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Methodological findings in studies on adoptive families

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Summary

The issue of adoptive families is the object of interest for many researchers, especially outside Polish borders. A critical analysis of previous studies on adoption shows that the scientific value of many of the existing studies raises doubts. The reasons of this are more or less significant methodological weaknesses, which significantly reduce their scientific value. Researchers often focus on the study of individuals in the adoptive family, e.g. mothers only, adopted children only or selected types of relationships within the family e.g. the mother – child relation. There is a little amount of studies on family systems. It seems worthy to note that numerous studies are conducted in the cause-effect model of explaining phenomena in the adoptive family. Such approach to the study of reality, which is the family, is regarded as too big simplification. Therefore, there is an important reason to undertake the scientific discourse on the research methodology on the adoptive family. Discussed in the paper issues include: theoretical models, arrangement of studies, especially the selection of the test group and the research methods used in the study on adoptive families. Conducting scientific research is essential for the adoption practice. Among psychologists-practitioners exists a disturbing belief that working with adoptive families can be based on the experience gained in psychological practice. This fact can be explained by the existing lack of willingness of adoptive families to cooperate in the field of scientific research. Lack of this cooperation significantly limits the access to the study population of adoptive families.

adoptive family research methodology / adoption / adoptive family

INTRODUCTION

A growing interest in the adoption of a child can be observed today. The reasons for this phenomenon can be traced in the a significant group of married couples who cannot have children because of infertility and in that the creation of families through adoption of an orphaned child slowly becomes a socially defined phenomenon, and thus gives the adoptive family a status of phenomenon of a normative nature. The latest data show that in Poland approximately 15-20% of couples have temporary problems with conception, and the actual infertility concerns approximately 5-7% of them [1].

Conducting systematic studies on the psychological functioning of adoptive families is seen as relevant and important task from a theoretical point of view. The obtained findings allow to better understand the adoptive families and their psychological functioning, as well as they provide a reliable basis for the development of reliable and valid research tools. It should be emphasized that in Poland there is a lack of research tools to examine an adoptive family.

The results of scientific studies can be a valuable resource for psychologists-practitioners who work with adoptive family in the area of pre-

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ventive treatment, counselling, and therapeutic effects. The results of studies [2] indicate a great need of psychological support for adoptive families. They show that "Dysfunctional families (families that are extreme in terms of cohesion and adaptability in the Olson model - FACES III) constitute 46% of the general population of surveyed adoptive families with adopted child [2]. Therefore, it seems reasonable to ask the question: why studies on the adoptive family in Poland are rarely undertaken by psychologists?

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the adoptive family research methodology in terms of the positive meaning of the selected theoretical models showing the factors important for understanding of the psychological functioning of the adoptive family, the arrangement of studies and to reflect on the selection of research methods. These considerations will form the base for the formulation of conclusions for researchers studying problematic aspects of adoption.

THEORETICAL MODELS OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS AND ADOPTION

Formulating theories is an important element of scientific knowledge [3]. Theoretical models allow to identify and arrange adoptive and non adoptive variables and they can be a base for the development of reliable and valid research tools that can be used in the practice of adoption. On the basis of theoretical models a researcher can formulate hypotheses about the relationships between adoptive and non adoptive variables. Identification of variables is related to the specificity of the adoptive family as such, which forms through the adoption, by the spouses, of a child who has been deprived of his/her biological parents. The biological family, and particularly the mother, becomes an important element in the functioning of the adoptive family. Another criterion, which is important in the planning of research projects on the adoptive family, is the issue of the transparency of adoption. Transparency of adoption is defined as the conditional informing the child about his origin. Adoptive parents are not obliged to inform the child about the fact of being an adopted child, and therefore born to other parents, and adopted by adoptive parents.

Theoretical models important in the study of adoptive families, mentioned by the researchers, include: biological models, attachment theory [4-5], the theory of stress and coping and the theory of the family as a social system [2]. Systemic approach to adoptive families studies has become the objective of this paper.

