

JEWISH FAMILIES ADOPT CHILDREN FROM ABROAD

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This study, which assesses the effects of intercountry adoption on the psychosocial adjustment of the adoptees, as well as of their adoptive parents and siblings, yields several important implications for social work practice. Normal developmental struggles of such adoptees may be complicated by the additional task of being loyal to their birth culture and racial identity while maintaining the integrity of their adopted religion and traditions. Linkage with an adoptive parent support group, such as the Stars of David, is very important.

This article describes the experiences of an adoptive parent network called "Stars of David" made up of Jewish or intermarried couples who have or want to adopt children from overseas. The research presented here assesses the effects of intercountry adoption on the psychosocial adjustment of the adoptees, as well as of their adoptive parents and siblings.

The "Stars of David" (SOD) is a Boston-based national adoptive parent group comprised of Jewish or intermarried couples whose avowed purpose is to rear the children they adopt as Americans and as Jews and with a knowledge and respect for the culture of their birth. Thus, a Korean boy adopted into a Stars of David family is likely to receive a Hebrew name, undergo circumcision, and have a Bar Mitzvah. A Colombian girl will also participate in a naming ceremony and may have a Bat Mitzvah. In addition, both will learn about their birth culture through language, books, food, travel, and observance of ceremonies and rituals. Both will be American children—legally and socially—as a function of their adoption, their environments, and their lifestyles. Since its founding in the early 1980s, the Stars of David has grown

from 35 families living in Boston and its suburbs to over 800 families spread across the country.

In this article, we describe the adoptees and their siblings' relationship with each other and their parents, their school performances, their social activities, and their future ambitions. We report the parents' interpretation of the reactions of their communities and religious congregations to their adopted child(ren). In addition, we present the families' descriptions of their religious practices and the types of activities and ceremonies they engaged in that commemorated the adopted children's birth culture.

Modeling this study after our earlier transracial adoption surveys (Simon & Altstein, 1977, 1981, 1987), we arranged to have the parents and children in the families, biological as well as adopted who were at least 6 years old, interviewed in their homes, separately and privately.¹ Altogether we conducted personal interviews with 59

1. The interviews were conducted by the authors, by graduate students in social work programs in the Boston area, and by two undergraduate students.

parents and 60 children, 37 of whom were adopted and 23 of whom were born into the families. The families in our sample live in the Boston area, the Washington-Virginia area, and in New York City and some of its environs. The fieldwork was carried out in the summer and fall of 1988.

PARENTS AND FAMILY MAKE-UP

Demographic Characteristics

The parents ranged in age from 30 to 60, with a median age of 40 for the mothers and 43 for the fathers. All of the mothers and 95% of the fathers had completed 4 years of college, and over 75% of the mothers and fathers had postgraduate degrees as well.

The fathers work as professionals, mainly in the fields of engineering, accounting, and as professors. Even though almost all of the mothers earned at least a bachelor's degree, about a third described themselves as full-time homemakers. The others work mainly as teachers and social workers. The family's median annual income was \$69,000. At least 60% of the families live in all or mostly white neighborhoods, and about one-third live in largely Jewish neighborhoods.

Table 1 shows the number of children adopted by the 59 SOD families. Thirty-three families did not have any children born to them; 20 had one child; 4 had two children; and 2 had three children. In total then, the 59 families had 128 children, 94 of whom were adopted and 34 born to the families. We interviewed 37 of the adopted and 23 of the biological children. We were able to interview a higher percentage of the children born into the families because more of them were at least 6 years of age at the time of the study than were the adopted ones. In 15 of the families, one adopted child was the only child; in 21, he or she was the oldest, and in 18, he or she was the youngest. In total, the families adopted 39 males and 55 females.

Table 1
NUMBER OF CHILDREN ADOPTED BY
THE SOD FAMILIES

<i>Number of Children Adopted per Family</i>	<i>Number of Families</i>	<i>Number of Children</i>
1	36	36
2	17	34
3	4	12
4	1	4
8	1	8
Total	59	94

The ages of the first adoptees at the time of adoption ranged from less than 1 month (13 families) to 9 years (1 family). The great majority of families (46 of 59) adopted children who were less than one year old. Families who adopted more than one child were a little more likely to adopt slightly older children; seven out of the 23 families who adopted a second time adopted children who were between 2 and 8 years old. Table 2 describes the racial, ethnic, and national characteristics of the children adopted by the families.

