

Health challenges of adopted persons

Amara C. Onoka*

Department of Nursing, University of Nigeria Enugu Campus, Enugu, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Background: Adoption of persons has been a commonly practised by human for centuries. Despite its popularity, little attention has been given to the health challenges faced by adopted persons as a result of the adoption. **Objectives:** Given the increasing acceptance and practice of adoption in Nigeria, this study aims at determining the health challenges adopted persons may be exposed to as a result of adoption. **Method:** Systematic review of literature and interview were adopted for the study. **Results:** Despite its huge benefits, the process of adoption severs the natural relationship between a child and his birth mother and exposes the child to a life-long trauma known as a primal wound. Primal wound and other biological and environmental factors expose the adopted person to various health challenges. Adopted persons therefore face physical, emotional, mental, social, and religious health challenges. Some physical health challenges include asthma, brain damage, developmental delay, mental (attention-deficit/hyper-activity, oppositional-defiance, major depression, separation anxiety disorders), and emotional (loss and grief about birth family, loss of access to health records and sense of rejection and abandonment). In Igboland Southeast Nigeria, adopted persons are exposed to social challenges as child negligence and abuse, inferiority complex, and denial of inheritance. In addition, adopted persons may also experience religious challenges where they might be compelled to change from the religious inclination of their birth parents to that of their adoptive parents. **Recommendations:** To ensure the health of adopted persons, it is suggested that adoptive parents should ensure proper documentation and maintenance of records relevant to adopted persons, ensure proper adoptive-parent to child bonding, and make adoption open adoption as against closed. The government, non-governmental organizations and adoption agencies should sensitize individuals and the public on the need to accept adopted persons and treat them like every other normal individual with human rights. They should also ensure that adequate record concerning the adopted person is maintained in addition to enacting a legislation to protect the rights of adopted persons. Furthermore, adopted persons are encouraged to handle some social and psychological issues of adoption when they W-I-S-E Up (walk away, it's private, share some information in confidence as well as educate others about adoption).

Key words: Adoption, adopted person, adoptive parents, birth parents, primal wound, health challenges

INTRODUCTION

Adoption is the process of transferring parental rights and responsibilities to persons other than a child's biological parents. An adopted person is an individual living in a household with at least one adoptive parent.^[1] Adoption has been practised by human before the 6th century and has evolved through the ages from what could be referred to as ancient adoption to the common practices of modern adoption.^[2] Ancient adoption varied significantly from the modern adoption in the sense that adults instead of children were commonly adopted. In addition, ancient adoption mainly satisfied the economic, social, and political needs of the adoptive persons. Unlike ancient adoption, modern adoption established a balance between the adoptive needs of both the adoptive and the adopted persons.^[2]

Adoption can be procured through two main processes such as open and closed adoption.^[3] In open adoption, both the adoptive and biological parents are known to each other, and every details about the child such as name of parents, surname, and place of origin are left unaltered. Conversely, in closed adoption, information about the adoptee is altered to rhyme with that, of the adoptive parents, the adoptive and birth

parents are also not known to each other. Forms of adoption include domestic, international, foster care, transracial, and embryo adoption.^[4]

Adoption has been of great benefit to humankind since its inception. Not only has it provided children for couples who are unable to have theirs due to infertility, genetic diseases, and conditions that complicate pregnancy and delivery (e.g. cardiac, renal, and certain metabolic diseases) but also it has brought succor to couples who desire a particular gender of children.^[5,6] Furthermore, it has not only provided parents and homes for orphaned and abandoned children but also it has also brought relief for children who are victims of child abuse and neglect.^[4] In a study to review the outcome of adoption on adopted persons, it was observed that most adopted children outperformed their mates who are biological children socially, economically, and academically with most of them having wonderful capabilities in mathematics.^[7] These wonderful performances could be attributed to the fact that most adopted persons are raised in families where parents were educated, loving, and supportive and had homes that provided material advantages that they otherwise could not have received.^[8]

Address for correspondence:

Amara C. Onoka, Department of Nursing, University of Nigeria Enugu Campus, Enugu, Nigeria. E-mail: amaraonoka@gmail.com

