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OPEN ADOPTION AND CHILD'S FURTHER SOCIALIZATION

Tomas Butvilas[1][*] – Eva Králová[2] – Maciej Kołodziejski[3]

[1] Institute of Educational Sciences and Social Work, Society and Human Study Faculty, Mykolas Romeris University, Ateities Str. 20, Vilnius, Lithuania

[2] Faculty of Healthcare, Alexander Dubcek University of Trencin in Trencin, Študentská 2, 911 50 Trenčín

[3] Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, Faculty of Philosphy and Social Sciences, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland

Abstract:

Background: Contribution discusses possible positive and negative effects to those who are adopted or taken under the foster care. On the other hand, openness within adoption in most cases is presented in a positive way, by becoming increasingly common, especially due to a growing recognition of the benefits of allowing an adopted child to establish or maintain connections with the birth family. Although many studies have shown a relation between adoption and later difficulties, there is no clear evidence that adoption could cause behavioral problems in child's later development periods. Many authors would argue that this process has also negative influence, especially dealing with adoptees' self-identity formation, social attachment, and communication with others. Attention is devoted to these children' abilities to develop their own relationships with other friends and mainly with step-parents. Teenage period is stressed when identification challenges take over other developmental necessities and social attachment is developed. That is why the phenomenon of open adoption in the childhood is mainly presented in the context of its influence to a child's further psychosocial development and growth.

Objective: The main objective of the contribution is to analyze theoretically adoptees psychosocial variables that influence their further development in the context of open adoption's process.

Method: Main method of this explorative work is a meta-analysis and more theoretical observation of previous research in the selected area.

Conclusion: Openness relates to the degree to which information passes between birth and adoptive families and to the level of contact and relationship between these families.

[*] Assoc. prof. Tomas Butvilas, PhD., Tel.: +37068418869
E-mail address: tbutvilas@mruni.eu

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1   Introduction

Open adoption, as it is stated in much of the literature, is a type of adoption in which birth and adoptive families have some form of initial and usually ongoing contact; the open adoption also allows adoptive parents (often the adopted child as well), to interact with the child's birth parents. Besides, the type and the way of openness can vary from family to family and may change over the time. Open adoption is becoming increasingly common, in part due to a growing recognition of the potential benefits of allowing an adopted child or youth to establish or maintain connections with his or her birth family [1]. Within past few decades a greater sophistication has emerged in the understanding of the concept of openness and the professional practices related to the concept. Openness no longer refers simply to open communication between adoptive family members but also relates to the degree to which information passes between birth and adoptive families and to the level of contact and ongoing relationship between these enmeshed families [2]. Yet, on the other hand, the formation of an adoptive identity is one of the more critical and complicated tasks that adoptees would face [3].

Having those aspects in mind, all European Union Member States have ratified the UNCRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child), which provides a key framework to guide program and policy interventions with and for children deprived of parental care. The preamble of the UNCRC emphasizes the role of the family as "the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children" [4]. Articles within the convention seek to prevent separation of children (Article 9), support family re-unification (Article 10), provide alternative care for children when required (Article 20), provide regular reviews of care plans, ensure attention to individual needs and development of each child (Article 25), and assure the child the right to express his/her own views (Article 12). Taking in account of the key principles of the Eurochild Policy Position on Quality of Alternative Care for Children Deprived of Parental Care [4], care responses must always be made in the child's best interests (Article 3).

Almost all countries in the world admit that every child needs a family, security, and constant feelings [5]. On the first hand, all necessary instruments should be taken in action while saving child's biological and unified family after some serious problems occur. Only if the best solution is suspending from parents' rights or biological parents cannot take care of their own child any longer, the adoption could take a serious part within child's wellbeing construction. On the other hand, adoption is rather a complicated psychosocial process even though a frequent phenomenon in society today. Rutter et al. [6] have been stated that adopted children's behavior, cognitive abilities as well as physical development in many cases are laden in comparison with non-adopted peers. After the adoption, a child needs to adapt to the new environment – get used to some strange smells, cultural differences, and all of that undoubtedly differ from his/her previous experiences.

In Western cultures adopted children's behavior and the variety of their experienced emotions are the focuses of many surveys. Besides, much of attention is paid to such children abilities to develop their own relations with other friends and mainly with stepparents. Especially teenage period is stressed when identification challenges take over other developmental necessities and social attachment is developed [7]. It is stated that early adoption factor plays much of the role within formation of self-identity, social attachment, and child's psychosocial characteristics – better results are expected when child was adopted before 6 months of age [8]. Open adoption, according to Singer and Krebs [8], is revealed as child's and his or her birthparents participation meaning at the adoption process as a progressive tactic [9]. Open adoption is recommended as the best option for the child by Committee on the Rights of the Child. It has been stated as the standard in the Quality4Children Standards for Out-of-Home Child Care in Europe [10]. It is almost taken for granted by adoption services and adoption participants in the USA.

