



An introduction to the adoption and trauma special issue

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Title: An introduction to the adoption and trauma special issue

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Background

A large international body of research over the past half century has shown that adopted children, whether placed early in life or later in childhood, are at increased risk for a wide range of adjustment difficulties (Askeland, Hysing, La Greca, Aarø, Tell, & Sivertsen, 2017; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Those who experience prenatal and postnatal adversity and trauma prior to adoptive placement are at even greater risk for maladjustment and adoption disruption (Juffer, Palacios, Lemare, Sonuga-Burke, Tieman, Bakermans-Kranenburg, et al., 2011; Palacios, 2020). However, more recent research from the past two decades, focusing primarily on children adopted from institutions in other countries or from domestic state care, has confirmed the potential for adoption, as a child welfare intervention, to promote developmental recovery for many of these children. It has been argued that recovery is enabled through the provision of a stable and permanent family, well-trained in understanding the complexities their children have faced and able to provide the type of nurturant parenting that facilitates secure attachments and a strong sense of belonging (Brodzinsky and Palacios, 2010; McSherry et al., 2013; Perry, 2009; Rutter, 1998; Rutter et al., 2009; Palacios et al., 2019; Lee Raby and Dozier, 2019; Sinclair et al., 2005). Recovery is also more likely to occur when the adoptive family has access to high-quality post-adoption supports provided by those who are clinically adoption-competent (Atkinson, 2020).

In 2019, as is now common practice for academics, one of the co-editors of this special issue (McSherry) shared findings on social media from a longitudinal study of children in state care in Northern Ireland, namely the 'Care Pathways and Outcomes study,' that further highlighted the positive aspects of adoption from care, particularly in relation to security of attachment and self-concept (McSherry et al., 2016). Unexpectedly, however, this social media posting generated some heated and impassioned responses on the nature of the relationship between adoption and trauma, with a number of respondents, primarily adult adopted persons, suggesting that adoption itself is

inherently traumatic, and that this reality has been overlooked by most researchers and adoption professionals.

Given the long history linking adoption and trauma, but with little attention to varied meanings of adoption-related trauma or how it is experienced by the adopted person, he approached one of the leading international journals in mental health and child welfare, the journal of *Child Abuse and Neglect*, and proposed that he guest edit a special issue broadly examining the relationship between adoption and trauma, including the differing perspectives of ‘adoption as a response to and potential recovery from early trauma’ and the less well-examined view of the ‘trauma of adoption.’ They kindly agreed and he approached two further international scholars in the field to co-edit the issue with him, Gina Miranda Samuels (University of Chicago) and David Brodzinsky (Rutgers University). In June 2020, our call (McSherry, Samuels, and Brodzinsky) for the special issue was released.

The primary aim of the special issue was thus to explore and examine the nature of the relationship between adoption and trauma. We also wanted to reflect the reality that adoption takes many forms across the globe including informal adoption, independent and private adoption, domestic adoption from state care, and adoption from institutions in other countries. Adoption also creates a host of family formations across biology, race, ethnicity, class/caste, and nation, and some of these adoptive family systems are stigmatized more than others (e.g., LGBTQ+ headed families, multiracial families). We also considered it important that contributors explicitly defined what they meant by the term ‘trauma.’ This was an acknowledgement that there is not one universally accepted definition of childhood trauma, and as such, it was important that contributors explained their particular understanding of this term, and how this applied to the perspective being presented in their articles.

It is a recognition of this complexity, and the ongoing debates about adoption as healing, harmful, or both, that inspired the central focus of the special issue. By bringing together a body of

empirical and autoethnographic research from across the spectrum of opinion and conceptual standpoint, we sought to further clarify the nature of this relationship. We invited empirical research, literature reviews, autoethnographies, and critical commentaries from adoption scholars. Importantly, we also allowed space for experiential perspectives from professionals who have been working clinically with adoptive family members, as well as from scholars who have themselves been adopted and who could provide a first-hand and intimate account of how being adopted had impacted their sense of self, relationships, and emotional well-being, and could speak directly to the relationship between adoption and trauma. Our hope was that the special issue would allow for an open discussion of the relationship between adoption and trauma in a way that exposed readers to a range of perspectives in this debate, and that could further inform theory, research, policy, and practice in this often controversial and expansive area of work.

