

Development and the Adoptee

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Introduction

Adopted individuals makeup about 2% of the general population and are accessing mental health services at twice the rate that non-adopted individuals do (Slap et al., 2001, Van IJzendoorn et al., 2001). Adoptees are also more likely to experience mental health struggles and to commit suicide (Slap et al., 2001, Van IJzendoorn et al., 2001). Poor performance in school for adoptees has been related to increased suicide attempts, criminal behavior, and dependence on welfare programs (Berlin & Hjern, 2011). This alone calls attention to the necessity of an in-depth analysis of the adoptee's development. The purpose of this paper is to understand how adoptees differ with reference to their learning and development through social learning theory (SLT) and attachment theory (AT). Using the SLT and AT to identify critical junctures in an adoptee's development this paper will offer an important starting point for teachers in understanding how the adoptee may develop differently in their classroom.

First, this paper will review the two theories that offer a clear explanation for developmental issues for the adoptee. Then literature about adoption will be woven in with the theories to understand the relationship. Self-efficacy will also be discussed in relation to both theories and adoption to exemplify adoption-related issues. After, this paper will pinpoint key points of disconnect in terms of the adoptee's development and what learning outcomes this could impact in the classroom context. Lastly, all the information will be used to offer insights for teachers, instructors, and society as a whole. Ultimately this paper will argue that adoptees are presented with several obstacles when it comes to development that if left unattended can result in learning difficulties and contribute to the overwhelming mental health crisis among the community of adopted individuals.

Background Information

For the purposes of this paper, adopted individuals are conceptualized as anyone who has caregivers who are not their biological mother or father (Adoption Network, 2021). Outcomes are generalized to adoptees as a whole and do not account for time in foster care, specific attachment style, differences in learning abilities, or instances of abuse. Caregivers are the individuals who are legally responsible for the adoptee, this might not always be a mother and father (Adoption Network, 2021). Educators are thought about as individuals who teach the child from pre-school throughout high school. Lastly, mental health is conceptualized as emotional and social wellbeing which impacts an individual's ability to handle stress, be productive, and contribute positively to society (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). I myself am an internationally adopted child who was adopted in infancy. I acknowledge that this paper was written and researched from my perspective as a white female adoptee.

Literature Review

The two theories that are fundamental in understanding the adoptee's divergence in development are SLT and AT. Using these two theories in combination offer important insight into developmental issues adoptees may experience in the classroom. Self-efficacy is further articulated as an important part of the adoptee's learning and development and a critical part of both theories. To begin the discussion, I will give a brief overview of SLT and AT by identifying key terms and the theories' relationship to the classroom.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (SLT) originally conceptualized by Albert Bandura argues that individuals learn through their social interactions (Bandura, 2002; Wenger, 2018). Specifically, children learn by watching their caregivers or other more experienced models. By observing and

mimicking others' behaviors humans learn how to interact with the world in given situations. For example, children may learn to brush their teeth by watching their parents brush their teeth. Ahn and Vega (2020) describe SLT by emphasizing the ability of the observed to inspire learning and imitation. A good model will have the ability not only to display the behavior but incite the replication of the behavior in the child. Both good and bad behaviors can be learned making it all the more important that children have proper role models to learn from. In order for a child to develop through the moral stages of development, they need to observe others enacting positive behaviors (Watt, 1989). For example, it is important for a child to see their parents displaying love and affection to one another to understand what a healthy relationship looks like.

Not all models display positive behaviors. If a child observes negative behaviors, they may be more likely to also engage in the negative behavior (Arrastia-Chisholm et al., 2020). Arrastia-Chisholm et al. (2020) studied incarcerated individuals finding that incarceration could either be used as a negative or positive example for the child to follow. Children mimicked negative behavior when parents failed to frame their negative behaviors as a learning lesson. For example, if a child sees their parent breaking the law they might also engage in this behavior. If a parent does display negative behaviors, it is important to underline the consequences of those behaviors to discourage mimicry (Arrastia-Chisholm et al., 2020). In addition to considering the social models the child is observing, it is important to consider to the social context in which events occur (Friedlander, 2003). Friedlander (2003) argues that social contexts can include family members, family dynamics, or the family in general. One must weigh environmental factors such as socioeconomic status, instability in the home, and race in addition to the observed behavior to understand the social learning context.

