



***THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY IN  
PERSONAL, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONSHIPS***

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## Adoption, Adult Attachment Security, and Relationship Outcomes

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### Abstract

Despite reports that adopted persons are destined for poor psychological and relational adjustment, this conclusion remains controversial. Previous research on this topic has been inconclusive, and has failed to provide a complex assessment of the predictors of adjustment. For instance, whether attachment security plays a key role in later relationship outcomes remains unresolved. This paper presents the results of a longitudinal study of adults who were adopted as infants, and a comparison sample of adults who grew up with both biological parents. Two research questions were addressed: differences in attachment security between the two samples, and the predictive relations between initial attachment scales and relationship variables (e.g., risk in intimacy, loneliness) assessed at follow-up. Attachment profiles at Time 1 indicated less security in the adopted sample than the comparison sample, and these differences were maintained at follow-up. However, adoptees who had not searched for birth relatives did not differ from the comparison sample. Although adoption status (adopted / comparison) was an important predictor of some relationship variables, it became less influential when attachment measures were included. Discussion focused on the complex factors that influence attachment security, and the need for in-depth study of the relational experiences of adopted people.

There is debate as to whether adoption is a risk factor for psychological problems throughout life. For instance, it has been reported that adopted persons have been over-represented in mental health facilities (Brozinsky, 1990), and there is some evidence to suggest higher depression amongst people who were adopted (Cubito & Obremski Brandon, 2000). In contrast, Borders, Penny, and Portnoy (2000) reported similarities between adopted and non-adopted persons on various measures of life satisfaction, while Collishaw, Maughan, and Pickles (1998) found no differences between adoptees and the general population in terms of psychological distress. Accordingly, it is still inconclusive whether adopted people are destined for poor adjustment generally.

Although some adopted persons adjust well to adoption-related experiences, others seemingly have more difficulty (Brodinsky, 1990). For instance, in many cases adopted children have no knowledge of the circumstances surrounding their adoption and this may lead to feelings of abandonment, mistrust, and uncertainty about self-identity. Perceptions of 'not fitting in' with the adoptive family may also fuel such feelings. Research has demonstrated lower self-esteem amongst adoptees who have searched for their birth parents when compared to non-searchers (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983). Leon (2002) noted how adoption specialists have proposed a key issue for adopted persons is loss, and that grief surrounding the loss of a birthparent is comparable to the grief of losing an attachment figure.

From an ethological viewpoint, attachment theory is uniquely suited to addressing issues pertaining to relational adjustment. Hazan and Shaver (1987) proposed that infant-caregiver relationships share vital psychological similarities to adult romantic relationships. Specifically, the concept of 'attachment style' appears important in both forms of relationships. These researchers found that measures of adult attachment were associated with evaluations of adult relationships and with childhood experiences with attachment figures. Other researchers have reported that a secure attachment style is associated with lasting and satisfying relationships (Feeney, 1999; Feeney & Noller, 1990). However, there is increasing recognition of the need to conduct longitudinal research to enable a clearer understanding of the causal relationship between the two variables.

The relevance of attachment theory to adoption research is largely due to the adopted child's loss of biological caregivers (Edens & Cavell, 1999). Despite the need to study adoption in terms of the attachment-separation-loss process, very few studies have investigated the impact of attachment security in adult adoptees. Borders et al. (2000) studied attachment security in adopted adults and their non-adopted friends. Adult attachment and social support differed between the two samples. Adopted persons reported more insecurity (preoccupied and fearful) than non-adopted persons. In addition, searchers reported less social support than non-searchers and non-adopted persons. This research paved the way for scientific inquiry into adoption and adult

attachment, but was limited in several ways: It was cross-sectional, used a categorical measure of attachment, and did not explore ongoing relational adjustment during adulthood.

In short, research has not yet comprehensively explored how the adoption experience may impact on dimensions of attachment security and relationship outcomes in adulthood. The moderating role of search status also needs further investigation. This paper presents the results of a longitudinal study that addresses these issues. Three hypotheses were proposed. First, it was expected that participants who were adopted as infants, in comparison to those raised by both biological parents, would report higher levels of insecurity. Second, insecurity was expected to be moderated by search status, in that adoptees who had searched for birth relatives would be less secure than the comparison sample. Finally, adoption status (adopted / comparison) and attachment security were expected to predict adult romantic relationship variables (e.g., intimacy, loneliness, trust, satisfaction, and commitment) at follow-up.

## Method

### Participants

Participants at Time 1 included 144 adults who were adopted before two years of age, and a comparison sample of 131 adults who had been raised within an intact biological family. Attrition was minimal, with 138 (95.83%) of the initial adopted sample and 128 (97.71%) of the comparison sample completing measures at Time 2. Due to the very low attrition rate, Time 1 demographic characteristics were reported with the average age for both groups being 37.7 years, whilst approximately 75% of participants were female. Frequency comparisons for the remaining demographic variables (e.g., relationship status, educational level, and employment status) found no significant differences between the two samples.