This special issue presents 13 articles that address the central issue of the relationship between adoption and trauma. These articles explore the core question from a range of perspectives, utilising multiple methodological approaches, exploring different types of adoption, and set within an international context. Most articles address the issue of adoption from state care, and a small number examine intercountry and/or transracial adoption. Most are from the US, with others from the UK, Spain, the Netherlands, and Italy. The focus of these articles can be summarised across three inter-related themes: adoption as a child welfare intervention; adoption as trauma; and adoption-related support needs.

Adoption as a child welfare intervention

Most articles reflect a focus on adoption as an ‘intervention’ for recovery from pre-adoption adversity trauma within family of origin, state care, or orphanages (Brodzinsky, Gunnar, & Palacios, 2022; McSherry & McAnee, 2022; Anthony et al., 2022; Blake et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2022; Pace, Muzi, & Madera; 2022; Román, Palacios and Minnis, 2022), providing further empirical and theoretical support for a position that builds on a well-established international research base.

These authors often explore the impact of both prenatal and postnatal pre-adoptive exposure to harm, and the detrimental impact this can have upon future development, with the extent of harm being mediated to some degree by the provision of nurturant parenting and access to support services, amongst other factors. Apart from the review by Brodzinsky et al. (2022), these articles do not reflect a perspective that adoption, per se, adds to the trauma of the developing child. However, they also do not depict adoption as a panacea for early trauma, but that adoptive placement is a vehicle for at least partial recovery from adverse childhood experiences.

Adoption as trauma

In contrast, a smaller group of articles by scholars who are also adults with lived experience of adoption, engaged autoethnographic methods to explore adoption as its own experience, and consider the relationship between trauma and being an adopted person (Samuels, 2022; Newton, 2022; Merritt, 2022). In these instances, the authors utilise a wide array of empirical research, interdisciplinary theories, emic perspectives, and lived experiences of adoption to substantiate the ties between trauma and adoption in both distinct and overlapping ways.

Samuels (2022) highlights epistemic injustice—harm to a person as a knower—as a distinct type of trauma among adopted, and particularly transracially adopted, persons. Calling our attention to how knowledge about transracial adoption is often smothered or distorted to center whiteness, she explores how dominant narratives of adoption as positive and gain can overshadow experiences of adoption as also trauma and loss, including experiences of racism and ambiguous loss of home. The related issues of ambiguous loss, including of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity, are also highlighted in the article by Kim (2022) in relation to adoption discontinuity and intercountry adoption. Both Kim (2022) and Samuels (2022) challenge positive-only depictions of adoption as harmful to the adopted person’s meaning making of the complexities involved in being adopted.

In what Newton (2022) names “*the trauma of consciousness*,” we are invited to consider how adopted persons often grow up without knowledge about adoption as a political and economic

institution and can carry often unrecognized or unacknowledged trauma. This paper stretches theories of trauma to account for a distinct kind of trauma among adopted persons, which only until it is brought to awareness, can possibilities for healing begin. Similarly, examining latent trauma specifically triggered through the birth of a child, Merritt (2022) calls us to take an embodied trauma approach to understand buried or hidden trauma lodged in the bodies of adopted persons. In recounting how her own preverbal separation trauma was viscerally triggered during the birth of her first child, her analyses challenge dominant notions of trauma requiring cognitive memory of the trauma event. Instead, she underscores the importance of bodily recollections, what she calls “latent traumatic memories.” All three authors draw upon a long tradition of research and trauma theory that underscores trauma as multidimensional, neurobiological, embodied, developmental, and socio-relational.

Together, these articles are especially important in inviting us to consider theories of trauma and adoption that are possibly relevant to specific types of adoption and identity work, as well as healing processes, pathways, and developmental needs that may be unique to persons who are adopted. This theorising specifically points to the issues of loss and ambiguous loss, racial and familial identity work, “coming out of fog,” and transracial adoption (domestic and international) as possibly distinct aspects of adoption that can be experienced as developmentally harmful and traumatic, if unattended to as critical and normative dimensions of living out the status of “adoptee.” Indeed, the autoethnographic analyses affirm adulthood as a critical moment for rigorously exploring the relationships between adoption and trauma.