The number of years that couples waited between the time they were married until their first adoption ranged from 1 to more than 10 years; the median was 6.5 years. Thirty-four families chose to adopt because they could not bear children, and an additional ten did so because they could not bear any more children. Nine families decided to adopt because they did not wish to bear any more children, citing overpopulation and the number of needy children in the world, and six families gave other reasons. The reason most often given for why a family adopted the child it did was because he or she was the child most readily available.

Jewish Practices and Ties to the Community

Thirty-five percent of the families were members of a synagogue at the time they adopted their first child, and most of them had discussed their plans with the rabbi before they adopted. With two exceptions,

Table 2
RACIAL, ETHNIC, AND NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ADOPTEES

	<i>First Adoptee</i>	<i>Second Adoptee</i>	<i>Third and More Adoptees</i>	<i>Combination</i>
Korean	23	9	4	36
Hispanic	15	6	1	22
Other Asian	4	2	3	9
American Black	3	2	4	9
American Indian	2			2
American White	12	4		16
Totals	59	23	12	94

the families reported a positive response. Members of the congregation were almost unanimous in their positive and supportive reactions.

Less than 10% of the families attend synagogue on a weekly basis; most attend only on the High Holidays. Among those families who attend, the Boston respondents were more likely to go to a Reform temple and the Washington-New York families to a Conservative synagogue. The Washington-New York families were more observant than the Boston families of rituals, such as dietary laws (33% compared to 16%) and lighting Shabbat candles. Three out of five of the Washington families observed these rituals on a regular basis compared to less than one out of three of the Boston families. The practices that at least 75% of all the families engaged in included making or attending a seder, lighting candles on Chanukah, attending synagogue on the High Holidays, and affixing a mezzuzah to their doorposts. Although only 35% of the families were members of a synagogue, four out of five of the families reported that they belonged to at least one Jewish organization (not including the Stars of David).

Although highly educated in the secular realm, three-quarters of the parents reported that they received little in the way of a Jewish education as they were growing up. Three of the mothers and five of the fathers had attended a Jewish day school. At least two-thirds of the fathers attended Hebrew School in the afternoons, as did 40% of the mothers.

Three out of four of the families had their adopted children undergo a formal conversion ceremony. With two exceptions, all the families who had birth sons had a brit milah for them, but only two out of three of the adopted sons participated in such a ceremony. None of the Boston families expected either their biological or their adopted children to attend a Jewish day school, in contrast to 40% of the Washington and New York families. Half of the Boston families plan to send their adopted and biological children to an after-school Hebrew program; the others expect to provide nothing in the way of formal Jewish education. Only two of the Washington families do not anticipate providing their children with any type of formal Jewish education. All but ten of the families plan for their children to have a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. None of the families differentiate between their adopted and biological children in their plans about Jewish education and rites of passage ceremonies.

The parents were asked to respond to each of the items in Table 3 by indicating whether it was "very important," "somewhat important," or "not important" for their children. Table 3 shows the percentage of parents who answered "very important."

In contrast to the traditional emphasis on family and community, the families' approach to Jewish identity, as suggested by Table 3, focuses more on individual behavior. Note, for example, the small percentages who believe it is very important that their children marry a Jew, have mostly

Table 3
PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS RATING JEWISH
PRACTICES AS VERY IMPORTANT

<i>Practice</i>	<i>Percentage Rating as Very Important</i>
Be educated about Jewish history/culture	88
Marry a Jew	26
Observe Jewish holidays	57
Participate in Jewish community life	34
Contribute to Jewish charities	43
Have mostly Jewish friends	4
Observe Jewish rituals and customs	41
Take pride in being a Jew	93

Jewish friends, and participate in Jewish community life; the higher percentages who believe in the importance of contributing to Jewish charities and observing Jewish holidays and rituals; and the still higher percentages who believe it very important that their children be educated in Jewish history and culture and that they take pride in the fact that they are Jewish.

Three out of four of the parents reported that they have spent time learning about their adopted child's birth culture and as a family engage in ceremonies and rituals that stem from that culture. The "ethnic" experiences that the families described included preparing special foods, having cultural artifacts and books in their homes, attending classes on their child's birth culture, belonging to ethnic organizations, establishing ties with families who have children of that culture, and learning the language of their child's birth culture. Indeed, only two of the families said that they did not engage in any of the above because they felt that it was the Jewish identity and heritage that the children should live with and inherit.

