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Maternal experiences of inter-country adoptions: Implications and challenges.

Reflections on Inter-country Adoptions

Original research paper

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Maternal experiences of inter-country adoptions: Implications and challenges

Introduction

Adoption of a young child poses multiple challenges for both the adoptee and the adoptive parents and family. When the adoption is inter-country in nature additional challenges are presented. The factors that impact or mediate the adjustment of an inter-country adoptee into the adoptive family and their psychosocial development through to adulthood are multifaceted and complex, influenced by a range of factors including, and not restricted to, pre adoption history (Cerderbald et al., 1999; Simmel et al., 2001), age at placement (Dance & Rushton 2005; Verhulst et al., 1990), cultural considerations of adoption (Bowie, 2004) and quality of parent-child relationship in the adoptive setting. In terms of disruption, the demographic characteristics of adoptive parents such as their age, race, education, and income do not seem to bring any bearing on the outcome of adoptive placements (Festinger, 1990) nor age, education or marital status on parenting stress in this population (Fick & McMahon, 2009).

It has been suggested that the unique transitional process to adoptive parenthood impacts on the adopted child's adjustment to adoption. As Brodzinsky (1990) highlights, "infertility, the uncertainty of the timing of the adoption process, the intrusiveness of the home study, the stigma associated with adoptive parenthood, and the lack of readily available role models, among other factors....are stresses which could very well have a negative impact on the parent-child relationship in the early years of the family life cycle" (p. 19). It is suggested that openly and effectively addressing these issues will lead to the parents being in a position to encourage a more positive adjustment to adoption among their children.

The willingness of adoptive parents to openly raise such issues is fraught with complexity. Adoptive parents often hold high expectations of themselves, making it difficult to seek and receive assistance at times of stress or indecision (Hughes, 1999; O'Neill, 2000). From the child's perspective inherent in the process of inter-country adoption is the experience whereby the adoptee is removed from the birth mother, transitions through one, or perhaps several, out of home placements before being placed with the adoptive parents and moved to live in a different country and/or culture.

Attachment theory provides a framework to understand the impact of these multiple separations and losses as well as the process of building new healthy relationships. Bowlby (1973) concluded that children suffer emotionally when separated from their parents. He emphasized the critical importance of the availability and responsiveness of parental care for the development of a sense of safety and security.

Based on Bowlby's guiding principles Ainsworth developed the infant Strange Situation (SS) procedure (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) that was specifically designed to assess the infant's perception of the availability of his or her caregiver during the stress of separation. The classification of attachment patterns flowing on from this work are now widely used and accepted as a reliable classification system of styles of infant attachment. These categories include secure, avoidant, and resistant. Main and Solomon (1986) later described a fourth category disorganized pattern of attachment.

Detailed observation of mother-infant interaction through the standardized SS procedure suggests that infants hold different cognitive expectations on how their parents will respond to them at times of distress based on their actual experience of

their mothers during the first year of life. Given the process of inter-country adoption Juffer, Bakerman-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn (2005) suggest that inter-country adoptees may constitute a specific case of attachment insecurity and disorganization. Zeanah (2000) also suggests that internationally adopted children are at higher risk for having a disorganized attachment especially where there is a history of institutionalization, parental mental illness and abandonment. There is also considerable literature to suggest that adoptive families might offer protective factors for these children (Fick & McMahon, 2009).

The impact of previous disrupted caregiving relationships can contribute to difficulties in forming new attachment relationships (Zeanah & Smyke, 2005). The behaviours displayed by the adopted child may be challenging, confusing and distressing to the adoptive parent who on attaining placement “hopes for a profound attachment to form wherein the child develops a sense of a sense of trust for the parents as well as seeks and needs shared time together” (Roberson, 2006, p. 728).

