



# Internationally adopted adults who did not suffer severe early deprivation: The role of appraisal of adoption

Hester E. Storsbergen<sup>a</sup>, Femmie Juffer<sup>b,\*</sup>, Maarten J.M. van Son<sup>c</sup>, Harm 't Hart<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Child and Adolescent Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Centre for Child and Family Studies, Leiden University, P.O. Box 9555, 2300 RB Leiden, The Netherlands

<sup>c</sup> Department of Clinical & Health Psychology, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

<sup>d</sup> Department of Research Methodology and Statistics, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

Psychological adjustment was examined in 53 adults ( $M = 29$  years), internationally adopted by Dutch parents as infants ( $M = 9$  months) from children's home Metera in Greece. At that time guidelines consistent with attachment theory were followed to ensure relatively favorable quality of childcare in Metera (Dontas, Maratos, Fafoutis, & Karangelis, 1985). The adults completed standardized questionnaires on mental health, well-being and self-esteem. We found that the large majority of the adults were well adjusted, although adopted males reported more depression. Adults who reported a negative appraisal of their adoption reported more problems and less well-being than adults with a positive/neutral appraisal of their adoption.

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## 1. Introduction

Little is known about the long-term consequences of being relinquished and being adopted for the mental health and well-being of internationally adopted adults. Children who are adopted experience the separation and loss of their birthparents, and often their background shows more major transitions as well as experiences of neglect and abuse in institutions (Groza, 1999; Gunnar, Bruce, & Grotevant, 2000). Compared to the large body of research examining the adjustment of international adoptees during (early) childhood and adolescence, empirical studies on internationally adopted adults are relatively scarce. Because the phenomenon of international adoption started only some decades ago (Selman, 2000), large groups of adopted adults are not yet eligible for research. In this study we focus on one of the first groups of adults who had been internationally adopted from Greece in infancy and now were reaching their thirties.

Empirical evidence on domestic and international adult adoptees revealed that some studies found no differences between the psychological adjustment of adopted adults and their nonadopted counterparts (e.g., Cederblad, Höök, Irhammar, & Mercke, 1999; Collishaw, Maughan, & Pickles, 1998; Simon & Altstein, 1987). Other

studies reported higher rates of mental health problems, lower self-esteem or an overrepresentation of mental health referrals for adult adoptees compared to their nonadopted peers (e.g., Cubito & Brandon, 2000; Hjern, Lindblad, & Vinnerljung, 2002; Sullivan, Wells, & Bushnell, 1995; Westhues & Cohen, 1995).

In a meta-analysis on behavior problems and mental health referrals of adoptees, Juffer and Van IJzendoorn (2005) found that most international adoptees were well-adjusted although they were referred to mental health services more often than their nonadopted counterparts. In this meta-analysis with behavioral data on 64 adoption studies, only six studies were included that reported on adoptees over 18 years of age, and only two of them reported on internationally adopted adults (Botvar, 1994; Storsbergen, 2004). Recently Tieman, Van der Ende, and Verhulst (2005) concluded that international adoptees run a somewhat higher risk of presenting psychiatric problems in adulthood (30%) than nonadopted persons of the same age (22%), although the majority of the adoptees did not show serious mental health problems. Tieman and colleagues studied a large, heterogeneous sample ( $N = 1,484$ ; age: 24 to 30 years) of adopted adults from many countries of origin while the majority of them had experienced severe pre-adoption adversity. Therefore, these outcomes may not generalize to a homogeneous group of adults without severe pre-adoption deprivation.

The empirical studies thus far leave the question open whether mental health problems and well-being are mainly effects of the adoption as such or a result of the adoption subsequent to a (long)

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [juffer@fsw.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:juffer@fsw.leidenuniv.nl) (F. Juffer).

period of adversity, in particular pre-adoption deprivation. There is a paucity of studies including adoptees with well-documented pre-adoption histories and who are relatively free from apparent deprivation.

### 1.1. Adoptees from Metera

One pre-adoption children's institute has been described by Dontas, Maratos, Fafoutis, and Karangelis (1985) in their observational study of Metera Babies' Center in Athens, Greece. According to Dontas and colleagues (1985, p. 137), child care in Metera was different from traditional institutional care, as 'one of the center's goals was to provide consistent mothering by a limited number of caregivers'. From the age of 1 month on infants were reared in pavilions with 10 to 12 other infants by two to three caregivers who lived in the same pavilion. The nursing staff remained as constant as possible, while an effort was made to assign infants to the primary care of one nurse for their entire stay (Dontas et al., 1985). The authors stated that the relatively limited number of caregivers and the rather optimal child–staff ratio were consistent with newly emerging ideas from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982). Based on their own observations at the Metera Center, Dontas and colleagues (1985, p. 145) concluded that the infants 'showed none of the possible devastating results of institutionalization: depression, marasmus, detachment, or indiscriminate attention seeking. Even young infants of 7–9 months of age were attached to adults and seemed capable of becoming attached to a new figure.'

