

ELEMENTS OF STRESS PERCEIVED BY INTERNATIONAL ADOPTIVE FAMILIES DURING THE INITIAL ADJUSTMENT AND STRATEGIES USED TO FACE THESE

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Abstract

Introduction

The revision both in the vital and scientific literature cycle coincide in pointing out that the state of the birth of the adoptive family – when the family adopts their child and when their principal task is the family integration – is the weakest and most critical, when the principal difficulties (Amorós, 1986; Berry and Barth, 1990; Cederblad, 1982; and, Fisher, Ames, Chisholm and Savoie, 1997), and the major risks and ruptures exist (Barth and Berry, 1988; Berástegui, 2003; and Howe, 1998). What is more, it has repercussions on the future individual and family development (Brodzinsky, Smith, and Brodzinsky, 1998; Levy-Shiff, 2001; Levy-Shiff, Goldshmidt, and Har-Even, 1991; Levy-Shiff, Zoran, and Shulman, 1997). It seems that the result of this stage is related to the good development and social-family adaptation on a long term (Quinton, Rushton, Dance, and Mayes, 1998). Definitely, it is a key moment in the family life which implies:

<<... a mutual adaptation, in which both the child and the family members must make use of abilities and strategies that facilitate the integration fully. >> (Barajas, Fuentes, González, et al., 2001:71)

Starting from this evidence we suggest an investigation that seeks to know about the development of this state with the view to suggesting social-educational proposals that favour and preserve the process of family integration, and assure their positive adaptation. In the framework of this investigation here we are going to deal first with a contextualisation of the process of family integration from the theories of stress and its confrontation, and secondly an approach to this integration process referring to the initial adjustment in the child's country of origin and taking as a basis the experiences of a group of international adoptive families as tensors and of strategies used for their resolution.

The process of family integration from the theories of stress and confrontation

The path towards family integration in international adoption is undertaken via the transition processes, stages in the vital family cycle and contexts. As well as the transition of stages, in international adoption the transition of contexts is important: the child change his/her surroundings to integrate into a new family, and the adoptive family travels to initiate the linking up in their adoptive child's country of origin.¹

This process of family integration can be divided into two phases according to the model FAAR by Patterson (1988) and its application to the adoption cases by Groze (1994, 1996) and Rosenthal and Groze (1994). A first one of adjustment and a second one of adaptation. In a very resumed way, we could remember that the first phase corresponds to the so called "coupling" and that in the case of international adoption begins in the country of origin (here we will call it "initial adjustment"), and in general it continues when the family get home. And the second phase is the adaptation that occurs in the family home and is where the most important changes occur that ensure the good functioning of the family system when they manage to get stabilised.

The theories of stress and the models of confrontation let us state that the way in which the families perceive the tensors and the repertoire of resources they have,

will influence the strategies and confrontation they apply to resolve the situation. At the same time, the positive and negative experiences will accumulate in the form of positive backups (protective factors) or as negative elements or distress (factors of risk) and will influence on the family well-being and its stability

If the studies on sources of stress and the perceptions in terms of expectations reveal that the relation they have with the adaptation, then the knowledge is less specific when they deal with resources and strategies, and in general, are based more on practical experience.

The results of the process of initial adjustment in the country of origin

Given the value that this "accumulator" can have, the results that are presented here make reference to the initial adjustment in the country of origin. These results are in a group of international adoption families whose children at the moment of the referral were three or over. This was a group of 28 families with 30 children adopted internationally who came from 13 different countries, the majority from South America (46.7%) and Eastern Europe (43.3%). The methodology of the study is principally qualitative and two of the techniques used are the semi-structured interview and the questionnaire.

We refer to three aspects: the process of initial adjustment (commonly known as "coupling"); the facilities and tensors or difficulties in the country of origin; and the strategies used by the parents to accept the tasks during this initial adjustment in a different context from the home.

The process of initial adjustment

All the families that participate in the study travel to the country of origin (as a couple, with children or accompanied by a relation or friend) to experience the meeting with their future children and spend time there that oscillates between one and six weeks. Only 28,57% stay only one week.

The procedure by which the child goes to live with his/her new parents is very variable. In all, and saving great differences with parents, we define two wide groups:

The immediate adjustment (46,7%); that is to say, the child remains with his/her parents from the first meeting and

The progressive adjustment (53,3%); when at least before living together they have several meetings.