The way in which the adoptive parent responds to these behaviours holds the potential for reparation to earlier attachment disruptions. Central to attachment theory is an understanding that the attachment is a reciprocal and dynamic process by which the caregiver influences the infant and the infant influences the caregiver. Research has strongly indicated that the attachment status of the caregiver is predictive of the attachment status of his/her child (van IJzendoorn, 1995). A longitudinal study by Steele et. al. (2008) also found that previously maltreated adopted children placed in homes where at least one parent is securely attached are significantly more securely attached at two year follow up. Security increased for all of the children in the study, but significantly more so where at least one parent was securely attached.

Seigal and Hartzell (2003) describe various strategies aimed at repairing attachment ruptures and achieving a more positive or secure attachment status. These strategies provide recognition of the need for parents to address their own attachment strategies in tandem with assisting more secure attachment in their children. People who manage to achieve a balanced state of mind with respect to attachment despite difficult life circumstances have been described as “earned secure” as distinct from those who are “continuous secure” (Main & Goldwyn, 1984).

Mentalization, Reflective Functioning and Attachment Security

Attachment research has directly and indirectly indicated over time that maternal insightfulness is a central dimension underlying sensitive caregiving and that this serves as an important antecedent to secure attachment. More recent theories in the field of attachment have emphasized the importance of the parental capacity to understand the developing mind of the child and the parents’ ability to communicate this back to the child in a way that provides the child with a sense of his or her own mind: the capacity for reflective functioning (Slade, 2005). The concept of reflective functioning was introduced by Peter Fonagy and his colleagues in 1991 who defined reflective functioning as the capacity to ‘mentalize’, to ‘envision’ mental states in the self or in others (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran & Higgitt, 1991). It is hypothesized that childhood attachment trauma undermines the capacity for the development of this ability (Fonagy, 2006).

The capacity to think reflectively means that not only is a person aware of others’ mental states, i.e., their thoughts, feelings, desires and intentions, but they also understand how those states can provoke other mental states in the self or the other and/or how these can result in different behaviours. Reflective function is

identified by “four vital distinct but related mental and emotional phenomena evident in speech: (a) awareness of the nature of mental states; (b) engagement in the effort to tease out mental states underlying behaviour; (c) recognizing developmental aspects of mental states; and (d) awareness of mental states in relation to the present context” (Steele & Steele, 2008, p.154). It is considered to be an essential human capacity crucial to self understanding and understanding of others – it is also pivotal in affect and arousal regulation.

Correlations between parental reflective functioning, assessed using the Adult Attachment Interview ([AAI] George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996), and infant attachment classification in the SS procedure have been found (Fonagy et al., 1991). Reflective functioning was assessed based on the parent’s capacities to reflect on their own childhood experiences with their parents. Related research has also been conducted using the Parent Development Interview ([PDI] Aber, Slade, Berger Bresgi, & Kaplan, 1985; [PDI – R] Slade, Aber, Berger, Bresgi, & Kaplan, 2004) – a semi structured interview designed to elicit representations within the context of the current ongoing relationship with the child – indicating that child attachment outcomes and maternal behaviour appear to be linked to parental reflective functioning (Slade, 2006).

The findings of these studies support Fonagy’s theory that a “parent’s capacity to make sense of her own and her child’s mental states plays a crucial role in helping the child to 1) develop flexible and adaptive means of regulating himself and 2) establish productive and sustaining relationships. Presumably, it is the parent’s capacity to tolerate her own internal, affective experience that allows her to tolerate and regulate the experiences in her child” (Slade, 2006, p.641). Parental capacity for reflective function is, therefore, emerging as a core component of interest in the examination of parent-child relationships from an attachment perspective.

The current paper will investigate maternal experiences of inter-country adoption with a particular focus on the mother's representation of her adopted child and her view of her child's adaptation to the adoptive placement.

Method

Participants

Participants are 20 West Australian mothers of inter-country adopted children. The adopted children, who were the focus of the interviews, were aged three years or less at the time that they were adopted. The children had been adopted for a period of three years or less at the time of the interview.

Procedures

The study had the approval of the university ethics board and was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of this body and of the Australian Psychological Society. The mothers were invited to participate in the study via email or letter sent by staff from three local adoptions agencies using their existing organisational databases. All participants were provided with an invitation letter that advised of the purpose of the study, the interview format and requirements of participation. The invitations clearly stated that participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw consent at any time without having any impact on their rights or access to services.

