

Factors Influencing College Attendance in Adopted Children

Jennifer Carpenter
School of Social Work
Abilene Christian University
ACU Box 27866
Abilene, TX 79699

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Stephen Baldrige

Abstract

Adoption is not a new phenomenon in society. It dates as far back as first recorded history. However, the ideas and processes surrounding the event have changed and developed drastically over time. In the limited research done exploring the difference in older placed adoptees, it is generally found that children adopted at older ages are at higher risk for behavioral problems, mental health issues, and had a harder time trying to bond with their adoptive family.¹ The older the child is at the time of placement, the more likely they are to have a less positive evaluation. Qualifications of a positive evaluation include the adopted child being well-adjusted, healthy, and without serious behavioral problems. This study explored the factors influencing college attendance of adopted children. As indicated in the review of literature, many different factors influence success in this population, however gaps still exist addressing factors specifically leading to college attendance. Using qualitative interviews of adoptees attending college, this study examined specific factors, including age at the time of adoption, religious background, open vs. closed adoption, relationship with biological and adoptive families, and ethnicity as determining factors that would lead to the attendance of adopted children. Initial findings suggest that highly educated or “successful” people who are highly involved with their religious affiliations tend to influence their adopted children to make some of those same decisions and continue their own education. This puts their child into a situation in which they are more likely to utilize higher education. The findings support the literature that adoptive children tend to have a higher level of education and therefore a higher economic status than their counterparts who are raised by their biological parents.² This study provides a thorough discussion of implications, as well as limitations brought about by the design and methodology.

Keywords: Adoption, College, Success

1. Introduction

Adoption is not a new phenomenon to society and while attitudes toward the matter have been growing and changing, there is still a long way to go. Adoption has long been thought of as a second choice way to create a family but that stigma is need of change. The more research and literature provided, the more information there is for families to take into consideration when thinking about adoption. The current study aims to find reasons that adopted children attend university to pursue a higher style of life.

2. Review of the Literature

According to the World English Dictionary, to adopt is “to bring (a person) into a specific relationship, especially to take (another’s child) as one’s own child.”³ According to UNICEF, there are 210 million orphans in the world and another 20 million displaced children.⁴ A child who is considered to be displaced is one who has been removed from their home of origin or given up voluntarily; these children still have a biological parent living. Thirteen percent of all children in the world are without a clearly defined family. Nationally, in the United States alone, nearly twenty percent of the child population lives outside a permanent family unit.⁵ These numbers show a problem that is of epidemic proportions within our global community.

Adoption is not a new phenomenon in society. It dates as far back as first recorded history. However, the ideas and processes surrounding the event have changed and developed drastically over time. Dating back to Roman times, there were two ways to go about acquiring a new family member: adoption and adrogation. Adrogation was when an individual was emancipated from the family of origin and then taken into another family whereas adoption was the direct movement of a child from one family to another. Then, adopting an individual into the family institution was a way to add to family, mostly for social appearances. For the most part, only males could be adopted or adrogated and only men could technically adopt. The only exception for a woman to be able to adopt was when she had no living heirs to which her wealth could be left. Adoption and adrogation of females was prohibited because in the social views of the time, there simply was no benefit. Having a daughter did not increase your social worth because she could not carry on the family name.

Beyond the Roman times, adoptions in Europe became a thing of secrecy and again necessary to social appearance. The physical dilemma of the inability to have kids was shameful. Adoptions were often made by matching a child and parents based on appearance. This way, people did not have to admit that the child was not their natural born child. There also rose an issue of “baby farms.” Babies were being sold to a “baby-farmer” for a minimal amount and the child was then sold to a couple for a fee. People began buying children because the process through a baby-farm was much cheaper than actually giving birth. The major problem with these alleged “baby-farms” was the incredible level of neglect that the children had to endure. Children who were left there for any amount of time were severely malnourished, underdeveloped and mortality rates were very high. Adoption continued to suffer a great stigma in England even as the process began to be rethought because of the recent past of the “baby-farms.”⁶