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Regardless of its huge benefits, adoption exposes the adopted person to many health challenges.^[9,10] The abrupt severance of the mother-to-child bond during the process of adoption causes a type of trauma known as primal wound which has lifelong effect on the adopted person.^[11] Adoption could be associated with some emotional health challenges such as feelings of loss and grief, sense of rejection and abandonment, and low self-esteem.^[12] A higher incidence of childhood asthma was also identified as an effect of adoption among adopted children.^[1] Some other physical health challenges listed include developmental delays, alcohol withdrawal syndrome, and brain damage.^[13] In Nigeria and specifically among the Ibo tribe (Southeast Nigeria), some social health challenges such as inferiority complex, denial of inheritance, and social exclusion have been commonly reported.^[4] The study revealed that these challenges are worsened if the adoption took place when the adoptee was a child and when closed adoption was the method of adoption used. In the face of these challenges and its numerous benefits, adoption has been observed to be gaining wider popularity and acceptance in Nigeria and beyond. Approximately 2.5% of the US children (1.6 million) joined their families through adoption.^[1] This paper, therefore, seeks to identify the health challenges faced by adopted persons. The concept of adoption, psychology of adoption trauma (primal wound), health challenges faced by adopted persons, care/management of adopted persons facing challenges, and prevention of the challenges faced by adopted persons were also reviewed in course.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- i. To describe the psychology of the primal wound.
- ii. To determine the health challenges (physical, mental, emotional, social, and religious) faced by adopted persons.
- iii. To assess the care/management of adopted persons facing challenges.
- iv. To make suggestions on the possible ways of preventing the health challenges faced by adopted persons.

PSYCHOLOGY OF ADOPTION TRAUMA: THE PRIMAL WOUND

The psychology of adoption is the psychopathological processes that occur in adopted persons during the adoption/given-up process. These processes mark the origin of most of the challenges faced by the adopted person.^[14] There seems to be a sort of physiological, emotional, mystical, spiritual, and everlasting connection between a child and his or her birth mother. This natural relationship is severed when a child is taken away from his mother through adoption, especially if the adoption occurred at birth.^[14]

A fetus/baby is so bonded to its mother to the extent that he/she is able to recognize their mother's voice, familiar smells, and faces and can be drawn to them within a few days of birth.^[11] In addition, unlike the common long-held beliefs that babies do not have memories, it has been proven that they are able to recognize the loss of their mother on separation through adoption.^[14] Although too small to express itself, findings revealed that the adoption process is traumatic to the child with its attendant feeling of fear, helplessness, and horror. This trauma of adoption was first described by Nancy Verrier (an adoptive-parent) as "Primal Wound."^[14] The child does not only mourn the loss of his birth-mother but also he struggles with certain issues

as abandonment, loss, rejection, mistrust, shame, and guilt throughout his lifetime.^[14]

Adopted persons respond to this early loss in various ways as they grow, they may act-out in aggression or become provocative and impulsive. Others respond by withdrawing and acting in a compliant, acquiescent manner. Both are wounded. Although they desire to love, they are afraid of another rejection by their adoptive parents and others around.^[14] The response of adoptive parents to these reactions has great implications on the general health and well-being of the adopted person.^[1]

HEALTH CHALLENGES OF ADOPTED PERSONS

Physical Health Challenges of Adopted Persons

A national survey on the health of children in the US observed that adopted children are more likely than biological children to have special health-care needs.^[1]

The health challenges observed were asthma, physical impairment and brain damage (due to falls, negligence, mal-handling in homes, and orphanages), developmental delays (due to speech, walking, sitting, and standing), and learning disabilities.^[1,15]

Most of these findings are inconclusive because of the closed nature of the adoption for most of the children in the study, and hence, it could not be ascertained if their physical health challenges were as a result of familial predisposition or due to their adoption.^[1]

Mental Health Challenges

Adopted children are at a higher risk of having mental health disorders such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity, oppositional defiance, major depression, and separation anxiety disorders.^[15] Other mental health challenges are eating disorders, overeating, hoarding, stealing food, and problem with eating certain solid food due to improper weaning. There is also evidence that children adopted internationally could have higher rates of fetal alcohol syndrome, autism, and brain damage.^[13] The incidence of these challenges increases progressively where the adopted persons were institutionalized.

Emotional/Psychological Health Challenges of Adopted Persons

Loss and grief

The adopted person at some point in his life experiences grief because of the loss of his first family.^[7] Even those adopted as newborns experience the loss of their connection with their birth mothers, although they may not be able to articulate their grief till later in life. In addition, the child does not only mourn the loss of his birth parents but also the loss of his cultural and family connections.^[7,10] This feeling is worsened in closed adoption where the child does not have any information or contact with his birth parents.

Loss of access to important medical or genetic birth family history^[10]

A closed or semi-closed adoption can lead to loss of access to full information on medical and family history of the adopted person. Painful and awkward feelings can be triggered when an

adult cannot fully describe himself and his history. There could also be associated medical complication due to inadequate health histories of allergies and genetic diseases.

