

# Adversity, adoption and afterwards

A mid-life follow-up study of women adopted from Hong Kong

SUMMARY



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## Introduction

This summary has been written primarily for the women who participated or were associated with the British Chinese Adoption Study (BCAS). However, we hope it will also be of interest to others, including practitioners or academics who have an interest in intercountry adoption and developmental psychology. The information that follows provides only a brief snapshot of some of the findings from the study. The full and detailed report of the study can be found in the book entitled *Adversity, Adoption and Afterwards: A mid-life follow-up study of women adopted from Hong Kong*.

The women in our study were mostly abandoned as infants (and left to be found) and spent between eight and 72 months in one of four orphanages in Hong Kong. They appear to have experienced a reasonable quality of physical and medical care and nutrition in comparison to the globally depriving environments reported in other studies. However, given limited resources and the sharp increase in the numbers of children entering orphanage care at that time, the children lacked the consistent one-to-one care and stimulation that infants typically need for their proper development.

During the 1960s, just over 100 children were sent to the UK via the International Social Services (ISS) UK Hong Kong Adoption Project and placed for adoption following publicity surrounding World Refugee Year. Placing these children for adoption was intended to provide them with a family life and to help reduce overcrowding in Hong Kong's orphanages with the influx of refugees from China. All but two of the children were girls.

Both the negative effect of early adversity in childhood and the potential for developmental recovery have been longstanding questions in human development. This unique study explored the long-term outcomes for this group of ethnically Chinese girls, now women in middle age. It has offered a rare opportunity to explore the impact of adverse early experience,

modified by international adoption in creating opportunities and risks, over 50 years.

The full sample for this study consisted of 100 girls. Ninety-nine women were located through publicly available records and 72 agreed to participate in the study. (In terms of sample bias, no major differences were found between those who agreed to participate and those who did not, based on the information we had about early experiences.) The study design used both quantitative (questionnaire pack) and qualitative methods (face-to-face interviews). Standardised measures were used that enabled key comparisons to be made with other samples, particularly the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS). Using comparative measures enabled us to explore how these women's experiences and outcomes were similar to or different from those of other adopted and non-adopted women raised in the UK and of a similar age. The areas explored included childhood and adolescence, relationships with the adoptive family, partnership and parenting, experiences of racism, health and well-being, reflections on the adoption experiences and views of transnational/transracial adoption.

## Key quantitative findings

One of the strengths of the study was the ability to use well-respected and widely used measures of psychological adjustment in order to make comparisons with matched groups of women born at about the same time in the UK. Our original hypothesis that the BCAS women would have worse outcomes due to their adverse early experience was not supported by our findings. When followed up in their mid-40s to early 50s, their psychological well-being and life satisfaction outcomes were not significantly different from the NCDS comparison women – both adopted and non-adopted. Neither was there evidence of severe difficulties in adult social relationships or poor self-esteem.

None of the variables associated with orphanage care or adoptive family structure were significant predictors of adult psychological adjustment. However, those who recalled their adoptive parenting as lacking warmth, understanding and/or acceptance had significantly worse adult psychological adjustment. Feeling happy about being adopted was found to be significantly associated with positive outcomes.

All studies have limitations and a relatively small follow-up sample size, despite its completeness, inevitably restricts the power to detect differences between groups. Furthermore, some desirable information was simply not accessible. For example, the genetic inheritance of the women, information about their pre-orphanage experiences and maternal health during pregnancy may all have had a bearing on outcomes. Nevertheless, having access both to orphanage and adult follow-up information was of great benefit to the study. The follow-up rate over such a long period was also highly satisfactory.

## Growing up adopted – childhood and adolescence

Sixty-two of the 72 women in this study (86%) were placed with adoptive families with two white British (or European) parents. Nine of the remaining ten women were placed in families with one parent of Chinese or part-Chinese origin. None of the women grew up in families where both parents were from a minority ethnic background. Most of the adoptive families already had children and so these adopters had prior parenting experience.

