



Family stress, parenting styles, and behavioral adjustment in preschool-age adopted Chinese girls

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to extend previous research on family stress, parenting, and child adjustment to families with adopted Chinese children. In doing so, we also seek to strengthen inferences regarding the experiential underpinnings of previously obtained relationships among these variables by determining if they also occur in families where parents and children are not biologically related. Participants were families of 133 preschool-age adopted Chinese girls ($M_{\text{age}} = 5.2$ years, $SD = 0.7$; $M_{\text{age at adoption}} = 12.8$ months, $SD = 4.1$). Data on family stress, parenting styles, and children's behavioral adjustment were collected from the adoptive mothers with the Social Problem Questionnaire (SPQ), Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ), and Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) respectively. Results showed that adoptive mothers reported relatively mild family stress, frequent authoritative parenting, and few behavior problems in their children. Nonetheless, family stress, authoritarian and permissive parenting styles positively correlated with children's behavioral problems. Finally, authoritarian parenting mediated the effect of non-child-related family stress (NCR-stress) on the adopted Chinese girls' CBCL internalizing and overall problems, even after controlling for corresponding CBCL scores from 2 years earlier. Our results showed that the overall pattern of relationships found in non-adoptive families is also seen in families with adopted Chinese children.

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It has long been theorized that children's adjustment may be influenced by factors both within the family and extending beyond it (Parke & Buriel, 2008). According to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), development takes place via reciprocal interactions between the child, other persons, and objects located within a set of "nested" environments (including the family, immediate community, and larger culture). Implicit in this view is the notion that parenting both affects children's behavior and is itself affected by other factors (e.g., cultural norms, family socioeconomic status, and stressful life events). For example, stressful family events (e.g., job loss) may influence the child via their effects on parenting. Additionally, such events may impact the child indirectly (e.g., via the child's exposure to resulting parental conflict; Cummings & Merrilees, 2009). At the same time, even if families experience relatively mild stress, children's adjustment would still be influenced by parenting styles.

Commenting on the observed relationships between family environment, parenting, and child adjustment, some scholars (e.g.,

Harris, 1995) have suggested that the apparent influences of family environment and parenting styles on children's adjustment may be due to shared genetic factors rather than the influence of environmental experiences. Methodologically, studying families with adopted children may shed valuable light on associations between stressful family events (henceforth termed family stress), parenting styles, and children's adjustment due to the absence of parent-child genetic associations. Because it offers a unique opportunity to help further clarify the distinctive contributions of genetic predisposition and environmental influences in child development, adoption has been regarded as a "natural experiment" (Haugaard & Hazan, 2003).

Studying adoptive families whose children come from other cultures may offer further advantages. If norms regarding caregiver-child relationships differ between the cultures of adoptive parents and the child's country of origin, then confounds between the child's experiences before and after adoption also would be minimized. Thus, relationships between adopting parents' behaviors and their children's adjustment would be less likely to have resulted from similar forms of care-giving experienced before adoption. Using adoption designs, research thus far has provided support for the notion that parenting, rather than genetic

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association, is largely responsible for children's behavioral outcomes. As an example, in one noteworthy study, [Stams, Juffer, and van Ijzendoorn \(2002\)](#) found that maternal sensitivity was related to secure attachment in internationally adopted children in the Netherlands.

In principle, shared genetic characteristics also might underlie observed relationships between family stress and child behavior since such characteristics might predispose both adults and children to produce difficult behaviors and thus become involved in stressful situations. For example, [Newman, Caspi, Moffitt, and Silva \(1997\)](#) documented relationships between childhood temperament (presumed to have a strong genetic basis) and adulthood difficulties in family relationships. Such difficulties are commonly considered to be forms of life stress. Thus, parents who find themselves in stressful circumstances may have a greater tendency to produce children with difficult temperaments (similar to their own). These children's subsequent problems may result from their temperament rather than the family stress to which they are exposed. Again, such possible confounding factors are excluded in adoptive families.

For about a decade, Chinese children have constituted the largest group of international adoptees whose culture of origin differs substantially from European American culture, accounting for one quarter to one-third of children internationally adopted by American parents each year ([United States Department of Homeland Security, 2010](#)). The size and continuous influx of this population alone make it an important target group for developmental inquiry. Due to Chinese society's preference for boys, the vast majority of adopted Chinese children are girls. Adopted Chinese girls typically experience their first year in an institutional setting with local caregivers. While detailed studies of infant–caregiver interactions in Chinese institutions are lacking (because access to Chinese orphanages is restricted), group care itself is drastically different from family care. Chinese mothers' caregiving behaviors also have been described as substantially different from Western mothers ([Ho, 1986](#); [Kisilevsky et al., 1998](#)). Thus, adopted Chinese girls undoubtedly experience very different caregiving before and after adoption and consequently comprise a highly suitable population for the study of their adoptive parents' influences on their behavioral adjustment.