SLT is typically thought about in relation to the primary caregiver since they spend the most time with their child, however more recent research has geared toward looking at the educator's influence on the student (Ahn & Vega, 2020; Mazzucchelli, 2018). SLT emphasizes the importance of role models of all kinds in a child's life (Ahn & Vega, 2020). Educators in particular make excellent role models and should focus on modeling positive behaviors for their students to reproduce and replicate (Ahn & Vega, 2020). Ahn and Vega (2020) found that teachers' positive behaviors have significant influences on the child's learning. It is important to note that SLT posits that perceived similarity and competency are important factors for role models (Ahn & Vega, 2020). In other words, if the student does not think their teacher is well versed in a topic or does not see any similarities between themselves and the teacher, this person will most likely not be an effective role model. Having diverse role models ensures that students have models that they feel comfortable mimicking. If the student does not see similarities in the goals, behaviors, strategies, or personality traits of the role model they may not imitate the intended behavior (Ahn & Vega, 2020). Furthermore, children need to feel like the behavior they are being asked to mimic is achievable (Ahn & Vega, 2020). This relates closely with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) that argues a learning outcome must be a balance of difficult yet attainable (Albert, 2012). Models have to operate in the ZPD to be able to teach the child. If a role model is enacting an unobtainable goal for the child this will lessen the probability the behavior will be mimicked (Ahn & Vega, 2020).

A child's role models ultimately contribute to their feelings of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the autonomous aspect of SLT described as the feelings of competency and ability to be successful in a given task based on what was learned in social interactions with role models (Ion et al., 2020; Zimmerman, 2002). Thinking about the ZPD, if the child is given a difficult task that

is out of their skillset this might decrease self-efficacy by highlighting their incompetence rather than their abilities. Self-efficacy is important with regard to academic achievement and life outcomes (Ion et al., 2020; Zimmerman, 2002). Ion et al. (2020) found that when a student perceived the task as achievable their accomplishments were positively influenced. It is important for caregivers to model positive behaviors and reinforce beliefs in the child that they are capable of being successful. Ion et al. (2020) argue that it is not the actual ability to complete the task that leads the student to success rather their perceived abilities that have been instilled by caregivers. Professional aspirations are significantly correlated with high levels of self-efficacy, solidifying it as an important skill to foster in young children (Ion et al., 2020; Zimmerman, 2002). Self-efficacy is also related to resilience and secure attachment styles, both important aspects of the adoptee's identity (Bender & Ingram, 2018).

This theory offers two important questions. What happens when an individual does not have a reliable person to observe? Who teaches the adoptee that they are capable of doing difficult things or how to overcome adversity? For example, an adoptee in an underprivileged orphanage. Individuals who are not given adequate models to observe can experience difficulties in life. Going back to my previous example, a late-placed adoptee may not know what a healthy level of affection looks like in a relationship or know what successfully completing a task looks like. One area that could be significantly affected by the lack of reliable role models is attachment.

Attachment Theory

Building off SLT, humans rely on other people to learn and develop (Bandura, 2002). One of the areas where modeling is most important and identifiable is in relationships. AT argues that caregivers provide examples of how to act in relationships (Bowlby, 1983). Through

interpersonal interactions with caregivers, individuals learn how to trust and pursue relationships (Bowlby, 1983). AT derives from the inherent need for closeness and comfort in interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1983). The need for human connection is a basic need that comes before other physiological needs (McLeod, 2009). Harry Harlow performed several experiments showing the need for connection and comfort is often more important than basic needs such as food and water (McLeod, 2009). One of the initial bonds formed is between mother and child at birth (McLeod, 2009). Through continuous interactions, relationships are modeled, and attachment styles are reinforced (Bowlby, 1983). Attachment begins to form in infancy during Piaget's sensory-motor stage (Bell, 1970; Watt, 1989). Thinking about the sensory-motor stage, children are just beginning to interact with their environment and observe their caretakers (Bell, 1970; Watt, 1989). Babies quickly learn what people will consistently be in their lives and if they can trust their caregivers (Bell, 1970). For example, when a mother responds to their infant's cries, they are teaching them that their cries will be responded to, that their feelings matter, and that someone will be there to help them if they need it. Based on these interactions, infants begin to form secure or insecure attachments.

