

## ADOPTIVE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT IN KERALA

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### Abstract

*One of the fundamental rights of the child is the right to a family. It is in securing their right to family, especially when they are abandoned at an early age, that adoption has come to be recognized as an important alternative for their rehabilitation (IAPA, 1989). This study explored and analysed the environment of the adoptive families in Kerala using Family Environment Scale developed by Bhatia and Chadha (1993). A total of 356 adoptive parents were interviewed to assess the integration of adoptive child into these families utilizing a descriptive design. The analysis of the three dimensions of the family environment (Relationship, Personal Growth and System Maintenance) revealed that only 53 percent of adoptive families have high relationship among the family members. And two third (70%) of these families have good Personal Growth and System Maintenance. As a whole, it is observed that three fourth (77%) of the adoptive families have very healthy environment and one fourth of these families have average healthy environment. Discriminant analysis shows that in families where cohesion, expressiveness, independence, active recreational orientation and control are higher, the adopted child is highly integrated into the family.*

**Key words:** adoption, family environment

### Introduction

“Every child has a right to love, and to be loved and to grow up in an atmosphere of love and affection as well as of moral and material security and this is possible only if the child is brought up in a family. But in case it is not possible for the biological parents or other near relatives to look after the child; or the child is abandoned and it is either not possible to trace the parents or the parents are not willing to take care of the child, the next best alternative would be to find adoptive parents for the child so that the child can grow up under the loving care and attention of the adoptive parents” (IAPA, 1989). One of the fundamental rights of the child is the right to a family. It is in securing their right to family, especially when they are abandoned at an early age, that adoption has come to be recognized as an important alternative for their rehabilitation (IAPA, 1989).

“Adoption” means the process through which the adopted child is permanently separated from his biological parents and become the legitimate child of his/her adoptive parents with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities that are attached to the relationship (JJ Act, 2000 amended in 2006). The Government of India considers adoption as the best non-institutional support for rehabilitation of the destitute and orphan children (Revised Guidelines for Adoption of Indian Children, Government of India, 1995).

### Theoretical Background

In a sense, adoption is both a beginning and an ending: it is the beginning of a life-long relationship for the couple and the adopted child; at the same time, for the biological parents, it is an ending—a relinquishment of their parental rights and responsibilities (Mehta, 1992). Adoptive parents need to make the child their own, accepting him/her entirely both in the present and in the past. Acceptance of an unrelated child into the family as one’s own, has an impact on the child, the family within which the child is placed and the parent-child relationship. It is an issue of extreme importance to the persons most directly involved in the adoption triad—the child, the adoptive parents, and the biological parents (Broadzinsky et al., 1992).

For both parents and children, the adjustment to adoption will be a lifelong process, with new tasks and challenges emerging at each stage of

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the family life cycle (Brodzinsky et al. 1992). For parents, adjustment to adoption begins with their struggle with infertility and the consideration of adoption as a means of achieving parenthood. It continues throughout the early family life cycle years as they integrate their children into the family and begin a process of sharing adoption information with them. Once children know they are adopted, they too will begin an adjustment process that involves integrating the meaning of their unique family status and their dual connection to two families into an emerging sense of self. Mc Glone et al. (2001) in their study identified that maintaining family cohesion is one of the parental stressors in adoptive family. The researchers also found that adoption changes family dynamics and affects birth children of adoptive families. Parents reported that attempting to meet different family members' needs is stressful when cohesion is low.

Billimoria (1984) in her study observed that the adoptive parents experienced a positive attitude towards adoption in their immediate environment (family and friends), but a loss of positive environment in their community. The parenting experience was largely satisfactory for a majority of the parents. Overall, the adoption experience was a happy one for a majority of the parents. Mc Guinness et al. (2000) through their study sought to (a) characterize the current social, academic, and conduct competencies of 6- to 9-year-old children adopted from the former Soviet Union who have resided in the United States for at least two years and (b) evaluated both risks and protective influences of adoptive families and their relationships to competence. It was observed that although the children scored below average in competence, adoptive family environments were positive and served as buffers between the risks experienced by the children and the subsequent development of competence within the adoptive family. Mc Guinness et al. (2005) in their longitudinal study to evaluate risks and protective influences of adoptive families and their relationships to competence of 9-12-year old children adopted from the former Soviet Union who have resided in the United States at least five years found that, of the risk and protective factors considered, only birth weight and the cohesion were statistically significant in explaining variation in the competence. Families continued to face challenges, but findings show that, despite early adversities, the adopted children generally fared well developmentally with protective family environments.