### Measures

As part of a larger study, respondents completed measures of attachment initially (Time 1) and at six-month follow-up (Time 2). Additionally, participants reported perceptions of family and personal relationships at Time 2.

*Attachment security* was assessed using the 40-item Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994). Five dimensions of attachment are obtained from this measure: confidence (8 items; e.g., "I feel confident about relating to others"), discomfort with closeness (10 items; e.g., "I prefer to keep to myself"), need for approval (7 items; e.g., "It's important for me that others like me"), preoccupation with relationships (8 items; e.g., "I worry a lot about my relationships"); and relationships as secondary (7 items; e.g., "Achieving things is more important than building relationships"). Participants responded on a 6-point Likert scale, from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*). All five factors were reliable, with alpha coefficients ranging from .74 to .88.

*The Risk in Intimacy Inventory* (RII; Pilkington & Richardson, 1988) is a 10-item scale that measures perceptions of personal risk in intimate relationships (e.g., "It is dangerous to get really close to people") ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Again, each item is rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

*The Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SELSA)* is a multidimensional measure of loneliness (DiTommaso & Spinner, 1993). The SELSA yields scores on the dimensions of romantic loneliness (12 items, e.g., "I wish I had a more satisfying romantic relationship"), family loneliness (11 items, e.g., "I feel alone when I am with my family"), and social loneliness (14 items, e.g., "I do not feel satisfied with the friends that I have"). All items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). All three scales were highly reliable with alpha coefficients exceeding .90.

*The Investment Model Scale (IMS)* measures perceived satisfaction ( $\alpha = .97$ ) and commitment ( $\alpha = .95$ ) in a relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Five items assess relationship satisfaction (e.g., "I feel satisfied with our relationship"), and seven items measure commitment (e.g., "I want our relationship to last forever"). Participants respond to a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*do not agree at all*) to 8 (*agree completely*).

*The Trust in Close Relationships (TS short version)* is a 13-item inventory ( $\alpha = .96$ ) adapted by Boon and Holmes (1992). Again, respondents can respond to a current or most recent relationship (e.g., "I feel that I can trust my partner completely"). A 7-point Likert scale is utilised ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

### Procedure

Participants were recruited through the media, Internet, distribution of pamphlets, and the University of Queensland and University of Southern Queensland psychology pools. Interested participants were mailed a questionnaire package at Time 1 and a second package six months later. The order of administration of questionnaires was counterbalanced.

## Results

### Adoption and Attachment Security

A MANOVA assessed the effects of adoption status and time. A significant effect of adoption status was found, multivariate  $F(5, 259) = 4.65, p < .001$ . Furthermore, univariate tests indicated that this difference applied to all five scales. The adopted sample scored lower than the comparison sample on confidence, and higher on all other attachment scales (see top rows of Table 1). These same differences were maintained at Time 2.

### Search Status and Attachment Security

To investigate the role of search status, another MANOVA was conducted to compare the attachment scales of searchers ( $n = 105$ ), non-searchers ( $n = 32$ ), and the comparison sample ( $n = 128$ ). The analysis again produced a significant overall difference, multivariate  $F(10, 518) = 2.53, p < .01$ . All scales differed across the three groups (at both times) except for relationships as secondary. Post hoc (Tukey) tests indicated that searchers reported lower confidence, and higher discomfort, need for approval, and preoccupation with relationships than the comparison sample (Table 1). However, no significant differences were observed between non-searchers and the comparison sample.

Table 1  
*Mean Scores (SDs) on Attachment Scales According to Adoption Status*

	<b>Conf.</b>	<b>Disc.</b>	<b>Relate second.</b>	<b>Need approv.</b>	<b>Preocc.</b>
Comparison	4.62 (.75)	3.18 (.92)	2.10 (.73)	2.99 (.85)	3.13 (.84)
Adopted	4.20 (.92)	3.52 (.96)	2.28 (.79)	3.35 (.98)	3.57 (.87)
Searchers	4.18 (.88)	3.55 (.95)	2.27 (.82)	3.38 (.97)	3.63 (.86)
Non-searchers	4.29 (.96)	3.40 (.99)	2.34 (.70)	3.26 (.90)	3.39 (.88)

*Note.* Mean scores reported as the average across Time 1 and Time 2. Conf. = Confidence, Disc. = Discomfort, Relate second = Relationship as secondary, Need approv. = Need for approval, Preocc. = Preoccupation.

### Adoption, Attachment, and Personal Relationships

To investigate the ability of adoption status and attachment scales to predict Time 2 relationship variables, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted. Seven relationship measures (risk in intimacy, three loneliness scales, trust, relationship satisfaction and commitment) were entered separately as dependent variables. At Step 1, adoption status was a significant predictor of risk in intimacy, family and social loneliness. Confidence was negatively correlated and the other four attachment dimensions were positively correlated with these relationship variables. When the five attachment measures were entered at Step 2, adoption status no longer predicted risk in intimacy or loneliness (Table 2). Beta values confirmed that confidence predicted all relationship variables except romantic loneliness. Discomfort with closeness made unique contributions to both risk in intimacy and romantic loneliness. Three attachment dimensions (confidence, need for approval, and preoccupation) made unique contributions to the prediction of social loneliness.