Parents' Accounts of Children's Performances in School and of Relations with Them and with Siblings

Twenty-two of the birth and 31 of the adopted children were old enough to be in

elementary or high school. The parents report higher grades for the birth children than they do for the children they adopted. However, when we controlled for age of adoption and compared the grades of the 15 children who were adopted when they were less than 1 year old with the birth children, the differences between adopted and biological children all but disappeared.

Using a four-point scale, we asked the parents to characterize their relationship with each of their children. The scale ranged from (1) "positive and good," (2) "positive outweighs negative," (3) "negative outweighs positive," and (4) "negative." If the parents checked any category save "positive and good," we asked them to explain the problems they were having with a given child. In regard to birth children, only one family said that the negative aspects of their relationship outweighed the positive ones. An additional three said that there were some problems, but that the positive factors outweighed the negative ones. Those families described the problems as "emotional" and related to "personality." The one family who checked "negative outweighs positive" described drug and alcohol use and anger directed at them.

The picture is somewhat more complicated for the adopted children. For their first adoptee, ten families noted that there were problems but the positive outweighed the negative, six of the parents felt that the negative outweighed the positive, and nine described their relationships with their first adopted child as negative. None of the 23 families who adopted more than one child felt that the relationship was either more negative than positive or was negative. Six said that there were problems, but the positive factors outweighed the negative. The problems most frequently described were disobedience, anger, and emotional and personality problems. Three families mentioned drug and alcohol use.

Looking at the responses another way, 83% of the parents characterized their relationships with their 34 birth children as

"positive and good," as compared to 68% of the parents of their adopted children. Among parents who adopted two children, 58% rated the relationship with their first adoptee as "positive and good," as did 74% of their relationship with their second adoptee. There are not enough birth children to make comparable examinations.

Using the same scale, we asked the parents to characterize the adopted and birth children's relationships to each other. One of the applicable 26 families described them as "negative," one as "negative factors outweigh positive ones," and two as "there are problems but the positive factors outweigh the negative ones." The four families who described problems talked about sibling rivalry and jealousy. Twenty-two families or 85% evaluated the relationships between birth and adopted siblings as "positive and good."

There were too few families with more than one birth child to make a comparison among birth siblings worthwhile. However, among the 23 families who had adopted more than one child, two sets of parents felt "the negative factors outweighed the positive ones" in their adopted children's relationships with each other and five parents stated that "the positive factors outweighed the negative ones." Sixteen or 70% of the families evaluated the relations among the adopted children as "positive and good." The parents' evaluations of the relationships among adopted siblings are not quite as high as among the adopted and birth children, but high enough to show generally positive relationships.

Finally, when we asked the parents what advice they have to offer families who are considering adoption, 62% urged it unequivocally, and 25% urged the family to adopt but only after they had thought about it for a long time and were sure of their own motivations. Nine percent would say only that the family should think for a long time before they took any action, and 4% or two families recommended against adoption.

EXPERIENCES OF ADOPTED AND BIRTH CHILDREN

In this section, we report the children's perceptions of their Jewish observance, identity, and self-esteem.

Demographic and Educational Characteristics of the Adopted and Birth Children

The birth children ranged in age from 6 to 23 (median age, 11.4 years) and the adoptees from 6 to 21 (median age, 9.8 years). For the birth children, their years in school ranged from second grade to college and for the adoptees from kindergarten to college. The median school year for the birth children was eighth grade and for the adoptees fourth grade. Forty-five percent of both the birth and adopted children were boys.

Three out of five of the birth interviewees were the oldest child in the family, as compared to one out of three of the adoptees.

Fourteen percent of the birth children and 22% of the adoptees were attending Jewish day schools. Three out of five of the birth children who were in the appropriate age categories were attending Hebrew classes after school compared to two out of five of the adoptees. Altogether, 14 of the 21 birth children in the appropriate age range were attending either Jewish day schools or Hebrew classes after school compared to 15 out of the 29 adoptees. For both the birth and adopted children, the percentages are high compared to a cross-section of the American Jewish community in those cities. Forty-three percent of the adoptees speak, read, and/or write Hebrew in contrast to 30% of the birth children. Only two of the adopted children speak, read, and write Spanish; an additional two speak, but do not read or write Spanish. Four birth children also speak Spanish. None report that they speak, read, or write Korean. From these responses, it seems clear that the adoptees are not retaining or learning the language of their birth cultures.

