

35 YEARS WITH INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTIONS

Nordic Research Conference
Göteborg 29 September 2001

Abstracts



MB

Illustr.: Marianne Bergström

List of contents

	Page
Celia Beckett: Romanian Research Project	3
Monica Dalen and Anne-Lise Rygvold: Internationally adopted children and young adults-Language development and school competence	4
Lars von der Lieth: Adopted children as schoolbeginners	5
Katarina Richardson and Anders Björklund: The educational attainment of children adopted from abroad: Swedish evidence	6
Signe Howell: The significance attributed to place of origins and "roots" amongst adoption "experts" and transnationally adopted people	6
Nina Forsten-Lindman: Psychosocial Adjustment and Mental Health of Intercountry and Domestic Adopted Teenagers in Finland	7
Malin Irhammar: Changes in interest in biological and ethnic origin, from adolescence to adulthood, in a group of Swedish adoptees born abroad.	7
Lotta Landerholm: The Experience of Abandonment and Adoption, as a Child and as a Parent, in a Psychological Motivational Perspective	9
Christina Lagergren: Language development	10
Ing-Britt Christiansen: Family secrets and identity	11
Anna Elmund: "And what about Me?" - The issue of disturbed communication within the adoptive family	12
Jørgen-Ulrich Raunskov, Leif Nord, Vibeke Ellegaard and Margrethe Primdahl: A survey of the health conditions of all foreign adoptive children placed in Denmark through Adoption Centre in 1992 and 1993	13
Gerda Skovmand-Madsen: Adoptive parenthood	15
Gideon Zlotnik: Adoption research -what is relevant and who knows best?	16
Lars von der Lieth and Robert Jonasen: "The hidden forgotten language" - A pilotstudy from The University of Copenhagen on late adopted childrens learning difficulties	16
Jonathan Telfer: Experiences of intercountry adoption in an Australian Setting	17
Louise Svendsen: The Singularly Unique Adoptees	18
Madeleine Matwejeff: Swedish-born adoptees situation and search	21
Katarina von Greiff: Adopted persons from Latin-America – their conceptions of the conditions during their childhood and adolescence, of their situation in life, and of Sweden as a socialization culture	22

social forces, tendencies and processes. My research thus approaches and explains adoption as a contested, conflictual field of engagement.

While identity is central to relatedness and kinship in the field of adoption, the reverse also holds. A study of the predicaments, experiences, struggles and risks that embroil agents whose lives are affected by adoption reveals the centrality of contextualised understandings of gender, connectedness and agency. Refractions of familiarity and strangeness repeatedly configure and problematise social situations for agents in which identity is either ambiguous, perilously sought, or threatened. The interpretation and valuation of the biogenetic and the social provide experiential avenues for agents to reflect, not only upon their origins, but also upon their most intimate aspirations. As a prime cultural entity, the individual assumes mediatory postures in various dialectical forms and juxtapositions. My research considers connections between identity, relatedness and kinship as they are mediated by the individual and the marital couple, cast in certain contexts as a unitary cultural and social phenomenon.

Adoption constitutes a cultural site through which the ambiguities and uncertainties that permeate relatedness and kinship are rendered visible and thus accessible. In the new millennium, questions of identity are critically implicated in realms of both relatedness and kinship. While identities often go to the core of existence, identities in adoption are also precariously situated; fragile, perilous pursuits, or uncertain predicaments which cannot be evaluated or understood without invoking realms of relatedness and understandings of separateness and attachment through kinship.

My research explores and helps explain the cultural forces and practices that shape common themes in adoption. These themes include human agency, the body and cultural notions of relatedness and resemblance, time and connectedness (including the culturally significant notion of the anniversary) and the significance of and cultural basis of emotion in the field of adoption.