Although the observations of Dontas and colleagues do not provide conclusive evidence about the child-care circumstances in Metera, they point to a relatively favorable background of the institutionalized children adopted from Metera during the late fifties (the Metera Center started in 1955), sixties and seventies. Between 1958 and 1970, a total number of 1820 children resided in Metera (including Metera in Athens and Metera on Corfu and Crete) and 64% of them were adopted internationally, mostly to the Netherlands and to the United States (personal communication, Mrs. Koussidou, Metera, 1999). The Greek adopted persons belonged to the first groups of international adoptees that reached adulthood in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, international adoption started at the end of the 1950s. Approximately 34,000 international adoptees and 16,000 domestic adoptees live in the Netherlands at present (Sprangers, De Jong, & Van Zee, 2006). The participants of this study were all adopted through the Greek children's home Metera before 1970.

It should be noted that more recent research showed a less favorable picture of the child-care setting and child outcomes in Metera (for example, an overrepresentation of insecure, disorganized attachment, see Voria et al., 2003). This may indicate that children adopted from Metera during the fifties and sixties of the 20th century did not experience the same level of institutional deprivation as children adopted from Metera after 1980 or from more deprived countries in the seventies and later (for example, children from Bangladesh and India in the Tieman et al., 2005 study; children from Romania in the Rutter, O'Connor, & English and Romanian Adoptees Study Team, 2004 study). A study of adult outcomes of the early adoptions from Metera may shed light on the contributions of adoption per se and pre-adoption deprivation.

### 1.2. Predictors of adjustment

Some studies showed that adopted persons who searched for their origins reported more psychological maladjustment (e.g., Cubito & Brandon, 2000; Tieman, Van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2008), lower self-esteem (Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983), a more negative attitude towards adoption (Aumend & Barrett, 1984), and less life satisfaction than non-searchers. However, because these studies examined domestic adoptees or heterogeneous groups, the existing evidence does not clearly show whether searching for origins predicts

(un)favorable adjustment in internationally adopted adults who did not experience severe deprivation.

From a theoretical perspective, Brodzinsky (1990) proposed a stress and coping model of adoption adjustment. At the core of this model is the assumption that adoption is inherently associated with loss-related experiences, for example the loss of the birth parents. The model also assumes that the way children (and later: adolescents, adults) appraise and cope with these losses, varies from person to person, and influences their adjustment. Appraisal refers to a person's attitudes and feelings towards the losses, separations and transitions involved in adoption, while coping refers to behavioral, emotional, social or cognitive coping strategies to deal with the losses and transitions. Adopted persons with negative appraisals are assumed to show less positive adjustment compared to adopted persons with positive appraisals. Because we were particularly interested in the effects of positive and negative appraisals of adoption on psychological adjustment, we examined how adopted persons' evaluated their adoption.

In our study we studied a homogeneous group of adult adoptees from a relatively favorable background: all of them were internationally adopted from Metera's children's home in Greece at an early age. We specifically focused on aspects of the adoption experience that may be related to the psychological adjustment of internationally adopted adults: search status (searching for one's origins) and appraisal of being adopted (negative or positive). Outcomes on three areas of psychological adjustment were considered: mental health problems, well-being and self-esteem. Based on previous empirical research (e.g., Tieman et al., 2008) we expected that searchers would show less optimal psychological adjustment than non-searchers. Based on Brodzinsky's (1990) theoretical model we hypothesized that adoptees with a negative appraisal of adoption would show less optimal adjustment than adoptees with a more positive appraisal of adoption.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The mean age of the 53 adult adoptees included in the study was 29 years (range: 25 to 36 years). All of them had been internationally adopted from Greece to the Netherlands before 1970. At the time of their adoption, most international adoptees in the Netherlands came from Greece and were placed through the children's home Metera (Storsbergen, 2004). According to the archives of Metera, over 400 children were adopted to the Netherlands during this period, but no recent addresses were available. We recruited the adopted adults in various ways: via retracing of the old address of the adoptive parents, via Metera a letter was sent to those adoptees who had contacted Metera (to see their files or to start a search for their origins), via public announcements in four major national newspapers, and via other Greek adoptees or relatives. We emphasized that all Greek adoptees were potentially eligible for the study. We were able to find 121 adult Greek adoptees and everyone located responded. We then randomly selected 60 adoptees for the study (also including an interview, reported in Storsbergen, 2004). Fifty-three adoptees (88%) filled out the measures described in this study during the mid 90s while data-analyses and interview coding were completed in 2004 (Storsbergen, 2004).

The adoptees were relinquished because the biological mother was not married or the child was born out of wedlock. There was no interference of the state social services, as was the case sometimes in later relinquishments (Storsbergen, 2004). Almost all children were born in a hospital or private clinic (Storsbergen, 2004; personal communication Koussidou, Metera, 1999). The adoptees were adopted as infants ( $M = 9.11$  months;  $SD = 8.58$ ) (Table 1). In Metera the children lived in pavilions with 10 to 12 other children and they

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