

Children's perception and approach to adoption

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The present study was conducted in order to identify the perception, of pre-school and school children of adoption, due to increasing coverage by the Mass Media of adoption issues in general, and illegal adoption in particular. A modified version of the "Primary Student Survey of Handicapped Persons' Questionnaire" was administered to three non-adoptive groups of children aged 4, 7 and 9 respectively.

Results revealed no impact from Mass Media on the 4-year-old group.

In the 7-year-old group, especially in females, there was a more negative perception with a statistical significance ($p < 0.05$), which indicates

Adoption was properly recognized and lawfully organized only in the last century¹. However, in spite of its great societal importance, it is still viewed with conservative attitude and sometimes negatively, and derogatory remarks maybe made to the adopted children and the adoptive parents by relatives, friends, neighbours, parents of classmates and others², particularly in transracial cases³.

Some social theorists have attempted to explain the causes of the adopted child's rejection by "the society's superego because he was probably illegitimate" or "rejected by its Id", or because "the child is not related by blood and comes into conflict with family narcissism"⁴. These positions on "psychic dynamics", however, have been modified. The adoptive parents are often obliged to inform the child of the origin, and the time of the adoption, and are concerned about the impact on early identification, identity formation and self-image, etc. Also, of concern is the child being informed of the "circumstances of adoption by non-family adoptive persons", the "development of lack of trust" and "criticism and resentment by the child"⁵, the "disruption of

that 7 years old girls are receptive to Mass Media influences, and appear more vulnerable than males in dealing with the concept of adoption.

On the other hand, the 9 years old group felt emotionally more secure and less influenced on Mass Media ($p < 0.05$).

An environment of inspiring confidence in, comprehension and reassurance especially on the part of teachers seems to be essential during the formative year (7 years old) in facilitating a positive adjustment to the concept of adoption and its complicated processes.

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socialization or maladaptive behavior", the "child's views of adoption as he grows older"⁶, as "influenced by public events".

Recently, in Greece there has been considerable concern about children's adoption in general and related illegal practices. Such concern becomes visible in the following title from the newspaper TA NEA "Hundreds of children were taken by sterile couples in America"⁷. Many interested adopted and adoptive persons have hired private detectives, and a special web site was created in order to help people find family members.

Preoccupation with these issues in the Mass Media began in 1995 and reached their climax in 1997⁷⁻⁹ forcing the legal authorities to become involved (Investigation command for the disappearance of valuable files of the civil war period, TA NEA 1995).

At the same time, priests, psychologists, sociologists and other concerned citizens, participated in long public discussions about this topic. It was hypothesized, therefore, that such issues and events have had a negative impact on the public in general (Thousands of people all

over Greece start to investigate their lost past, TA NEA)⁷ and on children's mental functioning and behaviour regarding the practice of adoption (Baby merchants stole me from my mother's arms the moment I was born)¹⁰ and adopted peers.

In order to investigate the "impact" on children in general, we decided to study the perceptions of children of pre-school and grade school ages regarding the concept and practices of adoption as well as the recent negative publicity.

We believe this knowledge is important particularly for parents and educators¹¹.

Method

This study was began in Northern Greece, April, 1997, and includes data from one hundred fifty four (154) children attending public and private "Child Centres" and "Primary Schools".

The main researcher individually interviewed all pupils. The interview took place in the children's classroom and was approximately of 12 minutes duration. The children were divided into two groups, group A, 76 children and group B, 78 children.

All were from middle-class families, to the best of our knowledge none were adopted and no physical or learning disabilities were reported. Each group was subdivided into 3 subgroups according to ages: 4±½, 7±½ and 9±½ years old. These subgroups were selected in order to correspond from middle of prelatency to middle of latency - schematical periods of children's psycho sexual and cognitive development¹²⁻¹⁵.

Without changing the items in a fundamental way, the applied questionnaire was a modified version of the Primary Student Survey of Handicapped Persons¹⁶. For group A, the word "handicapped" was substituted by the word "adopted". For group B, the nonsense word "fanopted", replaced "handicapped".

The data were analysed using the SPSS statistical software package (SPSS, version 7.5).

Frequency distribution of answers was used for univariate analysis, while for bivariate analysis the chi-square test of independence, was used.

Results

Results obtained (question 1 and 2, appendix) from children in the younger age groups (ages 4 and 7 years old) revealed that they did not know

the meaning of the word adopted. Different results were obtained from children in the third group (age 9), especially from verbatim recorded answers on question 2. An analysis of responses to question 3 by age and sex, did not show statistically significant differences.

In Table 1 a bivariate analysis of question 4 (Do you have any adopted friends?), by age and sex, revealed interesting statistically results (although the sample is not very high) .

