



Exploring The Psychological Terrain Of Adopted Children: Insights And Complexities

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Abstract

The psychology of adopted children is a multifaceted field that delves into various aspects of their development, adjustment, and well-being within adoptive families. Research in this area encompasses studies from developmental psychology, clinical psychology, and social psychology, shedding light on the unique experiences and challenges faced by adopted children and their families. This exploration seeks to understand how factors such as attachment, identity formation, and pre-adoption experiences shape the psychological landscape of adopted children. By examining these dynamics, researchers aim to provide insights that can inform supportive interventions and promote positive outcomes for adopted individuals.

Keywords: Adoption, Mental Health, Psychological Development, Adopted Child, Behavioural Issues

Introduction

Psychological Health of Adopted Children

Children who are adopted from care are more likely to experience enduring emotional and behavioural problems such as attention issues, anxiety and depression, adjustment problem and adopting new environment and culture. These issues often persist into adulthood across development. According to [study](#) children who are older at the time of adoption are more likely to have been exposed to a cluster of adverse environmental experiences, such as longer-term deprivation, maltreatment, and trauma.¹ Secure attachment development and positive family relationships can serve as protective factors against psychological distress stemming from early adversity.²

¹ Anthony RE, Paine AL, Shelton KH. (2019) Adverse Childhood Experiences of Children Adopted from Care: The Importance of Adoptive Parental Warmth for Future Child Adjustment. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. Jun 22;16(12):2212. doi:[10.3390/ijerph16122212](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16122212) PMID: 31234480; PMCID: PMC6617038.

² Balenzano, C., Coppola, G., Cassibba, R., & Moro, G. (2018). Pre-adoption adversities and adoptees' outcomes: The protective role of post-adoption variables in an Italian experience of domestic open adoption. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 85, 307–318. DOI:[10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.01.012](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.01.012)

Attachment Theory:

Attachment is “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” as explained by first attachment theorist John Bowlby.³ Attachment starts in the womb, so even for children relinquished at birth, this represents a significant trauma and attachment wound.⁴

In the study, it was found that most late-placed children initially showed attachment insecurity upon placement, which was more pronounced than in children raised by biological parents. However, within less than a year of adoption, there was a significant enhancement in the attachment security of late-adopted children.⁵ Attachment theory serves as a foundational framework for understanding the emotional bonds formed between adopted children and their adoptive parents. The quality of attachment relationships can significantly influence the child's emotional development and social functioning.⁶ Adopted children may face unique challenges in forming secure attachments, particularly if they have experienced disruptions or trauma in their early lives. However, supportive and nurturing environments within adoptive families can help foster healthy attachment relationships, promoting the child's sense of security and well-being.

Identity Formation:

Identity formation is a central aspect of psychological development for adopted children, encompassing questions about their origins, family ties, and cultural heritage. As adopted children grow more conscious of their adoptive status, they frequently pose inquiries like "Why was I adopted?", "Where are my biological parents?", and "Was I abandoned?" These inquiries delve into matters of personal identity, self-worth, and a sense of belonging. Identity is a broad construct and is associated with other self-constructs, such as self-esteem and self-concept, which are often difficult to tease apart.⁷ The adolescent's primary developmental task is to establish an identity while actively seeking independence and separation from family.⁸

According to the [study](#), four adopted children were interviewed. Among them, one experienced challenges grappling with their identity as an adopted child, impacting social interactions to some extent. Additionally, all four children expressed inquiries regarding their identity and sense of 'belonging' as they entered adolescence.⁹ Most adopted children experience a sense of not belonging when they realize they do not look anything like their parents but also have no similarities to their own race.¹⁰

Transracial and transcultural adoption affects adopted children into families of a different race or culture. navigate. Transracial, issues of racial and cultural identity, discrimination, and belonging issues may also affect a child's adoption experience.¹¹

Behavioural and Emotional Adjustment:

³ John Bowlby Attachment and Loss, Vol-1 Attachment https://mindsplain.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ATTACHMENT_AND_LOSS_VOLUME_I_ATTACHMENT.pdf

⁴ Brandon AR, Pitts S, Denton WH, Stringer CA, Evans HM. (2009) A HISTORY OF THE THEORY OF PRENATAL ATTACHMENT. J Prenat Perinat Psychol Health. Summer;23(4):201-222. PMID: 21533008; PMCID: PMC3083029.

⁵ Pace, Cecilia Serena & Zavattini, Giulio Cesare. (2011). 'Adoption and attachment theory' the attachment models of adoptive mothers and the revision of attachment patterns of their late-adopted children. Child: care, health and development. 37(1):82-88. [10.1111/j.1365-2214.2010.01135.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2214.2010.01135.x)

⁶ Malik F, Marwaha R. Developmental Stages of Social Emotional Development in Children. [Updated 2022 Sep 18]. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2024 Jan-. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK534819/>

⁷ Ryburn, M. (1995). Adopted children's identity and information needs. Children & Society, 9(3), 41-64.

