



Stress in adoptive parents of adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The stress experienced by the adoptive parents of adolescents adopted as young children was explored in a community sample from Spain. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the role of the child-, parent- and family-related characteristics as predictors of parenting stress in adoptive families. A group of 156 families of adolescents adopted domestically as young children participated in this study. The average age at the time of adoption was 3.15 years, 17.9% were sibling adoptions, and 10% had special needs. High correlations were found between mothers and fathers in the *Stress Index for Parents of Adolescents* (Sheras, Abidin, & Konold, 1998). Compared with other non-adoptive samples, the stress of the mothers was lower in the total scores, but higher in the adolescent domain. Variables pertaining to the child, to the parent and to the support and resources used regarding adoption made a significant contribution to the regression model (49.2% of the explained variance).

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a time of important physical and psychological changes. It is also a period when new developmental tasks are faced. When those adopted as children reach adolescence, further challenges are added to the normative ones; for instance, they will need to integrate their adoption into a new sense of identity, and some will start looking at their origins under the new light shed by their new cognitive ability (Brodzinsky, Smith, & Brodzinsky, 1998). The adoptive parents of teenagers are then confronted with the challenges of adolescence plus the additional challenges posed by adoption.

Most research studies on adoption focus on the developmental outcomes of the adoptees, whereas far less emphasis is placed on assessing the processes involved in the adoption situation. These processes occur not only in the child (e.g., the creation of new emotional bonds) but also in the adoptive parents (e.g., the specific characteristics of the transition to adoptive parenthood) and in parent–child interactions (e.g., communication about adoption). In spite of the great relevance of these processes, researchers have paid little attention to them (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). In response to this gap in adoption knowledge, the present study examines one aspect of family life; namely, the stress experienced by adoptive parents. Parental stress is, at the same time, a predictor and a consequence of parenting and family functioning. As has been pointed out by Webster-Stratton

(1990), stressed parents, who are frequently more irritable, critical and severe towards their children, are more liable to cause problematic behavior in them, which in turn increases parental stress.

The scant research on adoptive parents' stress shares three main features. Firstly, it frequently examines what happens in the first phase of the adoption process, since parental stress is assessed either in the first year post-adoption or shortly afterwards (Judge, 2003, 2004; Mainemer, Gilman, & Ames, 1998; McGlone, Santos, Kazama, Fong, & Mueller, 2002). Thus, these studies may be focusing more on the stress related to the adjustment to adoption (the family adjustment phase of the model by McCubbin and Patterson (1983)) than on adoption stress itself (the consolidation level of the family accommodation phase of the same model). Since most studies (Bird, Peterson, & Miller, 2002; Judge, 2003, 2004; Levy-Shiff, Zoran, & Shulman, 1997) have reported lower levels of stress in adoptive compared to nonadoptive parents, it could be hypothesized that, at the time of their study, these parents were still in the “honey moon” period, with more difficult times ahead.

Secondly, research on parental stress and adoption has frequently centered on parents who are involved in more difficult adoptions, such as those involving special-needs children (McGlone et al., 2002), children who have been institutionalized for a long time (Judge, 2003, 2004; Mainemer et al., 1998), or parents who have sought help from adoptive parents' support groups (Bird et al., 2002). Most of these studies (Judge, 2003; Mainemer et al., 1998; McGlone et al., 2002) have reported a clear association between the children's behavioral problems and parental stress. With very few exceptions (Levy-Shiff et al., 1997), there is little information available regarding the experience of stress in parents engaged in less problematic adoptions and it is difficult to determine whether the stress

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is linked with the adoption itself, or with the behavioral problems of the adopted children whose parents are being studied.

Thirdly, empirical research has been carried out using samples of adoptive parents of young children (Authors, 2006; Bird et al., 2002; Judge, 2003, 2004; Mainemer et al., 1998; McGlone et al., 2002; Viana & Welsh, 2010), there being no empirical research on adoptive parents whose children have reached adolescence. The only articles we have been able to find on this age group are more like reflections based on clinical experience than empirical studies (Katz, 1986; Mackie, 1982). Consequently, we do not know if the stress experienced by the parents of adopted adolescents is similar, or not, to that of the adoptive parents of young children or that of the parents of non-adopted adolescents.

Adoptive parents' stress is an interesting topic because, like all parents, they have to deal with the daily hassles of parenthood (Crnic & Low, 2002), and at the same time face what Bird et al. (2002) have termed "adoptive strains", which are defined as "more enduring, chronic or recurrent problems and conflicts that adoptive parents face on a routine basis that can result in increased feelings of distress" (p. 215). These strains include such varied circumstances as solving infertility-related problems, managing the financial consequences of adoption, creating attachment and making the new arrival feel like a member of the family, facing mental health issues, the fear that birthparents will reclaim their rights to the adopted child, and knowing how and when to disclose the adoption to the child. We are therefore not only dealing with situational distress, but also with a more stable and permanent type of stress that is linked to the role of adoptive parenthood. At the outset of research on adoption, Kirk (1964) referred to this as a "role handicap" with which adoptive parents are confronted.