Secure attachment means that the child feels safe to pursue relationships, trusts that if they need someone they will be there, and this, in turn, keeps them content and engaged (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1983; Vogel 2019). Secure attachment is correlated with positive outcomes in the classroom (Bergin, C. & Begin, D. 2009). Most children do ultimately form secure attachments (Van den Dries et al., 2009). In certain circumstances, a child is exposed to unhealthy relationships with their caregivers and develop insecure attachments. Insecure attachment styles include avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized attachment styles (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1983; Vogel, 2019).

Avoidant attachment occurs when the caregiver has consistently dismissed the child or has been unavailable when the child is in need (Vogel, 2019). A child with avoidant attachment learns that their caregiver does not respond to their needs. Ambivalent attachment happens when the caregiver is sometimes there and sometimes absent (Vogel, 2019). An ambivalently attached child does not know what to make out of their caregiver's behaviors since they sometimes are attentive to the child's needs. This often causes frustration for the child as they live in a constant state of uncertainty. Disorganized attachment is when the caregiver is the source of comfort and also the source of trauma (Vogel, 2019). Disorganized attachment is typically the result of neglect or abuse and is the most harmful attachment style to have. Insecure attachments are derived from children observing their caretaker's inattentiveness or overattentiveness to their needs (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1983). Those who form insecure attachments learn that they cannot trust their relational partners and may even learn not to pursue relationships at all. For example, referring back to my previous example, if an infant cries and nobody responds, they might stop crying because nobody has met their needs.

Children with insecure attachments also interact with their environments differently than securely attached children. Insecurely attached children do not explore their environment as much and show overall lower levels of curiosity (Baer & Martinez, 2006). Those who have an insecure attachment style show lower levels of self-efficacy and resilience resulting from unmet emotional needs (Bender & Ingram, 2018). Bender and Ingram (2018) found that in order to impact more solidified aspects of attachment caregivers should focus on malleable factors such as self-efficacy. In other words, those with insecure attachments do not believe in their ability to accomplish tasks and they find it difficult to overcome adversity. By encouraging students and fostering self-efficacy, resilience can be improved thus mediating insecure attachment (Bender &

Ingram, 2018). For those who do not form secure attachments, adverse life events are to blame. One of the risk factors for developing insecure attachment is being adopted (Van den Dries et al., 2009).

Learning from Theory

Having reviewed SLT and AT there is an important connection between social interactions with caregivers as young children and the attachment style that is developed (Bowlby, 1983; Bandura 2002). Not only do caregivers teach individuals how to interact in relationships, but this will also translate to how children learn in the classroom. Woolgar et al. (2013) used SLT to understand how attachment styles develop, but also propose pathways to unlearn insecure attachment. Proper role models, such as educators, can help children who have developed an insecure attachment (Woolgar et al., 2013). This leads to an important discussion about the developmental and learning differences that occur in adopted children in the classroom setting.

Critical Discussion

Adoption provides a specific context to understand SLT and AT. Through adoption, learning outcomes can be more comprehensively understood for children who experience difficulties in terms of social support and attachment. Looking at adoption, in particular, also offers a starting point in understanding mental health struggles that children may experience and offer techniques for educators to improve learning outcomes. An adoptee's exposure to neglect and maltreatment puts them at an increased risk for developing an insecure attachment and thus developing learning difficulties in the classroom (Van den Dries et al., 2009). Van den Dries et al., (2009) conducted a meta-analysis finding that time spent in institutional care impacted the attachment style and difficulties experienced.

