

# Factors affecting post-permanency adjustment for children in adoption or guardianship placements: An ecological systems analysis



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 2 March 2016

Received in revised form 14 May 2016

Accepted 14 May 2016

Available online 16 May 2016

### Keywords:

Adjustment

Children with special needs

Ecological systems analysis

Post-permanency

Public adoption

## ABSTRACT

Despite a growing body of research on post-permanency adjustment for children adopted from public child welfare agencies, many studies lack a systematic review using a theoretical framework. To develop promising post-permanency services for adopted children with special needs and their families, the first step is to examine risk and protective factors affecting adoption or guardianship adjustment. This study systematically reviews and synthesizes current empirical studies investigating post-permanency outcomes using an ecological systems analysis, with an integration of family theories. A search of five electronic databases and relevant child welfare books identified 36 empirical studies on post-permanency adjustment. Risk factors include some individual factors such as caring for a child with special needs, raising children with a multiple placement or maltreatment history and involving parents with no parenting experience. Living in a family experiencing boundary ambiguity and lacking social support are also risk factors. Protective factors include having adoption preparation and having a child living with married parents, as well as a high level of adoption openness and the availability of formal and informal social support. Implications for child welfare practice and policy also are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Finding a safe and permanent home for foster children is the fundamental goal of the United States child welfare system. For foster children who cannot reunify with their biological parents, two important options to attain permanency are to secure an adoptive or a guardianship home. Approximately 50,600 children were adopted from public child welfare agencies in fiscal year 2014 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2015a), a 37% increase after the passage of Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997. Another 21,000 foster children were taken into guardianship by relatives or foster parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2015b). Facing the rapid growth of the population achieving permanency, there is a growing concern as to how these families fare in the post-permanency period. Approximately 10 to 25% of adoptions disrupt prior to adoption finalization, and approximately 1 to 10% of adoptions dissolve after the adoption is finalized (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2012), both resulting in the child's being returned to foster care. Furthermore, a recent study using large sample to track children for at least 10 years post-adoption or post-guardianship showed that 13% of children experienced post-permanency discontinuity (Rollock, 2015). Adopted children with special needs are at even higher risk for re-entering foster care. Special needs adoptions include children who have a physical, mental, or emotional disability, have a history of abuse and

neglect, are at least 1 year old, or are a member of a sibling group, or have experienced a previous placement disruption (Barth & Berry, 1988; Clark, Thigpen, & Yates, 2006; Reilly & Platz, 2003).

Providing on-going support to post-permanency families, particularly those with children who have special needs, is essential to meet their significant needs and to help the children thrive. To develop promising post-permanency services, the critical first step is to examine factors associated with adoption or guardianship adjustment and to identify what resilient factors could be incorporated into future post-permanency services or interventions. This article emphasizes former foster children who have achieved permanency through public adoption or legal guardianship, as well as children from broader adoption populations such as international or private adoption. The post-permanency adjustment refers to the child's behavioral, social, and emotional adjustment, family functioning, the parent-child relationship, and the discontinuity of care. In spite of a growing body of empirical research on post-permanency adjustment, many studies lack a theoretical framework in which to organize the research. Even fewer use the comprehensive theoretical framework, ecological systems analysis, to guide their studies (an exception see Schweiger & O'Brien, 2005). A review and integration of updated evidence on post-permanency studies might advance our understanding of the dynamics of adoptive family adjustment and help design interventions for post-permanency families. The purpose of this study is to review and synthesize up-to-date empirical studies on the risk and protective factors, as well as any mediating or moderating processes, influencing post-permanency outcomes.

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## 2. Methods

The systematic review of the literature for this study began by using a keyword search conducted in five electronic bibliographic databases: PsycInfo, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, and SocINDEX. These databases are the most comprehensive and frequently used databases that include child welfare research. A secondary search of the reference lists of each article resulted in the identification of two books. The search was limited to English-language publications. The terms searched include each or the combination of the following words: adopted children, guardianship, post-permanency/post-placement, factor/predictor, special needs adoptions, child well-being, placement stability, and/or family functioning. These terms were searched as keywords or in the abstract of the articles and book chapters.

