

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-relationship?
- What do parents anticipate for their children's future?

INTRODUCTION

Background

- Ethiopia sends more children to the US for adoption than any other African nation
 - However, the number was reduced due to policy change from 1567 in 2012 to 993 in 2013.
- There is limited research on outcomes of these adoptions:
 - 2013 Donaldson AI Report reviewed findings on adoption practices and health needs of children at adoption
 - Miller, Tseng, Tierella, Chan, & Feig (2008) found slightly better health outcomes for Ethiopian adoptees than other international adoptees
 - Children adopted from Ethiopia have often spent more time in family units, are older, may come in sibling groups, and have better growth rates (Miller, et al.)
- Pre-adoptive factors have been linked with child outcomes in international adoption (such as time in institution, age at adoption, temperament) (Barcons et al., 2014)
- Parent-child relationship, parenting styles and attachment can mediate the negative impact of pre-adoptive adversities (Harwood, Feng, & Yu, 2013; Barcons et al., 2012)

Guiding Theories

- **Attachment Theory**- adopted children that have a secure attachment will have better functioning multiple across domains. Early adversity, including institutionalization, can impact attachment formation.
- **Parent-Child Relationships**-- are transactional, and characteristics/behaviors of adopted children as well as parenting practices and attitudes contribute to the strength of the relationship. Behavioral challenges should be seen in the context of the relationship.

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

Participants

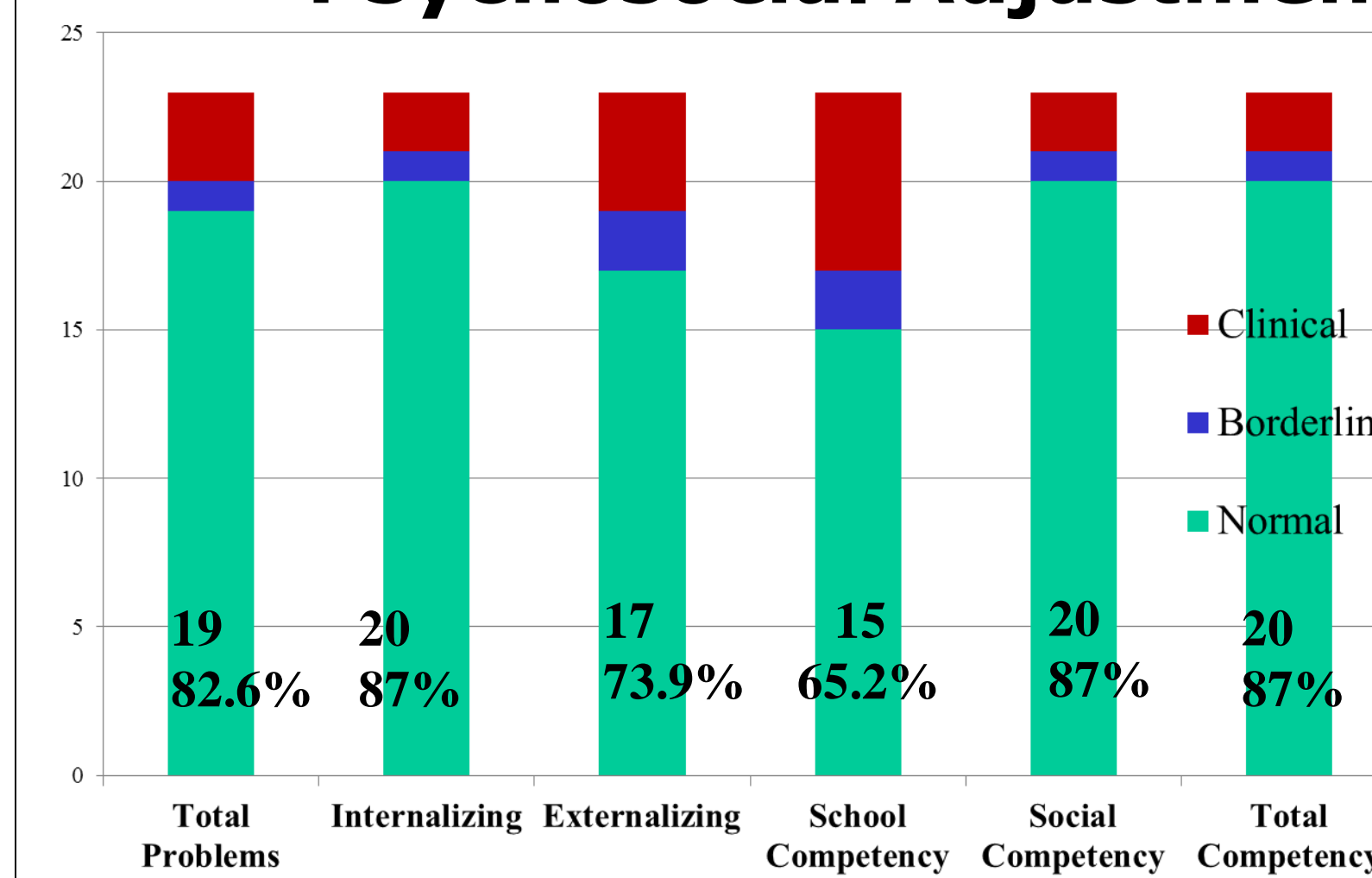
- 23* parents of children adopted from Ethiopia (9 boys, 14 girls).
- Mean child age of 9.57 (SD=3.06, range 6-17)
- Majority reported school-age at adoption
- All learned English as a second language
- Majority in US > 1 year

*one additional qualitative survey completed for 10 year old girl, only 6 weeks in US



RESULTS

Psychosocial Adjustment



No significant difference for CBCL or relationships scores by gender of child

Moderately strong correlation (-.648; p=.001, p<.05) Total Problem Score & Sum relationship score (even when controlled for age)

Parent-Child Relationship

	Very Good /Good	Not sure /Not at all	Mean
Get along	20	3	1.61
Communication	22	1	1.48
Impact	17	6	1.78
Trust	21	2	1.57
Respect	20	3	1.695
Closeness	19	4	1.65

Emerging Themes

- **Parents identified challenges impacting relationships:**
 - **Early adversity (trauma/grief)**- "The underlying grief that affects most days is tough...her hurts are deep. It is so sad to see someone you love in pain, and as 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 yrs...)" (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, two parents identified a relationship rupture—one resulting in termination of parental rights.
- Parents attributed the rupture to: 1) Unreported sexual abuse in the orphanage prior to placement, and continued sexual acting out in the home 2) Strong sense of entitlement of child and refusal to accept women's roles of authority
- **Parents identified strengths about relationship:**
 - **Parent's perceived child's willingness to share memories as openness to family relationships** "His openness to sharing himself, 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 w/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
- Many parents were aware of the grief/trauma experienced by their children, and seek ways to support them

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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