Adoption Status and Family Relationships During Transition to Young Adulthood

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Over the last 30 years adoption has become a less secretive and an increasingly valid way to build a family, resulting in the increased prevalence of adoptive families within the United States. As stigma surrounding adoption has decreased, adoptive family research has increased, focusing on parent-child relationships during childhood and adolescence. While adoptive family relationship research is progressing, we know little about how adoptive family relationships change or remain the same as adolescents enter young adulthood.

Existing research on adoptive family relationship quality has been conducted with families of mid-life adoptees retrospectively reporting relationship quality, which supported a general level of closeness within families (Loehlin et al., 2010). Rueter et al. (2009) measured the effect of warm, supportive communication and parent-child conflict across adoptive and nonadoptive parent-child dyads, finding evidence of less warm, supportive communication and increased conflict in adoptive families.

The purpose of this study is to build upon previous adoptive family research (Loehlin et al., 2010; Rueter et al., 2009) to explore differences in conflict, closeness, and relationship quality between adoptive and nonadoptive family dyads at Wave 1 and again at Wave 2 (W2), separately for adoptive and nonadoptive family dyads.

Families participating in the Sibling Interaction and Behavior Study (McGuire et al., 2007; Rueter et al., 2009) were included in analyses if adolescents were 14.5-18.4 years at W1 (M = 16.3yo) and 18.5-22.4 years at W2 (M = 19.8yo). Mothers’ mean age was 46.9 years at W1 and 50.3 at W2, and fathers’ mean age was 48.7 years at W1 and 51.4 at W2. The majority of adolescents (53%) and parents (97%) identified as White.

Participants
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Measures
Self-report. Dyadic conflict and closeness were assessed independently by each family member (Elkins et al., 1997). Conflict was assessed using a 12-item subscale, with lower scores indicating increased conflict. Closeness was assessed using a 12-item subscale, with lower scales indicating lower closeness. Observation. Conflict, closeness, and relationship quality were independently observed for each dyad (Rueter et al., 2009). Conflict was measured using the Hostility scale, and Closeness was measured using the Warmth/Support, Listener Responsiveness, Prosocial, and Communication scales. The Relationship Quality scale was the observer’s overall evaluation of the quality of the parent-adolescent dyad.

Conclusions
Two major trends emerged from our findings: 1) adoptive family dyads generally had higher conflict and lower closeness than nonadoptive dyads at both time points, and 2) both family types had similar relationship trends over time. Individuation theory may play a salient role in our results (Grotevant & Cooper, 1965; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). We suggest individuation occurs for both types of families, with adopted adolescents facing additional challenges during this process. Future adoptive family relationship research needs to move beyond the deficit approach comparing adoptee/nonadoptive group differences to investigating the family processes that influence and shape healthy adoptive families.