The Impact of Family Structure on the Adjustment of Adopted Children

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Psychological and academic adjustments were assessed in a group of 130 adopted children (six to 12 years of age) living in five different family constellations: only children, children with younger adopted siblings only, children with younger biological siblings only, children with older adopted siblings only, and children with older biological siblings only. Few differences were found from one cluster to another, suggesting that family structure, while complicating the dynamics of adoptive family life, plays a minor role in adoption adjustment.

Data from epidemiological studies, clinic-based studies, and community-based studies generally support the view that adopted children are at increased risk for a variety of psychological and academic problems compared to their nonadopted counterparts [Brodzinsky 1987; Brodzinsky and Schechter 1990]. Among the many factors linked to the increased vulnerability of adopted children are the difficulties associated with handling adoption issues within...
the family [Kirk 1964]. In this context, a number of writers have commented on the possible role played by family structure variables (e.g., presence of both adopted and biological children within the family) in mediating the way family members handle adoption issues. For example, Humphrey [1969] and McWhinnie [1967] have suggested that the presence of biological children in an adoptive family may lead to increased adjustment problems for various family members. In contrast, Kirk [1964] speculated that adoptive families with biological children may be forced to deal with adoption issues in a more open and honest manner, which in turn, could lead to more positive adjustment among parents and children.

To date, research on the role of family structure in adopted children's adjustment has produced somewhat mixed results. Several studies have indicated that the presence of a biological child in the family, whether the child's birth predates or postdates the adoption, has little impact on the adopted child's adjustment [Brodzinsky et al. 1986; Jaffee and Fanshel 1970; Kaye 1990; Witmer et al. 1963]. Other studies, however, have supported the notion that adopted children are more vulnerable psychologically when there is a biological child in the family. For example, Hoopes [1982] found that adoptees in "mixed" families (i.e., families comprising both adopted and nonadopted children) scored lower on a variety of indices of psychological adjustment compared with children from all-adoptive families, as well as children from nonadoptive families. This study, however, did not differentiate between families in which a biological child predated the arrival of the adopted child versus families in which the biological child was born following an adoption. In contrast, Kraus [1978] reported that the only family structure that placed the adopted child at risk for psychological problems was one in which a child was born to the adoptive parents following the adoption. To complicate matters even more, Ternay et al. [1985] reported that adopted children in "mixed" families had higher adjustment scores than comparable children in all-adoptive families.

Another family structure variable discussed in the adoption literature is the ordinal position of the adopted child. Reece and Levin [1968] found more first-placed rather than later-placed children referred for psychiatric services. This result parallels the findings of Lahey et al. [1980] and Schrader and Leventhal [1968], who studied psychiatric referral patterns in nonadopted children. Brodzinsky et al. [1968], however, found no differences between first-placed versus later-placed adopted children in terms of their understanding of the adoption experience. Moreover, although Bohman [1970] noted that "only" adopted children were at special risk for adjustment problems, neither Kraus [1978] nor Brodzinsky et al. [1986] could confirm this finding.
In summary, although the literature is replete with speculations about the potential importance of family structure in mediating adoptive family dynamics, and the subsequent adjustment of the adopted child, the data to date have not supported any consistent perspective on this issue. In light of the counseling implications concerning rearing both adopted and nonadopted children, as well as the increasing number of fertile couples who are adopting children [Cole 1985], it is imperative that researchers attempt to clarify the mediating role of family structure on the adjustment of adoptive family members. It was with this goal in mind that the present study was undertaken.

Method

A total of 130 adopted children (65 boys and 65 girls) were included in the study, ranging in age from six years, zero months to 11 years, 11 months (M = eight years, seven months). With the exception of three African-American children, one Oriental child, and one Hispanic child, all children were Caucasian. Nonwhite children lived in homes with parents of similar racial/ethnic background. Generally, children resided in middle-class families. Age at adoption placement ranged from three days to three years, six months (M = 3.2 months). All adopted children had been told of their adoption by their parents, generally between two and four years of age.

