Parent Perception of Adjustment and Relationships with Children Adopted from Ethiopia: Strengths, Challenges, and Hopes

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PURPOSE
Exploratory study of psychological adjustment and family relationships of children adopted from Ethiopia. Research questions were:
- How do parents perceive their children's emotional and behavioral functioning?
- How do parents perceive the parent-child relationship?
- What do parents identify as contributing to the strengths and challenges in the parent-child relationship?
- What do parents anticipate for their children's future?

METHODS
- Parents recruited through on-line parental support groups for parents of children adopted from Ethiopia
- Completed questionnaires online:
  - The Child Behavioral Checklist (CBCL/6-18) to assess psychosocial adjustment
  - Parent-Child Relationship Scale (Ryan & Groza*) to assess the strength of the parent-child relationship on 7 item likert scale
  - Three open ended questions (re: what enjoyed in the relationship, challenges in the relationship, and what anticipated in the future)
- Qualitative data was analyzed through a grounded theory approach

RESULTS
- Parents identified challenges impacting relationships:
  - Early adversity (trauma/grief) - “The underlying grief that affects most days is tough...her hurts are deep. It is too sad to see someone you love in pain, and at the parent, finding the way to help heal that is sometimes hard.” (7, girl)
  - Difficulty for parents adapting to child’s needs (Unsure about navigating limit setting, demanding, need for control) - “She needs to be in control most of the time and needs to be informed of everything that is going to happen in the course of the day...now...I incorporate giving her as much information as I can...The controlling behavior is much easier to manage now that I know her needs.” (7, girl)
  - Difficulty for children adjusting to new life (language, family life, lack of diversity, accepting women’s roles, school) - “Communication has been our biggest challenge as well as helping her understand about family life (she had been in a care home for about 5 years...)” (13, girl)
  - Parents’ attitude towards challenges - “Our daughter was 6 when adopted. Getting to know an older child, with an already-developed personality, and helping her traverse the challenges that an international adoption brings has been really rewarding.” (7, girl)
- Most parents identified strong relationships despite challenges. However, parents attributed the rupture to: 1) Unreported sexual abuse in the orphanage prior to placement, and continued sexual acts; 2) Strong sense of entitlement of child and refusal to accept women’s roles of authority

EMERGING THEMES
- Parents identified strengths about relationship:
  - Parent’s perceived child's willingness to share memories as openness to family relationships. “His openness to sharing his past. His willingness to bond and accept us with all our flaws.” (7, boy)
  - Unique characteristics of child contribute to family (diligent, intelligent, social, polite, resilient) - “He is a person of integrity. He is very honest. He is very kind to his little sister. He enjoys life despite all the losses he has suffered in the past.” (14, boy)
  - Child’s perceived willingness to be part of family “the most enjoyable part of the relationship is seeing him...beginning to see himself as part of this family.” (7, male)
- Parents generally hopeful about the future despite challenges
  - “I believe he will have to fight the urge of ‘always having one foot out the door’ and he will work at having relationships harder than most, but I believe he is social and does want those things and will do so when it is important.” (7, male)

CONCLUSIONS
- What we learned
  - Children adopted from Ethiopia generally have good behavioral outcomes & relationships with their adoptive parents despite acknowledging challenges
  - Parents generally perceive improved relationships over time, yet have some concerns about the future
  - Improved perception of the parent-child relationship is linked to improved perception of child adjustment
  - In some cases, adoption history information was inaccurate
- Suggestions for Practice and Research
  - Exploration of interventions to strengthen the parent-child relationship may impact behavioral outcomes
  - Exploration of interventions involving culture and past history to strengthen parent-child relationship
  - Analysis of moderators of child outcomes, including parenting styles and understanding of trauma and child temperament
  - Identification of supports regarding parenting children with history of grief/trauma and limit setting
  - Identification of supports for academic and language needs

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References