That is why the problematic situation in almost all research works is mainly defined with the following issues that are much of interest to many academics and practitioners and educators:

a) Experiences of adolescents adopted from the care system in relation to the themes of grief and loss status.
b) Reasons behind individual differences-why do some adoptive people feel different to others (cultural differences, dependence of adoption type).
c) Birth parents and adoptive parents' attitudes and values in relation to adoption and openness in adoption.
d) How does self-esteem, emotional and behavioral development of adopted adolescents relate to pre-placement risk factors such as length of time in institutions and care system?

The theme of this contribution is the phenomenon of openness within adoption and its impact to the child's further psychosocial development, especially having in mind self-identity processes.

The main objective of this contribution is to analyze theoretically adoptees psychosocial variables that influence their further development in the context of open adoption's process.

Method is a meta-analysis and theoretical review of previous research in the selected area.

2 Approaches to an Open Adoption and its Challenges: Insights and Discussion

The practical part consists of a case study and an objective. Neil [9] in her studies on post-adoption contact and openness reveals the fact that adoptive parents and their children report face-to-face contact to be a positive experience and such contact appeared to have a positive effect on the ability of birth relatives to adjust and accept the fact of the child's adoption. For instance, in England and Wales, the 2002 Adoption and Children Act obliges agencies to make post-adoption support plans for every child, and gives adoptive parents, adopted children and birth relatives the right to ask for an assessment of their support needs. Neil states that providing support for post-adoption contact is an important opportunity for social workers to facilitate communication between children, adoptive parents, and birth relatives, as well as helping all three parties understand and manage their own feelings regarding the adoption [9].

Although many studies have showed a relationship between adoption and later difficulties, there is no clear evidence that adoption could cause behavior problems in child's later development periods [11]. Indeed, many mechanisms are likely involved in the adoption process, which may interfere with the parent-child relationship and the child's development and well-being. As the matter of fact, fostering and adopting are both means by which children are given new, safe, and supportive homes, because early stress, poor life conditions and separation may constitute potential risk factors regarding the social-emotional development; the period of adolescence, which involves separations and new relationships may be especially sensitive in this regard [12]. However, both fostering and adopting, are important to remove adoptees from usually unhealthy environments and allow them to move towards a brighter future.

On the other hand, along with the positive intentions of adults to foster or adopt a child some psychological negative outcomes of child's adoption/foster process may be seen as well, especially having in mind the international adoption, that has some effect on emotional and social development in adolescence, specifically attachment, and separation processes [11]. Having been adopted may constitute a risk factor regarding psychological development, particularly at adolescence [12]. A question raised in the literature is, whether adopted children exhibit more behavior problems than non-adopted peers in later development stages.

As Pierrehumbert et al. [12] emphasizes, there are other important issues related to pre and post adoption processes that could be taken in account within proposed research, such as the effect of early deprivation on the adopted child, for example a late adoption frequently means a long time spent in institutions in poor living conditions, without any attachment figure. Therefore, these factors increase the risk that the child encounters adverse life events with probabilities of long-term consequences on his/her psychosocial development [11]. The data suggest that the impact of early deprivation may last long after adoption and that a long stay in institution can hinder the capacities of recovery.

The effect of early deprivation on parent-child attachment. That means that poor relationships at pre-

adoption phase may negatively influence the development of emotional regulation and of later social adaptation. Putting in other words, in case of adoption, child caregivers' bonds may have been disrupted or remained unconstructed, increasing psychological vulnerability [11]. That is why a late adoption increases the risks of having been exposed to harmful and disruptive life experiences, and to negative models of relationships.

Finally, the reactive attachment disorder (hereinafter RAD) may be observed when difficulties or impossibilities to create a significant relationship with anyone occur. Among the long-term consequences of RAD are the difficulties to engage emotionally with other people, loneliness, social withdrawal, identity problems, or loss of positive self-esteem. Adopted children with a RAD are then likely to endure difficulties regarding emotion regulation as they cannot trust the attachment figures in stressful situations [11].

Adoptive parents and their representations concerning their children is a significant factor that may influence child's wellbeing while in the new environment. Pierrehumbert et al. [12] have pointed out that parents' representations towards their children mainly could be described as the consequence of the capacity to understand their own behaviors and those of their children in terms of mental states, intentions and needs, and to reflect their children's psychological experiences. Parents of children who had been placed relatively late, experience a greater need for support, and report higher levels of children's aggression, rejection, control behaviors, and overfriendliness; this contrasts with children placed earlier in infancy, whose adoptive mothers report higher levels of joy, competence, confidence, warmth, happiness, and affection. Lastly, adoptive parents who were themselves insecure or unresolved in relation to attachment seem to be more likely to represent their adoptive children, and the relationship with them, in negative ways [11].