Measures

The Parent Development Interview – Adoption (PDI-Adoption) is a semi structured interview that was modified from the Parent Development Interview ([PDI] Aber, Slade, Berger, Brigs & Kaplan, 1985) and takes about 60 minutes to administer. It is designed to explore parents' representations of their children, themselves as parents, and their relationship with their children. Questions are grouped under the

headings of: View of the Child, View of the Relationship, Affective Experience of Parenting, Child's adaptation to adoptive placement. Parents with a high capacity for RF imagine how their child feels and thinks, however, they also recognise their own mental state and the complex interactions between mental states and behaviour that occur within the context of the continually developing relationships. For the purpose of reporting this study the focus is on the rich qualitative material produced by the interview rather than the RF coding scheme. Classifications by trained coders indicated the parental capacity for Reflective Functioning to be unremarkable falling in the range from 'questionable RF' to 'high RF' with the median at the 'ordinary' level of RF (Slade, 2005).

Analyses

Qualitative analysis of the Parent Development Interview transcripts in the form of a directed content analysis was conducted following the principles developed by Mayring (2000) and discussed by Hsieh & Shannon (2005). In this approach to qualitative analysis existing theory or research help focus the analysis and determine the initial coding scheme. Using existing theory (that of attachment theory and reflective functioning in this case) researchers began by identifying key concepts as initial coding categories within the major categories. In the present study major category headings were determined by the structure of the interview corresponding to the major areas of inquiry in the semi-structured interviews.

The author and two qualified psychologists/researchers familiar with the PDI read a sample of five randomly chosen interview transcripts. The interview material was worked through formulating possible sub-category criteria and highlighting examples. Sub-categories were finally identified through comparison and discussion of converging ideas between the researchers until consensus was reached.

Another appropriately qualified psychologist then assisted in the further validation of the coded material through a consensual model (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). A definition of each sub-category was provided along with three to five representative quotes of each. The unlabelled quotes were independently sorted under the appropriate sub-category. Discussion was held until consensual agreement was reached. Quantitative data from the PDI was also collated that related to the frequency of particular behaviours and particular views expressed by the participants.

Results

Demographics

The age range of the adoptive mothers interviewed for this study was 28-51 years ($M = 40.3$ years; $SD = 5.76$). All but one were married at the time of the study with average length of marriage of 14.8 years ($SD = 5.2$ years). Seventeen (85%) of the 20 participants had studied at entry level university level or beyond. When compared to the national average of 29.7% who had studied at Bachelor Degree Level or above (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006) it would seem to be indicative of high levels of education among the participants. Almost half of the participants (45%) had an annual household income within the range \$120,000 or above with an average household income level of approximately \$100,000. This is well above the national average household income of approximately \$35,000 per year (ABS, 2006). Seventy five percent of the participants participate in paid work with 50% working 20 hours or less per week and 25% working more than 20 hours per week.

Eleven of the participants had no other children while, of the nine participants who did have other children, six had other children who were adopted while three participants had other biological children.

Thirteen of the children were girls and seven boys whose ages at the time of adoption of one year ranged from 3 months to 36 months (M= 12.45 months, SD= 8.69). The children's ages at the time of interview ranged from 12 months-48 months (M=33.55months; SD= 12.48). Eight of the children were adopted from China, six from Korea, two from Hong Kong and the remaining from Thailand, the Philippines and Ethiopia. The demographic characteristics of the participants and their adopted children are representative of the demographic characteristics of inter-country adoptive parents and children in Australia as reported in the Adoptions Australia report for 2006-2007 by the AIHW (2008).

Thematic analyses from PDI

The qualitative content analysis yielded results within four major categories that correspond with the major areas of inquiry in the semi-structured interviews. These include: maternal view of her child; mother's experience of parenting; maternal view of her child's adaptation to adoption. The sub-categories that emerged under the major categories are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Major Categories and Sub-categories

Major Categories	Sub-categories
View of Child	Idealisation
	Ownership
	The influence of adoption
Parenting Experience	Mothers wish to ease the pain of

adoption for their child.

