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Psychological Adjustment: Are adopted adolescents at greater risk for negative outcomes?

Ajustamento psicológico: Adolescentes adotados apresentam maior risco
de resultados negativos?

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Abstract

During the last decades several authors have indicated that being an adopted child resulted in a higher risk of psychological maladjustment. The objective of this research was to investigate the changes in perception of parental styles in adopted and no-adopted adolescents Brazilians. The sample comprised 524 adolescents (68 were adopted and 456 were raised by their biological parents). The instruments used were a demographic questionnaire and the Responsiveness Scales and Parental Demands. The findings indicated that adoptive parents are significantly more indulgent than biological parents. In comparison, the adolescents described their biological parents as more negligent. The findings corroborated the trans-cultural effects of parental styles on the psychological adjustment and confirmed the

hypothesis that the parental socialization strategies moderate the development of adopted adolescent.

Keywords: psychological adjustment; adolescence; adoption; parental styles

Resumo

Nas últimas décadas, diversos autores têm indicado que a condição de ser filho adotivo implica maior risco de desadaptação psicológica. Visto que um das variáveis moderadoras do ajustamento é o estilo parental, esta pesquisa teve como objetivo investigar diferenças na percepção de estilo parental de uma amostra de adolescentes adotados e outra de adolescentes criados por sua família biológica. Participaram do estudo 524 adolescentes entre 14 e 15 anos de idade (68 adotados e 456 criados pelos progenitores). Os instrumentos utilizados foram um questionário demográfico e as Escalas de Responsividade e Exigência Parental. Os achados indicaram que pais adotivos são significativamente mais indulgentes do que pais biológicos. Em comparação, pais biológicos foram descritos por seus filhos como mais negligentes. Os achados corroboraram o efeito transcultural dos estilos parentais sobre a adaptação psicológica e confirmaram a hipótese de que as estratégias de socialização parental moderam o desenvolvimento dos adolescentes adotados.

Palavras-chave: ajustamento psicológico; adolescência; adoção; estilos parentais

The adoption of children is currently the subject of increasing social interest. The growth of poverty in developing countries leading to the expanding number of orphans, and children of victims of misfortunes such as wars and lethal epidemics contribute to the development of international studies investigating the effects of adoption on the psychological adjustment of the children. Current investigations reveal disparity in the results regarding the vulnerability of adopted children. While some studies demonstrate similarities between adopted children and children raised by their biological parents (Wright & Flynn, 2005) other studies claim that, in regard to pro-social behavior for example, adopted children have the tendency of showing more empathy and altruistic behaviors (Sharma, McGue & Benson,

1998). However, the majority of studies provide evidence of over-representation of adopted individuals in clinical populations, especially those studying adolescents. In general, the higher incident of behavioral or attention disorders, correlate to higher use of drugs and more prevalence of learning disabilities (Brodzinsky, Smith & Brodzinsky, 1998; Keyes, Sharma, Elkins, Iacono & McGue, 2008; Miller, Fan, Christensen, Grotevant & Dulmen, 2000; Moore & Fombonne, 1999; Sharma et al., 1998).

Because of its moderating effect, the perceived parental style should be considered as a variable when studying the psychological adjustment of adoptive families. Therefore, the goal of this research was to investigate the hypothesis of greater indulgence among adoptive families.

Evaluation of parental strategies from the perspective of parental styles

During the last decades, several studies emphasized the impact of parental interaction on the development of children and adolescents (Baumrind, 1971, 1991; Bolsoni-Silva & Maturano, 2007; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Milevsky, Schlechter, Netter & Keehn, 2007). Parental style is one of the more frequent themes in these investigations. The analysis of parental styles incorporates several situations involving the standards of control and affection that the parents utilize regarding questions of hierarchy, discipline, and decision-making (Reppold, Pacheco, Bardagi & Hutz, 2001). The styles can be defined as a set of expressions (non-verbal manifestations and attitudes) of the parents toward their children, characterizing the nature of their interaction and indirectly affecting performance and characteristics of children and adolescents, by changes in the effectiveness of parental practices. Therefore, parental styles can be characterized as moderating variables of parental activities and children's development. In order to operationally define the evaluation of parental styles,