⁸ Okun BF, Anderson CM. Understanding Diverse Families: What Practitioners Need to Know. New York: Guilford Press; 1996. p. 376.

⁹ Mahmood, Samina & Visser, John. (2015). Adopted children: A question of identity. Support for Learning. 30(3): 268-285. DOI: [10.1111/1467-9604.12095](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12095)

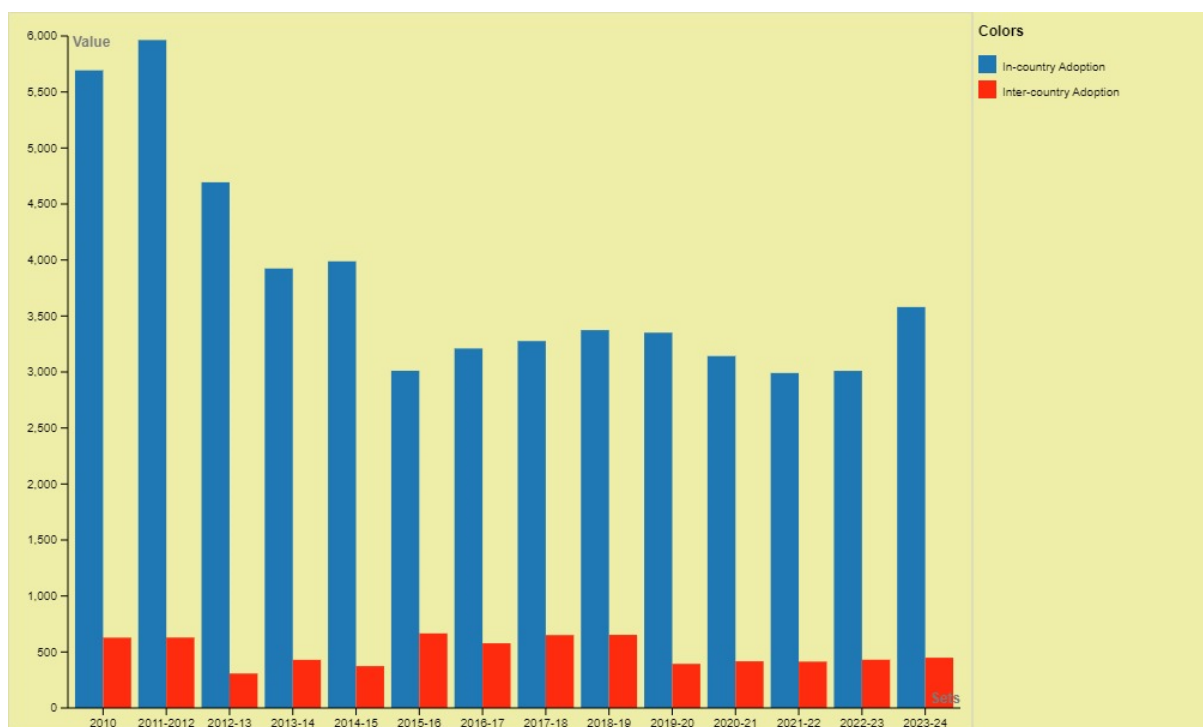
¹⁰ Lang, Anne Adams. "When Parents Adopt a Child and a Whole Other Culture." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 8 Mar. 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/08/news/identity-when-parents-adopt-a-child-and-a-whole-other-culture.html>

¹¹ Okun BF, Anderson CM. Understanding Diverse Families: What Practitioners Need to Know. New York: Guilford Press; 1996. p. 376.

Children adopted from care are prone to facing persistent emotional and behavioural issues throughout their development.

Adoption as an intervention greatly improves the developmental outcomes of adopted children.¹² While many adopted children thrive in loving, stable families, others may experience challenges related to attachment difficulties, identity concerns, or past trauma.¹³ Understanding the quality of parenting and home life offered can contribute to positive adjustment outcomes that can inform interventions aimed at supporting the well-being of adopted children and their families.¹⁴

In India. According to data from the Central Adoption Resource Agency (CARA), the steady decrease in adoptions in India could be attributed to shifting societal attitudes, economic constraints, and changes in adoption laws and administrative procedures. For instance, in 2010, there were 6,321 adoptions, with 5,693 being domestic and 628 being inter-country adoptions. Contrastingly, in the period from 2023 to 2024, there were 4,029 adoptions, comprising 3,580 domestic adoptions and 449 inter-country adoptions. This figure encapsulates the adoption trends in India from 2010 to 2023-2024.¹⁵



(Figure-1) Indian Adoption 2010- 2023-2024

Source: CARA

Another study revealed that the prevalence of behavioural disorders was higher in children out of parental care than in children under parental care.¹⁶ The majority of research has concentrated on assessing the influence of parenting behaviour. These studies have consistently shown that parental warmth, sensitivity

