



## Behavioral adjustment of Chinese adoptees: The role of pre-adoption experiences



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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** In the current study we examined associations between children's pre-adoption experiences (type of pre-adoption care and early deprivation) and their adaptive and maladaptive behavioral adjustment. Associations with prosocial behavior, attention problems, internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems were investigated.

**Methods:** Parental ratings of pre-adoption experiences and behavioral adjustment of 891 adopted Chinese girls aged between 4 and 12 year were obtained. The children were adopted from institutional care ( $n = 595$ ), foster care ( $n = 66$ ) or a combination of institutional and foster care ( $n = 228$ ). Prosocial behavior was assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Attention problems, internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems were assessed using the Child Behavior Checklist for ages 4–18 (CBCL). In addition to the main effects of pre-adoption experiences, we tested interaction effects between pre-adoption experiences and age at adoption, controlling for several family and child background variables.

**Results:** Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that type of pre-adoption care was not associated with behavioral adjustment. Early deprivation, on the other hand, was negatively associated with prosocial behavior, and positively associated with attention problems, internalizing and externalizing problems. Interaction analyses revealed no significant associations.

**Conclusions:** The results showed that pre-adoption deprivation increased the risk for less optimal behavioral adjustment. The effects however were small, leaving room for other explaining factors both in the pre- and post-adoption environment of the child.

### 1. Introduction

Each year, many children who cannot be raised by their birth-parents and for whom no substitute family in their birth countries can be found, are adopted internationally (Selman, 2009). Adopted children not only have to cope with loss of or separation from their birth parents – which is one of the most potent stressors in early life (Loman & Gunnar, 2010) – but are also exposed to other early adverse experiences, such as institutionalization, lack of opportunities to develop secure attachment relationships, malnutrition, or even neglect and abuse. These depriving experiences may put adopted children at increased risk for less optimal behavioral adjustment (Loman & Gunnar, 2010) such as more internalizing and externalizing problems (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005), and more attention problems (Hoksbergen, Rijk, Van Dijkum, & Ter Laak, 2004; MacLean, 2003; Merz & McCall, 2010; Rosnati, Montiroso, & Barni, 2008; Stevens et al., 2008). However, differences in behavioral problems between adopted and non-adopted

children are small (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005) and some studies even found that adopted children score higher than non-adopted children on indicators of adaptive behavioral adjustment such as prosocial behavior (Reinoso & Forns, 2010; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996; Stams, Juffer, Rispen, & Hoksbergen, 2000). This suggests that the drastic improvement in rearing environment after adoption buffers against the negative effects of early depriving experiences. Thus, adoption can be seen as a positive intervention in the life of children who cannot be raised by their biological parents (van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006). Nevertheless, some children show increased rates of behavioral problems (Bimmel, Juffer, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-kranenburg, 2003; Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005), suggesting important individual differences in adjustment after adoption. This raises the question why some adopted children are better adjusted than others (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010).

The goal of the current study is to examine whether pre-adoption experiences are associated with individual differences in both adaptive

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behavioral adjustment – expressed by prosocial behavior - as well as maladaptive behavioral adjustment – expressed by attention problems, internalizing and externalizing problems. We used two indicators to assess children's pre-adoption experiences, namely type of pre-adoption care and early deprivation. The associations of type of pre-adoption care and early deprivation with behavioral adjustment are examined in a sample of children who were adopted from China to the Netherlands. Studying these associations in a sample of adopted Chinese children is important, especially because China has been the main birth country of international adoptees since 1998 (Selman, 2010). Furthermore because one of the main causes of child abandonment in China were the strictly enforced birth planning policies, many Chinese adoptees - contrary to children adopted from some other countries - have not experienced serious prenatal adversity such as prenatal alcohol exposure (Johnson, 2004; Miller & Hendrie, 2000), reducing the risk that the effects of pre-adoption deprivation are confounded by prenatal adversity. Moreover, contrary to many countries where abandoned or orphaned children live in institutions before adoption, a minority of Chinese adoptees have lived in pre-adoption foster care instead of institutional care (Johnson, 2004). This allows examining the effects of these different types of pre-adoption care on later behavioral adjustment.