Idealisation of the experience

Intense focus on the child

Child's Adaptation to Adoption

Attachment-based behaviours

Impact of adoption on behaviour

View of the Child

Idealisation

The mothers' overall descriptions of their children were, without exception, positive. Responses (12, 60%) included entirely positive descriptions of the child's personality, global characteristics and/or behaviours. A typical example from one transcript is: *"She's bright and bubbly and happy and cute and cheeky and laughs all the time, good sense of humour"*.

The remaining descriptions (8, 40%) were expressed in mostly positive terms but included or suggested the presence of some specific behaviour that the mother experienced as challenging to some degree:

If he's on home territory, if he's at home he'll be....he'll sort of take to people pretty quickly and start interacting, but when we're out he'll....he doesn't like people talking to him or looking at him or laughing... If he thinks that they're laughing at him, he gets really cross.

A similar response was found when participants were asked what they liked least and most about their children. All participants readily stated their likes in terms of the child's personality, intelligence, their relationship with the child and the child's relationship with other siblings. Seven of the mothers had difficulty stating what they liked least about their child. Those who did state the least-liked attributes (13, 65%) of their child did so in terms of specific behaviours such as tantrums or aggressive behaviour.

Ownership

Many of the participants clearly expressed a strong sense of the child belonging to them and that this sense of belonging is shared by the child:

He still annoys me when he does naughty things and stuff like that but you know, I, he is just, I just feel like he is just part of me... I feel like he is, you know, just completely accepted us too.

Most of the mothers (18, 90%) were easily able to cite ways in which their child was similar to them and /or their spouse in one or more physical, cognitive and/or emotional terms. More of the mothers found it difficult to define ways in which their child was different from them or their spouse with seven (35%) of the mothers not able to provide any examples, apart from physical appearance. Three (15%) of the participants were not able to state any differences at all.

The influence of Adoption

A recurring query among many of the mothers centred on whether what they were observing in their child was 'normal' or was related to the child's adoption. This question was raised pertaining to a range of areas including difficult behaviour,

emotional and physical development issues. Some of the participants noted similarities between their child and non-adopted children at local playgroups or double checked with other non-adoptive mothers to compare notes and in some cases seek reassurance.

Because you kind, you kind of tend to get caught up on is this an adoption issue. And realistically you go to local play group and they have trouble sharing and they have... sleep issues and food issues and all those same issues...it's actually quite good to see that happening and, you know, there is a kid who is not walking and they are eighteen months old, you know..., these things are happening in, you know, in the wider world, not just in the adoption community. And I think sometimes if you just go to the adoption playgroup you can get a bit, almost too restricted in thinking oh this is an adoption issue....

Parenting Experience

Mothers wish to ease the pain of adoption for their child.

Some of the mothers expressed an acute awareness of the perceived pain that the child was/has experienced as a result of their adoption status. The mothers often described a desire to own or take on some of the pain for the child in an attempt to alleviate the child's suffering – behaving differently towards them in recognition of the 'wound':

Umm, (cough) he's just so young, he's very small, he's young and small and I just feel like a mother hen for him, you know, just all want to protect him and I guess I feel like his world has been pretty painful as it is and I just want it to be not so painful.

Idealisation of the experience of adoption and relationship with the child.

For the majority of the participants (17, 85%) the relationship with their child and the overall experience of adoption had exceeded their pre-adoption expectations:

He is, he's umm easier and more enjoyable

Of the participants that had found adoption more difficult than expected (3, 15%) the difficulty largely centered on the transition to motherhood or with perceiving oneself as a mother:

I thought it would happen a lot quicker [reciprocity of affection]. Um, and it didn't, it went on for months and months and months and I... I questioned, I questioned the decision that I made to be a mother... It was and I, and I was never his mother until just recently, until he, he allowed it, maybe 2 months ago.