Table 1. Question 4: Response frequency by age and sex

		Girls No	Girls Yes	Boys No	Boys Yes
Adopted	Age 4	10	4	7	3
Fanopted	Age 4	12	1	7	1
Adopted	Age 7	12	3	1	5
Fanopted	Age 7	7	3	8	2
Adopted	Age 9	12	3	14	1
Fanopted	Age 9	10	2	21	1

(x²=6.11 df=1 p<0.05)

Number of Missing Observations: 4

Table 2, shows frequencies of responses to the question "Do you believe that playing with an adopted child will lead you to have his own 'fate'? (cause you to be adopted too)" by age, and sex.

Table 2. Question 5: Response frequency by age and sex

		Girls No	Girls Yes	Girls Don't know	Boys No	Boys Yes	Boys Don't know
Adopted	Age 4	9	5	0	7	3	0
Fanopted	Age 4	8	5	0	8	0	0
Adopted	Age 7	11	4	0	3	3	0
Fanopted	Age 7	8	2	0	9	1	0
Adopted	Age 9	15	0	0	14	1	0
Fanopted	Age 9	9	3	0	17	4	2

(x²=4.21 df=1 p<0.05)

Number of Missing Observations: 4

The above results indicate that the 9 year-old girls, in comparison with 7 year-old ones, do not feel threatened by a friend's adoptive status.

Table 3, shows frequencies of responses to question 6, (Do you believe that adopted children seem a lot like you?), by age and sex.

Table 3. Question No 6: Response frequency by age and sex

		Girls No	Girls Yes	Girls Don't know	Boys No	Boys Yes	Boys Don't know
Adopted	Age 4	3	7	4	4	3	3
Fanopted	Age 4	7	4	2	4	3	1
Adopted	Age 7	7	8	0	4	2	0
Fanopted	Age 7	9	0	1	6	2	2
Adopted	Age 9	5	7	8	1	6	8
Fanopted	Age 9	4	4	4	7	6	10

($\chi^2=8.59$ $df=2$ $p<0.05$)

Number of Missing Observations: 4

It appears that 7 year-old girls can differentiate their own status from an unknown status, although their negative answers indicate a possible threat to their identity.

On the other hand, the answers of the 9-year-old boys in comparison to girls seem to differentiate more strongly between adoptive and non – adoptive status. Response frequencies for children of both sexes showed that they were uncertain whether the word "fanopted" was meaningful.

Table 4 shows response frequencies for the question "Do you think that if you keep company with an 'adopted' child the other children will stop playing with you?" by age and sex.

Table 4. Question 7: Response frequency by age and sex

		Girls No	Girls Yes	Girls Don't know	Boys No	Boys Yes	Boys Don't know
Adopted	Age 4	7	5	2	5	5	0
Fanopted	Age 4	4	7	2	5	2	1
Adopted	Age 7	12	2	1	6	0	0
Fanopted	Age 7	1	7	2	8	1	1
Adopted	Age 9	12	0	3	12	3	0
Fanopted	Age 9	8	2	2	14	8	0

($\chi^2=11.89$ $df=2$ $p<0.01$)

Number of Missing Observations: 4

Results for 4 year-old children indicate ignorance or apathy. It appears that some confusion exists in 7-year-old girls for the nonsense word in comparison to boys. However, both sexes of 9 year-olds responded similarly. The girls were more confident that their friends would not reject them.

Discussion

It seems that a child's awareness of adoption depends both on his age and the various psychodynamic factors involved in the aspects of his behaviour. A pre-school child at age three, in hearing about adoption, is expected not to understand its real meaning. Our study reveals that the same may apply to older children. While listening to the researcher pronouncing the word "adoption" these children do not seem to understand its meaning.

Therefore, it was expected that discussions by adults with regard to the subject of adoption, would not affect the children's socialisation nor cause behavioural manifestations.

Anything that attracts children's attention might yield a number of effects of psychodynamic factors. For example, in the case of an adopted child, early repeated mentioning of adoption, especially if this is of a teasing nature, could lead to problems because of fantasies of being cruelly rejected or deserted by his natural parents. The fantasies of children in general, at early latency, possess their own psychic reality. Children at that age cannot easily, effectively and appropriately express their feelings of fear, disappointment, sadness or anger¹⁷. Fantasies, when used to defend against anxiety, are a means of inhibiting or controlling instinctual conflicts. At this developmental stage children distort or deny material that threatens them¹⁸. On learning about adoption, children in general may use denial as a defence against the anxiety of wondering whether they are biological children of their parents.

In our sample, non-adoptive children aged 4, because they are not being aware of the meaning of the word "adoption" seem to view it rather superficially. Their answers "I do not know" indicate that they are not ready to experience fantasies about this subject. Fantasies that, "his adopted peer being bad so his parents gave him away" or "that the adopted child's natural parents were bad so they gave his peer away", with the danger that they might generalize this to other grown-ups, e.g. teachers, does not seem to be probable.