To minimize subject selection problems associated with recruitment of volunteers from a single source—e.g., a single adoption agency (cf. Marquis and Detweiler 1985), in the present study, adoptive families were recruited in a variety of ways, including solicitation of volunteers through public and private adoption agencies, adoptive parent support groups, and newspaper announcements. Subjects were recruited from a wide geographical area: New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, New York City, and Long Island.

Children with serious mental and/or emotional disabilities were excluded from the study. So too were children who had experienced a significant (adoptive) family disruption such as parental separation, divorce, or death within the past year.

Children were classified into five separate family structures: only children (n = 19); children with younger adopted siblings only (n = 31); children with younger biological siblings only (n = 29); children with older adopted siblings only (n = 27); and children with older biological siblings only (n = 15). Children with other family structures (n = 9) were eliminated from this analysis.

Children's psychological and academic adjustments were measured by means of maternal ratings on the Child Behavior Checklist (CBC) and the Adoption
Adjustment Scale (AAS); teacher ratings on the Hahnemann Elementary School Behavior Rating Scale (HESB); and children's ratings on the Adoption Belief Scale (ABS). Ratings were obtained during interviews in each family's home.

The CBC, which was developed by Achenbach [1978; Achenbach and Edelbrock 1979], is a reliable and well-validated measure of children's social competence and behavior problems. It consists of three social competence scales (Activity Involvement, Social Interaction, and School Success) and nine narrow-band behavior problem factors, which differ somewhat for boys and girls. For boys, the factors comprise schizoid behavior, depression, uncommunicative behavior, obsessive-compulsive behavior, somatic complaints, social withdrawal, hyperactivity, aggression, and delinquency; whereas for girls, they comprise depression, social withdrawal, somatic complaints, schizoid-obsessive behavior, hyperactivity, sex problems, delinquency, aggression, and cruelty. In addition, total social competence and behavior problem scores can be generated.

The AAS was developed by the authors as a measure of family members' adjustment to adoption [Brodzinsky 1983]. It is a parent report measure consisting of 18 questions that yield six independent factors: child's adoption adjustment; child's curiosity and questioning about adoption; child's separation anxiety; parent's adoption adjustment; parent's involvement with the child regarding adoption issues; and parent's confidence in handling adoption issues. The AAS has been shown to be reliable, but as yet, no convergent validity studies have been conducted with it.

The HESB, which was developed by Spivak and Swift [1975], is a reliable and valid measure of classroom behavior and academic achievement. It consists of 60 items that have been subgrouped into 16 narrow-band scales. Only the 12 scales appropriate for both traditional and open classrooms were used in this study. These scales comprise originality, independent learning, school involvement, productivity with peers, intellectual dependency, failure anxiety, unreflectiveness, irrelevant talk, social overinvolvement, negative feelings, inattention, and school achievement. The HESB was filled out by teachers and returned through the mail.

Finally, the ABS is a self-report measure of adoption adjustment consisting of 32 items that have been subgrouped into three scales: intellectual competence, social competence, and emotional expression/self-reflection [Singer et al. 1982]. The child's task on each item is to say whether adopted children or nonadopted children are more likely to be characterized by the behavior or trait described by the interviewer, or whether it is just as likely to be a characteristic of both groups.
Results

A series of preliminary 5 (family structure) × 2 (sex of subject) analyses of variance were performed on various demographic and adoption placement variables. Results indicated no difference between the various family structures for child's age, family socioeconomic status, and child's health (as perceived by mother) at the time of adoption placement. Family structure was significant, however, for child's age when placed for adoption, $F(4,111) = 2.70, p < .05$. Children with older biological siblings ($n = 6.73$ months) were placed for adoption significantly later than children with younger biological siblings ($n = 2.41$ months), younger adopted siblings ($n = 2.32$ months), or older adopted siblings ($n = 2.48$ months). "Only" adopted children were in between these groups ($n = 5.05$ months), but were not different from them. No sex differences were found for any of the demographic or adoption placement variables.