Maccoby and Martin (1983) proposed a typology which investigates two orthogonal dimensions – responsiveness and exigency. While exigency refers to the availability of the parents to act as socializing agents through supervision and discipline, responsiveness refers to the parental support and acquiescence, as well as, to the acknowledgement and respect of the child's individuality. When these dimensions are crossed, four parental styles emerge: indulgent, negligent, authoritarian, and authoritative.

Parents perceived as indulgent are described as very affectionate and less controlling. They tend to be tolerant, warm, and not very demanding regarding the maturity of their children's behavior. On the other hand, parents perceived as negligent are not affectionate neither demanding. Instead of monitoring their children's behavior, they are centered in their own interests. These parents maintain a certain distance from their children, only responding to their immediate needs. Parents perceived as authoritarian are distinguished by high demand and low tolerance. They try to control the filial behavior based on their own values and standards. As such these parents impose their own rules, sometimes in a punitive manner, leaving no room for dialog or children's autonomy. The same does not happen with parents perceived as authoritative. They encourage dialog and assertive attitudes, and are a supportive net for their children. Authoritative parents exert a firm, but affectionate form of control. They value discipline as well as autonomy. Therefore, they are protective without being intrusive (Baumrind, 1991; Milevksy et al., 2007).

From a parental style perspective, Baumrind (1991) portrays socialization as a dynamic process. Throughout this process parental styles alter the availability of the children, acting as a moderating variable of the psychological adjustment.

The authoritative parental style is positively correlated to the highest scores of social competency (Strage & Brandt, 1999) and self-esteem (Wolfradt, Hempel & Miles, 2002), as

such are often considered the “ideal standard” for parental socialization. Moreover, adolescents who describe their parents as authoritative, present low scores in anxiety and depression scales, and are less involved with delinquency and the use of drugs (Steinberg, 2000). At the same time, adolescents raised under an authoritarian style frequently reveal a superior school performance, low use of illicit substances, and a low level of behavioral problems, such as aggressivity, fraud, or rebellious behavior due to the rigid parental control and imposed hierarchical submission. However, low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence, and a higher incidence of non-assertive, dependent, and poor in terms of exploration of the environment was also observed among youngsters raised within an authoritarian style (Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts & Dornbusch, 1994; Wolfradt et al., 2002).

Adolescents who perceive their parents as indulgent tend to present with higher levels of psycho-social development (self-confidence, self-esteem, and pro-social behaviors), but poorer levels of academic achievements, higher drug use, and more frequent anti-social behaviors (Slicker, 1998; Steinberg et al., 1994). These results are inverse to those observed for children of authoritarian families.

Empirical data shows the worst adjustment indices for adolescents who describe their parents as negligent. Furthermore, symptoms indicative of depression, low self-esteem, anti-social behavior, drug use, somatization, and academic difficulties were also observed (Maccoby, 2000).

Regarding the distribution of parental styles, the work of Slicker (1998) shows that authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and negligent styles are represented by 38,7%, 13,1%, 15%, and 33,2% of the sample, respectively. The precedence of this order is similar to other studies: Steinberg et al. (1994) = 34,7%, 19,2%, 10,7%, and 35,4%, respectively.

In Brazil, there are few studies regarding parental styles. However, the existing literature maintains a similar level of quality as that observed in international studies (Costa, Teixeira & Gomes, 2000; Pacheco, Teixeira & Gomes, 1999; Reppold, 2001). The investigations of Pacheco et al. (1999) and Reppold (2001), based on Brazilian samples, corroborated the idea that parental styles affect the psycho-social dimensions which constitute important development tasks such as identity, autonomy, intimacy, and realization.