Adoptees often have a disorganized attachment style meaning that their source of comfort was also their source of trauma (Pace, 2014). Adoptees may carry their trauma into new relationships further impacting their life (Steele et al., 2009). Steele et al. (2009) assessed late placed adoptees and found that their trauma and insecure attachment often displayed as aggression and fear to their adoptive parents. Parents' behavior impacted the child's overall adjustment displaying the importance of observation in developing secure attachments (Steele et al., 2009). In addition to attachment styles, it is important to consider the age of the child and what developmental stage they are at. Watt (1989) posits that social development is a critical part of early childhood development. Those who do not have proper social development are at risk of developing difficulties in learning. Adoptees who had delayed placement or were adopted later in life have significant hurdles to overcome in terms of learning. Therefore, adoption can create a juncture in typical childhood development.

Social support is a fundamental part of the adoptee's development specifically because of the trauma that they have experienced (Brodzinsky, 2011). Brodzinsky (2011) found that adoptive parents who participated in open communication patterns had more psychologically adjusted children. Adoptive parents must demonstrate social support through open communication about adoption in order to improve adoption-related outcomes (Brodzinsky, 2011). Open communication includes honesty about uncertainty and encouragement of exploratory conversations (Brodzinsky, 2011). Open communication is modeled for children teaching them how to approach future conversations about adoption (Brodzinsky, 2011).

Ji et al. (2010) argue that pre-adoptive conditions do not matter as much as post-adoptive conditions. Being adopted alone does not mean that a child will experience difficulties learning, but it increases their likelihood of developing difficulties. This means that caregivers should

focus their attention on the child's specific needs for extra social support to overcome insecure attachment (Ji et al., 2010). Referring back to Brodzinsky's (2011) study it is apparent how communication can be a way that caregivers can adapt to the child's needs. However, the adoptee's risk for developing adoption-related attachment issues increases the longer they are in foster care and the more families they are placed with (Ji et al., 2010). Adoptees do not always receive the social support they need in order to adequately develop. In the instances where insecure attachments have been reinforced or poor relational modeling has been, displayed the adoptees may begin to experience difficulties learning.

Divergence in Learning

Due to the complex nature of adoption, adoptees may experience difficulties differently. Adoptees who were adopted at birth will not have the same experiences as a child that was in foster care until they were adopted at the age of eight or 18. In either situation, it is important to understand the potential variations in learning and where these issues could stem from. In addition, adoptees' attachment styles vary as well as their level of actual and desired social support. An adoptee might have an insecure attachment style but have an amazing social support system that is actively working on overcoming adoption-related issues. Another adoptee might have experienced several attachment traumas that require more social support.

The general absence of social examples and the presence of insecure attachment create notable difficulties in learning for the adoptee. Ji et al. (2010) argue that there is an increased risk for adopted individuals who were adopted later and lack caregivers for a prolonged time period. Many adoptees have to live in foster care bouncing from home to home before they are adopted. Living in foster care or with biological families prolongs the exposure to adversities like substance abuse, child maltreatment, and separation anxiety (Ji et al., 2010). Individuals who

develop insecure attachment are more likely to develop attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), become delinquent, have lower test scores, and struggle to learn (Bergin, C. & Bergin, D. 2009). Veríssimo et al. (2017) conducted a study that articulated a quantifiable difference in IQ between securely attached children and insecurely attached children. Not only are there measurable academic differences there are also measurable social differences. Bergin C. and Bergin, D. (2009) establish that securely attached children do better socially, emotionally, and scholastically. Bergin C. and Bergin, D. (2009) also found that for students who were insecurely attached their teachers played a fundamental role in raising achievement.

In addition to poor learning outcomes, individuals with insecure attachments also struggle to regulate their emotions and form healthy relationships (Bergin, C. & Begin, D. 2009). This can be problematic for the classroom environment as adoptees are interacting with their peers. Children with insecure attachment also reported having difficulties engaging with course content which further hindered their performance (Kennedy, 2008). Kennedy (2008) argues that attachment's close relationship to neurobiology explains the detrimental effects of attachment in the classroom. Adaptation to the school environment was closely related to educators' emotional connection with the child (Kennedy, 2008). Adoptees need to be able to feel that they are capable of successfully engaging in course content relating back to the development of self-efficacy (Bender & Ingram, 2018; Kennedy, 2008). Children with insecure attachment styles require a more individualized plan of study that caters to their specific emotional and learning needs (Flynn et al., 2012; Kennedy, 2008). Understanding the social context in which the adoptee is operating can help understand their particular needs in terms of attachment, self-efficacy, and learning. This could look like a teacher allocating extra time after class to meet with the student and create a plan of study for them specifically.

