Being adopted in the school context: Individual and interpersonal predictors

Joana Soares[a,*], Maria Barbosa-Ducharne[a,1], Jesús Palacios[b,2], Sílvia Fonseca[a,3]

[a] Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Rua Alfredo Allen, 4200-135 Porto, Portugal
[b] University of Seville, Calle Camilo J. Cela s.n., 41018 Sevilla, Spain

A B S T R A C T

The experience of being adopted and the development of an adoption related identity are unique and dependent on both individual and interpersonal variables. The way the adoption story is lived can have an impact on the adoptee's wellbeing and adaptation, both at home and in the school context. The goal of this study is to analyze, from the adoptee's point of view, the experience of being adopted in the school context and the impact of the child's social competence, social disclosure of adoption and social reaction to the adoptive status. Ninety-four Portuguese adoptees, aged 8 to 10, participated in this study. The child's school experience of being adopted, adoption social disclosure and the social reaction to the adoptive status were assessed by interviewing the children. SSIS-RS was used to evaluate the child's self-report of social competence. Results showed that the adoption social disclosure, the social reaction to the adoptive status and the adoptee's social competence predicted the child's school experience of being adopted. Additionally, in the cases of children who reported a less positive social reaction, social skills moderated the impact of adoption social disclosure on negative feelings toward being adopted. As such, social skills can be seen as a protective factor on the personal adoption experience against negative social reactions.

1. Introduction

A full understanding of the adopted child requires a better knowledge of his/her experience of being adopted as an individual, a family element and, last but not least, as a school member. Despite the recent increase in adoption research, few studies have been developed to unveil the nature, meaning and processes involved in the school experience of these children (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Thus, the goal of the present article is to analyze the child's school experience of being adopted, in a Portuguese sample, according to his/her point-of-view, and the individual and interpersonal processes involved.

According to the last 2015 national statistics (National Institute of Social Security, 2016), 8600 Portuguese children (one in every 250 of the overall Portuguese population under the age of 19) were in out-of-home care. Most of the children were referred to the welfare system for neglect, maltreatment and/or abuse within their birth families. Out of the 8600 children, 96.5% were placed in residential care and only 3.5% were living with foster families. Ninety-nine percent of the children under the age of three were placed in residential care and remained this way for two years on average. Overall, some children stayed in care for

most of their lives (8%), some returned to their birth families (37%), some became self-sufficient (33%) and around 10% had an adoption plan (even though not all of them were adopted).

In 2015, 324 children were legally adopted (< 5% of overall children in care). The majority were domestic and same-race adoptions (only 1.39% were international adoptions). There were many more prospective adopters than children available for adoption (28 times more prospective adopters than children under the age of six). In the last years some changes have taken place to improve adoption quality: a) in 2009, a national training program for prospective adopters was enabled; b) in 2015, a children's program for adoption preparation was nationally implemented; c) post-adoption services were legally formalized in 2015; and d) in 2016, adoption by homosexual couples was approved. All adoptions in Portugal are confidential and post-adoption contacts with birth families are being introduced very slowly.

1.1. Child's experience of being adopted during the school years

Cognitive and socioemotional changes that occur during middle childhood have significant implications in the child's understanding and

adjustment to adoption (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002). In this developmental stage, adoptees begin to consider the uniqueness of their family status and the meaning of being adopted by recognizing that this implies not just gains (such as belonging to a new family) but also losses (like losing the birth family) (Brodzinsky, 2011; Leon, 2002). The process in which adoptees try to make sense of their adoption experience and build a meaningful story of their lives (Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984) is key to an identity construction and requires the adoptees to incorporate their status in the formation and exploration of their self-concept (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011).

The adoptee's feelings about his/her adoption are an important aspect of the self-system, and these feelings have an impact on self-acceptance (Sarubbi, Block-Lerner, Moon, & Williams, 2012) and self-esteem (Tan & Jordan-Arthur, 2012). Neil (2012) concluded that adoptees' feelings (aged 5–13) about being adopted and their birth/adoptive families fell into three groups. Adoptees in the "unexplored" group, composed of younger children (both currently and at placement), were not able to report and discriminate thoughts and feelings and did not explore the topic of being adopted. The second group, classified as "unproblematic", showed mostly positive feelings toward being adopted and their birth/adoptive families. Finally, the "complicated" group included children for whom adoption was important and sometimes stressful, with a mixture of positive and negative feelings. The children in this last group (more boys than girls) were the oldest at placement and when interviewed, and had the highest levels of adoption understanding. Additionally, in their study of thoughts and feelings about being adopted, Reinoso, Juffer, and Teiman (2013) acknowledged the presence of positive/negative feelings toward being an adoptive family, as reported by the mother, the father and the adoptee (aged 8 to 12). In a study with adopted Chinese girls, Tan and Jordan-Arthur (2012) showed that, although thinking about adoption evoked a mixture of positive and negative feelings, the positive feelings were predominant over the negative ones.