A majority group (78,6%) carries out the first meeting in the institution, a minority group (14,3%) in the hotel or apartment where the family is staying, and exceptionally, a few (7,1%) in administration offices. Of the first meeting, we stress the emotion and we observe that 23.3% manifest "unfavourable" experiences with expressions of anxiety, fear, worry or deception amongst other negative emotions. In contrast, 43.3% explain "favourable" experiences with very emotional and positive expressions, while a similar group as the first (23,3%) have ambivalent feelings, and finally a few, (10%) explain that they were so pending of their children that they did not notice their feelings.

Facilities and difficulties in the country of origin

In this process of initial adjustment, nearly all the parents (96.7%) are capable of evaluating their children's aspect which satisfied them and feel that this facilitated their initial adjustment. Amongst the evaluation what is outstanding is that the children express their desire to have a father and mother (66.7%), the positive and

vital emotional state (50%), and the ease of communication, in spite of the differences in language (23.3%). However, 76.7% state that they found aspects that they found difficult or experienced them as tension. The families manage to identify between one and four difficulties, of these the externalised behaviour (40%) and the state of anxiety in the children (20%) represent the majority of the stress. s estados de ansiedad de los niños y niñas (20%) son representan la mayor fuente de estrés.

To face this new family stage represents new experiences and an important one of these is the establishment of family attachments. In 66.7% of the cases the relationships are corresponded and when they are not corresponded three possibilities are observed: rejection by the paternal figures, distancing by the child, and mutual distancing.

Apart from this, the difficulties also come from outside the family and its members. 36.8% of the families feel that the lack of information on their children's history is an aspect that could sometimes be a difficulty, and 5.3% consider that it is an important barrier.

Strategies used by the parents

The families count on a good repertoire of strategies and resources to face the difficulties which they set up in the country of origin. These resources can be divided in internal and external. In reference to the internal resources 85.7% set up at least one of these, the most used being the strategies related to the expression of affection and confidence (46.7%), the introduction of habits together with the definition of limits (30%), and strategies related to the management of their children's behaviour (26.7%). Although more individual, we stress the pro-active action aimed at preparing the family adaptation on returning home (16.7%).

Of the external resources, we observe that in spite of being far away from their usual surroundings, the families count on a series of external supports. A reduced group (10.71%) are supported by the extensive family (in presence or by phone), another group already seek support from health specialists in the very country of origin (17.85%) to resolve their initial problems, and finally, 10.71% construct small social networks with neighbours and other families who give them support. This detail coincides with the fact that the last group usually stays in the country about a month.

Conclusions

The results we present correspond to a part of the family integration process described by Patterson (1988) and applied to adoptive families by Groze (1994, 1996) and Rosenthal y Groze (1994). The general perception of the families (80%) on finishing this stage is they consider that the initial adjustment in the country of origin is positive while the rest undergo it with a strong presence of difficulties. According to the proposals of the stress theories we found that a good part of these families feel that in spite of the difficulties they perceive they can overcome them and activate them in this initial state their repertoire of resources. In contrast, there is a minority group that in this initial state perceives difficulties that surpass their family possibilities.

These details coincide with the revised theoretic information that indicates that in the adjustment phase is where the child has behaviour which is "easier to administer" and their demands are less demanding, while in the transition towards adaptation the demands are greater and require more profound changes. However, it is important to point out that a group of unsatisfactory initial experiences accumulate negative experiences in their process of family integration.

With respect to the fact that the process takes place in a context away from the adoptive family, we mention that although at first some families complain that they have to spend time in their child's country of origin while the legal steps are finalised, the great majority (60.70%) experiences this time in an adequate way and as an opportunity for the family, as the parents are totally free from occupations and can dedicate their whole time, as well as taking advantage of their stay to learn how the child lives, and to learn the culture of the people in the country of origin.

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1. The transition processes have been studied little (Palacios, 2006), in spite of the fact that important and valuable effort has been placed on trying to explain the variables that influence the results of family adaptation with reference to theories and models of confrontation of stress to study the cases of disruption (Barth y Berry, 1988; Berry, 1997); or to study the special adoptions, (Groze, 1994; Groze, 1996; Rosenthal y Groze, 1994), and with special emphasis on the cases of older children (Fernández, 2002a, 2002b; Pinderhughes, 1996); or to study international adoption (Berástegui, 2004; Bird, Peterson, and Miller, 2002; Groza, Chenot, Holtedahl, and Team from Children of the World, 2004; Stams, Juffer, Van IJzendoorn, and Hoksbergen, 2001), and in particular when the children proceed from institutions accepting that the attention implies additional stressors (Ames y col., 1997; Mainemer, Gilman, y Ames, 1998; Judge, 2003; Farina, Leifer, and Chasnoff, 2004).