Adoption-related support needs

Irrespective of the source of trauma, many of the articles flagged the importance of support for adoptive families, for the adoptive parents and adopted persons, as children and adults, to help them cope with any early and ongoing trauma, and to make sense of what they have experienced and/or are currently experiencing. Several authors highlighted the need for a more trauma-

informed approach to prevention (Baden et al., 2022) and therapeutic intervention (Vinke, 2022), with a particular focus on the Neuro-sequential Model of Therapeutics (Perry, 2006) as an appropriate framework for addressing the trauma experienced by adopted persons.

The article by Brodzinsky et al. (2022) neatly captures the corresponding trauma dynamics in adoption. They argue that *'for some, being adopted is a destabilising and, at times, traumatic experience, whereas for most it is not'* (p.6). They continue that:

"the likelihood of adoption being internalized as a positive personal and family experience or as a destabilizing and perhaps traumatic one is tied to the interaction of multiple contextual factors, including the society or culture within which the adoption occurred (macrosystem), the proximal community and professional interventions that impact the adopted person indirectly through its influence on parents and other caregivers (exosystem), the environments in which the adoptee spends most of their time such as family, peer group, and school (microsystem), as well as the dynamic interplay among these microsystems (mesosystem) and the changes in the environments and the person over time (chronosystem). Indeed, the impact of each of these contextual factors is mediated by developmental factors, especially children's cognitive and social-cognitive development, through which they attribute meaning to their adoption experience" (p.6).

The themes highlighted in this introduction further illustrate that the representation of adoption as a response to early trauma, and of adoption as trauma, are both valid and mutually inclusive perspectives. The driver of variation between these perspectives includes myriad variables but most certainly must include context. Thus, research strongly suggests that positive experiences of adoption can be promoted, especially for children whose early caregiving involved trauma, when they are placed with nurturing, well-prepared and supported adoptive parents whose parenting practices are attuned to the challenges of their children's early lives, where the children successfully foster a healthy identity and sense of self and that these identities are affirmed at a family,

community, and societal level. Where this family and broader social context is not present, children are more likely to struggle and experience further trauma. There do appear to be additional challenges when children are adopted from other countries, or transracially adopted domestically, where empirical and autoethnographic research highlight how adoption-specific trauma can be suffered during childhood, adolescence, and carried into adulthood.

What unifies these perspectives, however, is the clear need for formalised support and knowledge for adoptive families and adopted individuals that is attuned to adoption type and the child and family's distinct needs. This support is needed to ensure that parents are trained in trauma-informed parenting, to reduce adoptive parents' and children's level of stress, and ensure that all family members are prepared to navigate normative developmental experiences of adoption, loss, and identity work. Particularly for white parents parenting children of color, there is a need for parental skill and knowledge about racialized trauma as it exists in the history and contemporary politics of transracial adoption, and in navigating racism as it presents within their families, communities, and societies. Such knowledge and skill to navigate racism are also needed by those who are adopted, along with the knowledge and support to make meaning of their adoption holistically, across multiple contexts and life stages. This healing work includes affirming diverse lived experiences of adoption in contexts that are often underpinned by biocentric and racist dominant narratives, including monoracism, that invalidate one's sense of belonging and kinship racially, culturally, and familiarly. When one's experience of family defies boundaries of biology, class, race, and nation, these societal and interpersonal invalidations can themselves be traumatic.

Those authors (all adopted persons themselves) who asserted that harm and trauma can be endemic to adoption and the status itself, suggested that the lived experience of adoption may not be fully realized until the person separates and gains independence from their adoptive parents. In some cases, this realization may not occur until other life stages or contexts trigger it, as in the case of an adopted person's exposure to new knowledge or becoming a parent themselves. More

research is therefore needed, including the use of more sophisticated measures and methods, that can examine a range of life circumstances from the adopted person's perspective. More longitudinal studies capturing the independent contributions of prenatal and postnatal experiences, including the role of developmental and contextual factors, may lead to a clearer picture of the circumstances in which adoption is experienced as a trauma or not, even among some individuals placed immediately at birth.

Future Directions for Research on Adoption and Trauma

Where do we go with this conversation to examine the issues and questions more deeply, both represented and not represented in these articles? We offer a few suggestions for consideration, and end with several enduring questions.