¹² Palacios, J., Adroher, S., Brodzinsky, D. M., Grotevant, H. D., Johnson, D. E., Juffer, F., Martínez-Mora, L., Muhamedrahimov, R. J., Selwyn, J., Simmonds, J., & Tarren-Sweeney, M. (2019). Adoption in the service of child protection: An international interdisciplinary perspective. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 25(2), 57-72 <https://doi.org/10.1037/law0000192>

¹³ Fisher PA. Review: Adoption, fostering, and the needs of looked-after and adopted children. *Child Adolesc Ment Health*. 2015 Feb;20(1):5-12. doi: [10.1111/camh.12084](https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12084) Epub 2014 Dec 15. PMID: 25678858; PMCID: PMC4321746.

¹⁴ Brodzinsky, D. M. (1993). Long-Term Outcomes in Adoption. *The Future of Children*, 3(1), 153–166.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/1602410>

¹⁵ CARA is an autonomous agency under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. It was established in 1990 to deal with all matters concerning adoption in India. For additional information, see their website at <http://www.adoptionindia.nic.in>

For Statistics Data Website at https://cara.wcd.gov.in/resource/adoption_Statistics.html

¹⁶ Datta, P., Ganguly, S., & Roy, B. (2018). The prevalence of behavioral disorders among children under parental care and out of parental care: A comparative study in India. *International Journal of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 5(4), 145-151. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpam.2018.12.001>

in parenting, and adopting a positive approach to parenting are associated with favourable behavioural outcomes in adopted children.¹⁷

Parent-Child Relationships:

Parenting is an art, and parenting an adopted child demands dedication to tackle countless challenges. However, the adopted child often devalues or neglects the efforts made by parents, resulting in an unhealthy parent-child relationship. Positive parent-child relationships play a crucial role in the emotional well-being and overall adjustment of adopted children. Children with higher levels of aggression, delinquency, anxiety, or depression often have more difficult relationships with their parents, marked by increased negativity and decreased warmth.¹⁸ On average, adopted children exhibited greater levels of maladjustment.¹⁹

Adoption Trauma:

Adoption trauma refers to the emotional and psychological impact of separation from birth parents, multiple placements, or experiences of neglect or abuse prior to adoption. Psychological trauma is understood as ‘an inescapable stressful event that overwhelms people's existing coping mechanism’.²⁰

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the psychology of adopted children is a nuanced and multifaceted field that continues to garner attention from researchers across various domains of psychology. Through studies rooted in developmental, clinical, and social psychology, a deeper understanding of the unique experiences and challenges faced by adopted children and their families has emerged.

Attachment theory serves as a foundational framework for comprehending the emotional bonds formed within adoptive families. While late-placed children may initially exhibit attachment insecurity, research suggests that over time, the establishment of secure attachment relationships within adoptive families can significantly enhance the child's emotional well-being.

Identity formation represents another critical aspect of psychological development for adopted children. As they navigate questions surrounding their origins, family ties, and cultural heritage, adopted individuals may grapple with issues of self-worth and belonging. Transracial and transcultural adoptions further complicate this process, highlighting the importance of supporting adopted children in exploring and embracing their identities.

Behavioural and emotional adjustment are ongoing concerns for adopted children, with research indicating both positive outcomes facilitated by supportive parenting and potential challenges stemming from adoption trauma. Parent-child relationships play a pivotal role in the emotional well-being and overall adjustment of adopted children, emphasizing the need for nurturing and positive caregiving environments.

Moving forward, future research endeavours should continue to explore the complex interplay of factors influencing the psychological health of adopted children. Longitudinal studies tracking the developmental trajectories of adopted individuals and interventions aimed at promoting resilience and well-being are essential areas for further investigation.

¹⁷ Fabienne Hornfeck, Ina Bovenschen, Sabine Heene, Janin Zimmermann, Annabel Zwönitzer, Heinz Kindler (2019) Emotional and behavior problems in adopted children – The role of early adversities and adoptive parents' regulation and behaviour, *Child Abuse & Neglect, The International Journal*, Vol29, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104221>

¹⁸ Siqueland, L., Kendall, P. C., & Steinberg, L. (1996). Anxiety in children: Perceived family environments and observed family interaction. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 25(2), 225–237. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15374424jccp2502_12

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²⁰ van der Kolk BA, Fisler R. Dissociation and the fragmentary nature of traumatic memories: overview and exploratory study. *J Trauma Stress*. 1995 Oct;8(4):505-25. doi: [10.1007/BF02102887](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02102887) PMID: 8564271.

By advancing our understanding of the psychological dynamics at play within adoptive families, researchers can inform more targeted and effective interventions to support the healthy development and adjustment of adopted children, ultimately promoting positive outcomes for these individuals and their families.

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