins & Seay, 1999). With international adoptees, the findings that establish a relationship between psychosocial adjustment and ethnic identity are inconclusive. For example, Yoon (2004) examined the relationship of ethnic pride and parental support for ethnic socialization with psychological well-being of 241 Korean-born adolescent adoptees. The study developed an eight-item Collective Self-Esteem Scale using a standard 6-point Likert type measure. The scale was comprised of two subscales consisting of items describing pride about ethnic origin and shame about ethnic origin. Scores ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6) with higher scores indicating greater collective self-esteem. Alpha reliability for the overall scale was .85. Findings from applying the scale suggest that a negative sense of ethnic identity may adversely affect psychological well-being, which is contrary to Kim's (1977) study that found no association between racial/cultural identity and the self-concept of adopted Korean children. However, it should be noted that in the later study, ethnic identification was not clearly operationalized. Thus, the inconsistency in the findings may be the result of the absence of clear and valid measurement of ethnic identity of international adoptees.

2.3. Risk and protective factors for social adjustment

Research has shown that international adoptees can be at risk for certain negative outcomes, such as low self-esteem and poor social adjustment. Risk factors at the individual level for these children include age at adoption, gender and pre-adoption life experiences. A study of intercountry adoptees by Howard Alstein and Rita J. Simon (1991) shows that children who are adopted as infants adjust better to their new environment than children who are adopted at a later age. Children adopted when they are older can present greater problems for adoptive parents, particularly on social maladjustment, attachment and other mental health problems, and externalizing behavior problems (Alstein & Simon, 1991; Hjern et al., 2001; Verhulst et al., 1990). Verhulst et al. (1990) report that the older the child at placement, the greater the probability that the child will develop behavioral problems. Feigelman and Silverman's (1984) study indicates that the age of the child at placement is the most decisive element in influencing adoptees' adjustment.

Adoptees' gender also affects adjustment. Overall, boys are found to be at greater risk for developing behavioral/emotional problems than girls (Verhulst et al., 1990). In contrast, a meta-analysis by Bimmel, Juffer, IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2003) on problem behavior of internationally adopted adolescents found that adopted girls, in contrast to adopted boys, often exhibited both externalizing and internalizing behavior problems such as anxiety/depression, withdrawal, schizoid and delinquent behaviors. According to Harter (1990), during early adolescence, the task of maintaining high and stable self-esteem may be challenging for girls because of the concern with peer acceptance, physical attractiveness, and conflicting social role expectations, which may explain the conflicting results. Preadoptive experiences, e.g. the experience of institutionalization prior to adoption, may pose a significant risk for developmental delay and mental health problems. For example, the findings from several studies (see, for example, Groza, 1999; Groza, Ryan, & Cash, 2003) report that, as compared to children

who are raised in a birth family or foster family, adopted children with a history of institutionalization are at greater risk for evidencing health, developmental and behavioral difficulties. Kim (1995) notes that intercountry adoptees' problems are most likely related to preadoptive experiences such as neglect, malnutrition, or separation trauma.

While the presence of risk factors at the micro level can increase the likelihood of other risk factors for international adoptees adjustment, the presence of protective factors can help to ameliorate certain negative outcomes. The protective factors for adoptees' adjustment may include level of self-esteem, ethnic identity, cultural competence of adoptive parents, and quality of parenting which ideally includes not only warmth, love and support but also opportunities for learning about the child's birth culture and country of origin. Indeed, such parenting might be associated with higher self-esteem among adoptees at greatest risk for adjustment difficulties. According to Scroggs and Heitfield (2001), parents' efforts to give their children a sense of pride and understanding of their birth culture and country prepare the children for questions and stereotypes that they may encounter in their lives.

Adoptees' high self-esteem and ethnic identity can serve as protective factors for their social adjustment. According to Rutter (1987), it is protective to have a well established feeling of one's own worth as a person which strengthens one's ability to cope successfully with life's challenges. A strong positive ethnic identity may, in fact, protect the child or adolescent against the negative psychological effects of racism and discrimination (Lee, 2003). Others believe that adolescents with a strong ethnic identity may report higher pro-social attitudes and less involvement in problem behaviors (Smith et al., 1999).

According to Vonk (2001), transracial adoptive parents' cultural competence can help children develop pride in their ethnic identities, achieve better psychological adjustment, as well as help develop coping skills to deal with racial/ethnic prejudice and discrimination. Research indicates that internationally adopted children adjust well if their parents provide a nurturing environment, openly acknowledge their physical differences but emphasize their psychological similarities, and expose them to affirmative role models from their countries of origin (Benson, Sharma and Roehlkepartain, 1994). Feigelman and Silverman (1984) suggest that when adoptive parents emphasize their adopted child's racial or ethnic affiliation in a positive way, they are likely to inspire a sense of ethnic pride and positive self-concept in their transracially adopted children.