The information ISS UK held about the adoptive families indicates that religion played an important part in their lives, and several parents cited this as contributing to their motivation to adopt. We were very well aware that beliefs about parenting, children and adoption might

have been different to those of today although we have no direct evidence about this.

On average, the girls were just under two years old when they arrived in their adoptive homes. The majority of the girls appeared to have been received into loving homes and most said they felt loved by their adoptive mother and father.

We had the happiest childhood ever which, by today's standards, involved an awful lot of freedom. Very little in the way of material things, but very high on unconditional love and just a carefree childhood. About as good as it gets really.

There were exceptions, with some adopters being described by the women as "cold". In a few cases, the adoptive parents were described as harsh and rejecting. Some women reported having very strict and formal upbringings and acknowledge that being at the receiving end of corporal punishment was normal for that era.

*We got caned, we got strapped and stuff but that was accepted behaviour. That was no more so and no less than any other kid that I knew given the fact that caning and the slipping at home were accepted forms of discipline.*

A few women recalled how they were brought up in households where the behaviour of the parent could be unpredictable:

*She [adoptive mother] was quite unpredictable. Sometimes you'd think, oh, I've done something really awful and you dread it and it would be fine; other times suddenly you'd be in World War Two and you didn't know how you got there. .*

The study identified variations in the quality of the adoptive parenting, as reported by the women, and explored whether this was related to outcomes.

The greatest difficulties were reported during adolescence with relationships under more

strain. Such problems were not necessarily adoption related. Some women said they were not close to their adoptive parents, but only a very few had no continuing contact with one or other parent in adulthood. Among those who had experienced some difficulty in their relationships, particularly during adolescence, some nevertheless felt that their parents had been an important and valued source of support.

## Talking and telling about adoption

About three-quarters of the women in the study said their adoption was discussed openly with them when they were growing up. Forty-four women (64%) described feeling comfortable talking to their parents about their adoption. Those who did not feel comfortable described feeling “awkward” or as though there was an unwritten agreement that the subject should not be broached.

## The adult years

At the time of the study, the majority of the women were living in the UK but around one in ten were living abroad. All of the women were living independently from their adoptive parents. Although there were a small group who had little or no contact with adoptive parents or siblings, in most cases adoptive family members were reported as being supportive in a variety of ways.

## Career and employment

Fifty-four (75%) of the 72 women were in employment, 34 full time and 20 part time. Career choice and employment were wide-ranging and like many other women of their generation, some changed career or studied for further qualifications during their adult years. Of those who were not in work, one was seeking

employment, five (7%) were permanently or temporarily unable to work for health reasons, 11 (15%) said they were looking after the home or family and one was permanently retired.

Fifty-three women specified the field of work in which they were currently working or their most recent employment. Eighteen women (34%) entered the nursing and social care field; 11 (21%) were in managerial and professional jobs; seven (13%) were in the teaching profession; five (9%) were in administration and clerical jobs; and others worked in the creative arts and media, service industries, the legal profession or finance.

## Partnerships and parenting

An area of great interest was the intimate partnerships the women had developed in their adult lives. We asked them to describe the positive and negative aspects of their relationships with their current and past partners, whether relationships had ever broken down, and whether or not there were any specific serious problems associated with the partners they chose.

Ninety-four per cent of the women described themselves as heterosexual. Forty-six of the 72 participants (64%) were in marriages or civil partnerships at the time of completing the questionnaire pack and a further nine described themselves as cohabiting (13%). Five were separated and five divorced, making up around 14 per cent of the total; seven said they had never been married and were not in a co-habiting relationship (10%). Fifty-nine women (82%) had got married or entered a civil partnership at some point; seven women (just below 10%) had been married twice. Those who described themselves as gay/lesbian were in relationships with women at the time of completing the questionnaire pack. Forty-one women (57%) were still with their first marriage or civil partner at the time of participating in the study.