### 1.1. Type of pre-adoption care

Individual differences in adopted children's adjustment may be partly explained by different types of pre-adoption care, namely institutional care versus foster care. Many institutions fail to provide children with adequate care and opportunities to form personal relationships with stable caregivers (Van IJzendoorn et al., 2011). Instead, foster care resembles normal family life and is often believed to be less detrimental for children's adjustment. Research indeed provides support for the hypothesized beneficial effects of foster care compared to institutional care. For example, the Bucharest Early Intervention Project (BEIP; Zeanah et al., 2003) - a randomized controlled trial in which institutionalized children were randomly assigned to foster care versus continued institutional care (care as usual) - has shown that the children in foster care showed fewer internalizing problems at age 54 months (Zeanah et al., 2009) and fewer externalizing problems at age 12 years (Humphreys et al., 2015) than the children in institutional care. Associations with adaptive behavioral adjustment were not investigated. Although an important strength of the BEIP study is that differences between the foster care children and the institutionalized children were not confounded by selection bias, the BEIP study did not study whether institutional versus foster care differentially affects the development of adopted children. As far as we know, until now, only a few studies have investigated whether pre-adoptive institutional care and pre-adoptive foster care are differentially associated with behavioral adjustment once children are adopted. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge this has mainly been investigated with respect to maladaptive behavioral adjustment, and never with respect to adaptive behavioral adjustment.

Concerning maladaptive behavioral adjustment, Rutter and colleagues suggest - based on their findings of the English and Romanian Adoptees study in which post-institutionalized Romanian adoptees were compared with within-UK adoptees - that a history of institutional care is associated with, among other things, inattention/overactivity, but not with internalizing and externalizing problems (Kreppner, O'Connor, & Rutter, 2001; Rutter et al., 2009; Rutter, Kreppner, & O'Connor, 2001). Although research findings were mixed, some pertinent studies have provided support for the argument of Rutter and colleagues (e.g., Gunnar & van Dulmen, 2007; Wiik et al., 2011). However, the design of those studies had some limitations that may affect the interpretation of the results. First, age at adoption differed between the post-institutionalized and the post-foster children, with the post-institutionalized children being older at the time of adoption.

Second, type of pre-adoption care overlapped with differences in country of origin. The majority of the post-institutionalized children were adopted from Eastern European countries (mainly Romania), whereas the majority of the post-foster children were adopted from Asian countries. Consequently, effects of type of pre-adoption care might have been overestimated due to these two confounding factors. Third, the children in the post-foster group had not exclusively lived in foster care prior to adoption but also had experienced a short period of institutional care. As such, possible group differences in internalizing and externalizing problems might have been attenuated because both the post-institutionalized and the post-foster children had experienced institutional care to some extent.

The current study tried to overcome these limitations by investigating the associations between type of pre-adoption care and behavioral adjustment in a sample of children who were adopted from the same country (China) and for whom the average age at adoption did not differ between the different types of pre-adoption care. Moreover, in addition to a subsample of post-institutionalized children and a subsample of children who experienced a combination of foster care and institutional care, we included a subsample of children who exclusively experienced foster care.

### 1.2. Early deprivation

The quality of pre-adoption care may also be related to heterogeneity in adopted children's behavioral adjustment. Depriving experiences in pre-adoption institutional care and foster care may increase the risk for behavioral difficulties (Loman & Gunnar, 2010). Because often no information about children's early experiences is available, studies sometimes use age at adoption as a proxy for early deprivation (Tan, Marfo, & Dedrick, 2010). Studies in which information about pre-adoption experiences is available, incorporate different indicators such as malnutrition, neglect, abuse, or symptoms that may be suggestive of adverse pre-adoption conditions. In general, these studies confirm the detrimental effects of early deprivation on behavioral difficulties (Nickman et al., 2005). Adopted children who experienced more pre-adoptive deprivation scored higher on externalizing problems (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005; Tan & Marfo, 2006; Van Der Vegt, Van Der Ende, Ferdinand, Verhulst, & Tiemeier, 2009), on internalizing problems (Tan & Marfo, 2006; Van Der Vegt et al., 2009), and on attention problems (Audet & Le Mare, 2010; Roskam et al., 2014; Simmel, Brooks, Barth, & Hinshaw, 2001; Tan, 2009). Less is known about the impact of early deprivation on adaptive behavioral adjustment (but see Kriebel & Wentzel, 2011; Tan, 2006).

### 1.3. The current study

The current study examined associations between children's pre-adoption experiences - as indicated by type of pre-adoption care and early deprivation - and adaptive and maladaptive behavioral adjustment in girls adopted from China to the Netherlands. To assess early deprivation, we took into account pre-adoption sub-nutrition, social-emotional neglect, physical neglect, maltreatment and presence of health problems at the time of adoption. Age at adoption was added as a control variable in our analyses to examine whether pre-adoption experiences were related to behavioral adjustment over and above the effect of age at adoption. In addition, we controlled for two other child background variables - special needs (Rosenthal & Groze, 1991) and age at study (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005; Tan et al., 2010; Verhulst, 2000) - and for two family background variables - education (as indicator of SES) (Kalf et al., 2001; Nadeem et al., 2017), and presence of non-adopted children in the family (Howe, 1997) - that have been found to be associated with behavioral problems. Finally, because the effects of adverse pre-adoption experiences may become stronger when children are older at the time of adoption, we tested whether age at adoption moderated the association between children's pre-adoption

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