

Identification of Psychological Issues in Adoptive Families in Iran and Proposing Solutions for Their Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The need for children and adolescents to have a space conducive to growth has led to the widespread selection of adoption as a means to complete a family. With the hope of enhancing the well-being of the child and the family and aimed at identifying the psychological issues of Iranian adoptive families and proposing solutions for their adaptation, this study was conducted.

Methods and Materials: The research method, in both stages, was qualitative and followed the grounded theory approach according to Strauss and Corbin. Initially, to find the problems of adoptive families, an interview was conducted with a representative from each of the 13 families in 2022. In the next stage, the results of the first phase of the research were presented to experts, and their proposed solutions were obtained. Data analysis was performed using maxqda2020 software. Ethical considerations were observed at all stages.

Findings: In the first phase of problem identification, 4 concepts emerged: issues related to child development in an environment of social harm, legal-psychological problems, issues related to attitudes, and problems associated with the resilience of couples. From the next stage, 4 groups of adaptation solutions were extracted, including explaining the what, how, and why of adoption in Iran (knowledge enrichment), practical solutions to solve problems, intervention strategies for family resilience, and attitude change strategies. Problems related to attitudes and worldviews were the causal conditions for other issues. In the end, the final model was presented. Knowledge enrichment, correction and improvement of attitudes, increasing parental resilience, making legal reforms, and removing executive obstacles should be prioritized in this field.

Conclusion: Conditions should be facilitated so that volunteer parents can share their experiences and researchers can conduct scientific studies in this field. This facilitates better decision-making and creates more confidence for families with a suitable mental background to start this journey. Additionally, the need for psychological support from welfare for families should be considered in planning.

Keywords: Psychology, Adoptive Families Issues, Adaptation Solutions, Iranian Adoptive Families

1. Introduction

Infertility is a significant problem for millions of couples, and there is recently heightened attention on the relationship between infertility treatments and the onset of psychological disorders in infertile couples, with anxiety and depression being the most likely. Moreover, women who become pregnant using assisted reproductive techniques seem to be at a higher risk of experiencing depression in the future compared to others (Gdańska et al., 2017). On the other hand, one of the essential objectives is to pay attention to the care of children lacking proper guardianship, and in this direction, it is necessary to act to reduce the problems of adoptive families (Bailey, 2012). So that more individuals are encouraged to this choice and those who have embarked on this path face fewer psychological problems and adapt more to their problems.

Every year, 2,000 children in various regions of Iran are given to others for adoption due to their circumstances. The custody of these children, due to the absence of a guardian or having an ineffective guardian, is granted to families and qualified individuals with the judgment and permission of judicial authorities. There are more than 10,000 children without an effective guardian in the country. For every child, there are 11 families applying for adoption in Iran (Fathi Najafi & Latifnejad Roudsari, 2016; Iran's State Welfare Organization, 2022; Kamrani Fakoor et al., 2019; Shareyati et al., 2020). In addition to the need for appropriate screening of individuals for adopting a child and considering the child's readiness to move to a new family, after conducting investigations of handing the child to the new family and the realization of adoption, there still exist problems that can affect the desirable process and even lead to the child's return to their previous environment (adoption dissolution), which has its specific harms (Rushton, 2004). For example, one of the problems reported by these families is not knowing when and how to talk about the biological family of the child and deal with their past (Santona et al., 2022). Another example refers to the importance of parental support through psychological research (Shareyati et al., 2020), which showed that adoptive couples received concerns from significant people in their lives and as a result, they experienced negative feelings. Prejudgments by those around them, lack of family support, concerns about the adopted child's past are some of the main contexts reported for these worries. It has also been determined that empowering parents in dealing with their children and their

problems can be effective (Kamrani Fakoor et al., 2019; Rushton, 2004).

Research by Hackenburg, Morgan, Brank (2022) showed that considering the place where participants live is important; interventions should be developed in accordance with their environmental context and focused on the overall picture of adoption in their minds; as parents understand their past experiences and future ideals through that image (Hackenburg et al., 2021). Therefore, despite numerous research studies conducted worldwide in the field of adoption, but due to the qualitative nature of most research and their samples not being representative of all communities, there is a need for research in the Iranian and Islamic cultural context and under current circumstances. Some research, like (Kamrani Fakoor et al., 2019), conducted in Iran with a qualitative method and grounded theory approach, showed that although adopted children enter adoptive family life with issues such as disturbing experiences of abuse and neglect before adoption, poor institutional living effects, and also physical and psychological problems, employing some prudent coping strategies by adoptive parents can aid the success of adoption.

