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Issues in interpreting the findings from adoption outcome studies: A checklist for practitioners

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adoptionfostering



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Recently we were asked to write a book chapter concerning adopted children's behavioural and emotional adjustment. Although familiar with the field and knowing the backgrounds of many studies, we found that summarising research findings was not easy. It appeared that while many studies found that adopted children had problems in later adjustment in some developmental areas (e.g. Bramlett, Radel and Blumberg, 2007; Merz and McCall, 2010), at least an equal number of studies revealed the risk for problems being relatively small and not widespread (Juffer and van IJzendoorn, 2005; Keyes, et al., 2008; Nickman, et al., 2005). A closer examination of these diverse research findings made us realise that the difficulty in comparing and summarising studies on adoption outcomes was largely due to the tremendous variability in research settings and samples used. In the light of these complexities we thought that a short checklist might help practitioners to determine the cornerstones of how to evaluate different studies and so help their work with adopted children and their families. Clearly, many of the issues faced are not unique to adoption studies but five points seemed highly relevant to this type of research.

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1. Variations among adopted children

The first point concerns the heterogeneity of the population. Adopted children are studied in various settings and compared with various groups (e.g. international vs domestic adoption; adoption vs foster care, long, short or no history of institutionalisation; adoption at younger or later age, etc.). Some studies draw on large samples, including adoptees from different countries and with distinct histories, while others use more specific and smaller ones. It is important to note that although ‘adopted children’ as a group may share some vulnerabilities, such as fractured relationships with carers, among them are children with histories of deprivation, serious trauma, neglect, abuse and maltreatment, and others who have not had these experiences. Given all this variation in study populations, it is not surprising that there is a wide range of outcomes for conditions like behavioural, emotional, academic or social adjustment.

2. Different definitions of adjustment

The definitions of adjustment employed are also extremely varied and lead to contrasting views on how to operationalise measures of adjustment, especially as there is currently no gold standard for how negative or positive adjustment should be assessed (De Los Reyes, Augustein and Lipton, 2019). For example, should behavioural adjustment be evaluated in terms of a presence or absence of psychiatric symptoms, diagnoses or behaviour problems? And what do the scores of adjustment tools (e.g. often used total scores of Child Behavior Checklist) actually tell us about adjustment? What would we obtain by using more detailed measures of specific developmental areas, or focusing on the well-functioning aspects in child’s development (see Diener, Lucas and Oishi, 2002)?

In addition, to whom should we address our questionnaires? The extensive use of parental reports in studies on adopted children is at least partly due to the fact that reliable self-report measures of children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties have only become available recently (see Gagnon-Oosterwaal, et al., 2012). The importance of a multi-informant approach to assessment is underlined in contemporary research on child development (De Los Reyes, Augustein and Lipton, 2019) and has been employed in many studies on adoption research (e.g. Keyes, et al., 2008; Neil, 2012; Wiik, et al., 2011). It is argued, for example, that internalising symptoms are more validly reported by children themselves as they are often less visible to parents or teachers (Tandon, Cardeli and Luby, 2009).

3. Timing

The timing of the assessment can also influence study results. For example, adopted children may have issues with their identity in their emerging adulthood (Grotevant, et al., 2017), but measuring identity at some other point along the life course might yield different results. Another uncertainty concerns the developmental trajectory of adjustment problems where the study settings and the characteristics of the children studied can be influential. For example, those with severe early deprivation may show later onset of adjustment difficulties, whereas for others problems seem to decrease with time.

4. A variety of underlying factors

As suggested by the theory of multifinality in children's development (e.g. Cicchetti and Rogosh, 2002), there is a considerable heterogeneity in the sequelae observed in adopted children despite their frequent experience of early adversity. These diverse outcomes can be explained by many factors: genetics, epigenetics, prenatal factors, deprivation, biological and psychological stress and exposure to substances, as well as the impact of the post-adoption environment and individual differences in how adoptees experience and interpret their life events. Thus, adoption *per se* does not emerge as a factor yielding specific developmental outcomes; rather the outcomes are explained by the complex interplay between child, the environment and specific risk and protective factors that shape the neurodevelopmental processes underlying the differing adjustment outcomes.

5. The wider framework

Finally, it is important to stress that children's behavioural and emotional development always occurs within a broader, holistic development framework where biological, physical, cognitive, emotional and social development bind together and affect one another. For example, being adopted into a country with a relatively homogeneous culture and stable society is different from being adopted into one that is culturally and racially diverse; similarly, contacts with people coming from the child's country of origin may affect adopted children's identity and possibly self-esteem, and thus influence later adjustment (cf., Castle, Knight and Watters, 2011).

Obviously, disseminating research findings in a sound and reliable way is a challenge in any research field. This checklist endeavours to provide an effective tool for readers confused by the contradictions found in adoption research by alerting them to the considerable diversity in study settings and types of children scrutinised.

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