Sense of rejection and abandonment

Despite the love and care given to them by their adoptive parents, adopted children feel rejected and abandoned by their birth parents.^[16] The child forever wonders why his mother chose to "reject" or "give him away."^[10] He wonders if he was not good enough. This feeling is worsened if the child finds that his mother later had other children whom she decided to care for.^[10]

Low self-esteem

Young adopted persons experience feelings of low self-esteem because they find it hard to understand why their birth parents would not take care of them. They struggle with the feeling that something could be wrong with them that resulted in their parents rejecting them.^[12]

Sense of difference and exclusion

An adopted person may feel different, especially if he obviously looks physically different from his adoptive parents. This is common in international adoption where the adopted person is from a different race and culture, e.g. an adopted-person from Africa with Americans as adoptive parents may feel excluded when he sees the resemblance in everyone else in the family apart from himself. This may affect his/her feeling of self-worth if not well handled.^[12]

Guilt

Guilt accompanies loss and grief because adopted persons believe that they are being disloyal to their adoptive parents who raised them.^[16] They may also feel as though they are betraying their adoptive parents when they express their desire to locate their birth parents.^[10]

Finding out the truth

Most parents find it difficult to tell the adopted children the truth about their being adopted or orphaned.^[16] This difficulty is governed by the fear that they may lose the child if he gets to know that they are not his birth parents. Most parents fail to bear in mind that the child will grow someday, ask questions, or even be confronted by a fellow child about his being adopted.^[16] The sudden discovery of blood mismatch with an adopted person's supposed parents can trigger a whole lot of questions related to the adopted person's identity. This can come as a tragic revelation for the adopted person. About 90% of adopted persons breakdown needing therapies when they first get to know about their adoption.^[10] They act out and may also exhibit such behaviors as hatred and lack of trust for their adoptive parents for lying to them, especially if they find that their birth parents are alive when they were told that they were dead. They may also run away from home or take up deviant behaviors such as gangsterism, drugs, and prostitution just to hurt their adoptive parents and their unknown parent for abandoning them.^[10]

Lack of self-identity

The need to answer the question "who am I" triggers most adolescents to go out in search of their birth parents. Adopted persons suffer huge frustration when they do not have a clue about their birth family.

Social Health Challenges of Adopted Persons

Child negligence and abuse

Most adopted persons are neglected and abused by their adoptive parents.^[4] This is a common experience in unrelated adoption. About 55% of adopted children in Nigeria lose their virginity at a tender age because their adoptive parents assaulted and sexually abused them.^[4] Others are exposed to street life in the form of hawking and prostitution, used as sex slaves in other countries, while a majority of the children were used for rituals.^[4]

Furthermore, an adopted person may face huge trauma following neglect when his adoptive parents are finally able to have their own children. They may withdraw the love they had for him and shower it on their biological child. A situation where the couple is able to have a son many years after adopting a one could predispose them to withdrawing the first sonship rights of the adopted person for their own biological son.

Social exclusion

An adopted person may be socially excluded by other persons in the society. In most communities in Igboland Southeast Nigeria, adopted persons are sometimes treated as outcasts mainly because their background is unknown.^[4] In addition, adopted persons are not accorded freedom of expression among their kins in some parts of Nsukka and Enugu-Ezike in Enugu state, Southeast Nigeria, and indeed other parts of Igboland because they are not regarded as free borne. The adopted person may also be treated with hatred and disrespect by members of his immediate family and often reminded that he does not belong there.

Inferiority complex

Adopted persons tend to feel inferior to biological children. This experience is more common in the developing countries than the developed ones where such demeaning languages as bastard and free born are still in use.^[4]

Denial of inheritance/rights

The common law allows the adopted person full right to the inheritance of his adoptive parents, but the customary law in Nigeria is not specific on the issue.^[17] The typical Igbo society value legitimacy is patrilineal, and hence, it does not fully support adoption. Adopted persons are most often perceived as lacking a father figure and may therefore be denied certain rights, especially when his adoptive parents are dead and he lacks the burden of proof to justify his entitlement to any of his "parents properties."

