New Perspectives for Outcome-based Evaluation and Research on Family and Children's Services

Edited by
Cinzia Canali, Joyce Ma and Tiziano Vecchiato

Fondazione E. Zancan onlus
Centro Studi e ricerca sociale

iaOBERfcs
International Association for Outcome-based Evaluation and Research on Family and Children's Services

香港中文大學社會工作學系
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK
THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Feeling Different: The meaning of origin for international adoptions in Germany

Stefanie Sauer

Keywords: fragmentation of parenthood, origin, identity development of internationally adopted children, bicultural adoptive families in Germany

Background

In Germany, international adoptions are discussed controversially both among experts as well as in politics. Especially the impact of the adoption on adoptive children's lives and their opportunity of a favorable identity development are assessed differently.

On the one hand, international adoptions are considered to be an effective support for abandoned children in the so-called Third World. On the other hand, experts point to the risks of international children trafficking and the dubious practice of self-organized adoptions abroad, which is still allowed in Germany. However, there is a lack of empirical studies and valid data in regards to the situation of families who adopt a child abroad. In Germany, there are no reliable and significant analyses concerning the development of these families and the relationship between adoptive parents and their adopted children.

The author introduces results concerning the course of international adoptions in Germany. A special focus is set upon the meaning of the child's birth parents and their country of origin for the development of internationally adopted children in Germany. Therefore, the present study is an important step to close this research gap and contributes to the discussion about the chances and risks of international adoptions.

Objectives

The research project «Courses of International Adoptions» was a cooperative project with the German office of the International Social Service (ISS) to investigate different courses of international adoptions and to gain new insights about detrimental as well as favorable influences on a positive course of adoption.

Thereby, this research project was set out to answer the question which factors affect the development of stable parent-child-relationships and the favorable development of identity of the adopted children. Associated with this question was a special focus on the requirements of the different biological and cultural origins of the adopted children for the adoptive parents and the children themselves.

Finally, the results serve to expose which kind of professional support adoptive families need for the integration of the adopted children in their adoptive family and the German society.

Methodology

The study follows a triangular qualitative research design, which incorporates multiple perspectives and subjective experiences on the research question of determinants for the growth of a stable parent-child-relationship and for the development of the adoptive child's identity in international adoptions.

During the first part of the research process, 17 qualitative expert interviews with professionals of state and non-state adoption agencies in Germany as well as with experts working with international adoption (i.e. psychologist and administrative officials) were conducted. Thereby, institutional conditions and professional positions were investigated. Then, the subjective interpretations, experiences, and needs of the adoptive parents and adopted children were captured by qualitative interviews (Witzel, 2000). Altogether, 29 adoptive families and four grown-up adoptees were interviewed.

In order to cover a wide range of different courses of international adoptions, families which differ in relation to the age of the children at the point of time of the adoption as well as the duration of the adoptive relationship were recruited as participants. Therefore, scientific findings about the development of the children and the parent-child-relationship in different phases of the adoption and their correlations were expected. The age of the adopted children at the time of the adoption ranged from three weeks to eight and a half years. The adoptions lasted from four months to more than 18 years at the time of the interviews. Furthermore, it was important that the adopted children came from various countries, i.e. India, Thailand, Vietnam, Mali, Ethiopia, Brazil, Russian Federation, Bulgaria, Belarus, Colombia, Burkina Faso and Mongolia.

The setting of the interviews and the participation of the children were left in the hands of the families. The families decided whether the children were involved or not and whether they talked to the researchers alone or accompanied by their relatives. Separated interviews with parents and children were preferred to give the children the opportunity to express their own opinion. This setting could be realized in most families. The majority of the adopted children were interested in the questioning, which made it possible to interview 20 children in individual interviews or together with their siblings. Three children wanted to conduct a family interview. The interviewed children were of the age of five to 19 years.

