Children’s recovery after early adversity: Lessons from inter-country adoption

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Presented at the Child and Family Research Centre Conference NUIG June 14th 2007
Long history of interest in examples of recovery and failure to recover from early adversity

Casts light on the old nature vs nurture question. Also very informative in relation to:

- The influence of early years experience in shaping later development
- Children’s vulnerability to risk, the mechanisms determining the short and long term impact of risk
- The processes involved in recovery and resilience
Resilience

Defined as ‘the manifestation of positive adaptation despite significant life adversity’ (Luthar 2003)

Not a fixed attribute of the child but an inferred outcome of a process.

Inter-country adoption - a long history
Recently:
Growing phenomenon in rich countries, for a complex of reasons
In Ireland, c. 4,000 on Register of Foreign Adoptions.

Controversial ethically and politically
A powerfully informative phenomenon

Adoption as an example of:

- Total ecological change – ‘the most pervasive and dramatic intervention of all’ (Masten and Powell, 2003)
- Largely independent of child’s behaviour and characteristics

Inter-country adoption additionally provides information on:

- Child’s capacity to recover from institutional care
Research on inter-country adoption
Major limitations:
‘An experiment in nature’ (O’Connor, 2003)

- Lack of reliable and detailed information on child and birth parents pre adoption

- Assumption that institutional care is never good for babies and infants.

- Qualified in some cases by knowledge that the institutional care is very bad.

- Child’s status on arrival in receiving country known only in broad terms - prospective studies ideal.
Major studies:

**UK** - English and Romanian Adoptees Study (Rutter et al. 1998, 2007)


**USA** - Institutionalized children from E Europe (Groze & Ileana, 1996); Chinese adoptees Tan (2007)

**N. Europe** – Mixed background studies, (Lingblad, Hjern et al. 2002; Dalen et al. 2001 in Sweden; Verhulst et al, 1992; Juffer & Rosenbloom, 1997 in Netherlands)
How is resilience to be judged?

Better than expected -

➢ In terms of the known or highly probable outcomes of each child’s specific adversities?

➢ In relation to his/her developmental status on adoption?

➢ In relation to likely development if left in institution or in foster care in country of birth?

➢ In comparison to the average child in country of adoption?

➢ In comparison to birth children of adopted parents?

What are the important outcomes?
What these studies tell us about children’s resilience.

Adoptions from Romania

ERA Strong association between spending 6 months plus in institution and higher rate of negative outcomes, e.g indiscriminate friendliness /disinhibited attachment (70% at age 6, substantial drop at age 11).

Catch –up in children adopted before 6 months almost complete.

Overall, recovery ‘remarkable’

Similar findings from Canada.

NB. Adopted 1990-1992, quality of care in Romania from ‘poor’ to ‘abysmal’
Adoptions from China and Far East

Tessler et al 1999, marked developmental delay on arrival in US.

Tan, 2007 240 girls aged 6-11, higher academic performance than matched counterparts but more anxiety and withdrawal.

Cohen et al. 2005 catch up complete one year after adoption in all but 12%.

Early days.

Key conclusions:

- Evidence for massive catch-up and plasticity in physical, social and cognitive development.

- Physical growth and attachment remained problematic for some children and was related to adoption after 12 months.

- Age at adoption not consistently related to IQ, behaviour problems or self esteem

- Adoption ‘a successful intervention’... which ‘documents the astonishing plasticity of human development’.
The outcomes of inter-country adoption in Ireland: Phase 1

Conducted on behalf of the Adoption Board by:

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To be launched in TCD on June 18th
Study continued:

Focus of study:
Examination of pre-placement, placement and post-placement procedures and the experiences of families
Evaluation of experiences, needs and outcomes of internationally adopted children

Sample:
180 children aged 2-17 randomly selected from total population and their adoptive mothers and fathers

Additional interviews:
19 internationally adopted young adults aged 19 -26
Social Workers
Representatives of support groups
Implementation and Advisory groups’ members
Conclusions

➤ Inter-country adoption provides many striking examples of resilience

➤ Pervasive environmental change from very poor to very positive circumstances can bring about remarkable levels of recovery in children suffering the effects of adversity - by any standard.

➤ Most children demonstrate a capacity to recover when their circumstances change dramatically, a minority do not.

➤ Some children who have been subjected to long periods of very intense deprivation will show some recovery but may never be normal in their functioning.
Implications

➢ In the face of very detrimental life circumstances is pervasive environmental change needed to effect dramatic change in child outcomes?

➢ Does the failure of many early interventions point to the need for intense and pervasive change in the total ecology? Abecedarian - 8 hours a day, 5 days a week from 0-5.

➢ Taking children out of their families vs changing the life conditions (and capacity to parent) of their families and of the children themselves as they grow up.

➢ The circumstances of the first few years do not necessarily mark children for life - fatalism and stereotyping are therefore misplaced
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