In addition to the methodological advantage of studying families with children adopted from China, the broader context of their post-adoption environment also makes it particularly valuable to study family stress, parenting, and child adjustment with this population. Specifically, these families are distinguished by some unique experiences due to racial differences between most of the adoptive parents and their children ([Tan & Nakkula, 2004](#)). Children have been shown to be aware of racial differences as early as in the preschool years (e.g., [Katz, 1982](#)). For transracially adopted children, sensitivity to racial differences might affect their feelings about themselves and toward their parents ([Friedlander, 1999](#); [Friedlander et al., 2000](#)) and might mitigate their responsiveness to positive parenting strategies. According to [Vashchenko et al. \(2009\)](#), families with adopted Chinese children are made aware of their racial differences on a regular basis in public settings (e.g., stores) and this often creates subtle yet challenging experiences for both parents and children.

Another challenge that faces families with adopted Chinese children stems from the reality that China only opened for large-scale international adoptions about a decade ago. As a result, most families have only gone through the early stages of raising adopted children from China. Parents may have uncertainty about what they might expect as their children grow. For example, one might expect that children who have experienced institutional care during their first year may be less responsive to positive parenting. That is, in families experiencing the challenges of raising adopted

children, the influence of parenting styles and behaviors might be overwhelmed by stresses stemming from problems that the child brings to the family originating in her pre-adoption experiences. Consequently, relationships between family stress, parenting, and children's outcomes may differ from those found in studies of non-adopted children. Studying these relationships in families with adopted Chinese children may provide information about the extent to which relationships found in past studies can generalize to families with different types of parenting challenges.

Overall, the unique characteristics associated with adopted Chinese children's post-adoption experience call for a closer examination of the adjustment of these children in relation to family and parenting experience. Demonstrating relationships between family stress, parenting, and child outcomes in families with adopted Chinese girls would provide strong support for theories that emphasize the important influence of the environment on children's development (e.g., [Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006](#)). Studying these families has the unique advantages of removing genetic confounds that exist in studies of non-adopted children, removing cultural confounds that may exist in studies of post-institutionalized adopted children from other backgrounds, and demonstrating that family stress and parenting behaviors can significantly influence children who may also bring additional challenges to the parent–child relationship stemming from their international adoption background.

1. Stressful life events, parenting, and children's behavioral adjustment

Despite considerable disagreement in the literature regarding the conceptualization and measurement of stress itself ([Grant & McMahon, 2005](#); [Lazarus, 2000](#)), many studies have demonstrated a relationship between stressful life events and children's behavioral adjustment (e.g., [Conger et al., 1993](#)). In fact, one recent literature review ([Grant, Compas, Thurm, McMahon, & Gipson, 2004](#)) found that in over 88% of the 60 studies examined, stress and child psychopathology were positively correlated. One limitation of the literature is that most studies focused on families in high stress environments. It is thus unclear whether milder family stress might also impact children's adjustment. Another limitation of the literature is that few studies have examined how stressful life events in families affect the adjustment of preschool-age children (i.e., under 6 years of age; [Grant et al., 2004](#)).

To further understand the mechanisms underlying the connection between family stress and child adjustment, many studies have turned to the role of parenting. [Baumrind \(1971, 1973\)](#) highly influential theory has played an important role in these investigations. Baumrind described three principal parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting. As is well known, authoritative parenting involves not only high demands but also warmth and responsiveness. Authoritarian parenting tends to involve high levels of control, demands for strict obedience from children, but little warmth or responsiveness. Permissive parenting is relatively warm but undemanding and involves little control at all.

Findings suggest that negative parenting mediates the effect of stressful life events on children's psychological symptoms (see [Grant et al., 2003](#) for review). The identified mediating relationship is usually contemporaneous. For example, [Cui and Conger \(2008\)](#) reported that parental hostility and rejection mediated the relationship between divorce or marital conflict and adolescents' current maladjustment. Overall, a review of the current literature by [Sorkhabi \(2005\)](#) shows that the beneficial effects of authoritative parenting and the detrimental effects of authoritarian and permissive parenting are widely observed.

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