Intense focus on the child.

The three researchers who analysed the interviews found that most of the mothers took an intense focus and reflective stance in relation to the child and the child's needs, there was less reflection on their own states of mind.

Intense scrutiny of the child's thoughts, feelings and behaviours was common among the participants. Many of the mothers showed constant vigilance in relation to any issues that may be indicative of emerging problems in the child, problems rooted in the child's adoptive status. Some mothers were openly aware of this as in the following example:

Yeah you do, you tend to, you tend to look a bit deeper at everything that happens with them you know, just to make sure. I mean classic example ... we were sitting watching the Olympics and um, [son] said "I'm Asian aren't I mum" and I said "yes, you are Asian", and I said "and you know that the European people like mummy and daddy have the round eyes and the Asian people have the almond shaped eyes like yours", and he said "oh can um, can I have toast now", and I said to [husband]... "do you think he just wanted toast, or do you think he was uncomfortable talking about the difference in our eyes" and [husband] said "no I think he just wanted toast"... That's what you tend to do, you tend to double look at everything that happens...

Child's Adaptation to Adoption

The mothers were asked about a range of attachment-based behaviours as displayed by their child. When asked directly approximately 50-66% of respondents reported their child to show physical affection and to accept this in return to seek comfort and to enjoy creative play. A small number of respondents spontaneously expressed concern over tantrums (5, 25%), Food refusal (3, 15%), emotional freezing (3, 15%). While sometimes difficult to negotiate, the negative behaviours described did not seem to impact on the overall positive view of the child. The behaviours, however, were disturbing and challenging to the mothers.

Umm, his tantrums (laugh) just dealing with the hard stuff cause they're really intense you know and they last for a decent time you know. Yeah and I know it's only a stage it will pass and you know and dealing it with

*the best I can and I know it's not going to last forever, but geez it's hard
(laugh).*

Impact of Adoption on Behaviour

Most of the participants (17, 85%) repeatedly considered the impact of adoption on their child's behaviour and tended to primarily view behaviours as having a foundation in the adoption experience of their children:

...we noticed he was kind of disappearing ... that he was withdrawing into himself... trying to cope with the pain and the separation... that's what I assumed.

The children for whom behaviours were not considered a reflection of the adoption experience all displayed behaviour that was predominately internalizing rather than externalizing behaviour. For example these children were more obedient, yet emotionally distant, rather than exhibiting tantrum behaviour.

Discussion

View of the Child

The almost unanimous positive description from the mothers regarding their child lends support to existing literature surrounding transition to adoptive parenthood. The literature highlights the positive light that adoptive parents have towards their child (Brodinsky & Huffman, 1998). This positive regard persists in the face of a range of difficult behaviours displayed by many of the adopted children and in attachment literature if not balanced is frequently thought of as idealised.

It seems that challenging behaviours exhibited by the adopted child are frequently experienced and named by mothers without these negatively impacting on

her overall view of her child. Some authors interpret this as denial or a defense against feelings of negativity towards the child (Levy-Shiff, Goldshmidt, & Har-Even, 1991). From a different perspective, a genuinely positive view of the child, one that includes a warm and accepting stance towards the child, has been viewed of critical importance in the building and reparation of attachment security (Fonagy, et al. 1991).

This study found a prevailing sense of entitlement and 'belongingness' to the child and a perception that this sense was reciprocated by the child. Hughes (1999) identified this as a positive element in the approach to parenting adopted children, especially where there are attachment difficulties. A sense of entitlement assists in underpinning the trust and consistency of care essential to the security of the mother/child relationship, and has been identified as a point of commonality between adoptive and biological mothers (Koepke, Anglin, Austin, & Harris, 1998).

Queries were frequently raised by the respondents as to whether particular behaviours, and/or emotional and physical issues of the children were related to adoption or not. One explanation for this might be that the adoption process included an emphasis on likely difficulties which encouraged parents to excessively scan for differences rather than accepting and relaxing with their children, dealing with difficulties in a spontaneous fashion as they arise. This is supported by Gray's research on Australian adoptive parents' experience of the adoption process (2010). Another explanation may be that these mothers tend to dismiss the difference between their children and other biological children in attempts to fulfill their need to see themselves, their children and their families as being like others who have not adopted.