The Singularly Unique Adoptees

Summary of thesis paper for Master of Science in Psychology

May, 1998

University of Copenhagen

By: Louise Svendsen, M.Sc. Psychology

August, 2001

LsSvendsen@yahoo.com

tel: +45 26 24 40 64

Introduction and Rationale

While we know quite a bit about internationally adopted children's lives, there is little information available about their later adolescent and adult lives. We know that in their early lives, all adoptees have experienced a traumatic loss, but how has this in combination with their experiences as adoptees affected their later lives? This study attempts to answer this question,

paying particular attention to the development of the adoptees' self-perception and coping strategies. Specifically, this study aims to aid in the understanding of how adult adoptees from Korea manage in Danish society and what it means to grow up as a Korean adoptee in Denmark.

The factors relevant to investigating how adult adoptees manage in life and more specifically cope with the aspect of being adopted are: autonomy, resilience, coping strategies, self-image and the ability to build relationships with others. These factors are based on the child's earlier experiences, and in his experiences relating to significant adults in his life. For many adoptees the first period of their life includes drastic changes, which are the loss of one or more significant care providers, and the variation of residences such as orphanages, foster homes, or other institutions. Is it possible that later experiences in an adoptive family can counteract the earlier trauma? If so, how do their combined experiences influence their attitude toward life, their expectations of others, and their image of others and themselves?

Description

The results of this study are based on data gathered in the form of semi-structured interviews with three women and three men. The subjects are all of Korean origin. Four of them were adopted at the age of 6 to 7 months, while the other two were 18 months and 1 year and 8 months old. At the time of the study they were aged 21 to 25.

Results

In general, the subjects see themselves as Danes and do not pay attention to the fact that they are adopted; only one conceives of himself as partially Korean. Their Danish identities, however, are challenged when they come in contact with strangers as a result of questions, comments, looks and possibly even discriminatory behaviour on the part of the stranger. This type of behaviour is typically a result of their non-stereotypical Danish appearance. Even though all of the subjects feel uneasy by the strangers' behaviour, only one subject tends to react by lashing out. The majority of the subjects has become used to this sort of behaviour and respond politely. Nonetheless, these interactions do not threaten the subjects' self-perceptions and identities for several reasons: the main reason is that the adoptees do not primarily define their identities by virtue of being adopted; not much subjective meaning is attached thereto. On the contrary, their self-images rely more on their own personal traits which they consider to be characteristic of Danes. In addition, the subjects have a strong sense of self and a high self-esteem (both of which increase a person's resilience). This, in combination with the fact that they with time have become used to comments, questions and other behaviours based on their foreign appearance results in a balanced and secure self-identity.

This research has shown that although the subjects attribute little worth to their status as adoptees, it nonetheless affects their individual lives. They all imagine as a result of their adoptions that their psyches have been affected in such a way as to increase their fighter instinct, their ability to handle major crisis, as well as the tendency to reflect on aspects of their current life situations, which in their opinion biological Danes may never consider. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that being adopted has an importance. Although they all accept their fate as adoptees, this study shows another side to their conception of their status as adoptees: one, which is more complex than one would think. For instance, none of the subjects describe a meeting with another adoptee as a neutral incident. Also, when asked, they find it difficult to attribute anything positive regarding their appearance, instead referring to themselves in an unflattering manner. They hesitate when asked whether they themselves would consider adopting. One female outright refuses to do so.

In everyday life, the subjects manage well. They appear to be capable adults, who are able to set goals for themselves and fulfil them. None of them seem insecure or incapable of coming to a decision, just as they all are self-confident. In fact, they do not rely heavily on their social network when it comes time to make an important decision or deal with a problem. Such independence could be a result of their secure attachment to their adoptive parents from childhood, and current relationship with one or more significant peer. However, it could also be a result of anxious avoidance attachment patterns in the earlier years. For two of the subjects, and partially also for a third, this seems to be the case. These three describe themselves as not particularly attached to their adoptive parents, or describe incidents where they did not seek help from their adoptive parents or others where it otherwise would be expected. It cannot be maintained with certainty that their autonomy, self confidence and resilience are a result of their experiences as adoptees, however, it is likely that the foundations for their working models are laid in the adoptive families as they were adopted at such a young age.