Fifty-one (71%) of the 72 participants reported that they had given birth to or had adopted at least one child. For those who were parents, the average number of children was 2.1. The average age at which participants became parents for the first time was just over 30 years, with the youngest aged 20 and the oldest 42. Notwithstanding the normal challenges that children can bring, parenthood was usually seen as a great joy, with comments such as 'best thing I've ever done' or 'took to it like a duck to water – it was great'.

## Health and well-being

The orphanage records included reports of the medical examinations the children underwent before coming to the UK to be placed for adoption. Just over half the children (55%) were known to be slightly or moderately malnourished at the point of leaving the orphanages and a few children had health conditions such as a squint, cleft palate or polio. Blood tests showed that many children had low haemoglobin levels and iron-deficiency anaemia, which is a reflection of a poor diet. Their health status was more positive than that of children from severely depriving institutions.

We explored how our sample women compared at adult follow-up with matched groups of women in the UK. Our study showed that 85 per cent of participants described their health as good or excellent compared with other people of their own age. This was very similar to the NCDS groups. None of the women disclosed serious cardiovascular problems. None of them had diabetes (bar one which was pregnancy-related). Two-thirds of the participants (67%) indicated they had vision problems, comparable with national data from China. The study women's alcohol use was much lower than either of the NCDS comparison groups and they reported much lower rates of smoking and higher rates of regular exercise. Good nutrition and a healthy lifestyle following adoption and into adulthood may have modified the risk of these chronic health conditions. In summary, no

increased risk of health problems was apparent, and possibly fewer health conditions were reported than might have been anticipated in view of the women's nutrition in orphanage care and other factors.

## Identifications, ethnicity and transracial adoption

Half of the participants identified themselves as Chinese, 19 per cent British and 15 per cent British Chinese, with the remainder using more personal definitions. Generally speaking, they saw themselves as both British (by nationality and cultural socialisation) and Chinese (by genetic inheritance).

Visible difference from family and peers played an important part in childhood experience to varying degrees. The interview data also gave illustrations of feelings of alienation and struggles with dual/multiple identities and experiences of race-based mistreatment. However, we found no evidence on our statistical tests for associations between higher connectedness to Chinese communities and/or affiliation with Chinese cultural practices and mental well-being in adulthood, or between connectedness and worse mental health. The women were much less likely in adulthood to report feeling uncomfortable at times with their Chinese appearance than in their childhood. In reviewing all of the data we collected, we concluded that the conflicts, uncertainties and stresses of identity development have not disappeared over the life span but for most women they have not come to dominate their lives in terms of psychological well-being. The thoughtful reflections of the women on these important issues are reported in Chapter 10 of the book.

## Thinking about origins and access to information

Previous studies have revealed the complex reasons why some adopted people seek access to information and then search for birth relatives, whilst others apparently show no interest.

Eighty-nine per cent of those who took part in the study were “abandoned/left to be found”. As such there was an almost complete absence of knowledge about birth families and the circumstances of their adoption. Many regarded their very early history as “a closed door” but this did not necessarily leave them feeling incomplete.

*Well, the thing is when you are told from dot that you were left on the steps of the orphanage, it is clear that you can't find somebody. So you don't even harbour those hopes.*

The largest group reported that they rarely or never thought about their birth parents during childhood and adolescence. Others had wondered what it would be like to meet family members, about physical resemblances and shared characteristics. Thoughts about origins were not limited to birth families, however, as sometimes women focused more on wondering about their life in the orphanage or other aspects of their early experiences. Such thoughts often lay dormant until triggered by an event, such as having children.

Visits to Hong Kong were common and reactions ranged from experiencing it as a “homecoming” to feeling no more allegiance to Hong Kong than to any other country.

## Reflections on adoption and messages for adoptive parents

The study women were asked to reflect on their lives from the vantage point of mid-life. A note of caution – retrospective recall can be subject to distortions.

A small proportion (10%) thought orphanage experience had had a negative effect on their lives and a similar number viewed their adoption experience negatively; 20 per cent had mixed feelings.