First, the authors of the articles in this special issue, including the editors, represent diverse perspectives, distinct racial-ethnic or cultural identities, and different lived experiences in relation to adoption. Specifically among the co-editors of this special issue, two are personally connected to adoption (i.e., Samuels is an adopted person, Brodzinsky is an adoptive parent), whilst one is a stepparent (McSherry). What is the current role in adoption research of adopted persons as researchers, and what should it be into the future? What perspectives remain missing in creating a diversity of voice and perspective in our understanding of the adoption-trauma connection?

The inclusion of autoethnography was an attempt to begin disrupting the longstanding disparities in who has power and privilege to create and make meaning of information in this field, to authorize what counts as evidence of an experience or condition, or to name or label it. Adopted persons, particularly adopted persons of color, remain a minoritized sub-group of adoption scholars in our field. So too are birthparents underrepresented, who themselves often suffer significant trauma and loss in relation to adoption placement; a trauma that can last a lifetime (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014; Neil, Beek & Ward, 2015). The need for rigorous and novel research methods and designs to explore adoption and trauma undoubtedly requires disrupting the current underrepresentation of adopted persons and families of origin as the creators and leaders of adoption research, theory, practice, and policy in this field.

Second, our ability to draw conclusions about the relationship between adoption and trauma is restricted in a number of ways. There are many populations, social identity experiences, care settings, cultural and national contexts, adoption experiences, and personal or family circumstances not represented among the articles. Examples of areas that need more consideration in research related to the adoption-trauma connection, across a range of perspectives include: same-race versus transracial adoptions; formal adoption among families of color; open versus closed adoptions; private infant adoptions where there is no maltreatment or prenatal trauma versus older child placements where early adversity is well documented; infants and children who are reunified with birth parents or birth family members versus those who remain in foster care as a permanent outcome versus those who are adopted; and birthparents, including those who voluntarily placed a child for adoption and those whose child was removed from their care by child welfare authorities.

Third, there remains a dearth of scholarship on the legacies of forced mass displacement of children into adoption and congregate “care” for purposes of addressing poverty, promoting racial-ethnic assimilation and cultural genocide. Such histories are well documented in Canada, Ireland, the United States, Australia and elsewhere. Exploring historical and colonialist roots of trauma

enacted often via government-sanctioned outplacement, particularly of indigenous and First Nations people is a deeply understudied, but critically important, dimension of understanding the relationships between adoption and trauma on an (inter)national, societal, and cultural level. As part of an emerging critical adoption science, our field needs research that contextualizes our understandings of adoption and trauma beyond the level of individual and family, to understand adoption within its colonialist, political, economic, and global contexts.

A number of questions remain when considering the implications of the articles presented in the current special issue:

- What is gained and lost from using trauma as a lens in discussing the impact of being adopted on the developing person, and who gets to define what is traumatic for the adopted person?
- Is the language and definition of trauma, typically associated with psychological research and clinical assessment and treatment planning, useful in capturing all the complexities of the adoption experience?
- Is the focus on trauma too narrow to capture multiple experiences of adoption that may not fall neatly into the boundaries of psychologically-orientated definitions?
- What are the contextual and developmental pathways for the emergence of adoption-related trauma across the life course?
- What are the contextual and developmental pathways for the emergence of adoption-related healing across the life course?

These are all important questions that have not been adequately addressed in the adoption literature to date but should be. The articles in this special issue suggest that the relationship between adoption and trauma is complex, with trauma not being associated with only one type of placement or set of life circumstances; for what is experienced as traumatic by one adopted

individual may not necessarily be so by another. Clearly, future research needs to focus more on this question, considering not only the person's pre-placement life experiences, but myriad other variables, including the quality of post-adoption experiences, parenting, and support, individual and family-level characteristics, the context in which the adoption is lived, the communities in which the person has and has not been raised, and the developmental level and life stage of the person.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this special issue is an invitation for a continued dialogue, building on and contesting earlier discourse within adoption research, policy, practice to examine trauma and adoption explicitly and rigorously. We entered this stream of conversations as a catalyst for a range of contributions on this topic in the hope of furthering the discourse. While we do not and would not claim that this special issue has resolved anything in a definitive way, we do consider it an encouraging step forward, inviting even more voices to future dialogue, debate, and exploration.

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