Although there are no references in literature, neither Brazilian nor international, of studies which evaluate parental styles in adoptive families, studies conducted in Brazil regarding familial relationship do not highlight differences between adopted groups and non-adopted groups. While analyzing the standard of attachment behavior of adopted children to their adoptive mothers, Berthoud (1997) found indices equivalent to those observed in biological families. The results showed that 80% of the toddlers sample, consisting of children between one- and three-year-old, presented safe attachment.

Later studies investigating children 12 years of age or older, also showed that during adolescence familial ties are qualified as positive (Mariano & Rossetti-Ferreira, 2008; Weber, 1999). The majority of Brazilian adoptive parents have rated the relationship with their children as excellent, and stated no problems related to affection or academic performance in regard to their adopted children's socialization (Schettini, Amazonas & Dias, 2006; Weber, 1999). As the example above, the majority of studies found in the Brazilian literature regarding adopted children used subjective criteria for the evaluation of family interactions. In an attempt to further our knowledge from this perspective, the goal of the present study was to investigate if there were significant differences between the perception of adopted and biological children regarding parental styles.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 524 adolescents, divided in two groups: one of adopted children and the other of biological children. There were 68 adolescents of both sexes in Group 1 (48,5% boys and 51,5% girls) who were adopted during infancy through the judicial system (complete adoptions). Considering that some literature points to differences in the level of psychological adjustment in function of the age of the child when adopted (Verhulst et al., 1990b), we included in our sample only adolescents who at age two were already living with the current adoptive family, at least as foster children. However, the majority of the sample was comprised of children adopted as newborns. Around 70.6% of the participants were placed in the adopting homes up to 30 days after their birth.

The ages of the adolescents varied between 14 and 15 years old (average $M = 14,4$ years and $SD = 0,5$ years). This age group was selected due to the indication from the literature that from that age on, there is an increase in vulnerability to depression and low self-esteem, and there is a difference in prevalence of these symptoms between boys and girls (Steinberg, 2000).

The adolescents participating in the adopted group resided in the greater Porto Alegre, a major city in southern Brazil. The majority of the participants was enrolled in private schools (77,9%) and was in the 7th and 8th grades. In general, the participants lived in a two-parent household (73,5%), was middle-class ($SD = 10$ salaries), and had only one sibling (45,6%). The majority of the participants (79,4%) identified as Caucasian. The ethnic group characterization was volunteered by the study participants, as an open question.

Concerning the level of education of the fathers, there was a majority with college degrees (60,6%), followed by high-school degrees (28,8%), 5th grade education (6,1%), and advanced degrees (4,5%). A distribution similar to that was observed regarding the level of education of mothers (55,9%, 27,9%, 11,8%, and 4,4%, respectively).

The comparison group (Group 2) was comprised of 456 adolescents raised by their biological families, selected in school. Parents reported that the participants of comparative group were not adopted children. Both groups were matched in relation to the percentage of the variables: age, sex, race, level of education, familial structure (i. e., marital status of the parents and number of siblings), and social-economic status of the participants (classification of family income, level of education of parents and kind of school enrolled – public or private). A description of the samples is shown in Table 1. The larger number of adolescents raised by their biological parents in the sample is justified by the attempt to guarantee a minimum of 50 participants in each category of parental style.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

		Adoptive		Biologic	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Age range	14 years	36	52,9	248	54,4
	15 years	32	47,1	208	45,6
Sex	Male	33	48,5	225	49,3
	Female	35	51,5	231	50,7
Ethnic group	Caucasian	54	79,4	387	84,9
	Afro-Brazilian	14	20,6	69	15,1
Grade	7th grade	14	20,6	80	17,5
	8th grade	30	44,1	207	45,4
	9th grade	24	35,3	169	37,1
School	Private	53	77,9	330	72,4
	Public	15	22,1	126	27,6
Parents	Married/live together	50	73,6	343	75,2
	Divorced/Separated	16	23,5	94	20,6
	Single	2	2,9	19	4,2

Instruments

The social-demographic data of the participants was collected using a questionnaire containing information about personal, family, and socio-economic characteristics. Parental styles were measured using the *Parental Demand and Responsiveness Scales* (Lamborn et al., 1991), translated to Portuguese by Costa et al. (2000). The Parental Demand and Responsiveness Scales were originally developed by Lamborn et al. (1991) as a result of studies conducted in the United States investigating educational parental practices. It is a self-report instrument where adolescents rate frequency or intensity of the parental behaviors.