Denial of leadership rights

Adopted persons are denied rights to traditional leadership positions such as Igwe and Eze in Igboland and most other parts of Nigeria because they might be erroneously perceived non-freeborn. This is so despite the fact that they may be more qualified than other biological children to do so.^[4]

Relationships/marriage

Adopted persons may experience difficulties choosing and being accepted in relationships and marriage. There could be fear that the adopted person may get into sexual relationship or even marriage with a close relation since his natural lineage cannot be traced particularly in closed adoption.^[4]

Religious challenges of adopted persons

This challenge is more commonly faced by individuals who were not adopted as babies. An adopted person may experience difficulty changing his religious orientations, beliefs, food, and dressing.^[4] A Muslim male adopted into a Christian or Jewish family may be subjected to circumcision even as an adult. In similar vein, although Islam permits adoption, it favors open adoption more.^[18] In this case, the adopted person is expected to maintain his original surname, identified with his blood relatives as well as maintain his original cultural and religious practices despite living in their adoptive parents' home. While this has an advantage of preventing protecting the adopted person from mistakenly contracting a relationship or marriage with a blood relation, there may be the disadvantage of sociocultural and religious exclusion by the adoptive parents, relations, and biological children. Adoptive parents may also not be very willing to share all their love with a child who they consider as not legally theirs.

CARE/MANAGEMENT OF ADOPTED PERSONS FACING CHALLENGES

By Adoptive Parents^[19]

It is suggested that adoptive parents should:

- Exercise patience, love, and support their adopted children who are facing challenges due to their adoption status even when they become rebellious.
- Be calm and let the child know that you are not trying to replace his biological parents but that you are there to give him a home because you love him so much.
- Continue to reassure the child and understand that he is going through a lot. The adopted person at this point may be having a lot of psychological issues such as nightmares and depression.
- Have it in mind that the adopted person may decide to find his parents: Adoptive parents should be prepared for this. Tell the child what he needs to know about his background but in a mature manner. For instance, if the parents were drug addicts and were negligent, tell him this and also add that they gave him up because they could not take care of him and you do not know what their feelings are presently. Furthermore, tell him that his parents may not wish to be found but you will support him even if he wishes to continue.
- Be supportive throughout this phase. Most of them will come back after satisfying their curiosity. Studies revealed that after knowing their most of the adopted persons will prefer to stay with their adoptive parents.^[16] Some of the reasons given by these adopted persons include not wanting to disappoint their adoptive parents who have loved and cared for them over the years after all their biological parents rejected them by giving them up. Most of them have also lived in foreign countries in case of international adoption and have acculturated that they are regarded as strangers when they go home. Furthermore, there is usually a huge difference in the level of education and socioeconomic status between their adoptive and biological parents. Thus, most adopted persons will no longer fit into their birth families and would prefer to continue with their adoptive families with whom they have got used to.
- Seek help: Adoptive parents are encouraged to seek professional help from family counselors, psychologists, and the clergy to talk to the adopted person.

Role of the Family counselors, Clergy, Nurses, and Psychologists^[16,20]

These professionals should assist the adopted persons by reassuring them to:

- Understand that they were adopted because their adoptive parents love them.
- Join support groups where they can interact with other adopted persons. This will assist them cope with their feelings of fears and frustrations.
- Make themselves available for psychotherapy when necessary to help reduce their guilt, anxiety, and depression.
- Search for their parents if they wish.
- Adopted persons should read as many books as possible about adopted children, families, and their experiences.

PREVENTION OF HEALTH CHALLENGES FACED BY ADOPTED PERSONS

Proper Adoptive parent to Child Bonding

Proper bonding with the adoptive parents is very important to avoid most challenges adopted persons and their adoptive parents face.^[19] The report identified reactive attachment disorder (a situation whereby the adopted child fails to establish healthy attachments with his parents) and post-traumatic stress disorder as some of the challenges that could occur due to improper bonding of the adopted child.

The report therefore suggests that, for successful bonding, adoptive parents should endeavor to:

- Love and tolerate the adopted as if he is their biological child.
- Identify activities, the child is interested into boost his physical, mental, and social health.
- Respect the child's birth parents, nationality, culture, and religion (especially, where these are different).
- Know when to seek help.

Proper Documentation and Maintenance of Records Relevant to the Adopted Persons

Adoptive parents should equip themselves as much as possible with all the medical, psychological, psychiatric, behavioral, and cognitive information of the adopted child and his parents.^[9] In the case of foster adoption, adoptive parents should make enquiries about treatments obtained as well as immunization history. This will assist in the child's future treatments and help the adoptive parents to understand the child's behavior better.^[9]

Tell the Truth

Adopted persons should be told every truth pertaining to them.^[20,21] Adoptive parents should bear in mind that the truth cannot be hidden from the child forever. The adopted person should know that he or she was adopted and not a biological child and he should also be told the history and the circumstances surrounding his birth (rape, incest, and orphan)^[21] This should be related to the child in the language that he can understand when he is as young as 8 years (although he should be psychologically prepared for it). Studies show that children tend to handle the news better with better adjustment than when they are adolescents or when they get to find themselves.^[21]