Observance of Jewish Practices

When asked to describe the Jewish ritual and ceremonial observances that their families engaged in on a regular basis, birth and adopted children gave very similar responses. The large majority reported observance of the major holidays, but not of regular daily or weekly activities, such as dietary laws and Shabbat.

Like their parents, only a small group—two of the birth children and six of the adoptees—reported that they and their families attend temple or synagogue on a regular basis. Eighty-seven percent of the children born into the families and 80% of the adoptees report having had or are planning to have a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Over the past year, 42% of the birth and 27% of the adopted children reported having read at least one book about Jewish history or culture. Three of the adopted children reported reading a book about their birth culture.

Looking ahead, we asked the children whether they expected to participate in Jewish community life when they were adults and on their own. Sixty-four percent of the birth and 57% of the adopted children said they did, mostly by joining a temple or synagogue.

Identity and Self-Esteem

When the adopted children were asked whether it bothered them that they looked different than their parents, two-thirds said it was not a source of difficulty for them and that it caused them no problems. Three of the ten children who mentioned specific problems said that they were uncomfortable at extended family functions on Jewish occasions. Twenty-two of the adopted children also mentioned that, within the past 3 years, other children had called them names and made fun of them because of their racial backgrounds. Two-thirds ignored the incident, but half later either told their

parents about it or reported what had happened to a teacher.

When asked how he or she would describe him- or herself to a stranger, none of the birth children mentioned physical characteristics or religion; they all described personality traits. In contrast, 37% of the adopted children mentioned race, religion, and the fact that they were adopted.

The Self-Esteem Scale developed by Morris Rosenberg and Roberta Simmons in 1968 remains one of the most often used and reliable measures of this concept to date. It has been used in countless studies, including the most recent contact we had with our cohort of transracial adoptees that we began to study in 1972. We used the Self-Esteem Scale again in this study and report the results in Table 4.

On five of the nine items, the birth children were more likely to take a positive attitude about themselves, to believe they have a number of good qualities, and to feel well satisfied with themselves. Yet, paradoxically, the adopted children were less likely to feel that they were "no good," "a failure," or that they did not have much about which to feel proud. It is interesting that the adopted children scored higher when they responded against a negative image in contrast to the birth children who made more direct positive assessments of themselves. In other words, the adopted children are more likely to assert their self-esteem in response to negative assessments, such as "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" or "I think I'm no good."

Family Ties and Integration

There were no differences in the relations that the birth and adopted children had with their grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other relatives. For almost all the children, the ties were positive. For a few, the relatives lived far away, and visits were infrequent.

In a series of items that asked "who knows best who you are" and "to whom

Table 4
SELF-ESTEEM SCORES BY CHILDREN'S STATUS

Items	Percent Showing High Self-Esteem*	
	Adopted	Birth
1. I take a positive attitude toward myself (Strongly Agree)	32.1	47.6
2. I wish I could have more respect for myself (Strongly Disagree)	16.7	15.0
3. I certainly feel useless at times (Strongly Disagree)	4.2	15.8
4. I feel I have a number of good qualities (Strongly Agree)	37.0	52.4
5. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure (Strongly Disagree)	64.3	50.0
6. I am able to do things as well as most other people (Strongly Agree)	21.4	33.3
7. I feel I do not have much to be proud of (Strongly Disagree)	48.0	31.1
8. On the whole, I am well satisfied with myself (Strongly Agree)	28.0	55.0
9. At times I think I am no good (Strongly Disagree)	20.0	9.5

*As measured by a "Strongly Agree" or "Strongly Disagree" response depending on which is appropriate for determining high self-esteem.

would you be most likely to go if you were happy about something," "worried about something," or "accused of stealing," we found no significant differences in the preferences expressed by birth and adopted children. Parents and siblings, as opposed to nonfamily members, were the most likely targets for both the birth and adopted children.

Another measure of the extent to which the adopted and birth children believed themselves to be an integral part of their families may be observed by comparing scores on the "Family Integration Scale" that was used on the British Adoption Project (BAP) (Owen & Jackson, 1983). The birth and biological children were asked to respond to the items in Table 5. On three of the eight items—"trust," "similar treatment," and "parents stick by me"—the adopted children indicated less of a sense of family integration than did the birth children. However, on the other five items, the differences were negligible.