Attachment to the adoptive parents through childhood also has an effect on their ability as adults to build and maintain intimate and close relationships; all of the subjects have friends and acquaintances, though two feel the need for a closer friend. Some doubts arise regarding two of the subjects' closeness to their friends: one only speaks with her friends roughly once a month, and sees them even less, whereas the other's advice to his friend during a time of need is simply to pull himself together, simultaneously disregarding advice to himself during a time of crisis. It is therefore reasonable to say, that four of the six interviewees have some degree of difficulty with one or more of the following: establishing and maintaining intimate and secure relationships, and/or seeking help with another, while alternately providing support as well.

The degree of acceptance of the adoptees' own status as such, the subjective meaning of their being adopted, and their willingness to share their thoughts with others is mirrored in and by their relationships with significant members of their lives. With the exception of one, all the subjects have discussed adoption issues with their adoptive parents on their parents' initiative. Two of the subjects, who discussed adoption with people other than their family members, have mostly shared their thoughts with people who have a particular understanding of their situation, specifically with others adopted from Korea. They all describe a double-faceted experience of distance and closeness to their close ones, an inner boundary in relationships to others because of a distance which could be a result of their particular situation of being adopted or maybe of a more general existential nature.

An assessment of the subjects' work and love lives generates mixed results. All of them manage their professional lives well. With the exception of one, who is following his dreams in a different direction, they are in the process of completing their higher educations, and each for himself has chosen the direction he is following. Their ambitions are not modest for what they wish to achieve professionally. Taking their ages into consideration, it is not surprising to find that only two of the subjects find themselves in long-term relationships. However, it may merit notice that both of them are women. Moreover, one of the male subjects, who has had some problems finding a girlfriend, rejects starting a family for the time being. The third female subject does not necessarily see herself establishing a family and/or having children at all. However, apart from her, all the subjects do expect a future with a partner and with children.

Conclusions

The adoptees in this study differ from each other in many ways, however they are all similar in that they are singular and singularly unique. This is reflected in their fundamental life strategies, their own perception of themselves as adoptees, and the way in which they react to others perceptions of them as foreign or not Danish. The overall impression of the adoptees is that they

are doing well in Denmark. The trauma experienced early in life does not necessarily have a negative impact on the rest of their lives. The amount of influence the trauma has seems to be related to the upbringing in the adoptive family. It is important that the adoptive parents are able to establish a secure attachment with the adoptee. Thereby, the parents are able to support the child by nurturing a stable self-perception, high self-esteem, a Danish identity, which in turn prepare the adoptee for the challenges of surrounding misperceptions of him as foreign.

The conclusions drawn from this study are limited in their general applicability. Because of the limitations of the qualitative interview used in this research and the population of only six people, the data collected can only point to expected behaviour in a similar population. However this research can potentially serve as a guideline in preparing a larger study.

Reflection

It is the opinion of this researcher that a broader and more in-depth study of a larger population would yield more generally applicable results of the quality of adult life for adoptees in Denmark. Such a study and its results can provide a foundation for the post adoption services, which currently leave much to be desired in Denmark. The results would provide a foundation for better directed efforts in this field. Adoptive parents would be able to seek partial guidance based on the analysis of what meaning the different conditions and relationships have on an adoptee's upbringing. It is important to note, however, that in relation to such possible conclusions, it would be necessary to consider that the number of adoptees from countries other than Korea has increased with the years, and that their conditions will not always be comparable to those of Korean adoptees. The reasons for this are partially that the surrounding society has become used to them as the number of children adopted in general has increased. Also, the number of people with a foreign appearance living in Denmark has increased, and different stereotypes and expectations are tied to these different ethnic backgrounds. It would also be essential to consider that the conditions in Denmark's donor countries are varied, and also have changed after the subjects of this study were adopted in the 1970's, when the adoption of foreign children was only its beginning stages.

Swedish-born adoptees situation and search

Madeleine Matwejeff
Department of Behavioural Sciences
Linköping University
Sweden

In Sweden the largest group of adoptees are the Swedish-born. They are about 70 000. Because of a traditional silence about the adoption they have become a quiet and invisible group. Yet no extended research has studied the adoption process from the Swedish-born adoptees point of view.

Matwejeff, S. M. (1992). Adoption from the adoptees perspective. This study contains data from a questionnaire given to 18 Swedish-born adult adoptees, twelve women and six men at the age