Adoptive Parents Should Also

- a. Raise the adopted child with the knowledge and experience of his background. The child should also know and be allowed to practice his culture, language, religion (if he chooses) as well as that of his adoptive parents.^[16]
- b. Ensure that they legally formalize the adoption of their children to forestall future legal or inheritance issues.^[4]
- c. Care for all children in their custody as they would their biological children.^[4]

Role of the Government, Non-governmental Organizations, and Adoption Agencies^[4]

It is recommended that these stakeholders should:

- i. Maintain adequate record about adopted persons and their birth-parents (names, medical, social and family history etc.). This information should be made accessible to the adoptive parents when required.
- ii. Make periodic visits to homes where adopted children are raised to obtain details about their welfare.
- iii. Organize community-based health education programs to create awareness and educate the society on the importance and benefits of adoption. The importance of meeting the needs of adopted persons, increasing their social acceptance asides reducing the stigma attached to it should also be emphasized.
- iv. Facilitate the passage of legislations that are geared toward protecting the rights of adopted persons in the society.

For Adopted persons

Adopted persons can handle confrontations by others to ensure that they are not hurt by applying certain principles. In situations where an adopted child is confronted with such questions as, “where is your real mum?” “don’t you want to find your real parents?” “do you have a dad?” and so on, the child should W-I-S-E up by:^[17]

- W: Walk away or choose not to pay attention.
- I: It is private: Adopted person can choose not to share information about himself with anybody OR.
- S: Share some information about his adoption in confidence and happiness.
- E: Educate others about adoption in general, by telling them correct information and helping them to understand it.

Recommendations

1. Open adoption should be encouraged.
2. Adoptive-parents should:
 - Formalize all adoption processes to ensure the protection of the rights of the adopted person.
 - Show love to adopted-persons.
3. Adopted-persons should:
 - Accept the fact that they were adopted.
 - They should consider the situations which made their adoptive parents to adopt them in the first place (e.g. infertility) and show them love and understanding to them as they would their birth parents, and they should also appreciate that they are loved by their adoptive parents.
 - Join adoption support group, interact with other adopted persons, and read adoption-related books to help them cope with adoption.

4. The government should:
 - Pass laws to ensure that all adoptions are procured through legal procured means.
 - Pass laws to protect the rights of adopted persons as well as prescribe and enforce punishment in cases of violation of their rights.
5. The society should love and accept adopted persons as bonafide members of the family and society and should not discriminate against them.
6. Adoption agencies, civil-right activists, child/social welfare, hospitals/health professionals (Nurses), government, and NGOs should ensure that:
 - All information related to an adopted person is well documented and made accessible to him and his adoptive-parents when the need arises.
 - They make periodic visits to homes where adopted persons live to ensure their welfare.
 - In cases of abuse, negligence, or reactive-attachment, the adopted person should be withdrawn from the home, put in foster care, and also assisted to seek redress.
 - They should create massive public awareness on the need for the society to accept adoption as natural human need as well as the need to accept adopted persons as bonafide members of the society to help reduce the stigma attached to adoption.
 - Create supportive groups for adopted children.
7. Customs and traditions, especially in Igboland and beyond, should be reviewed to give adopted persons equal rights with every other person in the community.
8. Religious organizations should create awareness regarding adoption and show tolerance as regards religious orientations, for example, a Muslim who is adopted into a Christian home should be allowed to choose if he wants to pass through the circumcision rituals or not.

SUMMARY

This paper reviewed the health challenges of adopted persons. Adoption was defined as the legal process whereby parental rights and responsibilities are transferred from birth parents to adoptive parents in situations where such never existed at birth. Adoption has been practised by human as far back as the 6th century, and the practice has changed with time from the ancient adoption to what is currently practised as modern adoption. The major methods of procuring adoption are the open and closed methods while some types of adoption include private, domestic, international, and foster care adoption. Some identified indications for adoption include infertility, chronic diseases, gender selection, and desire to have a family. It was also discovered that adopted persons face numerous physical, mental health, psychological, social as well as religious health challenges. Showing love and understanding, giving support, and seeking professional help are some of the ways that parents can care for adopted persons facing health challenges while health professionals, the clergy, and the government can help by providing psychological support and creating awareness.

CONCLUSION

Adopted persons face a lot of health challenges, embracing open instead of closed adoption, telling adopted persons the truth about their adoption, legalizing all adoptions to make adopted

persons bonafide members of the family, creating intensive public awareness to increase the social acceptance of adoption and adopted persons, and passing laws to protect the rights of adopted persons are some of the ways of preventing the challenges faced by adopted persons.

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