By the time of the World War I, thousands of children had been ‘exported’ to British colonies and forced to live as indentured servants, the war began to change this. People soon desired to adopt children to recreate their family institution after being left childless by the war. Thus, The National Children Adoption Association (NCAA) and the National Adoption Society (NAS) sprang up in 1917-1918. These organizations played the role of matching adoptees to adoptive parents, although still by genetic looks. Soon after, the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (NCUMC) was founded. They were concerned with ensuring the welfare of biomothers and their children. All of these organizations worked together to pass the Adoption of Children Act of 1926. This new law placed regulations and authority on the matter of adoption in the court’s hands, in turn legalizing the process. This was the beginning of interviewing and looking at the adoptive family before a child was handed over. This is when some agencies began requiring recommendations and doing home visits as part of the interview process. However, this was done at the discretion of the agency and because of various problems, the Adoption of Children (Regulation) Act of 1939 was put in place. This act limited the role of the private agency. The changes were made so that the view became that “the well-being of the child should be the primary utility to be served by adoption.”⁷

Just before all of these laws were passed in England, adoption in America took the form of apprenticeships. Governments of the American colonies would act on the behalf of the child by intervening when necessary (when a child was unparented). That child would be given into an apprenticeship and cared for by the master worker. Often, the care given was not ideal for the child. As urbanization and poverty grew in America, more children were filling the orphanages. This overflow led to the use of the “orphan trains” which moved children from the East to the West so that they could be placed in groups to work in rural areas. Finally, “in the mid-nineteenth century, Mississippi and Texas were the first states to establish registries for adoptions, which followed the general format used to register property deeds.” Massachusetts enacted the first modern adoption law in the country in 1851. This law identified the needs and well-being of children as the primary function served through adoption. Shortly, twenty-five more states instituted similar laws for cases of adoption. While America was catching up to England, adoptees and adoptive families were still being matched according to physical resemblance.⁸

The single biggest landmark in the beginning of organized child welfare was the foundation of the U.S. Children's Bureau in 1912. Regulations were set and enforced. Just after the Children's Bureau was put in place, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) formed. The CWLA was the private agency that monitored agencies all over the country. The League published adoption standards, which included safeguards for children, adopters, and the state. If an agency failed to uphold these standards, it was suspended from the League. Following the devastation that resulted from World War II, humanitarianism gained a completely new momentum in Western culture. Adoption had already begun to be more about the welfare of the child, but after the war the view of adoption began to broaden. There was an increase in the 1950's-1960's of transcultural and transracial adoptions. People began to look beyond wanting a kid that looked just like them. Some of the intentions behind adoption began to change although the stigma was not entirely gone. In the past, the purpose of getting a child that looked like the adoptive parents was to often hide the fact that they could not have their own, which was so shameful. But now, children were being seen as people with needs rather than just a way to further the family unit. The passion of adoption was born.⁹

There are numerous studies that explore the differences between adopted and non-adopted children. A noticeable limitation to the current body of literature is that in most studies, the age at which the child was adopted has not been taken into consideration. When comparing non-adoptive children and adoptive children, adoptive children tend to have a more negative adolescence including more behavioral problems and lower achievements in school. This pattern usually then results in more criminal activity and then less likelihood in pursuing education beyond high school.¹⁰ Based on these studies it is apparent that adoptees show more behavioral and psychological issues. Long-term effects on the adoptees' life into adulthood is still a phenomenon largely under researched.¹¹

In the limited research done exploring the difference in older placed adoptees, it is generally found that children adopted at older ages are at higher risk for behavioral problems, mental health issues, and had a harder time trying to bond with their adoptive family.¹² The older the child is at the time of placement, the more likely they are to have a less positive evaluation. Qualifications of a positive evaluation include the adopted child being well-adjusted, healthy and without serious behavioral problems. "The behavioral and emotional adjustments of adoptees decrease as age at adoption increased."¹³ However, in opposition one study found that adoptees typically have a higher socioeconomic status than children reared by their biological parents. The same study said that adoptees also seemed to attain a significantly higher education than children raised by biological parents.¹⁴

3. Current Study

The study explored the factors influencing college attendance of adopted children. As indicated in the review of literature, many different factors influence success in this population, however gaps still exist addressing factors specifically leading to college attendance. The study examined specific factors, including age at the time of adoption, religious background, open vs. closed adoption, relationship with biological and adoptive families, and ethnicity as determining factors that would lead to the attendance of adopted children.

3.1 Research Question

The research question for the current study was "what factors influence adopted children to attend university?" This question was selected after examining what factors made adopted children more successful. Although there is not a consistent definition of success throughout the literature, "success" and financial wealth is usually preceded by a higher education. This lead the study in the direction to find common themes in adoptive families as to what lead to the adoptee's decision to attend college.