However, based on other findings that compare adoptees to the general population these mothers could well be correct in their observations of similarities between adoptive and biological children. In a broad sense, adoption research does

seem to indicate that there are indeed many similarities between the two groups of children. The differences, however, serve as an important window into the unique aspects of adopted children and their experiences in attempting to build connections with their 'new' mother, family, community and physical environment.

Parenting Experience

Along with the positive view of the child the results also reveal that the mothers' experience of adoption had exceeded their pre-adoption expectations. An overall feeling of joy, deep connection and love for their child describes the overall consensus of the interviews. This is in keeping with other research which has shown high levels of satisfaction in adoptive parenting (Brodinsky & Huffman, 1998; Levy-Shiff, et al. 1991). A high level of satisfaction has been interpreted by some as a defence. Hartman & Liard (1990) have described a "perfect parent" requirement that is born out of the guilt of 'taking' someone else's child and/or the sense of failure from infertility—having to prove to themselves and others that they are responsible and proficient parents. Yet again an alternate interpretation could be the obvious fact that adoptive parents have made a considered and enormous effort to become parents, often at high emotional and financial cost. The high levels of satisfaction with parenting could well reflect the attainment of a highly desired goal that has been long awaited, or that they do not feel they can admit dissatisfaction after putting in such effort.

Alternative explanations were thoughtfully suggested by a reviewer of this article who made the point that the social constructionist approach to adoptive motherhood considers the intersections between broad community attitudes such as changing ideologies of "good mothering" and race (Gray, 2010). From this perspective Gray suggests the intense scrutiny reported by mothers in this study might be interpreted as a reflection of the impact of changing adoption discourses on parenting styles.

Maternal ability to reflect on their children's state of mind was clearly evident throughout the interview transcripts. The reflection was often characterized by a detailed scrutiny of the child's possible state of mind rather than the spontaneous reflection more typical of parents with high reflective functioning capacity (Slade, 2005). Perhaps this is an unintended consequence of the style of adoption preparation programs and training whereby mothers feel they must take away the emotional pain of adoption from their children. The transcripts from this exploratory study found that this scrutiny did not extend to the mothers' reflective stance about themselves. It seems that participants displayed an awareness of the child's mental states and how they may impact on behaviour but this did not extend to an in depth understanding of how the child's mental states impacted on themselves as a person/mother or how their own mental states impact on the child.

Using Fonagy's et al. (2006) construct of reflective function as a guide it would seem that the mothers are strong on one side of the equation, envisioning mental states of the child, but are lacking in the ability to envision mental states within themselves as a person or as mother. This is in keeping with international research that found adoptive mothers tended to score low on the 'Self-as-Mother' factor compared to Child factors when compared with non-adoptive mothers who had similar scores across both factors (Priel, Melamed-Hass, Bessar, & Kantor, 2004). Priel et.al. concluded the following from their findings:

The conspicuously lower score on the Self-as Mother reflectiveness factor among adoptive mothers might stem from these participants' specific difficulties with their own motherhood; while their psychological mindedness about the children is as good, if not better, than among non-adopters, their capacity to attribute relevant psychological

meanings to their own maternal role is undermined by a conventional, defensive, and sometimes even rigid stance. (p. 391).

One wonders what the impact of being under intense scrutiny has on parent-child relationships and later social development. It would seem that one might either comply and conform to this as in an avoidant attachment pattern or react and protest as in an ambivalent attachment pattern both of which have been associated with overprotective mothering (George & Solomon, 2002). The range of attachment-based behaviours observed by the mothers in the study supports the literature suggesting that adopted children are at increased risk of displaying externalizing behaviour (Verhulst et al., 1990).

