Communication That Matters: How Salient is Adoption Communicative Openness to Adjustment?

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Introduction

Research clearly shows that family communication is related to child adjustment (Rueter & Koerner, 2008; Steinberg, 2001). Some researchers hypothesize that adoption-specific communication, or adoption communicative openness (ACO), is particularly important to adopted child adjustment. Yet tests of this hypothesis have yielded mixed results. Thus, the effect of ACO on adjustment is still uncertain.

The Present Study

The present theoretical paper examines the following question:

-How important is ACO to child adjustment?

We propose the following:

-Relationship between ACO and adjustment may be spurious.
-ACO may be what really determines adjustment.

General communicative openness (GCO) may be what really determines adjustment.

General communication theories, such as Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, 2004, 2006), provide an important theoretical framework in which to examine our research question (see Figure 1).

Literature Review

Adopted Status & Child Adjustment

-Empirical evidence suggests adopted adolescents may be at increased risk for externalizing behaviors (Keyes, Sharma, Iacono, & McGue, 2008).
-Meta-analyses (Juffer & van Uzendoorn, 2005; Wierzbicki, 1993) examining decades of descriptive research have confirmed this increased risk, although note that most adopted adolescents are well adjusted.

We have little understanding of the contributing factors that help explain this increased risk.

Adoption Communicative Openness (ACO) & Child Adjustment

-Adoption Communicative Openness (ACO) defined as adoption-specific communication processes—both in terms of adoption-related content and emotions (Brodzinsky, 2006).
-Research examining the relationship between ACO and adjustment has been inconclusive. Some studies have found that ACO and externalizing behaviors (Brodzinsky, 2006; Levy-Schiff, 2001) are negatively correlated; others have found no relation (Grotevant, Rueter, Von Korff, & Gonzales, in press; Neil, 2009).

General Communicative Openness (GCO) & Child Adjustment

-To our knowledge, few studies have examined the association between GCO and adopted child adjustment. However, there is overwhelming evidence for GCO and child well-being in the general population.

-For example, studies have shown that adolescents in adoptive families that deemphasize openness were at a significantly greater risk (3-5 times more likely) for externalizing problems than adolescents in adoptive families that emphasized open communication. (Note: This study did not measure ACO.)

-In light of these findings, it is possible that the association between GCO and adjustment creates a spurious one between ACO and adjustment.

-No theoretical or empirical reason to assume that the association between ACO and adjustment would be different from that of GCO and adjustment.

-We propose that general communication patterns are more likely to predict content-specific patterns (than vice versa). We suggest that adoptive families who generally communicate openly are more likely to do the same concerning adoption-related issues.

Theoretical Framework

Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT)

-Adoption is a component in a family communication theory to examine the association between GCO and adjustment. The original FCPT is conceptualized along a continuum from high to low:

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Discussion

Using FCPT to measure FCPs incorporates an important family-level measure of family interactions that may explain its empirically supported association with adopted externalizing behaviors (Rueter & Koerner, 2008). FCPT accounts for all family members.

Suggestions for Future Research

To understand how important ACO is to child adjustment, future research should test the following research questions that examine the relationships among GCO, ACO, and adopted child adjustment based on the conceptual model in Figure 1:

-How are GCO and ACO related to adjustment?

-A significant “b” path would indicate GCO predicts ACO.
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Conclusion

FCPT is an appropriate family communication theoretical framework in which to examine GCO.

Future research should determine the nature of the relationships among GCO, ACO, and adjustment. Namely, does each (GCO, ACO) make a contribution to adjustment? Or does ACO mediate the relationship between GCO and adjustment? Such research is needed to pave the way for adoption researchers to focus on communication that matters.