According to our results 7-year-old children, and especially girls, seem to perceive this matter differently. They appeared rather confused, because they did not know the meaning of the

word "adopted"¹⁹. Oedipal and maternity factors may have played a key role.

In the case of a non-adoptive child who has been informed that his friend has two sets of parents, the unknown natural parents "or bad parents", become figures of fantasy while the foster parents "or good parents", are representative of reality. This can provide opportunities for teasing, manipulation, and hurtful comments to either the parents or the adoptive child, resulting in a mutual projection of negative feelings²⁰.

The non-adoptive child's fantasies relating to the possibility of being adopted alters according to his age. Children 4±1 years old⁸, particularly boys, have more controlled fantasies compared to girls. This may mean that the type of assistance needed in each case is different.

Since the child keeps the good and bad images separate, this might lead to subsequent problems in superego and ego ideal formation⁴.

The ego of the child in early latency is usually not established enough to provide the stability needed to face the task of learning in school, and the challenges from peers in the classroom and neighbourhood.

A child of this age continues to be vulnerable to regression and to the overarching, punitive superego which is new, untested, untried, and often ineffective.

In our study children age 4 reacted to the question "if they like adoptive children", without really understanding it. Their answers did not provide statistically interesting results.

But what happens when children grow up further?

The objects existing in the external world, which regulate the child's behaviour after the formation of the superego, come to occupy a place in the child's internal world^{21,22}. Step by step, feelings, thoughts and mental activities become concretely and reassuringly different from acts and consequences²³.

In present study the 7-year-old children, although it was expected that they would react differently, performed in the same way as the first group of 4 years old did.

Even the 9-year-old children appeared to be a little sceptical towards a positive answer to the question No 3 (Do you like adopted children?).

This might indicate the creation of a confusing effect by the Mass Media, which tends to overreact to social events, in general.

The formation of the superego results from both the processes of identification and introjection²⁴. In its more mature form, identification becomes operational approximately during the third year of life²⁵ and continues on through childhood and into later life, facilitating the adjustment of a growing person.

In our study, 4 years old children reacted in a way, which shows that by no means they have identified with an adoptive child. Perhaps, for these children not knowing what adoption means, such identification was impossible for them.

Seven years old children seem unable to differentiate themselves from a condition which makes sense, comparing it with a nonsense unknown one. Results of the question No 4 might reflect that 7 years old boys become perplexed with the nonsense word "fanoption".

However, at this developmental stage answers from girls at least indicate that the healthy ego means do not remain over. Undue stress may arise at any point along the developmental continuum, having an effect on ego functions, which make for adaptation.

In certain aspects, the child unconsciously tries to identify, to become the same as his parents or other role figures in his life by internalising one or more aspects of their behaviour.

In time, the child begins to construct an inner image of how he is supposed to be, in order to fulfil parental expectations and construct the concept of ego ideal.

His identification process focuses, upon the psychological and social factors, which determine who he is and what his relationship is to the world in which he lives.

Disruption of this process has been observed in some adopted children who were told at an early age that they are adopted resulting in difficulty in establishing a permanent sense of self. When they have been informed about two sets of parents, they might wonder who are they, what is their real name, who are their real parents.

The realization of the case in point happens later, after identification has formulated and the narcissism has constituted²⁶.

Nine years old children of age, knowing the meaning of the word "adopted"¹⁹ feel emotionally secure contrary to 7 years old that seem to be rather ambivalent.

Results in this study indicate that, boys particularly 9 years old, seemed able to place the necessary boundaries to their identification processes and assume acceptable and creative personal and social roles.

A child's environment in school is more firmly consolidated and through his identification with a peer group, his ego gains additional strengths. Playing with a peer group is very important at all developmental stages. However, there are many different types of social interaction occurring in same-age children.

An adoptive child's apparently uncomplicated childhood behaviour, may alter suddenly to a disordered one, including aggression, stealing, running away from home, deterioration in schoolwork, and difficulty in establishing a strong feeling of identity and personal sense of security. The same might happen to other children as well.

However, our results revealed that to 4 years old children, social interaction with peers has not been threatened. The presentations, comments and discussions of Mass Media's did not attract their interest at all.

Seven-year-old girls, perceived this matter rather less firmly than was expected. Their self-esteem seemed to be lower than boys' of the same age ($p < 0,01$).

On the other hand, both sexes at age 9 did not feel threatened ($p < 0,01$).

The excessive publicity about adoption did not create lack of confidence, development of fears or a sense of under-estimation of adopted children.

Although the subgroups are not too numerous, our statistical results rather than simply interpretations of feeling or behaviours, seem to support the above.