The behavioural findings could also lend support to other research that suggests adopted children are at increased risk of presenting with avoidant, resistant and disorganized patterns of attachment (Howe, 2006; Juffer et al., 2005; Zeanah, 2000). It is clear that many of these inter-country adoptive mothers are observing and experiencing a range of behaviours from their child that are often challenging and distressing. The inability to give and receive affection, indiscriminate friendliness and lack of comfort seeking behaviour serve as examples of behaviours that are often peculiar to populations with a history of attachment trauma. Furthermore these behaviours serve as a possible indication of a lack of a secure attachment base.

Most participants displayed knowledge and/or awareness that such behaviours were likely to be associated with the child's adopted status. Also noted was that the children who displayed more internalizing behaviour, for example obedient and emotionally distant behaviour, were more likely to be considered free of adoption related issues by their mother. Hughes (1999) also points to the danger of parents and

professionals missing the attachment relevant behavioural cues from adopted children who may be socially engaging but fail to make more than a superficial and indiscriminate connection to others.

Demographic Variables

Demographic variables of the participants were of interest in terms of the high levels of household income, high education levels. Both of these characteristics are well above national averages (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; 2007) and are representative of the demographic characteristics in inter-country adoptive parents in Australia (AIHW, 2008). The criteria for prospective adoptive parents outlined by the Western Australian Government and the countries of origin do not require such high education and income levels and yet they seem to prevail as the norm for inter-country adoptive parents.

High income (Festinger, 1990) and/or education levels (Festinger; Fick & McMahon, 2009) do not seem to have a positive bearing on adoption outcome or parenting stress associated with adoption. The reverse has actually been suggested in some studies where higher income was highlighted as a possible risk factor in increased levels of adoption disruption (Rosenthal & Groze, 1990) and parental stress (Mainemer, Gilman, & Ames, 1998). Explanations have included unrealistically high expectations of adoption among higher income families (Rosenthal & Groze, 1990) and increased levels of stress due to the cost of adoption (Mainemer, et al. 1998). While research remains unclear the issue remains pertinent in that adoptive parents with more average levels of income and education are largely absent in the current study and in inter-country adoptions nationally.

Another area of interest that warrants some consideration is the high levels of participation of adoptive mothers in the paid workforce. The implications for the adopted child being cared for by others in a childcare setting are unclear. The present study did not investigate this issue further and it appears there is a scarcity of research that does so.

Summary

The findings of the current study hold implications for all those who are involved with providing information, education and support to adoptive mothers. It would seem that while the mothers experience their child in a positive and reflective manner they may still remain vulnerable for difficulties associated with developing a secure attachment with their child. This is evidenced by the range of difficult attachment-based behaviours that have been reported. The findings highlighting a deficit in the ability of the adoptive mother to reflect on her own reactions to the child and consideration of herself in the role of mother also hold important implications for the nature of support services provided to adoptive families.

Suggestions for further research

The findings of the present exploratory study have highlighted areas requiring further investigation and research. Some of these include:

1. Further investigation of the role of reflective function in terms of the development of a secure attachment base in adopted children. Investigation of the efficacy of intervention models aimed at increasing the reflective stance within adoptive mother's/parents.

2. An exploration of the role of the father in the adoptive process and the impact of the adoption process on their view of themselves as an individual, a husband/partner and their transition to fatherhood.
3. Exploration of the characteristics of the prospective parents who drop out of the adoption process in the early stages compared to those that continue. What are the implicit and explicit reasons for drop out? Are there differences in the level of reflective function between the two groups? What implications may this hold for the characteristics found in those who proceed with the process and their approach to caregiving?
4. Many inter-country adoptees are placed in families where both parents are in, or are soon to return to, the paid workforce. What are the rates of placement in childcare among inter-country adopted children? Given the likelihood that the child will have already experienced multiple attachment losses/trauma what is the impact on the development of a secure attachment base with the primary caregiver/s?
5. Longitudinal follow up study to explore whether adoptive mothers capacity for Reflective Functioning changes as their relationship with their children develop.
6. Broader societal research that considers the impact of community attitudes to intercountry adoptions on adoptive parental reflective functioning.

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