In a longitudinal study Levy-Shiff (2001) explored the role of adoption-related variables—age of placement, openness to adoption, and reunion with biological parents as well as family environment—in predicting adjustment. It was observed that adoptees, as compared with non adoptees, scored lower on self-concept but higher on pathological symptomatology. Groza et al. (2003) in their study found that as age at placement increases, there is an increase in behaviour problems and a decrease in attachment.

The practice of adoption and attitude towards it has undergone a sea change in recent years. Beginning as an informal practice focusing on the needs and interests of adoptive parents and society in general, it has emerged in contemporary society as a formalized social service practice, regulated by state law, and geared primarily towards meeting the “best interests of the child” (Brodzinsky et al. 1998). Its orientation has shifted from parent's welfare to child welfare. In other words, the institution of adoption has broadened from purely parent-based considerations to encompass the needs of the child and, in fact, make the latter paramount.

In India organized form of adoption became a reality when Adoption Co-coordinating Agency (ACA) was established. Even though adoption services increased in the past few years and several adoption agencies under ACA were committed to promoting adoptions, very few attempts (Chatterjee et al., 1971; Ahmad, 1975; Goriawala, 1976; Billimoria, 1984; Mehta, 1992; Bharat, 1993 & 1997; Groze et al., 1996; Chowdhary, 1996; Vaidya, 1998; Raju, 1999; ICCW, TN, 2001; Lobo and Vasudevan, 2002; Bhargava, 2005; and Sinha, 2006) were made to empirically examine and analyse the situations of the adoptive families and related issues in India. Even a single study has not been conducted in Kerala on adoptive families.

It is against this background, that the present study is conducted to analyse the present situation of the adoptive families in Kerala. It is conducted to understand and analyse the adoptive family environment and its various aspects and also tries to verify its influence on the integration of the adopted child into the family.

## Methodology

The study followed a descriptive design and 356 adoptive parents from six districts in Kerala selected at random were interviewed to explore

and analyse the adoptive family environment. It was assessed using Family Environment Scale developed by Bhatia and Chadha (1993). The 69 items in the scale were answered on a five point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Based on the scores, the families were grouped into three viz: families having: 1. Very healthy environment; 2. Average healthy environment; and 3. Less healthy environment. The scale measures the Environmental aspects such as: cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, acceptance, independence, active recreational orientation, organization and control.

## Results and Discussion

It is observed that three fourth (77%) of the adoptive families have very healthy environment and one fourth of these families have average healthy environment. Matthew et al. (2007) found that the adoptive parents are doing more to ensure that the children have needed supportive environments. However, in a longitudinal study Shiff (2001) noticed that adoptees scored their families lower on all three dimensions of family environment—relationship, personal growth, and system maintenance as compared with non-adoptees. The analysis of the three dimensions of the family environment (Relationship, Personal Growth and System Maintenance) revealed that only 53 percent of adoptive families have high relationship among the family members. And two third (70%) of these families have good Personal Growth and System Maintenance. It is noticed that, the most affected aspect among the adoptive families is the relationship among family members when compared to the other two dimensions, which needs to be taken care.

## Family Environment Aspects

The family environment scale is a combination of eight subscales or factors such as: cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, acceptance, independence, active recreational orientation, organization and control. All the subscales were analysed in such a way that the higher the score the better will be the corresponding factor of the environment in the adoptive families except in case of conflict, for which the analysis is: lower the score, lower will be the conflict.

## Cohesion

The study shows that 17 percent of adoptive families have low cohesion in their families. Cohesion/family relationship is an important factor that influences the family environment. Lucia and Breslau (2006) in their analysis of the association of family cohesion with childhood behaviour problems found that family cohesion had a beneficial effect on children's internalizing and attention problems. Groothues et al. (2001) found that an older age at adoption leads to increased levels of attachment disturbances or hyperactivity which in turn is related to less parental satisfaction with the adoption. Smith and Howard (1999) reported that age at adoption placement is significantly associated with attachment problems for adoptive mothers to children and children to mothers.

## Expressiveness

The study shows that 17 percent of adoptive families have low expressiveness and 71 percent have average expressiveness in their families. Only 12 percent of adoptive families have high expressiveness. If there is good cohesion and family relationship, the family members will be genuine and also freely express their feelings and emotions. Hence, it is important to address this issue among the adoptive family members.