In its first version, the instrument was comprised of eight items of demand and 10 items of responsiveness. The indices of internal consistency were 0,76 and 0,72, respectively, considering the combined scores of fathers and mothers (Lamborn et al., 1991). The instrument adapted for the Brazilian version (Costa et al., 2000) resulted in 16 items (six of demand and 10 of responsiveness) which are evaluated by means of a three-point scale. The scores of father and mother can be evaluated separately or jointly, through the calculation of the average score of the parental pair.

During the instrument adaptation research, the scales showed adequate psychometric properties with internal consistency coefficients ranging from 0,70 to 0,83 (Costa et al., 2000). Regarding the combined scores of both parents, the index described by Pacheco et al. (1999) in the Demanding Scale was 0,83, and in the Responsiveness Scale was 0,87. In the current study, the internal consistency of these scales was highly satisfactory. Cronbach's alphas began at 0,91 for responsiveness of mothers and fathers, analyzed separately. For the Demand Scale, the alpha obtained was 0,89 for maternal items, and 0,92 for the paternal.

Procedures and ethical considerations

Initially, in order to evaluate the procedure for utilizing the instruments and conducting data analysis, a pilot project was carried out including 52 adolescents between 14 and 15 years old. The participants belonged to two classroom cohorts chosen by chance. The pilot project also included data collection of five 13-year-old adopted adolescents, chosen randomly. The objective of this data collection was to evaluate the effectiveness of how to approach parents and adolescents, using as parameter their acceptance to participate in the research. The choice of the age range was due to the restrictive size of the adopted population, and to the need to have a viable collection of data among the 14 or 15 years old.

For this study, the participants in group 1, the adopted adolescents were selected from a list of adoptions that occurred in the jurisdiction (Juizado da Infância e Juventude de Porto Alegre - JIJ/POA) from 14 or 15 years ago. Once the jurisdiction (JIJ/POA) consented to disclose, a researcher or a psychologist from the Adoption Agency contacted the parents of all families who adopted the adolescents that fit the study profile, except those which current address was not updated. The goal of this contact was to explain the objective of the study, to verify if the adolescents were aware of their condition as adopted, and to ask for parental consent to invite the adolescent to participate in the study. For methodological reasons, six adolescents who were not aware of their adoption history were excluded from the sample, because the study assumes filial type as an independent variable in relation to self-esteem and depression. At this stage, five more cases were discarded because the parents did not allow the child to participate in the study. The parents indicated that they would prefer to avoid new discussions on the subject.

The remainder of the adolescents were informed of the study and invited to participate, with the guarantee of anonymity. For this group, the data was collected by the researcher at their home, after consent was obtained from at least one of the parents.

The participants of the comparative group were selected from four schools in the city of Porto Alegre (three private and one public), based on the characteristics of the sample of adopted adolescents. Initially, the objectives of the research were submitted for evaluation by the school and the students, and an informed consent was sent to the parents. The adolescents were assured that the information would be anonymous and that they had the option of not participating in the study. Differently than the adopted group, this data was obtained in the classroom.

Results

The descriptive analyses of the Responsiveness and Parental Demand Scales showed the average score obtained with respect to responsiveness was 25,2 (SD = 4,59) for the mother and 24,3 (SD = 3,51) for the father. The average score with respect to the demand scale was 15,3 (SD = 2,96) for the mother and 14,5 (SD = 3,51) for the father. With respect to the combined scores for mother and father, the average score for responsiveness was 49,6 (SD = 8,56), and 29,9 (SD = 6,03) for demand.