The search resulted in a total of 203 articles (1988–2014) and two books (2003, 2006), and the article or book was selected for full-text review if the study: (1) was an empirical study examining post-adoption or guardianship adjustment with a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods method; (2) was classified as special needs adoptions or guardianship; and (3) involved children or youth or their adoptive or guardianship families. The rationale for inclusion of the search terms and articles or books was based on the purpose of the study, which was to examine factors associated with post-permanency adjustment for adopted children or children taken into guardianship with special needs and their families. Publications which did not meet these criteria were excluded because they were not consistent with the study's purpose. After the abstract and full-text of each article and book were reviewed thoroughly, 34 peer-reviewed journal articles and one book (Howard & Smith, 2003) were included and analyzed in this review. One individual study from another book also was included in this review (Lerner, Gibbs, & Barth, 2006). The excluded articles were either a non-empirical study, or only discuss birth parents' outcomes (e.g., birth mother's emotional health), parental outcomes (e.g., marital issues), sibling relationships (e.g., visitation or contact), or post-adoption service needs and access. In this study, continuity of care was measured by placement disruption, dissolution, or displacement; child social, behavioral, and emotional well-being was measured by child behavior

checklist (CBCL) or the child behavior problem index; and family functioning was measured by a family functioning outcome variable. Finally, this review did not differentiate between kinship and non-kinship adoptive families due to the limited space in the journal article.

## 3. The ecological systems analysis

An ecological systems analysis is a broad approach to understanding the theoretical conceptions of the environment that underlie human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems analysis is a suitable framework to understand a variety of factors associated with children's and families' adjustments to adoption or guardianship because adoption adaptation is a complex process which involves interactions among children, adoptive parents/legal guardians, community, the child welfare system and policies, and time factors. The ecological environments are conceived as nested structures in which changes in one level will lead to a ripple effect on others. Fig. 1 describes how an ecological systems analysis is used as a theoretical framework to organize and categorize research into the levels of (a) the *microsystem*, or the innermost ecological environment affecting the developing child, which consists of an array of relationships between the developing child and the immediate environment containing the child; (b) the *mesosystems*, or interrelations between immediate environments, both containing the developing child; (c) the *exosystems*, or processes between two or more systems, but only one contains the developing child; (d) the *macrosystems*, or overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture; and (e) the *chronosystems*, or the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course. As Fig. 1 illustrates, relevant theories interwoven within each system also are introduced correspondingly to examine how various factors exert impacts on adoption or guardianship outcomes.

### 3.1. Microsystems

Microsystems are comprised of immediate settings containing the developing person in which the participant engages in particular

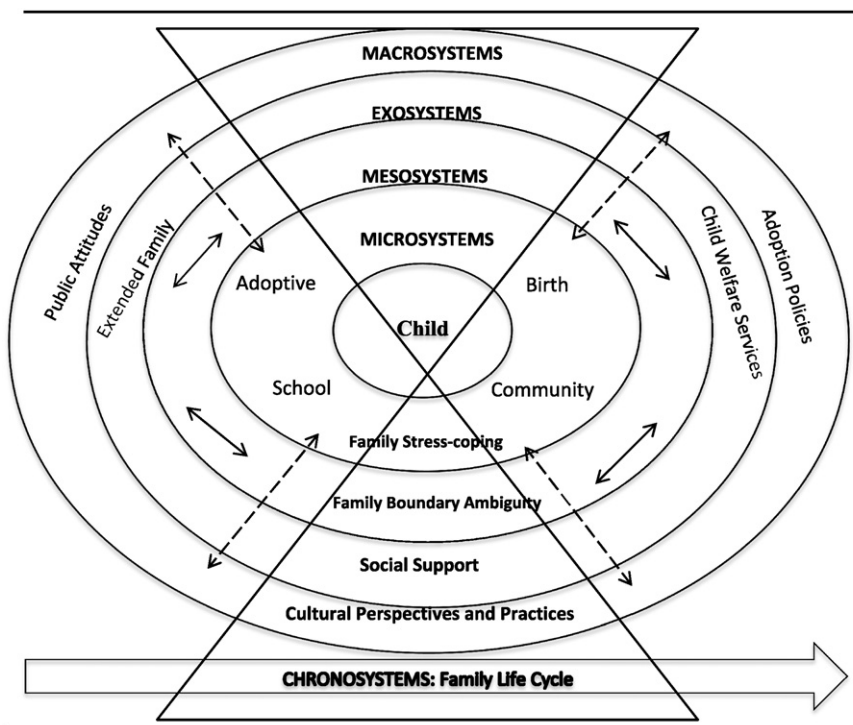


Fig. 1. An ecological systems analysis with family theories.

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