The analysis of existing studies on the adoptive family showed that many of them had atheoretical nature, which makes it difficult to compare the results of studies [2].

ADOPTIVE FAMILY AS A SYSTEM

Systemic model of family should be mentioned among the most significant models in this area. Studies conducted on the family ground are particularly important, but also complicated because of the nature of the relationships in the family, their variety and importance for individual family members and the family as a whole. In the adoptive family the researcher encounters an additional space that may be significant to the study and the obtained results.

Family in the systemic approach is an organized unit, the parts of which interact with each other. Interconnectedness of family members occur on the basis of feedback loop [6–7]. A change in one element of the family system involves a change in the functioning of the system as a whole.

The family system is described as a structure of roles. Roles in the family system are divided into: assigned and assumed by individual family members. Between the roles there are relationships based on feedback loop (principle of circularity). In the systemic approach the concept of the role is used in functional terms, and not in terms of traditional social roles [8]. Family roles are important for the development of the personality of the individual members of the family in terms of self-image, self-esteem, social self-image. The process of family roles formation takes place in the course of development of the family by assigning specific meanings to family members who, with the passing of time, assume the family role assigned to them.

The system of adoptive family as a structure of roles is more complex in comparison to the biological family. In the adoptive family the existence of new family roles is possible. These include the role of the biological mother who gave a birth to the child, and gave this child up for adoption or who has been deprived of the rights for the child by the family court. Often, the role of "bad mother" is assigned to her, and the role of adoptive mother who brings up a child with the consent of the family court. In the adoptive family she often fulfils the role of "incomplete mother", "social mothers". Both roles play are important in particular stages of child's development. Taking into consideration the role of the father in the adoptive family there is the role of the biological father. His participation in the development of the child is often limited to the moment of conception. The role of "irresponsible father", "absent father" is often assigned to him, and the role of the adoptive father, which is possible owing to the decision on adoption made by the family court. The roles of "incomplete father" are assigned to him. Another role is the role of the child. The roles of "substitute child", "non-biological child", "child who was rescued from orphanage by his parents", "child of unkind biological parents", "child of unknown origin". This child has been deprived of his/her biological parents' care and transferred, with the consent of the court, to the adoptive parents. After the decision on adoption the child 's surname name (and often the name), parents and place of residence have been changed.

Borders understood as a " barriers constructed out of norms, values, beliefs, characteristic for the family, determining the sense of identity and distinctiveness of both the whole family and the individual members who belong to it" are an important characteristics of family system [9]. External borders, that separate the family from the environment and internal borders, that exist between subsystems and between family members can be distinguished [10]. External borders define the flow of information between the family system and the environment. In the case of the adoptive family these borders often define the division into "adoptive families" and "biological families". Among the adoptive families we can distinguish those that are characterized by fixed borders between the adoptive family and the biological family and those where these borders are of excessive permeability, which means they are obliterated. External borders define the identity of the family. Both the obliterated and fixed borders are not favouring the proper identity of the adoptive family. The most appropriate types of borders are those that allow for the exchange of information related to the adoption only with selected people. The intrafamily borders separate individual subsystems. In the adoptive family there are borders that separate adoptive parents' subsystem form biological parents' subsystem and that separate the child from the biological parents' subsystem. The borders should be clear, i.e. allow the individual elements of the family system to perform their functions, but should also be permeable enough to ensure interactions to the members of the family. In the adoptive family relationship system is extended with relationships with biological parents. This regards to adoptive family conversations on topics related to biological origin of the child, the circumstances of giving his/her up for adoption, that is the pre-adoption history. Proper system of borders allows for the proper development of the identity of the individual family members and the family as a whole.

