



Adoptive parents' evaluation of expectations and children's behavior problems: The mediational role of parenting stress and parental satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

Despite empirical evidence of the impact of parents' expectations on the success of adoption, few studies have specifically focused on this subject. This study aimed to test the impact of parents' evaluation of expectations on their child's behavioral problem by investigating a sequential mediation effect of parenting stress and parental satisfaction. The sample included 116 adoptive parents (31–60 years) of children (6–12 years) who had been part of the family for, at least, two years. The Portuguese versions of the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire-Parents version were used to measure the level of parenting stress and the children's behavioral difficulties, respectively. Moreover, specific indexes of parents' evaluation of expectations and satisfaction were used. The results supported the sequential mediation model proposed, highlighting the importance of fostering the development of accurate expectations.

1. Introduction

Adoption is an ongoing and dynamic process which evolves over time (Dunbar et al., 2006). It combines both love and joy and intense challenges, disappointments and surprises. This occurs mainly due to the previous experiences of the children in their biological families, often marked by traumatic adversities (Hart & Luckock, 2004). Throughout this process, parents re-examine their expectations and idealizations of the children and themselves (Hart & Luckock, 2004) when confronted with the difficulty their children may have in overcoming previous, painful family experiences, rebuilding their identity and settling into and adapting happily to their new adoptive home (Dance, Rushton, & Quinton, 2002).

Several authors have highlighted the role of parents' expectations as a variable associated with parents' and children's adjustment (e.g., Berry, 1992; Brabender & Fallon, 2013; Foli, 2010; Foli, South, & Lim, 2012; Foli, South, Lim, & Hebdon, 2012; Gross & Marcussen, 2016; Reilly & Platz, 2003) in different family configurations, including adoptive families (Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2005). Regarding the latter, some studies have evidenced the connection between unrealistic expectations and an increased risk of disruption (Foli, 2010; Rosenthal, 1993; Schmidt, Rosenthal, & Bombeck, 1988).

Many studies have focused on adoptive parents' expectations (e.g., Chesney, 2009; Foli, South, Lim, & Hebdon, 2012; Foli, Lim, South, & Sands, 2014; Hebdon, Foli, South, & Lim, 2012; Reilly & Platz, 2003; Tasker & Wood, 2016; Welsh, Viana, Petrill, & Mathias, 2008), but only

some of these have included the parents' evaluation of their expectations (i.e., the parents' appraisal of whether the expectations they had prior to the adoption have been met or an assessment of the differences between the previous expectations and the real experience) (e.g., Foli, 2010; Foli, South, Lim, & Hebdon, 2012; Moyer & Goldberg, 2015; Tasker & Wood, 2016). Others have studied the association between adoptive parents' expectations and parenting-related variables and children's adjustment (e.g., Bohman & Sigvardsson, 1990; Foli, 2010; Foli et al., 2014; Hoksbergen, Rijk, Van Dijkum, & Laak, 2004; Moyer & Goldberg, 2015). Therefore, considering the need for further understanding of the processes that occur within the adoptive family system (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001; Lipscomb et al., 2011; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010) and the essential role of parents' expectations, the aim of this study was to analyze the mediational role of specific parenting-related variables (parenting stress and parental satisfaction) in the association between parents' evaluation of expectations and their perceptions of children's behavioral problems.

1.1. Theoretical background

According to Brabender and Fallon (2013), couples' representations of their child's experiences in the family of origin may influence their expectations as far as the formation of the new (adoptive) family is concerned. Additionally, the authors suggest that these prospective parents may have had a fantasized image of a long-awaited untroubled child, which would also contribute to the development of extremely

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positive expectations (particularly related to the child) that would not match the subsequent experience. The results of a qualitative study carried out by Foli (2010) also indicated that adoptive parents often held unrealistic expectations of being 'super parents' with problem-free families, which later contrasted with reality, leading to feelings of failure and guilt. In the same vein, a study developed by Levy-Shiff, Goldshmidt, and Har-Even (1991) demonstrated that, in the transition to parenthood specifically, adoptive parents reported more positive expectations than biological parents.

Tasker and Wood (2016) carried out a longitudinal study on adoptive parents' expectations from the beginning of the adoption process until six months after the child's arrival. The authors reported that dynamics between adoptive siblings (e.g., siblings being competitive about parents' affection or even food) reflected their pre-existing family scripts, and these collided with the couple's own script expectations of family relationship dynamics. Such evidence points to a degree of expectation instability over time, which was also observed in a study by Johnson, McGue, and Iacono (2007a). Their results showed that, in comparison with biological parents, adoptive parents make greater adaptations to their previous expectations. Similarly, in a recent longitudinal study, Foli, Lim, and South (2017) examined changes in adoptive parents' expectations (expectations of self as parents, of the child, of family and friends, and of society) and concluded that the pre-placement expectations of self as parents had not been met after the child's placement.