In terms of emotional divergence in the classroom, adoptees have to spend more time coping with abandonment, rejection, and worth than their non-adopted peers (Jones, 1997). Adoptees need to first overcome issues related to their adoption before they can sufficiently interact in the classroom. One particular area that educators should focus on developing is the ability to cope with stress as this is something adoptees struggle with (Ji et al., 2010). Non-adopted individuals are able to focus on learning the class lessons while adoptees may be worrying about their basic need to feel connection (Bowlby, 1983). Insecurely attached children, like adoptees, have lower levels of self-efficacy that can contribute to their ability to do well in the classroom (Bender & Ingram, 2018). Furthermore, instances of failures may only reinforce this low level of self-efficacy due to the lack of resilience (Bender & Ingram, 2018).

School performance for adoptees was seen to significantly impact suicide attempts, criminal behavior, and dependence on welfare programs (Berlin & Hjern, 2011). Berlin and Hjern (2011) also found 55% of school-related issues stemmed back to adoption-related issues. In other words, when a child exhibited problems learning content this related back to insecure attachments and the trauma that resulted from the adoption. These divergences in learning can be overcome with proper caregiver intervention (Berlin & Hjern, 2011). School is one instance where interventions can be implemented to identify early warning signs such as delinquency or low-test scores to allocate extra attention to those who need it (Flynn et al., 2012). Flynn et al. (2012) argue that adoptees with insecure attachments benefit from individualized instruction and tutoring. To be most effective, interventions should occur before the age of 16 or as soon as possible (Berlin & Hjern, 2011). Berlin and Hjern (2011) found that by improving school performance through caregiver interactions, learning outcomes were improved 38-52%. Parents

and educators can unify to reduce attachment-related issues and improve modeling to create these improved learning outcomes.

Long-Term Consequences of Insecure Attachment

If these classroom issues are not accounted for, the adoptee may have lingering issues as they transition into adulthood (Feeney et al., 2007). Feeney et al. (2007) found that insecure attachment can be unlearned to improve future relationships. Moreover, if the insecure attachment is unlearned the adoptee can go on to develop healthy and productive relationships (Feeney et al., 2007). As mentioned before, adoptees who do not resolve their insecure attachment are more likely to attempt suicide and experience mental health struggles (Slap et al., 2001, Van IJzendoorn et al., 2001). In addition to mental health impacts, adoptees experience relational issues as well. Adoptees who had insecure attachments in adulthood had difficulty responding to their babies' cries and forming healthy bonds with their children (Schoenmaker et al., 2015). Schoenmaker et al. (2015) found that individuals with insecure attachments often had no emotional response to watching children cry. Blake et al. (2021) conclude that issues related to adoption are internalized during early childhood and then externalized throughout adulthood increasing individual risk in terms of emotional and behavioral outcomes. In other words, adoptees with unresolved trauma were more likely to display negative behaviors in adulthood as a way of externalizing the trauma. When discussing adoption outcomes for children it is paramount to understand the long-term effects of attachment issues and inadequate role models.

What Can Teachers Do?

Teachers are a fundamental piece of the puzzle when it comes to classroom outcomes for the adoptee (Bergin C. & Bergin, D., 2009). Teachers can help adoptees unlearn insecure attachment by being positive models (Bergin C. & Bergin, D., 2009). Starting with pre-school-

aged children teachers need to acknowledge their role in developing securely attached children (Veríssimo et al., 2017). Veríssimo et al. (2017) found that teachers co-constructed secure attachment with their students through classroom interactions. Co-constructing secure attachment means building off the existing attachment style while simultaneously fostering a healthy student-teacher relationship in the classroom.