Since our data were not collected before children's exposure to the Mass Media it may be useful to compare them with those of different countries in which people lack such "experience".

A longitudinal study, therefore, might prove valuable. Due to the fact that Mass Media (Newspapers and TV) may have totalitarian effect on the same sociocultural population, such a study has limited value in our case, for obvious reasons.

Of course, our results could be useful for future comparisons.

Conclusion

The results of this study allow us to conclude that for children age $4\pm\frac{1}{2}$ the exposure to the negative publicity of adoption created by the Mass Media, seem to have no impact on them, at least at present.

However, children age $7\pm\frac{1}{2}$ and especially girls, presented some degree of confusion and apprehension and seemed to be in need of more reassurance and praise in order to overcome this major public event on adoption and its difficulties. The children being bombarded by the Mass Media, with information on cases of kidnap for adoptions, might have been led into reluctance to go to school on their own, or having difficulty in making social attachments, and trusting others.

In contrast, the $9\pm\frac{1}{2}$ year old girls and boys feel emotionally more secure and less dependent on environmental influences (Mass Media etc). These children demonstrate considerable ability to place boundaries and protect themselves. Thus in the latency period of development, the super-ego is more firmly established, the ego is stronger and the instinct and drives are more in child's service.

Therefore, teachers being aware of how vulnerable children of $7\pm\frac{1}{2}$ years old, and especially girls are, should develop proper projects, even at an earlier stage, helping them to approach adoption naturally. At the story time they can use fairy tales or puppet shows to present these issues smoothly and make them understandable. Besides, they can ask the whole class to adopt an animal, so they can attribute a real and dimensional aspect of adoption.

We believe that further studies in adoption with a greater number of subjects should be encouraged, so that all concerned would be able to understand and sufficiently enhance the concept of children's adoption, its benefits and its complicated processes.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

E. Λαλούμη-Βιδάλη, Α. Βιδάλης, Μ. Ευαγγελάκης. Αντίληψη και προσέγγιση της υιοθεσίας από τα παιδιά. Ιπποκράτεια 2001, 5 (2): 84-90

Η παρούσα μελέτη διενεργήθηκε με σκοπό να αναγνωριστεί το πώς αντιλαμβάνονται και προσεγγίζουν το θέμα της υιοθεσίας παιδιά προσχολικής και σχολικής ηλικίας μετά από μία εξεζητημένη παρουσίαση αυτού από τα μέσα μαζικής ενημέρωσης. Χρησιμοποιήθηκε μια τροποποιημένη έκδοση του ερωτηματολογίου "Primary Student Survey of Handicapped Persons' Questionnaire" σε τρεις ομάδες μη υιοθετημένων παιδιών ηλικίας 4, 7 και 9 ετών. Από τα αποτελέσματα διαπιστώθηκε ότι τα άτομα ηλικίας 4 ετών τουλάχιστον στην παρούσα φάση δεν είχαν επηρεαστεί από τα ΜΜΕ. Στην ομάδα των κοριτσιών ηλικίας 7 ετών καταγράφηκε ένα αίσθημα απειλής που ήταν στατιστικά σημαντικό ($p < 0.05$), και το οποίο υποδεικνύει ότι το φύλο αυτής της ηλικίας επηρεάστηκε από τα ΜΜΕ σε σχέση με τα αγόρια σε σημαντικότερο βαθμό. Από την άλλη πλευρά τα άτομα ηλικίας 9 ετών έδειξαν ότι ήταν συναισθηματικά πιο ασφαλή και λιγότερο ευάλωτα στην επιρροή των ΜΜΕ ($p < 0.05$).

Τα παραπάνω αποτελέσματα υποδεικνύουν ότι ένα περιβάλλον που να εμπνέει εμπιστοσύνη, κατανόηση και καθυσυχασμό από την πλευρά των δασκάλων, είναι ουσιώδες για τα άτομα ηλικίας 7 ετών, προκειμένου να προσαρμοστούν εύκολα με θετικό τρόπο στην έννοια της υιοθεσίας και στην πολύπλοκη διαδικασία αυτής.

Appendix

Sex: Boy Girl
 Age: 4 7 9
 Siblings:..... Number:..... Age:....
 Father's profession:.....
 Mother's profession:.....

1. Do you know what the word "adopted" means? Yes No
2. Tell me everything you know about an "adopted" child:
3. Do you like "adopted" children?
 Yes No
4. Do you have any "adopted" friends?
 Yes No Don't know
5. Do you believe that playing with an "adopted" child will lead you to have his own "fate"?
 Yes No Don't know

6. Do you think that "adopted children" seem a lot like you?
 Yes No Don't know
7. Do you think that if you keep company with an "adopted" child the other children will stop to play with you?
 Yes No Don't know

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