2.4. Importance of adoptive parents' cultural competence

Some believe that international adoptees may have a better adjustment if adoptive parents are aware and sensitive to their adopted children's race, ethnicity, and culture (Vonk, 2001). Research findings suggest that the self-esteem of adoptees is positively related to transracial adoptive parents' cultural competence and the extent to which adopted children are positively exposed to their culture of origin. For example, Yoon (2000) found that parental support of ethnic socialization was associated with better psychological adjustment of the adopted children. However, the response rate was only 30% and, thus, the findings have limited generalizability.

In an exploratory study of 30 Caucasian parents and 40 adopted Korean children, Huh and Reid (2000) studied what kinds of ethnic identities are developed by transcultural and

transracial adopted children, what factors are associated with the development of these identities, and whether family involvement in culturally related activities is an influential factor. Data was collected via semi-structured, in-depth interviews, and included an original scale measuring the extent of family involvement in Korean cultural activities, the extent of the children's identification with Korean culture, and the ease of communication between parents and children concerning adoption. The median age of the children was 10. The study found that when adoptive parents were actively involved in Korean culture, their adopted children developed strong ethnic identities and were able to identify themselves as Korean–American rather than Korean. However, the sample was quite small and there was no underlying theory to interpret the results.

A descriptive study by [Trolley, Wallin, and Hansen \(1995\)](#) found that exposure of the children to their culture of origin was beneficial. Most parents agreed that knowledge of birth culture was significant in relation to their children's self-identity and social adjustment. These authors conclude that parental acknowledgement of their child's birth culture is a fundamental part of adoption status for children from other countries and cultures, and it is important for parents to preserve the culture of origin on some level to enable the children to accept all aspects of themselves. However, the study sample size was only 34 and thus the results are limited in terms of generalizability.

The previous literature review clearly reveals that there are many unanswered questions about the needs and outcomes for intercountry adoptees and their families. Because the studies cited above are atheoretical, and offer little systematic empirical data using established measures, there is a clear need for the development of a research agenda to address these gaps. Theory is important because it helps social work practitioners to interpret research findings and apply such findings to identify appropriate interventions for a particular client population. Theory also helps researchers define the study questions and identify the most important variables in the data analysis.

Identifying those elements that represent risk or protective factors affecting international adoptees' psychosocial adjustment can provide social workers a theoretical framework to guide the selection of particular interventions to assist international adoptees and their adoptive families. We would like to present a conceptual framework to serve as an underpinning for the key research questions.

3. Conceptual framework

Any agenda for future research on the needs and outcomes for intercountry adoptees and their families is most appropriately guided by the ecological and risk-resiliency theoretical perspectives. The basic assumption of the ecological perspective is that the person and environment are interactive and inseparable ([Bronfenbrenner, 1989](#)). The perspective assumes that the reciprocal nature of the relationship between a person and his or her environment forms a unitary system in which each shapes and influences the other ([Greene, 1999](#)). The risk and resiliency perspective clarifies the links between the risk and protective factors that affect an individual's growth and development. While risk factors involve individual predispositions and environmental conditions that heighten vulnerability to negative outcomes, protective factors are individual or environmental

characteristics that enhance one's ability to be resilient and recover from negative experiences and situations (Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert & Stephens, 2001). Ecological theory is useful for understanding the risk and protective factors involved at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels for children who are international adoptees. An appropriate research agenda could begin by focusing primarily on risk and protective factors at the micro level, taking into account the influence of macro risks such as societal-level stereotypes and institutional racism and prejudice that are experienced by children of color or macro protective factors, such as whether there is the presence of high quality integrated schools and accessible health/mental health care and treatment.

4. Directions for future research

4.1. Importance of instrument development

Although prior research has provided some beginning insights about the issues related to ethnic identity among international adoptees, there are still many unanswered questions. Future research must use established measures with solid records of reliability and validity across a range of racial and ethnic groups. Or, when such measures are not available, future research must emphasize trans-cultural measure development work. Examples of established measures would be the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which is the most widely used measure of self-esteem and has been used by Altstein and Simon (1991) and Westhues and Cohen (1997) to study international adoptees' self-esteem. Lee (2003) has reported an internal reliability of .88 for this scale. Vonk (2004) developed the Transracial Adoption Parenting Scale (TAPS) as a measure for assessing parenting and cultural competence of transracial adoptive parents. Vonk (2004) reported the internal reliability of 0.91 for the TAPS.