3.2 Methodology

Based on the current body of literature the research hypothesis for the current study was "the adoptive family in which a child is raised will have the most impact on their decision to attend college." Some literature suggests that most children who are adopted are adopted into well-educated, upper-middle class families and that higher education is then more available.

3.2.1 participants

This qualitative study aimed to gather information from six participants that were selected from a small Christian liberal arts university's body through voluntary purposive snowball sampling. Participants were gathered by multiple blanket announcements made to classes and mass e-mails sent out as well as word of mouth. The goal was to gather ten to twelve participants, but only six were found.

3.2.2 instrument

Data was gathered through face-to-face interviews. Questions that were asked were from a questionnaire developed from a review of the literature.

3.2.3 data analysis

Each interview was recorded so that it could be listened to and transcribed for data analysis. Interviews were reviewed and organized by common themes. Themes were then analyzed for relevance and similarity.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 interviewee narratives

Interviewee A is a 20 year old female who was born in New Mexico and was adopted at 6 weeks of age. She moved home with her adoptive family to Texas where they raised her as their own along with one brother (biological child of her adoptive parents). The adoption was closed and only as she got older did she learn a little more about her biological family but has still not met them. Her adoptive father was college educated at the same private university that she is now attending. She described the religious atmosphere that she grew up in as fairly conservative Church of Christ. She described her family as very involved.

Interviewee B is a 20 year old male who was born in Texas and was adopted at 3 days old. He moved home with his adoptive family where he was raised as an only child. His adoptive parents went through an interview process with his biological mother to be chosen. Beyond that, the adoption was semi-open. Interviewee B has never had any contact with his biological mother, but his parents have. He would like to eventually meet her at some point. Both of Interviewee B's parents attended the same private university that he is now attending. He described the religious atmosphere in which he was raised as fairly strict Church of Christ. His family remains quite involved in the COC church that he grew up in.

Interviewee C is a 21 year old female who was born and adopted in Texas at 1 day old. She moved home with her adoptive family where she was raised with one brother (biological child of her adoptive parents). She now attends the same private university that both her biological mother and her adoptive parents attended. Interviewee C has not met her biological mother but would like to. She described the religious atmosphere in which she was raised as moderately conservative Church of Christ. Her family remains involved in the church and her father serves as an elder.

Interviewee D is a 21 year old male who was born in Korea. He was adopted at 6 months of age and moved home with his adoptive family to Texas. He was raised with two older siblings, both of whom were adopted as well. Interviewee D knows little about his biological parents and has never met them. He described the religious atmosphere in which he was raised as very active in pursuing a relationship with God. His family is very spiritual and consider themselves Church of Christ. He also remains very involved in church himself. Interviewee D is currently attending the same small private university that both of his adoptive parents attended.

Interviewee E is a 20 year old female who was born and adopted in Texas. At two weeks of age she was able to move home with her adoptive family where she was raised with one older sister (biological child of her parents). Interviewee E does not know her birth mother but hopes to find her before she graduates from college. She currently is attending the small private university where her adoptive father is a professor. She described the religious environment in which she was raised as very vibrant. Her family is active in the Church of Christ.

Interviewee F is a 20 year old female who was born in Thailand. She moved to Texas with her biological family where she was raised. Her home life was not what it should have been and she was placed in foster care at age 11. She was adopted into a loving family at the age of 13 and has live with them in Abilene, Texas since. Neither of her

adoptive parents completed college but both had some higher education. However, they own a business and have managed quite well. Interviewee F does have one older sister (biological of her adoptive parents) but she is quite a bit older, so she was not raised “with” her. Although she knows her biological parents, she no longer has any contact with them, nor does she want to. She described the religious environment of her adoptive family as very strong. Her adoptive father previously served as an elder in the Church of Christ. Interviewee F is currently attending a small private university.

3.3.2. themes

A notable theme throughout all of the interviewees is a consistency in adoptive families being very active in their churches. This could be quite an influencing factor in the parents adopting the children. The self-identified morals instilled by faith beliefs of their identified religions are also believed to help the children have perceived value and self-worth, causing them to strive for what might be considered success within the culture of their adopted families.

Also noteworthy is that nearly all interviewees’ parents attended college. The one participant whose parents did not complete their higher education still succeeded in owning their own business. This seems to have a large influence on the adoptee’s choice to achieve their own higher education. Not only does a child whose parents attended college more likely have the means by which to attend college but parents are likely to instill their same value of education in their children. It is also likely that parents who attend college have the means to adopt a child in the first place due to their typical higher level of income.