Through a Chi-square Test, it was observed that the differences pointed by the MANOVA were due the adoptive parents presenting with a more indulgent style than the biological parents ($\chi^2 = 31,99$, $df = 3$, $p < 0,01$). The findings demonstrated that, in comparison to the adopted adolescents, the biological adolescents refer more frequently to a negligent parental style. The data confirmed the hypothesis that there is a difference in styles of socialization between biological and adoptive families in this study. However, among the adopted adolescents, a characteristic distribution was observed, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Description of the parental styles perceived by the participants

	Paternal Style (%)		Maternal Style (%)		Combined Style (%)	
	Biologic	Adoptive	Biologic	Adoptive	Biologic	Adoptive
Authoritarian	12,0	19,6	15,0	11,9	13,3	12,3
Authoritative	36,3	33,3	37,0	46,3	35,8	45,6
Indulgent	11,5	31,4	14,4	35,8	11,1	33,3
Negligent	40,3	15,7	33,6	6,0	39,8	8,8
N	375	51	381	67	369	57

When using a t-test, it was observed that in general the adoptive parents presented with higher levels of responsiveness than the biological parents. A large effect size ($d = 0,73$) should be noted. The results with respect to this analysis are described in Table 3.

Table 3. Demandingness and responsivity means of biological and adoptive parents

	Affiliation	N	M	SD	T	df	p <
Demandingness of father	Biologic	421	14,4	3,58	-2,10	97,9	0,03
	Adoptive	66	15,2	2,94			
Responsivity of father	Biologic	421	24,1	4,89	-3,87	106,7	0,01
	Adoptive	66	26,0	3,60			
Demandingness of mother	Biologic	456	15,2	2,99	-1,24	93,3	0,21
	Adoptive	68	15,7	2,70			
Responsivity of mother	Biologic	456	24,9	4,69	-3,87	115,4	0,01
	Adoptive	68	27,1	3,19			
Combined Demandingness	Biologic	421	29,7	6,17	-1,59	100,0	0,06
	Adoptive	66	31,0	4,92			
Combined Responsivity	Biologic	421	49,1	8,81	-3,64	122,2	0,01
	Adoptive	66	53,2	5,60			

Note. Because the variances were not homogeneous the Bonferroni correction was used for the degrees of freedom.

It was also observed that regarding the level of demand of the father, there was a higher score among the adopted adolescents ($p < 0,03$). However, this result may be due to issues related to infertility. A Chi-Square Test revealed that when the adoption was not motivated by infertility, the couple was more authoritarian with respect to the maturity of their children ($\chi^2 = 33,53$, $df = 9$, $p < 0,01$). On the other hand, in cases where both adoptive

parents presented with fertility problems, the parental behavior was characterized more frequently as indulgent. The analysis using adjusted residuals showed that when mothers or fathers were diagnosed as infertile, they were less authoritarian than the others. Furthermore, there was evidence that the men with infertility were related to a negligent parental style for both the father and mother (paternal: $\chi^2 = 30,4$, $df = 9$, $p < 0,01$; maternal: $\chi^2 = 29,32$, $df = 9$, $p < 0,01$).

Discussion

The results indicating low levels of negligence and high levels of indulgence among adoptive parents were as expected. Especially when considering the large investment of emotional energy from the adopting families, generally, after long periods of failed trials for pregnancy, as well as, of personal reflections on motivation and expectations of parenting potentially reducing the chances of abandonment of adopted in these families. Furthermore, the high indulgence disclosed among the adopting parents may be related to an attitude, not necessarily on a conscious level, of the parents to compensate the supposed adversities and misfortunes experienced by the child previously to the adoption which may have caused the loss of custody from the biological family.

Another possible justification for the high frequency of indulgence among the adoptive parents may be related to the parental insecurity regarding the excessive value given to blood-relation that characterized the ideal family model since the Middle Ages, until the diffusion of new family configurations at the end of the 20th Century. In this context, the belief that the instinctive love between parents and children may be an obstacle for the

adopting parents to feel legitimacy in taking on parental roles and imposing order that opposes the child's wishes, without the fear of being abandoned by the child.