A variety of instruments have been developed to measure ethnic identity of biracial and/or immigrant children, but there is an absence of a valid and reliable measure for ethnic identity of international adoptees. Ethnic identity of international adoptees is different from the ethnic identity of immigrant and/or biracial adoptees because such children are raised by white adoptive parents whose culture is different from theirs (Friedlander, 1999). Further, internationally adopted children often lack opportunities to meet other individuals from their native countries. It is difficult for international adoptees to develop a level of ethnic identity similar to that of immigrant and/or biracial children.

Further, researchers that have studied ethnic identity of international adoptees have used different conceptual definitions and, thus, different scales. For example, Andujo (1988) used color and ethnicity as self-descriptors and employed the Twenty-Statement Test and Mexican–American Value Attitude Scale to measure ethnic identity of transethnically adopted adolescents. Westhues and Cohen (1997) did not employ any established scale but rather developed a few items and used a 5-point scale to measure the degree of comfort with ethnic and racial backgrounds of international adoptees. Yoon (2000) used ethnic pride as a measurable indicator of ethnic identity and developed Collective Self-Esteem Scale to measure adoptees collective self-esteem/positive ethnic pride. It is evident from these studies that there is a need to develop a commonly-accepted

definition of ethnic identity and the importance of a scale development work. An important aspect of international adoptees' identity is feeling comfortable with their adoptive status and ethnic background. Therefore, the development of an ethnic identity scale should include two aspects of ethnic identity: personal identity as an adoptee and the degree of comfort with adoptive status; and the degree of comfort with ethnic background.

4.2. Possible research questions

Future research should be designed to increase our understanding, based on theory, of how and why international adoptees who adjust most optimally are different from those who do not. This is important in terms of identifying at-risk subgroups and developing appropriate interventions with the aim of buffering risk and enhancing psychosocial adjustment. Research questions that can be asked within the ecological and risk/resilience theoretical frameworks include the following:

1. Is the adoptive parents' cultural competence related to intercountry adopted children's self-esteem? If so, which aspects play the greatest role and how exactly do such aspects impact self-esteem positively or negatively? Also, how is the construct of cultural competence operationalized for this particular population?
2. Is ethnic identity related to self-esteem and how is it related? How is "ethnic identity" operationalized for children whose identity bridges two or more racial or ethnic groups?
3. Is parenting in the home environment related to children's self-esteem and what are the most important components of effective parenting for transracially/transethnically adopted children?
4. Does the level and quality of social support moderate the relationships between the transracial adoptive parents' cultural competence and adoptees' self-esteem?
5. Does more adequate parenting moderate the relationship between ethnic identity and the adopted children's self-esteem? And how is "adequate" or "good" transracial parenting operationalized? What are the most important aspects? It may be that certain aspects carry more or less weight with girls versus boys or some other subgrouping.
6. Is the children's comfort with their adoptive status related to their degree of comfort with their racial and/or ethnic background?

5. Implications for practice

Intercountry adoption agencies need to provide post-adoption parent training in culturally competent parenting strategies and cultural socialization. Social support in the form of post-adoption services to both the adoptive parents and children from the adoption agencies could help to mitigate negative effects of adoptive parents' lack of cultural competence on adoptees' self-esteem and problem behavior and facilitate the development of such competence. For example, [Barth and Miller \(2000\)](#) state that the quality of support parents receive from the adoption agency, especially full disclosure of information about their child and the child's birth culture, may help parents to better understand their adopted child and deal with issues surrounding adoption; and for adopted children, post adoption

services may help them to understand what it means to grow up as an adoptee and what it means to be a person of color in society. Many adoptive parents assume that children are better off adopted out of country and, thus, may not fully appreciate the importance of facilitating and supporting their child's ethnic identity. In that case, social workers need to properly assess the eligibility criteria of adoptive parents according to the Hague Convention and their motivation to adopt internationally. Social workers should be sensitive about the issues that may undermine parental support for the child's identity development by validating the adopted child's birth culture. Because, for adoptees, birth culture is an important part of their identity and giving cultural support to adoptees will foster the adoptees' positive sense of ethnic identity which will ultimately strengthen their adaptive psychosocial functioning.

6. Conclusions

For many children, international adoption provides a chance to have a "forever family", and for many couples and individuals, it provides a viable option for building a family. These days, international adoption is no longer a rare phenomenon. In some way or another it has touched most Americans via family, friends, neighbors or co-workers who have adopted a child. In spite of its prevalence, little research attention has been paid to exploring the factors that lead to successful or problematic outcomes for internationally adopted children in the U.S. It is clear from the research that has been reported, that to support the development of healthy adoptive families, child and family adoption social workers need to learn how to make skilled assessments and engage in culturally sensitive interventions to assist these families and their children. There are many research questions that have yet to be addressed, the answers to which could lead to the development of theory based guidelines for enhancing such interventions. For the welfare of children and the families that love them, we as a society have an important responsibility in providing the support to enable internationally adoptive families to achieve success.

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