Teachers should focus on developing close relationships with their students, especially students who may be at risk like adoptees (Ansari et al., 2020). Ansari et al. (2020) found that when teachers put in the effort into forming more close relationships with their students learning outcomes improved in every subject area. Thinking about the teacher's role in forming attachments and what specifically can be done to address attachment in the classroom, Post et al. (2020) argues for specialized programs. Post et al. (2020) found that teachers who took specialized child-teacher relationship training (CTRRT) were able to nurture more positive classroom environments, address the trauma experienced by students, and build resilience. This specialized training creates more positive student-teacher relationships and can help build secure attachments in the school setting.

On a large scale, Nitecki (2017) argues that society needs to reconceptualize the teacher-student relationship and foster longer relationships to form secure attachments. In the current system, children are continuously moving classrooms and switching teachers at a minimum once a year. While the system might not change to allocate for a single teacher over the span of a child's life, teachers can consider how outside classroom interactions can be beneficial for building secure attachments. Relationships should not have to end just because the student is going on to the next grade. Allowing students, a space to have a professional relationship with their teacher can help form those secure connections (Nitecki, 2017). In addition to relational

closeness, Claessens et al. (2017) conducted research that centered the discussion of bridging the gap between academic and home life for children. Claessens et al (2017) found that teachers' communication should not just be about academic concerns, but also about the child's home life as well. Having discussions about the child's home life helps reassure the child that their teacher cares about them and aids in forming secure attachments. These recommendations offer an excellent starting point for educators in understanding their role in helping adoptees unlearn insecure attachment, develop self-efficacy, and build resilience.

Limitations

There are several areas that should be acknowledged as potential limitations. First, the literature on attachment focuses mainly on those who are insecurely attached and not specifically on adoptees. While it is known that adoptees make up a majority of the insecurely attached population, studies may be limited in their capacity to generalize to this population. This also applies to the research about the teacher's impact on forming attachment. While teachers are important in forming attachments this has not been confirmed in the adopted population, Furthermore, there is not an analysis of how trauma informs the attachment process with educators. The second important limitation is the lack of acknowledgment of intersectionality. Adopted individuals are more than just adopted individuals. The literature does not focus heavily on interracial adoptees, adoptees of low socioeconomic status, adoptees who have same-sex parents, or who have experienced extreme adversity. While some of the literature addresses these issues, they are often not addressed in a holistic way making the above analysis incomplete. In other words, it would be ignorant to assume that attachment is the only issue that adoptees have to face, and fixing attachment-related issues would solve all problems experienced. Another critical limitation that was not addressed abundantly in this paper is the role that adoptive parents

play in the attachment process and how they fit into this dynamic. The last limitation of this analysis that should be reiterated is my status as a white female international adoptee. This unintentionally informs my choice of articles, perspective in writing, and areas of focus. Future research should consider these limitations and account for the many areas of intersectionality this paper did not.

Conclusion

Adoptees are a vulnerable population at an increased risk for developing a mental illness or attempting suicide. Insecure attachments and non-existent role models can contribute to problematic outcomes for the adoptee. Some issues adoptees may face relating to insecure attachment include lower test scores, poor emotional regulation, and inability to form lasting relationships. Adoptees also have more difficulties developing self-efficacy and resilience which are paramount skills needed in overcoming trauma. These outcomes can be used as a starting point to understand the poor mental health outcomes for adoptees with unresolved trauma. Using SLT and AT to better understand classroom outcomes for the adoptee, the lived experiences of the adoptee can be better understood.

This paper reviewed SLT and AT highlighting conversations about self-efficacy and resilience. After, SLT and AT were used to identify key differences in the adoptee's learning experience. Lastly, educators were identified as key models in helping adoptees unlearn insecure attachment, improve classroom outcomes, and ultimately improve life outcomes. I argue that educators should use SLT and AT to inform their teaching practices, develop a more inclusive classroom, and understand adoptees as an at-risk population. Adoption does not have to come with a death sentence. With the help of caregivers and educators, adoptees can reverse the

harmful effects of inadequate role models and insecure attachments to overcome the trauma of being adopted by unlearning harmful behaviors.

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