Due to organizational issues or as the result of the parents' separation, the participation of adoptive fathers could not be realized in every family. Therefore, in seven cases the adoptive mothers were interviewed alone and in 22 families the interviews were conducted together with the adoptive parents.

All interviews were designed as problem-focused interviews (Witzel, 2000). First, the interview partners were brought into a self-determined narrative continuity by an open topic-specific initial question. In this process, the interview partners developed subjective interpretations concerning the research questions. Thereafter, the interviewers asked questions about topics which were identified as significant in advance but were not brought up in the self-presentation. In general, this approach applied equally for all

interviews. However, to observe the age-related level of development, the interviews with preschoolers and schoolchildren until about ten years were designed more game-based.

The data evaluation was conducted according to Philip Mayring's method of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000). Hereby, similarities and differences in experiences and perspectives of all interviewed participants were contrasted and different strategies interacting with the special challenges of international adoptions were identified. Further, influencing factors for a successful parent-child-relationship and a positive identity development of the internationally adopted child were identified.

Key findings

Most internationally adopted children are affected by health burdens and have to cope with the separation from familiar people and their country of origin. Adoptive parents must support their adoptive child in coping with the particular challenges connected to an international adoption. The majority of adoptive parents have a high degree of sensitivity for attachment processes. Hereby, the development of stable parent-child-relationships in adoptive families is enabled (Keller, 2011).

However, the favorable development of the adoptee's identity between two families and two cultures is directly associated with the strategies of the adoptive parents handling their special status as an adoptive family. Most adoptive parents stated that they deal with this special status openly.

Relating to the biological and cultural origin of the child, many families however developed strategies, which are contradictory to the professional standards of adoption agencies as well as the needs and rights of the respective child. Adoptive parents often trivialize the meaning of the biological prehistory of their adopted child. They also neglect the meaning of the birth parents as well as the country and culture of origin for the child's development. In this context, the handling of missing information regarding the child's birth parents and the beginning of the child's life history is particularly tenuous. This also applies to experiences concerning racism and discrimination due to a different outward appearance than the majority in Germany. While the specific situation as an adoptive family seems to be without any problems for the most adoptees, many children reveal issues in the reactions of their social environment (e.g. classmates) concerning the visible difference between the parents and the child as well as between the German majority society and the child as a member of a minority group. Surprisingly most parents do not know about these conflicts of their children. Thus, the development of identity and the question of origin and belonging appear to be difficult and ambivalent for many adoptive children.

Conclusions

Adoptive parents of internationally adopted children in Germany only receive limited professional support during and after the adoption.

In order to guarantee the child's welfare, parents require professional counselling and advisory services which are sensitive to diversity, fulfill the child's needs to learn about its biographical history, and integrate multiple experiences from the country of origin as well as from Germany (Tomasello, 2016).

Adoptive parents need support in order to adequately decode the meaning of different cultural heritage for their adoptive child and their development as a bi-cultural

family. Further, parents require help to support their adoptive child's self-understanding and self-acceptance as a child with double parenthood *and* cultural affiliation to contribute to an integrated self-concept of the adoptive child.

Main references

Keller, H. (2011). *Kinderalltag. Kulturen der Kindheit und ihre Bedeutung für Bindung, Bildung und Erziehung*. Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer.

Keller, H. & Otto, H. (2012). *Bindung und Kultur*. Nifbe Themenheft no. 1, Nifbe.

Mayring, P. (2000). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Grundlagen und Techniken*. Weinheim: Deutscher Studienverlag.

Tomasello, M. (2016). Cultural Learning Redux. *Child Development, 87(3),* 643-653.

Witzel, A. (2000). Das problemzentrierte Interview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung Social Research, 1(1),* doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-1.1.1132.

Contact details: Prof. Dr. Stefanie Sauer, Evangelische Hochschule Berlin, Teltower Damm 118-122, 14167 Berlin, Germany, E-mail: stefanie_sauer@web.de, Tel. +49 (0)157 51100760.