

Effect of Adoption Status on the Transition from Adolescence to Young Adulthood

Amy J. Walkner-Spaan, M.S.W. & Martha Rueter, Ph.D.

Background

Importance of close relationships. Research has shown that close relationships provide a significant context for development and adaptation (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Noack & Buhl, 2005). This is particularly important in parent-child relationships, in which patterns of interaction during childhood remain influential through adolescence and young adulthood (Aquilino, 1997). While evidence from research on the general population supports parent-child relationships as especially salient because they begin early in life and are intensive across large portions of the life course (Thornton, Orbuch, & Axinn, 2005), little research exists on this transition within adoptive families.

Relationship changes over time. Trends in the literature vary, showing affection (Thornton et al., 2005) and emotional closeness (Aquilino, 1997; Rice & Mulkeen, 1995) increasing between most parents and their children between late adolescence and young adulthood. Yet other literature shows emotional closeness and interaction quantity (Tubman & Lerner, 1994) decreasing. Trends in the literature also varied for conflict, power, and control as family relationship quality during the transition from late adolescence into young adulthood. Young adults reported that relative power between them and their parents reached equality at young adulthood (Noack & Buhl, 2005). Parents reported increased conflict in adolescence lead to increased control and conflict when their children reached young adulthood (Aquilino, 1997), while young adults reported relationships with their parents as having been less conflictual (Shulman & Ben-Artzi, 2003).

Existing research on adoptive family relationship quality has been conducted on families with children in mid-life, retrospectively reporting their family relationship quality during adolescence. This research supports a general level of closeness within families based upon a single measure completed by all family members rating each other on perceived closeness (Loehlin, Horn, & Ernst, 2010). Most notable to the adoptive family relationship quality literature is a study by Rueter, Keyes, Iacono, and McGue (2009), which measured effects of warm supportive communication, parental control, and parent-child conflict across adoptive and nonadoptive parent-child dyads, and within families with one biological child and one adopted child. Data from self-report measures found evidence of less warm, supportive communication, and increased conflict in adoptive families, while observers rated conflictual behavior in adoptive families as stemming from adolescents towards their parents. Within family differences also reported less warm, supportive communication and increased conflict with adopted adolescents as opposed to biological adolescents.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to build upon Loehlin, Horn, and Ernst's (2010) and Rueter et al.'s (2009) work on family relationship quality in adoptive and nonadoptive families in adolescence. First, this study will describe adoptive and nonadoptive dyadic family relationship quality at two timepoints, utilizing self-report and observational data. Second, dyadic family relationship quality in adoptive and nonadoptive families is analyzed over time, from late adolescence into young adulthood. The following research questions were explored:

1. What is the level of parent-child relationship quality in adoptive and nonadoptive families at adolescence and young adulthood, and do they differ?
2. Do levels of parent-child relationship quality in adoptive and nonadoptive families change between adolescence and young adulthood?

Methods

Participants

Participants came from the Sibling Interaction and Behavior Study (SIBS; McGue, et al., 2007), consisting of $N = 617$ families ($N_{\text{adoptive}} = 409$, $N_{\text{nonadoptive}} = 208$). Data was collected at the Intake wave and Follow Up wave four years later. Eligible adoptive families had an adopted adolescent between the ages of 11 and 21 at the Intake wave, with a sibling who was not biologically related to the adopted adolescent. All sibling pairs were no more than five years apart in age. A comparison group was recruited based upon age and gender from Minnesota state birth records

Measures

Self-report and observational data were used to compare levels of conflict, control, and closeness with adoptive and nonadoptive families, as measures of family relationship quality. Self-reported family interactions came from the Parental Environment Questionnaire (PEQ; Elkins, McGue, & Iacono, 1997), as reported at Intake and Follow-up. Each family member's responses created four measures: mother to adolescent, father to adolescent, adolescent to mother, and adolescent to father.

Observational data on family relationship quality came from two levels of measurement. The first, dyadic interactions, came from assessed behavior directed at one family member toward another. The second, dyadic relationships, came from assessed relationship quality between parent-child dyads as assessed by the Relationship Quality scale, as observed at Intake and Follow-up. This resulted in each dyad receiving a unique relationship quality score.

Preliminary Results

Table 1

Between Family Comparisons: T-test Results of Comparing Mean Family Relationship Quality in Young Adulthood

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-----------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Mother | | | | | |
| Conflict | | | -2.20 | 1065 | 0.03* |
| Adoptees | 2.60 | 0.66 | | | |
| Nonadoptees | 2.69 | 0.72 | | | |
| Control | | | -0.41 | 1140 | 0.68 |
| Adoptees | 2.01 | 0.24 | | | |
| Nonadoptees | 2.02 | 0.22 | | | |
| Closeness | | | 3.43 | 1063 | 0.001*** |
| Adoptees | 2.59 | 0.31 | | | |
| Nonadoptees | 2.66 | 0.29 | | | |
| Father | | | | | |
| Conflict | | | -2.77 | 898 | 0.01** |
| Adoptees | 3.12 | 0.55 | | | |
| Nonadoptees | 3.23 | 0.54 | | | |
| Control | | | 2.66 | 898 | 0.01** |
| Adoptees | 2.08 | 0.27 | | | |
| Nonadoptees | 2.03 | 0.24 | | | |
| Closeness | | | -2.42 | 898 | 0.02* |
| Adoptees | 2.62 | 0.28 | | | |
| Nonadoptees | 2.66 | 0.26 | | | |
| Child to mother | | | | | |
| Conflict | | | -2.81 | 1066 | 0.001*** |
| Adoptees | 3.10 | 0.54 | | | |
| Nonadoptees | 3.18 | 0.51 | | | |
| Closeness | | | -2.02 | 1081 | 0.04* |
| Adoptees | 2.60 | 0.29 | | | |
| Nonadoptees | 2.63 | 0.29 | | | |
| Child to father | | | | | |
| Conflict | | | -2.21 | 1053 | 0.03* |
| Adoptees | 3.15 | 0.56 | | | |
| Nonadoptees | 3.23 | 0.54 | | | |
| Closeness | | | -3.00 | 1069 | 0.03* |
| Adoptees | 2.58 | 0.30 | | | |
| Nonadoptees | 2.64 | 0.30 | | | |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Future Directions

Preliminary analyses suggest the need for further exploration of adoptive family relationship quality from adolescence into adulthood. There were statistically significant differences between adoptees and nonadoptees on mother's and father's ratings of conflict and closeness with their children. Additionally, a statistically significant difference was found between adoptees and nonadoptees on father's rating of control. Statistically significant differences were also found between adoptees' and nonadoptees' rating of conflict and closeness with both their mothers and fathers. Future research will utilize more precise analyses to account for family-wise error. Adoptive family relationship quality will also be examined for change over time.