That is why it is of great importance to understand what and how underlying factors may intervene in the pre and post adoption processes, to prevent difficulties and vulnerabilities, and to optimize chances for an optimal child's psychosocial development [9]. Secure attachment has been pointed out as a protective factor regarding behavior problems in childhood. Attachment is also influenced by several individual and environmental factors such as parental competencies regarding interactions, sensitivity to the child's demands, and parental representations (mentioned above), as well as characteristics of pre-adoption context (age at adoption, origin, adoption from care, early institutional/environmental experiences, and others).

To be more specific, the experience of adoption makes the adopted child deal with more rather complex emotional issues, such as rejection and grief at an early age. Even though adopted children can grow up joyfully, as stated above, but they grow up differently as well, and both internal and external factors could have an impact for adoptees further development [13]. Many believe the increased incidence of referral for adjustment problems is the result of the psychological impact of adoption on children [13].

Therefore, the psychological impact of adoption means that adopted children and their both biological and adoptive families face unique challenges: loss, grief, rejection with accompanying feelings of guilt/shame, identity, and intimacy/relationships issues and others [9]:
- Loss is the primary adoption-related matter from which the other issues flow. Adoption involves many losses for the child [13]. Adopted children have lost the chance to be "normal" like their friends who are growing up in their biological families. Child also may have lost siblings, birth order, and other connections with the biological family. Another unique feature of adoption is that the adopted child must cope with losses that are less obvious, for example in the case of death, society provides the rituals of funerals and the gathering of people to support the person who is mourning [14]. However, losses of adoption frequently are not recognized, nor are there established rituals or ceremonies to mourn such losses. For the adopted person, loss in adoption is not a single event but a series of ongoing losses: birthdays, Father's Day, and Mother's Day can be viewed as a reminder of the original loss and the ongoing nature of that loss [13].
- Adopted children have experienced significant losses, and grieving these losses is rather important for healthy adaptive development.

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Grieving is a natural and necessary response to the adoptive experience as well as to the death of a loving one, parents' divorce, migration, and others [7]. The losses of adoption may be less obvious and less likely to be acknowledged, thus the adopted child and others may deny the grief being experienced. Behavioral changes seen in elementary school-age adoptees that reflect grieving include anger, aggression, oppositional behavior, and uncommunicativeness, depression, and self-image problems. Feelings of anger, resentment, and sadness may be projected onto the people available to the child, especially the adoptive parents. Besides grief in adolescence may be expressed with anger and defiance.

- Child's feelings of loss are heightened by feelings of rejection [13]. As the child matures, he/she begins to wonder why his/her birthparents or someone from the extended family did not choose to care for him or her. Adopted children may view themselves as responsible for the birth family decision not to parent them. Because of egocentric thinking, they feel they were bad, defective, unlovable, and unworthy. A sense of deserving the loss and rejection may lead them to feel guilty and ashamed [13].

- Consider the challenges and the models of coping with them, the possible consequences in later child's development stages could become obvious, for example when expanding social network in adolescence, many adoptees, as for their specific "internal working model of attachment" may present a difficulty in establishing selective bonds with others, leading to social withdrawal and feelings of helplessness [11].

3 Conclusions

Open adoption is mainly seen as the phenomenon that allows the adopted child freely to communicate with both birth and adoptive parents and this process leaves no space to any hidden psychological or even identity obstacles within child's interaction with his/her closest environment. Openness no longer refers simply to open communication between adoptive family members but also relates to the degree to which information passes between birth and adoptive families and to the level of con-

tact and ongoing relationship between these enmeshed families.

Along with the positive intentions of adults to foster or adopt a child some psychological negative outcomes of child's adoption/foster process may be seen as well, especially having in mind the international adoption, that has some effect on emotional and social development in adolescence, specifically attachment and separation processes.

It becomes also much clear that the psychological impact of adoption in many cases means that adopted children and their both biological and adoptive families face unique challenges: loss, grief, and rejection with accompanying feelings of guilt/shame, identity, and intimacy/relationships issues.

Therefore, it is of great importance to understand which and how the underlying factors may intervene in the pre and post adoption processes, to prevent difficulties and vulnerabilities, and to optimize chances for an optimal child's psychosocial development. Secure attachment could be as a protective factor regarding behavior problems in childhood and social support along with networking may assure this secure attachment to be fulfilled.

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