These responses are the first indication we have from the adopted children that they are less comfortable or feel less integrated into their families than the birth children. They are not inconsistent with the parents' responses about their relation with their adopted children. The children who checked responses that indicated that they felt greater distance from their parents

were those who were 3 years and older at the time they were adopted.

When we probed further and asked about the ties they expected to have to their parents in the future, 74% of the birth children compared to 43% of the adopted children said "very close." The remaining 26% of the birth children answered "close," whereas 50% of the adopted children said "close" and 7% said "fairly close." Here again, the birth children's responses exhibit a greater sense of integration and commitment than do the adopted children. We asked about the ties the birth and adopted children expected to have to each other, but unfortunately, the numbers were too small to make the responses worth comparing.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

On the basis of the data collected during this first encounter with these families, the age at which the child was adopted is a crucial factor in the parent-child relationship. Those adopted when they were older than 1 year not only missed a crucial bonding period but many of them had also experienced trauma in their native societies. The older children had quite likely observed violence committed against their birth parents. They had been abandoned or had lived in institutions, and they may have

Table 5
SCORES ON THE FAMILY INTEGRATION SCALE BY CHILDREN'S STATUS

<i>Family Integration Items</i>	<i>Birth Children (%)</i>	<i>Adopted Children (%)</i>
1. I enjoy family life.		
Strongly agree	54.6	45.2
Agree	45.4	51.6
Disagree	0	3.2
Strongly disagree	0	0
2. I would like to leave home as soon as possible when I am able to.*		
Strongly disagree	0	7.7
Disagree	33.3	30.8
Agree	50.0	46.2
Strongly agree	16.7	15.4
3. People in our family trust one another.		
Strongly agree	45.5	23.3
Agree	54.5	60.0
Disagree	0	10.0
Strongly disagree	0	6.7
4. Most families are happier than ours.		
Strongly disagree	27.8	29.6
Disagree	72.2	63.0
Agree	0	7.4
Strongly agree	0	0
5. I am treated in the same way as my brothers and sisters.		
Strongly agree	18.2	21.4
Agree	40.9	53.6
Disagree	31.8	17.9
Strongly disagree	9.1	7.1
6. Most children are closer to their parents than I am.		
Strongly disagree	42.9	25.0
Disagree	42.9	66.7
Agree	14.3	8.3
Strongly agree	0	0
7. If I am in trouble, I know my parents will stick by me.		
Strongly agree	52.4	31.0
Agree	47.6	55.2
Disagree	0	10.3
Strongly disagree	0	3.5
8. My parents know what I am really like as a person.		
Strongly agree	42.9	27.6
Agree	47.6	65.5
Disagree	9.5	6.9
Strongly disagree	0	0

*The numbers on this item are smaller: 12 for the birth children and 13 for the adopted. We retained this item because the distributions are similar to the others in which the numbers range from 18 to 31.

seen their birth mothers work as prostitutes. How deeply such events are likely to affect the children's subsequent development and ability to integrate into a family must await further study. We hope to return to these families in a few years to observe the relationships among parents and children and among adopted and birth children when the adoptees are several years older and when most are entering adolescence.

These study findings yield several important implications for social work practice. Along with normal developmental struggles, foreign-born intercountry adoptees who are being raised as Jews have to come to terms with being loyal to their birth culture and racial identity while maintaining the integrity of their adopted religion and its traditions. Social workers should be alert to the difficulties inherent in this struggle.

Additionally, social workers treating potential adoptive parents, families who have already adopted foreign-born children, and/or the intercountry adoptees themselves must be aware of the complex set of issues involved in this type of adoption. Particularly during adolescence when identity is often a source of confusion and conflict, social workers should be sensitive to the possibility that intercountry adoptees may demonstrate additional stresses. The social worker should help prepare the adoptive parents for the struggles that are likely to occur with this type of adoption. The possibility of negative reactions toward these children by the Jewish community, partic-

ularly when dating begins, is another issue with which social workers may have to deal.

Finally, what seems to be universally agreed upon is the importance of linkage with an adoptive parent support group, such as the Stars of David. This connection appears critical for all concerned. We recommend that social workers actively encourage adoptive families to join local branches of this organization. It provides the comfort of a common identity along with the realization that there are other families living through similar situations. Most important, it offers an opportunity for sharing successful problem-solving techniques associated with commonly experienced circumstances.

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