All but one interviewee was adopted as an infant. While this is a commonality, it is not believed to be a highly influential factor according to this interviewee. She inferred that although she was adopted later in life, she was still able to learn and pick up successful habits from her adopted parents. This also rings true in the life of this author of this study.

Another important identified theme in this study was that all of the adoptions associated with the participants are identified as closed adoptions. Some even knew a little about their parents at a young age. However, most of the adoptees did not learn about their parents until they were much older. Also, none, except for the interviewee who was adopted when she was older, have met their biological parents. A closed adoption means that the child does not have any contact with the biological parents.

Also noted was a very interesting commonality between most of the adoptees: their desire to meet their biological mother. Not one of the interviewees articulated an interest in finding their biological father specifically. Four of the six interviewed would like to find and meet their biological mother within the next couple of years before they complete their higher education.

During the interview, each participant was asked if he or she felt any type of void stemming from the lack of biological parents. The response was overwhelmingly no. While each had wondered about their biological parents at some point, all felt fully nourished and nurtured. This supports the huge impact that adoptive families have on their children.

The majority of the adoptees that were interviewed also grew up with siblings. In some cases there were other adopted children in the family. Others had older siblings that were the biological children of the adoptive parents.

3.4 discussion

The current study suggests that highly educated or “successful” people who are highly involved with their religious affiliations tend to influence their adopted children to make some of those same decisions and continue their own education. This puts their child into a situation in which they are more likely to utilize higher education.

There are several driving factors behind one’s choice to adopt. It is suggested that a strong driving force is a family’s faith. People who are highly involved in their churches often feel the need to take of others in need and this is sometimes shown through complete care of a child through an adoption.¹⁵

The literature supports that adoptive children tend to have a higher level of education and therefore a higher economic status than their counterparts who are raised by their biological parents.¹⁶ This is congruent with most families that elect to adopt. Eligible potential parents not only have the financial means by which to take care of a child but they themselves have those means frequently due to their access to higher education.¹⁷ The ratio is higher in adopted children.¹⁸ This is because biological parents can differ a great deal from adoptive parents in regard to social and economic status. The costs that are associated with typical adoptions are obviously not required with biological births.

There are often concerns about adopting older children. It might seem that a child that is adopted at an older age, therefore having less time to spend in the influential environment of their adoptive family, may have less of an

opportunity; less time, less influence on the adoptee. Based on this current study, we cannot definitively say that it is or is not an influential factor. Even though being adopted at a significantly older age than most of the other participants, the adoptee was still positively influenced to attend a place of higher education.

From data collected from the interviews, it was established that none felt out of place in their adoptive families, nor did they feel that they were missing a part of themselves. However, there were a few things that were mentioned by a couple of the adoptees that made them feel a little different from their family. One example was a difference in ease of learning. The adoptee described that she had more difficulty in school than her siblings that were biological children of the adoptive parents. While this was a difference she experienced, she described it as something that could be experienced in a completely biological family as well. What was gleaned from this is that the dynamics within a biological family and a family with adoptive children can be similar.

Consistently through all of the interviews the adoptees indicated that their adoptive families had a huge impact on their lives in general. It could be said this is the case for any child. What's different for these adopted children is the difference of quality of life and family that had an influence on them because they were adopted.

The results of this study result in the acceptance of the hypothesis. Based on the findings, the most influential factor of a child choosing to attend college is the impact of their family.

3.4.1 implications

The practice implications for this study are noteworthy. One implication of this study that is not necessarily consistent with the overall body of literature is that the age of adoption is not as influential as other factors such as the adoptive parents themselves. This was a theme that was only briefly mentioned but can be very beneficial knowledge to potential adopting parents. Potential parents desire a child that they believe they can help grow into a fully functional adult. Some have reservations about the child's potential for success when adopting an older child because of possible issues that may occur because of the child's past. While it is a valid concern regarding problem behavior, it is rather than a barrier, just a small obstacle. Often, there will need to be a very high level of commitment and love from adoptive parents to overcome an older child's past. However, when that high level of commitment, love, and nurturing is placed, adoptive parents are just as influential on their children and the reward is that much greater. All of this is to encourage more people to not only adopt, but adopt older children- not just babies. Older children have just as much likelihood to succeed by going to an institute of higher education.