## Conflict

It is observed that among 12 percent of adoptive families there is high conflict, which is a situation that leads to low cohesion and expressiveness. 70 percent of adoptive families have average conflict in their families. This finding is in accordance with the findings of Rueter et al. (2009) who found more conflict in adoptive families compared to non-adoptive families. Eighteen percent of adoptive parents reported low conflict in their families. Since, there is high conflict among 12 percent and average conflict among 70 percent of adoptive families, it is an important area of concern and hence social work intervention.

## Acceptance and Caring

Acceptance and caring is affected in nine percent of adoptive families that is these families have low acceptance and caring among the

family members including the adopted child. Bowlby (1969) has found that the child, who experiences parents as emotionally available, loving, and supportive of his/her mastery efforts, will construct a working model of the self as competent and lovable, the characteristic pattern of securely attached children. In contrast, insecurely attached children, who experience caregivers as rejecting or emotionally unavailable and non-supportive, will construct a model of the self as incompetent, unworthy and unlovable.

Bowlby (1962) also found that adoptive parents who consistently engage their child in a manner that shows empathy, acceptance, affection, curiosity and playfulness will increase the child's ability to respond to the parent in the same manner as would a child who had formed a secure attachment. In this study 70 percent of adoptive parents reported there is average acceptance and caring among the family members. This is a serious situation which will negatively affect the integration of the members especially the adopted child into the family.

### **Independence, Active Recreational Orientation, Organisation and Control**

The aspects such as: independence, active recreational orientation, organisation and control of the adoptive family environment are affected only among two percent of adoptive families. Majority of the adoptive parents reported average independence (90%), average organization (65%), good control (90%) over its members and active recreational orientation (72%).

### **Anxiety of adoptive parents and Family Environment**

The study shows that there exists significant negative correlation between the anxieties of the adoptive parents and their family environment except in the case of anxiety related to financial and economic matters. That is anxieties in total as well as family related anxiety are significantly negatively correlated to the family environment at 0.01 percent significance level. Child related anxiety and anxiety related to legal aspects are significantly negatively correlated to family environment at 0.05 percent significance level. It implies that as these anxieties increase, the family environment will be less healthy or vice versa.

### **Integration of the adopted child into the family and Family Environment**

Analysis shows that the adopted child is highly integrated into the adoptive family where the aspects of family environment such as cohesion, expressiveness, independence, active recreational orientation and control are higher. In general, it is found that the adopted child is highly integrated into the adoptive families where there is a healthy environment. Hence, the hypothesis—*healthier the family environment, higher the integration of the adopted child into the adoptive family*—stands accepted. A national level analysis (ICCW, 2001) shows that the integration of the adopted child into the new family is greatly facilitated by the acceptance of the adopted child by the members of the extended family and the community as well.

### **Disclosure Status and Family Environment**

The t-test between the adoptive families where the fact of adoption is disclosed to the child and the adoptive families where the fact of adoption is not disclosed revealed that the two groups of families significantly differ in cases of cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, active recreational orientation and control at 0.05 percent significance level. That is cohesion, expressiveness, active recreational orientation and control are significantly higher among the families where the fact of adoption is disclosed to the child than the other group.

However, it is noticed that conflict is significantly higher in families where the fact of adoption is not disclosed compared to the families where the fact of adoption is disclosed to the child. The result shows that disclosing the fact of adoption to the child is one of the important aspects to have a healthy family environment. ICCW (2001) also found that as a group the adopted children who were 'told' of their adoptive status showed more trust, family cohesion and a well-integrated ego. Kirk (1984) argues that the rejection of the differences associated with adoption will create a rearing environment that inhibits open communication about adoption and reinforces in the child the idea that to feel different is to be deviant.

## Social Support, Family Environment and Integration of the adopted Child

ANOVA test shows that both social support and family environment influence the integration of the adopted child into the adoptive family at 0.05 percent significance level. Among the two factors, family environment influences the integration more significantly than social support as it has the higher F-ratio. It is worth to mention the feelings expressed by an adoptive mother: "it is very important to have good relationship and atmosphere for the proper adjustment and development of the adopted child in the families". They reported that there is good adjustment because of the support from family, friends and good relationship among the family members especially between the husband and wife and between the parents and the child.

### Conclusion

Adopted children traverse a challenging journey through childhood, with many obstacles to their optimal development. Many have experienced and compromised prenatal environments, maltreatment prior to adoption, or multiple moves while in foster care. The impact of these experiences on their development can be devastating. However, a stable and nurturing family environment protects adopted child against the negative effects of these experiences. Mc Guinness, et al. (2000) found that although the children scored below average in competence, adoptive family environments were positive and served as buffers between the risks experienced by the children and the subsequent development of competence within the adoptive family.

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