

Psychosocial Outcomes within Adopted and Non-adopted Individuals.

Introduction

The aim of this study was to investigate whether adoptees and non-adoptees differ on attachment dimensions and self-esteem variables.

Attachment theory asserts that through early experiences with attachment figures, individuals form internal models, which go on to influence their perceptions, ways of relating and outcomes within all subsequent relationships. These internal models underpin the two attachment dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Those low in both attachment anxiety and avoidance have the sense that they are worthy of love and view others as accepting and responsive. Those who are high in attachment anxiety but low in attachment avoidance believe that they are not worthy of love and acceptance and look to derive self-worth from the acceptance of others. Those who are high in attachment avoidance perceive that others are not accepting or responsive and avoid close relationships. Depending on their level of attachment anxiety, these individuals may or may not also feel that they are unworthy of love and acceptance. Previous research has demonstrated that adoptees are higher than non-adoptees in both attachment anxiety and avoidance. The current study extended existing research by being the first to employ the most empirically supported measure of attachment (the Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire - Revised).

Self-esteem relates to an individual's evaluation of his or her own worth and is considered a stable personality characteristic that encompasses beliefs, emotions and behaviours. For example, individuals with high self-esteem may believe themselves to be worthy and competent, experience a feeling of pride, and act with confidence. Despite the fact that adoptees are considered to experience difficulty in identity development, a recent meta-analysis concluded that across the many empirical studies that exist, adoptees' self-esteem does not differ from that of non-adopted individuals. A problem with the existing research however, is that it employed measures that rely on direct, explicit questioning as a way of gauging respondents' private self-evaluations. This permits conscious or unconscious misrepresentation. Therefore, a major contribution of this study was the use of a measure of Implicit Self-esteem. In contrast to explicit self-esteem, implicit self-esteem relates to unconscious self-evaluations that are spontaneous, automatic and affectively driven.

It was hypothesised that:

1. When the influence of maternal and paternal care and overprotection is controlled for, adoption status will significantly predict attachment anxiety and avoidance, with adoptees scoring higher on these dimensions.
2. Adoptees will possess significantly lower levels of implicit self-esteem than non-adoptees, but that any such group difference on explicit self-esteem will not reach statistical significance.

Methodology

A group of 64 non-adopted participants were recruited through the Griffith University subject pool and networks available to the researcher, and a group of 64 adopted participants were recruited via community organisations and internet forums. The adopted sample was made up primarily of adoptees who had searched, were currently searching or intended to search for biological relatives. Each participant completed a survey package, containing measures of the various constructs and a demographic questionnaire. The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire was used as a

measure of attachment anxiety and avoidance. The Parental Bonding Instrument was used as a measure of maternal and paternal care and overprotection. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale was used to measure explicit self-esteem. Finally, the Name Letter Preference Task was used as a measure of Implicit Self-Esteem.

Results

The data were analysed using a hierarchical regression approach and *t* tests. Consistent with the hypotheses, adoption status significantly predicted attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, even when controlling for maternal and paternal care and overprotection. Here, adoptees demonstrated significantly higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance than the non-adoptees. Also consistent with the hypotheses, adoptees demonstrated significantly lower levels of implicit self-esteem than non-adoptees. Inconsistent with the hypotheses however, adoptees also demonstrated significantly lower levels of explicit self-esteem than non-adoptees.

Implications

The current findings imply that adoptees are at greater risk of experiencing negative outcomes within intimate relationships than are non-adoptees. This inference is based on the well established link between high attachment anxiety and avoidance, and poor relationship outcomes as related to communication, relationship satisfaction and trust. In addition, the established link between these negative attachment outcomes and theory of mind development, personal and social competence, adolescent peer relationships, academic success and transition to college, indicates that adoptees are also at greater risk of negative outcomes in the realms of social functioning and academic achievement. It is important to note however, that the current results indicate adoptees are at higher risk of negative, but not pathological, attachment outcomes.

The current study's finding adds to the inconsistencies within the field of research that has investigated the relationship between adoption and explicit self-esteem. On the basis of the current findings, it is reasonable to suggest that adoptees may be at greater risk of aggressive, antisocial and delinquent behavior, depression and anxiety, illicit drug use, and difficulties in social skilfulness. This is because much research has demonstrated a link between low self-esteem and these negative outcomes.

Within the current study it was reasoned that adoptees may be motivated to avoid the painful feelings that are associated with negative self-beliefs by denying them at a conscious level. The current results do not support this possibility however; as the adopted group was found to be significantly lower in both explicit and implicit self-esteem. This suggests that aspects of the adoption experience impact upon adoptees levels of self-esteem at both an implicit and an explicit level.

The findings should be considered in light of the fact that the current sample consisted mainly of 'searching' adoptees, where some past research has indicated that these negative outcomes may only be relevant to adoptees who choose to search for biological relatives. More research is required to clarify these differences and the reasons behind adoptees' negative outcomes.

An understanding of the unique issues related to adoption, as promoted by this research, will aid effective post-adoption services and encourage positive change within adoption practice.