*Although being abandoned is not a good start, being adopted has been. I gained a family who loved and supported me.*

A common experience was to regret separation from birth family and country of origin, but nevertheless to value being brought up in a secure, loving family with good life prospects.

The majority (78%) agreed that intercountry adoption was a good thing, but with many caveats about prioritising placement in the home country, adequate preparation of adopters, and the availability of support over the long term. Unpicking the influences of the many factors involved in intercountry and transracial adoption is problematic and these are discussed in detail in the book.

## Key messages for practice and policy

- All studies have their limitations. This one focused on the experiences of adopted women and we cannot say whether the same outcomes would be found for a similar group of men.
- Adoption involves many legal and ethical issues. In the case of intercountry adoption, children grow up not just in a different family but in a different country and culture, with all the challenges that brings.
- Evidence from other research of the persistence of risk through middle childhood and adolescence has been important in this study. Our findings have led us to conclude that followed up into mid-life, those with less severe risks (in the form of relatively less depriving orphanage care) do not seem to differ from the identified comparison groups. However, our findings also reinforce what had been learned in the *Adoption, Search and Reunion* and *Beyond Culture Camp* studies: that adoption continues to have an impact across the lifespan and feelings about being adopted can change in adulthood as well as earlier stages of life.
- Of those who had sought counselling or used other support services, many found them beneficial and in some cases described them as “life-saving”. From the women’s accounts we were informed that support agencies need to be able to grasp the complexity of adults’ needs where orphanage care and international adoption are key historical features.
- The findings from this study in relation to health are remarkable. It is known that children adopted internationally are likely to have been exposed to malnutrition, to drug and alcohol use by their mothers, risks from blood-borne viruses and intestinal parasites, and lack of routine health care, such as screening and immunisation. The prevention of, screening for and treatment of these conditions must be a priority to maximise the developmental chances for internationally adopted children.
- The records of these women’s adoptions, in most cases, contained no information about birth parents and circumstances of the birth. However, some women were curious about their early life and to discover what if any information was available. Despite the challenges that may be present, it is important to gather as much information at the time the child comes into care as possible; even small seemingly insignificant details can be invaluable.
- Many of the women grew up in isolation from Chinese communities and/or others adopted in similar circumstances and the challenges and difficulties this gave rise to have been identified and discussed. There has been an important shift from a view that this would have little significance on their subsequent development to one where it has come to be thought of as either having overriding significance or, as we have identified, that it has changing significance over time.
- Sameness and difference in physical appearance, values, beliefs and traditions have enormous importance to human beings. The consequences of this are profound but, as we have found, not irrecoverably damaging, despite the arguments to the contrary. Adoption policy and practice have moved to a position where giving recognition to questions of sameness and difference, to belonging and not belonging, to feeling connected and disconnected, and the ways in which these weave themselves into an evolving identity, is very important. Adopters, in many instances, have taken the lead in incorporating into family life, lived experiences that support the recognition of what the child brings from their heritage. This has often led to the formation of self-

help groups to support this. It is vital that children are given appropriate opportunity to explore, understand and celebrate their origins and address their experiences of difference. This must include in-family and community support when they experience discrimination and oppression.

- The debates on the ethics and legality of intercountry adoption continue, as they have for many years. The profile of intercountry adoption is changing as countries develop their own domestic solutions for children relinquished or abandoned by their parent/s and where dominant belief systems – particularly the position of girls in society – have less influence. But there are still very large numbers of children at severe risk because of war, political and social unrest, famine and the absence of adequate practical and social support for families. Every finding from this study demonstrates

the importance of and the significant advantages that flow from providing a family life for children in the context of reasonable practical, financial, educational, health and social support. That should not, and indeed does not, come as a surprise. But the development and resourcing of national policies that provide essential support to families still does not receive sufficient priority when set against other national and political objectives.

- This study clearly identifies the adaptability, resilience and strength of human beings when faced with significant early adversity. It attests to the importance of family life in providing nurture, care, stimulation and opportunity, even when children have had a poor start in life, but it does not underestimate the challenge for those adopted and those who adopt.

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