Although these interpretations are fundamental to the understanding of the dynamics of adoptive families, the data relative to the distribution of parental styles are even more relevant when their effects are considered regarding the development of the adopted adolescents, and their potential to describe interaction factors which are conducive to higher levels of psychological adjustment. Some studies (Brodzinsky et al., 1998; Keyes et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2000) described that higher occurrence of externalization problems, school difficulties, and eating disorders (obesity and anorexia) among the adopted adolescents may be associated to the differences in parental styles. Generally, adoptive parents experience difficulty in establishing boundaries for their children. The description of the parental styles perceived by the participants of the comparative group were similar to those found in national and international studies (Milevsky et al., 2007; Costa et al., 2000).

Another interesting research finding highlights the relationship between the demand of the fathers and the couple's fertility. Analyses indicated that in families where both parents were infertile, higher indexes of indulgence were observed. While in families without fertility problems, parents were less tolerant of their children's difficulties. With regard to this result, we may conclude that the data perhaps reflected the feeling of greater submission and conformity among the adolescents placed in fertile families. Considering that adoption is a remote option among Brazilian couples (Chaves, 2000), perhaps the adolescents feel more compelled to continue the family traditions, and to show higher levels of adaptive psychosocial behavior in retribution to the investment of the adoptive family. Another hypothesis that could justify the differences highlighted is that there is a higher probability that the adoptive parents had experienced losses in their life histories (e. g., miscarriages, incapable of

genealogical transmission, etc), thus increasing their ability to empathize with their children's mourning their losses, thus allowing for greater parental tolerance and acceptance.

The higher level of negligence among the couples where the father was diagnosed with infertility may be associated with a wide spread cultural confusion between conception and virility. It was observed that fathers who were infertile, as well as their partners, presented greater difficulty establishing a family environment supportive of exploration of questions related to adoption and to sustaining a positive self-image. Therefore, the low involvement with raising children may be understood as an escape strategy when confronting questions of personal identity and unresolved sexual issues. These extended to both the father and mother, who must renounce their reproductive capability and opt for adoption.

Final considerations

The data presented in this study demonstrated the moderating effect of parental styles on the psychological development of adopted children. The data suggested that the high frequency in which adopted children perceived their parents as negligent justified the studies that described higher incidences of behavior problems and low academic achievement among adopted children, as well as better indices of pro-social behavior presented by this population, considering that these are behavioral characteristics observed among the families which present high standards of responsiveness and low level of demand. Accordingly, the over-representation of adopted children in clinical samples can be a response to the low levels of a negligent parental style observed in this group and of preventive measures employed by adoptive parents. Due to the linear relationship established by common sense between adoption and adaptation problems, it is common for adopting parents to direct their children to preventive therapeutic care as a function of social pressure, increasing their representation

in clinical samples. These data confirm the research findings that demonstrate that adopting parents are more active in regard to their children's difficulties (Brodzinsky et al., 1998).

From the analysis it should be emphasized that it was evident that the protective measures of adopting families in regard to the well-being of their children (especially referring to the lower levels of negligence) was not intended as a defense against giving children up for adoption. The lack of economic resources, a characteristic of most of the families that select to give their children up for adoption, should not be confused with the omission of those parents who are indifferent to their children's needs. In reality, when pointing to the differences between the groups examined, the objective of this study was to provide helpful information so that family members may qualify their action strategies, promoting better levels of adjustment, and minimizing the fears, many times with no basis, related to the adjustment of their children. Above all, an objective of the study was to understand that a family is a social reality which interacts with biology, but is not subjugated by it. Therefore, a better knowledge of the dynamics of adoptive families may result in some adoptive parents feeling more encouraged to assume their parental functions which not only include the establishment of an affectionate environment, but also of a protective control. Also, it may result in adoptive parents being better prepared to support important tasks their children will assume throughout their lives, such as to retrieve their own biological and cultural origins.

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