According to Brodzinsky et al. (1998), adoption is not a one-off event, but rather a life cycle experience in which specific "adoptive strains" characterize each period of life. In this regard, adolescence brings with it a perturbation of the interpersonal equilibrium established during middle childhood (Steinberg & Silk, 2002) after which increased conflict and strain might be anticipated. In adoptive families, adolescence introduces new tasks and challenges for both the adopters (e.g., supporting the teenager's search interests and plans) and the adoptees (e.g., integrating adoption into a stable and secure identity) (Brodzinsky et al., 1998).

In addition to the age of the children whose parents' stress we study, our approach differs from the existing literature on stress in adoptive parents in at least two main aspects. First, the children's behavioral problems have been found to be the variable that is more closely linked to parental stress (Judge, 2003; Mainemer et al., 1998; McGlone et al., 2002), but the most widely used tools for the assessment of parental stress (PSI for children and SIPA for adolescents, see below) already include, in one of the subscales, children's behavioral problems as assessed by their parents. It is therefore possible that the same variable (behavioral problems) is included in both the dependent and independent variables. This concern has been also expressed by other researchers of parental stress (Anastopoulos, Guevremont, Shelton, & DuPaul, 1992; Johnston et al., 2003). In our analysis, we have eliminated this possible, unwanted source of redundancy by omitting children's behavioral problems from the predictor variables.

Second, our study has included two variables that are not considered in most studies of adoptive parents' stress: acknowledgment/rejection of differences and parenting styles. Since parental cognition is a critical element of parenting stress (Deater-Deckard, 2005; Viana & Welsh, 2010), we included an assessment of the extent to which adoptive parents believe that their families are similar to non-adoptive families (rejection of differences), or have some specific characteristics and challenges (acknowledgment of differences). This distinction was introduced by Kirk (1964) and has been acknowledged in adoption research from its

early days. Parents who strongly deny differences are less likely to talk openly about the adoption, while parents who are more accepting of differences facilitate open communication, the expression of ambiguous feelings of loss, and even a child's search for his/her biological parents. The concept of insistence on the differences proposed by Brodzinsky (1990) is especially interesting here: in this case, parents not only admit the differences, but also emphasize them to such an extent that adoption is the primary explanation and justification for any problems that the family experiences. According to Brodzinsky, the occasional rejection of differences might simply indicate that there are no adoption-related problems to be faced in a specific stage of the family life cycle, and does not necessarily result in the negative consequences that Kirk (1964) suggested. Insisting on differences, however, might clearly be more problematic: "parents who overemphasize differences in family discussions about adoption are more likely to create atmosphere that increases the risk for dysfunctional family interactions (Brodzinsky, 1990, p.16)". Extreme communication patterns are associated with problems in adoption adjustment.

Finally, parent-child relationships, and specifically parenting styles, have not been considered in the extant studies of stress in adoptive families. Parenting stress has been found to be a significant correlate of parenting styles, with parents who are stricter and less nurturing obtaining higher stress scores (Anthony et al., 2005; Karras, VanDeventer, & Braungart-Riker, 2003). We therefore explore whether parental style is linked to stress in adoptive parents.

It is our hypothesis that the stress experienced by the parents of adopted children who have reached adolescence will be higher than that experienced by the parents of adopted children who are still in childhood (stress linked to adolescence) and will also be higher than that experienced by the parents of non-adopted adolescents (stress linked to adoption). Following research conducted by Abidin (1990; 1992), we expect that parental stress will be influenced by the characteristics of the adopted adolescents (such as their age at adoption and at present, and their experiences prior to adoption), the characteristics of the adoptive parents (such as acknowledgment/rejection of differences and parenting style), and the characteristics of the context in which the adoption takes place (such as the availability and use of resources to support the parents).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 156 adoptive families participating in a longitudinal study of domestic adoption. In the first data collection, 393 families participated in the research. This sample was drawn from the entire population of parents adopting in Andalusia, Southern Spain, between 1987 (the year in which the new adoption laws came into force) and 1994. The sample consisted of 393 families and included 88% of all of the adoptive parents contacted, since 12% decided not to participate in the study. All of the children were adopted through domestic adoption programs, since international adoption was rare in Spain before 1997. The data collection for the study reported here took place six years after the first one. In this case, 17% of the parents did not want to take part in the study and the final sample was 273 families (also, 13% of the parents could not be located). For the purpose of the study being reported here, we are only interested in those families with adopted adolescents (12-year-olds or older), which amounted to 156 cases. Data on the parents of younger adopted children are reported elsewhere (Authors, 2006).

As for the adopted adolescents, 48.1% were boys and 51.9% were girls. The average age of these children at the time of adoption was 3.15 (sd = 3.47) and 15.42 (sd = 3.98) at the time when the data

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