Adoption agencies can use this information to help potential parents make their decision about a child. Agencies can also use this information to help the children. With the reassurance that an older child can succeed, adoptive parents will be more willing to adopt them older. When this happens, the result is that less children age out of the system which is currently a huge problem in our society.

The current study has implications in the realm of policy as well. Currently policies to help adoptive and foster children attend college are very individualized by state. Some states offer full waiver of tuition and fees to a public university, while others do not. A universal policy needs to be made at a federal level to ensure displaced children the opportunity of a higher education.

Future research in this area would greatly expand the current study as well as the overall body of literature. Future studies might include other groups of adopted children, such as adopted children who have not attended college. This is a group that will give more insight on the matter. Other studies could also examine other factors influencing the adoptee's decision to not attend school to the adoptees who did choose to attend a university.

Further research is undoubtedly needed in this area to help those working with this population better understand and support adopted children and their families.

3.4.2 limitations

This study has substantial and well noted limitations. One of the primary limitations of this study involves the sample size. While qualitative studies tend to utilize smaller samples, the fact that this study only included information from six interviews severely limits the generalization of the overall results. All participants in this study were selected from the same university. The small sample size is partially due to the fact that the university itself is small. In addition, the sample was rather homogenous, further limiting generalizability.

In addition to this limitation, this study did not take into account a number of other factors that could have had significant impact on adopted children attending college, such as race, gender, and other themes supported through the literature.

4. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mentor, Dr. Stephen Baldrige, for guiding me through this research project in a way that made it manageable and not overwhelming. I am so grateful for the time and effort he invested in the betterment of my education and I admire the work that he has devoted his life to.

5. References

1. Howe, D., Shemmings, D., & Feast, J. (2001). Age at placement and adult adopted people's experience of being adopted. *Child & Family Social Work, 6*(4), 337-349.
2. Lois, W., & Cynthia C., F. (2005). Adolescent adoption: Success despite challenges. *Children And Youth Services Review, 28*487-510.
3. Adoption. (n.d.). In *Dictionary.com*. Retrieved April 16, 2012, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/adoption?s=t>
4. UNICEF. (2009, June). UNICEF publications. *UNICEF*. Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/publications/index_49924.html
5. World demographics profile 2012. (2011, July 12). *Index Mundi*. Retrieved April 16, 2012, from http://www.indexmundi.com/world/demographics_profile.html
6. Borrozo, P. (2011). Finding home in the world: A deontological theory of the right to be adopted. *New York Law School Law Review, 55*(3), 701-731.
7. Borrozo, P. (2011). Finding home in the world: A deontological theory of the right to be adopted. *New York Law School Law Review, 55*(3), 701-731.
8. Borrozo, P. (2011). Finding home in the world: A deontological theory of the right to be adopted. *New York Law School Law Review, 55*(3), 701-731.
9. Borrozo, P. (2011). Finding home in the world: A deontological theory of the right to be adopted. *New York Law School Law Review, 55*(3), 701-731.
10. Brodzinsky, D. M., Radice, C., Huffman, L., & Merkler, K. (1987). Prevalence of clinically significant symptomatology in a nonclinical sample of adopted and nonadopted Children. *Journal Of Clinical Child Psychology, 16*(4), 350.
11. Decker, S., & Omori, M. (2009). Age at adoption: long-term measures of success in adulthood. *Adoption Quarterly, 12*(1), 37-52.
12. Howe, D., Shemmings, D., & Feast, J. (2001). Age at placement and adult adopted people's experience of being adopted. *Child & Family Social Work, 6*(4), 337-349.
13. Sharma, A. R., & And, O. (1996). The emotional and behavioral adjustment of United States adopted adolescents: part II: age at adoption. *Children And Youth Services Review, 18*(1-2), 101-14.
14. Smyer, M. A., Gatz, M., Simi, N. L., & Pedersen, N. L. (1998). Childhood adoption: long-term effects in adulthood. *Psychiatry (New York), 61*(3), 191-205.
15. Malm, K., & Welti, K. (2010). Exploring motivations to adopt. *Adoption Quarterly, 13*(3/4), 185-208.
16. Lois, W., & Cynthia C., F. (2005). Adolescent adoption: Success despite challenges. *Children And Youth Services Review, 28*487-510.
17. Lois, W., & Cynthia C., F. (2005). Adolescent adoption: Success despite challenges. *Children And Youth Services Review, 28*487-510.
18. Lois, W., & Cynthia C., F. (2005). Adolescent adoption: Success despite challenges. *Children And Youth Services Review, 28*487-510.