Separate 5 (family structure) × 2 (sex of subject) analyses of variance were performed on the total social competence score and the total behavior problem score from the CBC, as well as the mean score on the ASB. In addition, separate multivariate analyses of variance were performed on the three social competence subscales from the CBC, the nine CBC behavior problem scales (computed separately for boys and girls), the 12 scales from the HESB, the three subscales from the ABS, and the six factors from the AAS. With the exception of the main effect for family structure on the ANOVA for total CBC behavior problems, $F(4,111) = 2.37, p < .05$, no differences in adjustment were found as a function of family structure, sex of subject, or their interaction. With regard to the one exception noted above, it was found that "only" adopted children ($n = 35.58$) and children with younger adopted siblings ($n = 35.10$) scored higher on total behavior problems than did children with older adopted siblings only ($n = 22.55$). Adopted children with younger ($n = 33.93$) and older ($n = 28.40$) biological siblings were in between these groups, but did not differ from them.

Discussion

Analyses on 35 scores from four different measures and three different reporting sources (e.g., parents, teachers, and children) produced only one significant difference among the various family structures—for total behavior problems. This one difference suggested that "only" adopted children and first adopted children may be at increased risk for behavior problems, es-
especially in comparison to later adopted children. Although this finding supports the data reported by Bohman [1970] and Reece and Levin [1968], it must be viewed with great caution. The fact that only one of 35 analyses produced a significant effect means that the result could very well have occurred by chance. Thus, the data from the present study, taken as a whole, suggest that the adoption order and the presence of biological children in the adoptive family have relatively little influence on the adjustment of adopted children and their parents, at least in situations involving early adoption placement and in families composed of parents and children who are similar in racial/ethnic background.

The results of the present study are in line with the data reported by other adoption researchers who have failed to find an effect for family structure on various aspects of adoption adjustment [Jaffee and Fanshel 1970; Kaye 1990; Witmer et al. 1963] or children's adoption knowledge [Brodzinsky et al. 1986]. Of particular importance is the failure to replicate the findings of Kraus [1978], who noted that the presence of younger biological siblings predisposes adopted children and their parents to increased adjustment problems. This is especially important given the frequent concern among adoption professionals and adoptive parents that the birth of a child to a couple following a previous adoption will lead the adoptee to feel displaced and rejected (even more than is usually associated with the birth of a younger sibling), thereby fostering heightened feelings of anger and resentment toward both the younger sibling and the parents.

Given that previous research in this area has failed to produce any consistent pattern, how confident can we be that the present results represent a clearer picture of the role of family structure in adoption adjustment? Admittedly, the failure to reject the null hypothesis does not prove that family structure is unimportant in the adjustment of adopted children and their parents. Moreover, the current sample was of only moderate size and did not exhaust the various types of adoptive family structure. Nevertheless, the present study has several advantages over previous ones. First, the sample was recruited from a variety of sources, thereby minimizing selection problems associated with the unique characteristics of a single agency. It also encompassed a wider age range than most other studies. Finally, the present study employed a greater variety of adjustment measures and multiple reporting sources (i.e., parents, teachers, and children). These advantages, taken together, strengthen our belief that the results are valid. At the very least, they lead us to conclude that family structure, in particular the order of adoption and the presence of biological children in the adoptive family, while often complicating family dynamics, generally poses no serious impediments to successful adoption adjustment.
1. Throughout this article, the term "biological child" refers to those children who are born to the adoptive parents and who do not share a genetic tie to their adopted siblings.

2. In our clinical and educative/counseling work with adoptive families, one of the more common issues that arises is parental guilt and anxiety related to the following concerns: (a) that the adopted child, who already has experienced loss through relinquishment, will feel even more rejection or displacement because of the presence of a biological sibling; and (b) that they (the parents) will engage in compensatory behavior reflecting favoritism toward either the adopted or biological child.

3. Today, most fertile couples are adopting foreign born children, older children, minority children, and other special-needs children.

4. Analyses of covariance, using family socioeconomic status, child's age at adoption placement, and child's health at adoption placement, produced essentially the same pattern of findings.

References


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