



Understanding the Adoptive Sibling Experience

Jana L. Hunsley, MA; Rachel D. Crawley, PhD; & David R. Cross, PhD
Texas Christian University



Abstract

Research has explored the effects of adoption on the adopted child as well as the parent-child relationship in an adoptive family. However, little is known about the effects of adoption on the remaining members of an adoptive family—the adoptive siblings, defined as the biological children in families who adopted one or more children. The current project is an exploratory study aimed at examining the adoptive sibling experience in effort to understand a) the effects of adoption on this population and b) which, if any, precluding factors are related to these effects. Participants included adult siblings to at least one adoptee who completed an online survey about their experiences. The survey included multiple choice items about family demographics, free-response items about specific adoption experiences, and assessments about sibling relationship quality and overall family functioning. Results of this study revealed themes, including personal growth, parentification, invisibility, and chaos and stress, which are similar to those in the literature on siblings of individuals with disabilities. The similarities of these findings provide various future directions for research.

Method

Participants were recruited online via the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development Facebook page, which has approximately 28,000 followers. Inclusion criteria were being a biological child in a family who adopted at least one child and being at least 18 years of age. Participants were asked to complete a survey that included demographic questions, free-response items about their sibling experience, and assessments measuring the quality of the sibling relationship and overall family functioning.

Participants:

- 150 participants
- Age: 18-64 years ($M = 28.6$ years)
- Gender: Female (85%), Males (14%), Other (1%)
- Race: Caucasian (95%), Hispanic (3%), African American (1%), Other (1%)

Results: Qualitative

Participants responded to survey items about their experience as a sibling. When prompted with “describe your experience as an adoptive sibling,” five themes emerged.

Personal Growth:

Siblings stated that it was a hard experience, but it made them a better person (e.g. more mature, empathetic).

“It has been a very positive experience for me. It has taught me to be more compassionate, open minded, understanding and brave. It has allowed me to learn skills of working with children who have high needs and has taken me down a work path I never would have gone down without my history.”

Invisibility:

Siblings stated that when their adopted siblings came into the family, they felt they became invisible and strived to please their parents in order to not cause any further burden to their parents.

“I tried to be perfect so my parents didn't have to worry about me because my sister had so many issues but most of the time I remember also feeling invisible.”

Parentification:

Siblings were placed in a position to parent their adopted siblings.

“When the sibling group of 3 were adopted I had just finished high school. I quickly became a third parent and live in nanny for a year, our entire family was definitely unprepared for adding 3 family members (especially not their trauma). I have now adopted the youngest of this sibling group due to all 3 having complex trauma and not being able to live together.”

Chaos & Stress:

Siblings stated that it was the worst experience of their lives and wished their families had not adopted.

“I have no relationship with my adopted sibling...My adopted sibling was physically and emotionally abusive towards myself and my other biological sibling as well as our parents and would destroy or steal my property constantly.”

Euphoria:

Siblings stated that it was an amazing experience – one of the best things to ever happen to them - and their adopted siblings are no different than their biological siblings.

“It is the best thing that has ever happened to me. My adopted sibling is my favorite sibling and I can't imagine life without them. I remember sobbing the day the adoption was finalized because I was so filled with joy and love for my brother.”

Results: Quantitative

Table 1. Bivariate correlations of family demographic factors and the impact of adoption ($n = 150$).

Variables	Impact of Adoption	Number of Adopted Siblings	Number of Total Siblings	Age at Adoption	Age of Sibling at Adoption
Impact of Adoption	1.000				
Number of Adopted Siblings	.116	1.000			
Number of Total Siblings	.119	.879**	1.000		
Age at Adoption	.012	-.075	.020	1.000	
Age of Sibling at Adoption	-.065	.403**	.443**	.258**	1.000

Note: Statistical significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

1 The results of this study demonstrated no statistically significant relationship between adoptive siblings' response to their family's adoption and family demographic and background factors. This is interesting because the literature has noted many of these demographic factors as being related to the adoptee's overall adjustment to adoption (Helder, Mulder, & Gunnoe, 2016).

Independent Sample T-Tests Comparing Family Demographic Factors and the Impact of Adoption