When predicting trust, relationship satisfaction and commitment, analyses were conducted separately for participants reflecting on a current relationship as opposed to their most recent relationship. For the former group, confidence was the only attachment dimension to predict relationship variables (e.g., trust and relationship satisfaction). For those reporting on a previous relationship, adoption status, confidence, and discomfort with closeness predicted trust, whereas adoption status and confidence predicted relationship satisfaction (Table 3).

Table 2  
*Predicting Risk in Intimacy and Loneliness from Adoption Status and Attachment Measures*

Predictor Variable	Risk in Intimacy		Romantic Loneliness		Family Loneliness		Social Loneliness	
	r	$\beta$	r	$\beta$	r	$\beta$	r	$\beta$
Step 1								
Adoption Status	-.15**	-.15**	.02	.02	-.15**	-.15**	-.17**	-.17**
Step 2								
Adoption Status	-.15**	-.01	.02	.10	-.15**	-.03	-.17**	-.03
Confidence	-.60**	-.27**	-.25**	-.10	-.46**	-.36**	-.59**	-.57**
Discomfort with Closeness	.66**	.44**	.31**	.25**	.41**	.14	.45**	.05
Relationship as Secondary	.39**	.08	.10	-.06	.27**	.04**	.32**	.05
Need for Approval	.31**	-.04	.14*	-.05	.22**	-.11**	.24**	-.19**
Preoccupation	.32**	.05	.20**	.14	.27**	.11**	.30**	.13*

\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 3  
*Predicting Trust, Relationship Satisfaction and Commitment from Adoption Status and Attachment Measures (Complete Model)*

Predictor Variable	Current relationship			Most recent relationship		
	Trust	Rel Sat.	Rel Com.	Trust	Rel Sat.	Rel Com.
Step 1						
Adoption Status	.03	-.01	.02	.31*	.27*	.04
Step 2						
Adoption Status	-.03	-.04	-.02	.36*	.32*	.13
Confidence	.25*	.26*	.09	-.60*	-.56*	-.53*
Discomfort with Closeness	.02	-.06	-.07	-.56**	-.41	-.32
Relationship as Secondary	-.11	.04	-.12	.07	.04	-.01
Need for Approval	.15	.10	.07	-.10	-.17	-.08
Preoccupation	-.11	.03	-.02	-.15	-.17	-.11

Note. Rel Sat. = Relationship Satisfaction, Rel Com. = Relationship Commitment; \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

This research investigated whether dimensions of adult attachment differ between adopted persons and the general population. Further, the predictive power of attachment dimensions on later adult relationship variables was assessed. Results supported the hypothesis that insecure attachment would be greater for the adopted sample than for participants raised by both biological parents. This difference was moderated by search status, with searchers reporting higher insecurity on four of the five attachment scales. As predicted, all of these differences were maintained at Time 2.

The expectation that adoption status and attachment dimensions would predict relationship variables at follow-up was partially supported. Adoption status alone predicted risk in intimacy, family and social loneliness, and when participants reflected on a previous relationship, this variable also predicted trust and relationship satisfaction. However, when attachment measures were included, the predictive power of adoption status was generally reduced. Indeed, the confidence dimension was the strongest predictor of relationship variables, predicting risk in intimacy, family, and social loneliness. Confidence also predicted trust and relationship satisfaction (for both current and previous relationships). However, the remaining associations between attachment and relationship variables were scattered.

These results extend the debate as to whether adopted persons are disadvantaged in terms of psychological adjustment. Within the current study, reports of higher insecurity amongst adopted persons supported the findings of Borders et al. (2000). Furthermore, higher levels of insecurity amongst searchers, specifically, fits with previous studies linking search status to indices of psychological adjustment (e.g., Sobol & Cardiff, 1983). An important finding of the current research was that adoption status predicted adult relationship variables. However, when combined with attachment dimensions, it became less influential. This finding supports the argument that attachment theory provides a useful perspective on the relationship issues that arise for adopted persons (Edens & Cavell, 1999).

There are many complex factors unique to adopted persons that may influence attachment security. As searchers in the current study reported higher levels of insecurity, motives to search for birth families require further investigation. Exploration of adoption issues (such as feelings of abandonment and betrayal, loss of self-identity, belonging, and trust) is needed in terms of identifying possible associations with attachment dimensions. This is especially important given the strong predictive power of attachment for future relational adjustment. Future directions of this project will explore relational experiences of adopted persons throughout their lives, discovering particular challenges and obstacles that are unique to this population. More focus will be directed towards reunion experiences with birth relatives and how roles and relationships are negotiated with adoptive families. Such information should provide a better understanding of potential difficulties that adopted persons might have in terms of relational adjustment and attachment security.

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