THE STUDIED PERSONS

Conducting empirical studies in adoptive families is not an easy task [2, 11-12]. Researchers must face the difficulties related to the arrangement of a study. Those difficulties include limited access to a representative study group and the difficulty in obtaining consent for study in the group of adoptive parents, especially when it comes to examining children. The reasons for this may be due to: (1) the pre-adoption history, during which the married couple striving for the adoption of a child had to undergo a series of psychological tests at the adoptive centre, in family diagnosis and consultation centre. The fate of the whole family depended on their results; (2) the adoptive parents often do not inform the child about his origin; hence the fear of disclosure of this fact by the researchers. The inclusion of variables in adoptive families where adoption is the secret is not possible. The study on adoptive families is, then, limited to the area

of the variables which are not directly related to the adoption; (3) protection of a child against interference in the child's life, in his/her experience. Regarding above mentioned difficulties in the arrangement of study it seems advisable to say that studies are conducted on the basis of a study group sourced using the "snowball" method. It also seems important to highlight that cooperation with adoption centres in conducting research projects is difficult. Employees of adoption centres often do not see the need for a systematic study of the adoptive family. They work with adoptive family on the basis of practical experience.

A significant problem in an adoptive families research methodology is the selection of the comparison group. In the history of studies on adoptive family two types can be distinguished: a study in which biological families are included in comparison group [13-15] and a study in which the group of adoptive families was divided. The aim of the second type of research was that a group of adoptive families do not constitute a homogeneous group, and among them types of adoptive families can be distinguished. Approach to studies based on the phenomenological assumptions of the description of reality have their supporters in studies on family in Poland [2, 16-17]. They allow to take into account the characteristic of adoptive families in the research projects, which means taking into account adoption variables and other psychological variables.

QUALITATIVE OR QUANTITATIVE METHODS IN STUDIES ON ADOPTIVE FAMILY

In the contemporary discourse on the research methodology in psychology, the question of the relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods is on important place. Nomothetic trend, which is focused on the search for general patterns and idiographic trend, in which the researcher focuses on emphasizing the uniqueness and the non-repeatability of the subject are often defined as two different, often antagonistic, approaches to scientific research [9].

Among Polish psychologists emerged a position which presents integration of nomothetic approach which is dominated by quantitative methods and idiographic approach in which it is possible to reach the subjective meanings of the subject and understanding of his/her individual, unique experience [9, 18-20]. The precursor of approach to research which consists of combining quantitative and qualitative methods (Family Portrait Test , Schematic Family Portrait) is Braun-Gałkowska [7].

On the basis of these findings, it can be stated that the most appropriate approach in the study of adoptive families is combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Through qualitative methods, among which a prominent place is occupied by narrative studies. Their major aim is "to create interpreted description of a set of rich and multi-layered meanings contained in the personal experience of the person who tells his/her own story, understanding the life of the individual in terms of his/her subjective and the discovery of his/her specific meanings assigned to the experience" [9]. Bartosz says that a person "refers to these events, interpreting them in a certain, individual, their own way, thus making his/her live meaningful" [21].

CONCLUSIONS

These considerations seem to support the assumption that the study of adoptive families is methodologically complex task. The value of study on adoptive families depends on the extent to which the researcher managed with the specificity of the adoptive family, and to what extent he was able to determine the relationships between adoptive variables and other psychological variables. Adoption variables, to various extent accepted by the adoptive families, have a significant impact on the functioning of the family [2]. Both the omission of adoptive variables, as well as the emphasis of adoptive variables, by e.g. the study on attitudes towards adoption, seems to significantly limit the knowledge on adoptive families. In the case of omission of variables related to the fact of adoption, adoptive family is treated like a biological family, and the emphasis of adoption variables limits the selection of a test group only to families that reveal the fact of being adoptive family. The examination of the importance of the fact of adoption for individuals in the system, interrelationships,

identity of the family members and the family as a whole seems to be interesting. This goal seems to be achievable in the adoptive family research methodology based on the systemic assumptions and using qualitative methods, which include the narrative study.

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