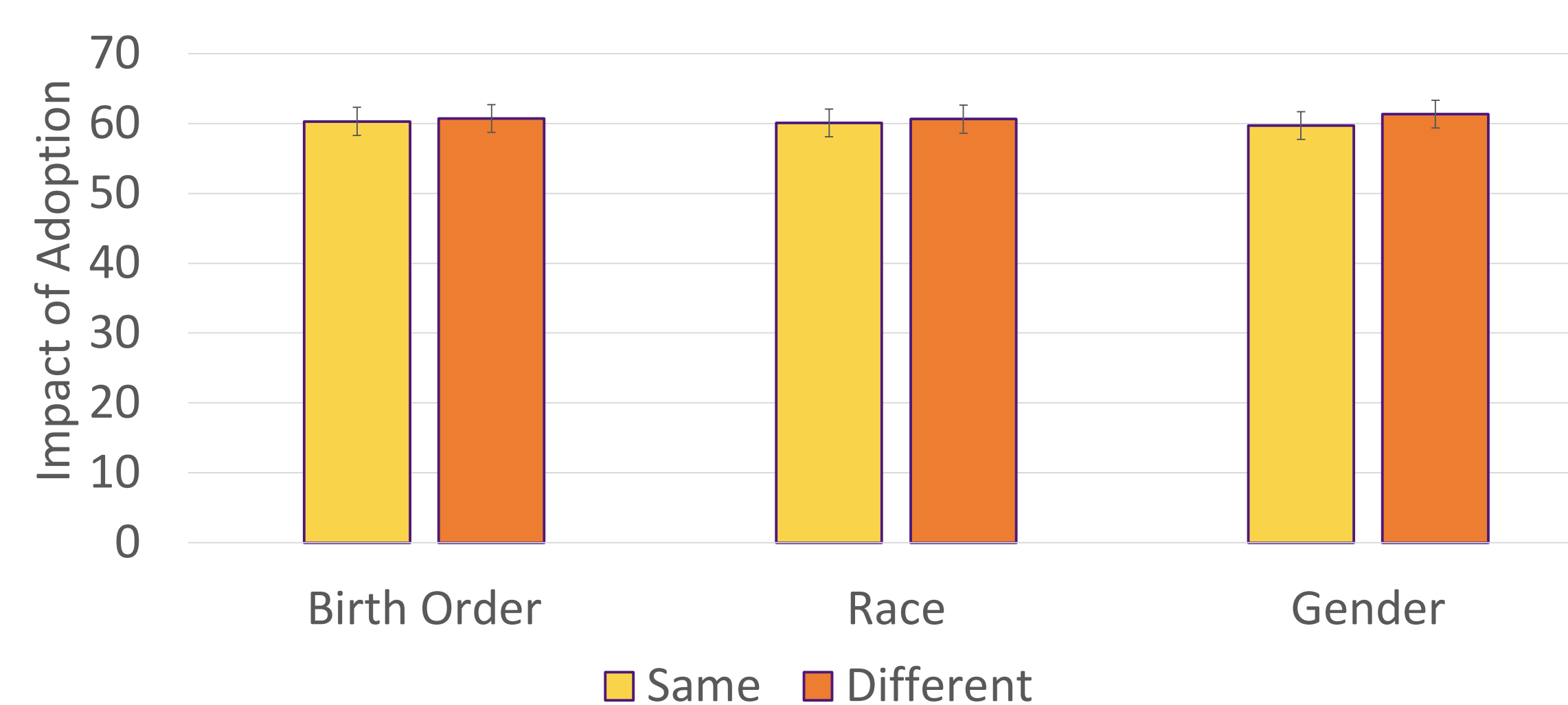


Table 3. Bivariate correlations of pre-adoption involvement and the quality of the sibling and family relationships ($n = 150$).

Variables	Pre-Adoption Involvement	Impact of Adoption	Sibling Closeness	Family Satisfaction	Family Cohesion	Family Communication
Pre-Adoption Involvement	1.000					
Impact of Adoption	.206*	1.000				
Sibling Closeness	.241**	.793**	1.000			
Family Satisfaction	.222**	.329**	.260**	1.000		
Family Cohesion	.283**	.468**	.390**	.565**	1.000	
Family Communication	.316**	.299**	.226**	.798**	.659**	1.000

Note: Statistical significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

2 There was a significant relationship between how involved the adoptive sibling was in the adoption process and the adoptive sibling's response to adoption. Specifically, adoptive siblings who were more involved in the process reported a closer sibling relationship, more satisfaction in their family, and a more positive response to their family's adoption.

3 Additionally, siblings who reported more family communication also reported greater closeness to their siblings, more family satisfaction, and more family cohesion.

Discussion

The results of this exploratory study reveal five primary themes of the adoptive sibling experience: personal growth, invisibility, parentification, stress and chaos, and euphoria. Additionally, the findings demonstrate greater adoptive sibling involvement in the adoption process and more open family communication are related to better sibling and family relationships.

While this population has not been studied previously, the results of this study are similar to the findings in the literature for siblings of individuals with disabilities (Nuttall, Coberly, & Diesel, 2018). Similar themes found in the current study have been found in this literature (Ross & Cuskelly, 2006; Tomeny, Barry, Fair, & Riley, 2017). Of particular interest are studies that revealed siblings who have a greater understanding of and preparedness for their sibling with disabilities experience improved sibling adjustment (Howlin, 2988; Roeyers & Mycke, 1995), which may be similar to the relationship found between pre-adoption involvement and adoptive sibling adjustment.

Future directions of this research can look more closely at the effects of perceived parentification and invisibility on adoptive siblings as well as a deeper examination of the effects of pre-adoption involvement and open family communication and whether they serve a protective role in adoptive sibling adjustment.

References

Helder, E. J., Mulder, E., Gunnoe, M. L. (2016). A longitudinal investigation of children internationally adopted at school age. *Child Neuropsychology*, 22(1), 39-64.

Howlin, P. (1988). Living with impairment: The effects on children of having an autistic sibling. *Child: Care, Health, and Development*, 14, 395-408.

Nuttall, A. K., Coberly, B., & Diesel, S. J. (2018). Childhood caregiving roles, perceptions of benefits, and future caregiving intentions among typically developing adult siblings of individuals with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48, 1199-1209.

Roeyers, H., & Mycke, K. (1995). Siblings of a child with autism, with mental retardation and with a normal development. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 21, 305-319.

Ross, P., & Cuskelly, S. (2006) Adjustment, sibling problems, and coping strategies of brothers and sisters of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*, 31(2), 77-86.

Tomeny, T. S., Barry, T. D., Fair, E. C., & Riley, R. (2017). Parentification of adult siblings of individuals with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 26, 1056-1067.