Besides all the social and academic demands of the school context, being adopted makes these children different from the majority of their peers (Juffer & Tieman, 2009) and requires their ability to manage this "difference". However, researchers have paid very little attention to this aspect of the adoption experience. Donalds (2012) conducted a study to capture the adopted child's experience at school, but the assessment only took place after the participants turned 18 years, which was a major limitation. Knowledge about the child's experience of being adopted in the school context and its associated factors seems to be so far lacking in the adoption research literature.

1.2. Social disclosure and communication about adoption

The construction of the meaning-making about being adopted and the consequent identity formation occur in the adoption communication process. Adoptive parents' communication about adoption influences the way in which children think and feel about being adopted (Brodzinsky, 2011). An open adoption communication allows for the comfortable exploration of the meaning of adoption and the discussion of positive and negative issues related to the child's identity as an adoptee (Brodzinsky, 2005). Consequently, adoption communication openness and comfortableness, both in and outside the family, seems to be essential to the positive experience of being adopted during school years.

Nevertheless, not many studies have focused on social disclosure of adoption - the sharing of adoption with different social agents with whom family members interact (Weir, 2001) - and comfortableness in adoption communication at school. Hawkins et al. (2007) realized that most adoptees discussed their status primarily with their mothers, followed by their fathers and their peers, and that only < 2% of the participants spoke to their teachers. Similarly, Neil (2012) concluded that even when the children nurtured positive feelings about their adoptive families and their adoption, they were reluctant to reveal their

adoptive status to their peers. Moreover, Barbosa-Ducharne, Soares, Ferreira, and Barroso (2015) found that the majority of the school-aged adoptees who were interviewed did not reveal their adoptive status to their peers and did not often speak about adoption.

1.3. Social reaction to the adoptive status

Neil's study (2012) observed that over half of the adopted participants reported being rejected and even teased by their peers. Some of them appeared uncomfortable with the questions asked and comments made, which embarrassed, confused and upset them. Others talked about peers tormenting or teasing them or feeling sorry because they had been adopted.

Indeed, some authors have shown how others can interfere with the experience of being adopted. Social interactions transmit implicit and explicit messages about adoption with impact on how children model their identity as a person who was adopted (Smith & Riley, 2006). Jones and Hackett (2011) discussed the difficulty of constructing a sense of family membership and adoptive identity in a social context, especially in some schools, where blood relationships are viewed as the basis of "real" families. Emphasizing biological relationships is putting the adoptee in a difficult position because his/her family ties are grounded in social, rather than biological relationships (Leon, 2002). According to Meese (2012), the peers' rejection represents a risk factor for the psychological adjustment of the adoptees and Baden (2016) identified 13 different themes for frequent adoption microaggressions toward adoptees. Reinoso, Pereda, Van den Dries, and Forero (2016), in a study exploring stressors and coping strategies reported by school-aged adoptees, identified "victimization" (e.g., insults, jokes, teasing, derogatory comments, intrusive questioning) as the most commonly reported stressor related to adoption problems. Furthermore, as children grow up, they are more aware of negative reactions (Reinoso et al., 2013). In turn, when positive reactions are displayed, namely acceptance, adoptees seem to be more prone to social disclosure and maintain an open adoption communication (Weir, 2001).

1.4. Adoptees' social competence: social skills and behavioral adjustment

The data on the adoptees' social competence are not consistent in literature, especially when compared to other groups, such as institutionalized and non-adopted children. Palacios, Moreno, and Román (2013) showed that children in residential care were the ones at a greater disadvantage. Other existing studies have shown lower social competence in adoptees, mainly if there has been greater pre-adoption adversity (e.g., Barcons et al., 2012; Glennen & Bright, 2005; Pearlmutter, Ryan, Johnson, & Groza, 2008; van IJzendoorn, Juffer, & Poelhuis, 2005). According to Julian and McCall (2016), post-institutionalized adopted children had lower levels of social competence, but only in adolescence, not in middle childhood. Additionally, in terms of behavioral adjustment, which is important in the evaluation of social competence (Gresham, Elliott, Vance, & Cook, 2011), several studies have documented a higher incidence of behavioral problems in the adoptees (e.g., Hawk & McCall, 2011; Stams, Juffer, Rispens, & Hoksbergen, 2000). Juffer and van IJzendoorn's meta-analysis (2005) found that adoptees showed significantly more behavior problems in middle childhood than in adolescence.

The scarce studies on adoptees' social competence are focused on this variable as an outcome and not as an independent variable. However, since emotional and social development are practically inseparable (Denham, Salisch, Olthof, Kochanoff, & Caverly, 2002), social competence can be critical to the emotional experience of being adopted and to coping with this in the school setting.

1.5. The present study

The goal of the present study was to analyze the impact of