In a study on the pre-adoptive expectations of parents pursuing international adoption, Welsh et al. (2008) also found that most parents reported very positive expectations concerning their children's future and integration in diverse groups (community, school, peers and family). The authors also described how, despite these positive expectations, adoptive parents tended to expect their children to exhibit mild problems, but only very few of them expected serious problems. Welsh et al. (2008) reported that parents adopting girls expected more (mild) problems than parents adopting boys. In terms of the child's age, parents adopting children below the age of two had more positive expectations and fewer expectations of problems than parents adopting 2-year-olds or older children (Welsh et al., 2008). Research has shown that the emergence in older children of a new perspective on adoption, coupled with increased awareness of the differences between biological and adoptive families, contributes to emotional and behavioral difficulties (e.g., Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2005) which may explain less positive expectations. Similarly, Foli et al. (2017) observed that parents' met expectations appeared to decrease as the child got older. Additionally, according to the results of Welsh et al. (2008), older parents expected more (mild) problems than younger parents. It should also be noted that parents held positive expectations, even when they lacked potentially critical information on their children's backgrounds (birth family characteristics, prenatal and perinatal history, exposure to abuse and neglect). Nevertheless, expectations of serious problems emerged in parents of children with severe special needs more than in parents of children without medical diagnoses.

Some studies have focused specifically on the impact of adoptive parents' expectations on the adjustment of both the family and the individual (e.g., Bohman & Sigvardsson, 1990; Hoksbergen et al., 2004; Reilly & Platz, 2003; Roberson, 2006; Sánchez-Sandoval, 2011). In a Swedish longitudinal study on adoption, Bohman and Sigvardsson (1990) found that adoptive parents' high expectations related to school achievement impacted children's school-related problems. The study by Sánchez-Sandoval (2011), focusing on adoptive parents' satisfaction, indicated that the higher the expectations regarding the child's adjustment, the more difficult it was for parents to be satisfied, and this appeared to impact the adoptees' life satisfaction. However, Hoksbergen et al. (2004), studying adoptive parents of Romanian children, did not find any relation between parents' expectations of children's behavioral problems and the scores on different clusters of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (e.g., attention problems, aggressive behavior, social

problems). Meanwhile, Reilly and Platz (2003) reported that parents' expectations of attaining appropriate parenting behavior were associated with more parental satisfaction and with a higher quality of the parent-child relationship.

With regard to more recent studies, only a few (e.g., Foli et al., 2014; Foli et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2007a; Johnson, McGue, & Iacono, 2007b) have looked at the complex mechanisms that underlie the relationship between parents' expectations and other variables. For instance, Foli et al. (2014) found that adoptive children's behavior seemed to act as a determinant of parental expectations and, in turn, parents' expectations appeared to be a determinant of parental aggravation (e.g., difficulty caring for the child, anger toward the child) and the way the parents perceived the bonding. Foli et al. (2017) examined the relationship between parental expectations and depressive symptoms over time and found significant negative correlations between affirmed or met expectations and depressive symptoms, suggesting that parental expectations may contribute to the mental health of adoptive parents. Johnson et al. (2007b) suggested that parents' expectations regarding school success contribute to the family environment concerning education and are affected by the degree to which the children adjust to that environment. In another study, these same authors (Johnson et al., 2007a) indicated that children's characteristics proved to have a greater influence on parents' expectations regarding school success than the parents' expectations had on children's engagement and performance at school.

Research has clearly demonstrated that adoptive parents' unrealistic expectations interfere with their ability to face and cope with the reality to come. Ward (1997) described the variation in the resulting discrepancies between an earlier period, when candidates preparing to adopt are well informed about the reality of adoptive families and the common characteristics of children available for adoption, and newly adoptive parents who believed the new child would readily form attachment bonds with them or that a stable and caring environment is sufficient guarantee for the child's adjustment and well-being. These findings led to an acknowledgement of the importance of considering not only parents' expectations but also, and perhaps more importantly, their assessment of the mismatches between their expectations and their actual experience.

The ability of parents to engage in a flexible mindset regarding their unmet expectations is a potential protective factor, specifically in the transition to parenthood (Moyer & Goldberg, 2015). In fact, as in biological parenting, where discrepancies between parents' expectations regarding parenting and their actual experiences are associated with a more difficult period of adjustment (Kalmuss, Davidson, & Cushman, 1992), children's and parents' adjustment to adoption might also be impaired by parents' perceptions of the extent to which their actual experience reflects what they previously expected (e.g., Berry, 1992; Chesney, 2009; Foli, 2010; Foli, South, & Lim, 2012; Hebdon, Foli, South, & Lim, 2012; Moyer & Goldberg, 2015; Tasker & Wood, 2016; Viana & Welsh, 2010; Ward, 1997). To our knowledge, there is limited adoption research on this particular theme, however the few results that have been produced have revealed important clues as to its relevance in the study of adoptive families' adjustment.

In a review of the literature, Berry (1992) concluded that the mismatch between parents' expectations and reality contributes negatively to both children's and parents' adjustment. Accordingly, Roberson (2006), when reviewing the literature on attachment and caregiving behavioral systems, concluded that parents' unrealistic expectations regarding their children's outcomes contributed to the children's low attachment security. Schmidt et al. (1988) interviewed adoptive parents of children with special needs aged 4 to 17 who had experienced adoption disruption. This study found that parents' unmet expectations of adopting an "easy" child was one of the most important factors explaining the path leading to disruption. Additionally, mothers' unmet expectations of themselves and their children were negatively associated with their own emotional stability (Hebdon et al., 2012). In line

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