In another example, research (Gafari & Zarean, 2021) aimed at examining the problems of women in the path of adoption, categorized women's adoption problems into three categories: "social, cultural, and religious attitudes," "legal, religious, and family structure," and "selective operation, aware and responsible action." The emerging theme from the categories was "individual and social attitudes resulting from traditional values and beliefs institutionalized towards adoption," which lays the groundwork for the emergence of non-biological adoption problems.

For the present study, the grounded theory method was chosen, one of the most significant interdisciplinary research (Fathi Najafi & Latifnejad Roudsari, 2016), and is considered one of the most popular qualitative research methods in the world. It is important because, in this method, the researcher begins work in the real world and allows their theory to emerge from the data collected through a strong, accurate, and fair research method. Given the increasing inclination of families to choose adoption as a way to complete the family in our country and the increasing population of orphaned children in the country, also since accurately understanding the issue itself indicates a solution for it, this research was carried out with utmost precision to identify the problems of adoptive families after accepting their adopted child and their entry into their home. Data were

collected from various cities in Iran in 2022, and interviews were conducted with experts to gather solutions for families to adapt to their problems, and the results of this grounded theory research were presented in the form of a model.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The increasing dissatisfaction with the problems of the positivism paradigm has led to a growing inclination towards qualitative research, and among the types of qualitative research, the grounded theory method was deemed suitable for this study. The researcher began the process of coding the interview documents systematically, considering the systematic design model of Strauss and Corbin, and continued the inductive extraction of data until all categories reached theoretical or conceptual saturation. For recording information and conducting qualitative research, the latest and most updated qualitative data analysis tool, MAXQDA2020 software, was used. In the first phase of the research, in line with a call for participation in the research on the social network Instagram, adoptive families (with a permanent custody decree of a child) from different provinces of Iran volunteered to participate in the research, and an interview with a representative of the parents group of each family was conducted. The interviews were conducted until reaching the point of theoretical saturation after the 8th interview and continued additionally until the 13th interview. Ethical requirements were considered at all stages of the research.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the research team, each lasting between 45 to 90 minutes. These interviews were carried out using a combination of in-person and virtual settings, according to the preferences and accessibility needs of the participants. The interview guide comprised open-ended questions focusing on participants' experiences with adoptive sports, perceived psychological impacts, and the role of these activities in their overall mental health and well-being.

To ensure a thorough understanding and interpretation of participants' experiences, interviews were audio-recorded with their consent and transcribed verbatim. Participants were also assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses.

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, using NVivo software to facilitate the organization and coding of the data. Initial codes were generated from the first few interviews and continuously refined and expanded upon as more data were collected. Through an iterative process of coding and theme development, we identified patterns and constructed themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences and perceptions.

All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. They were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to protect their privacy and data.

3. Findings and Results

In the first phase of the research, 84.6% of the participants were female and 15.38% were male, and all had at least a high school diploma. 69.2% of the families were dealing with infertility issues, and 30.8% did not have infertility problems and chose adoption as their first option. The adoptive families consisted of 15.3% single mothers and 84.6% couples. The highest volunteer participation in the research was observed from the province of Isfahan. In the first phase of the research, aimed at identifying the problems of adoptive families, codes were first extracted from interviews with a representative of each adoptive family, a conceptual relation between the codes was identified, and they were categorized. At the end of the initial coding process, with amendments and adjustments made and consulting with experts, a total of 353 final initial codes were obtained. After extracting the initial codes and after categorizing the initial codes, main categories were obtained. Then the categories with the highest degree of abstraction (second-round coding) were conducted, which identified the concepts.

Ultimately, from the first phase of the research in the stage of identifying concepts, 4 concepts were extracted. The first concept was issues related to child development in a social harm environment, which included 3 categories: biological-physiological issues (child's illness problems, uncertainty of genetic background and potential illnesses of the child, inappropriate diet of the child in the harm environment and care centers), psychological issues (arising from codes: the impact of the harm environment on the child's self-concept, the child's confusion about their biological parents, effects of insecure attachment, traumatic memories), and educational issues (arising from codes:

inappropriate learnings for entering the family, unfamiliarity with affectionate behaviors like kissing, inability to recognize danger).

The second concept was legal-psychological problems, which included 8 categories: the lack of coordination between well-being and justice (arising from codes: problems in vaccine reception and medical follow-ups, difficulty and slowness in court permission for the child's exit from the harm environment, frustrating and exhausting administrative processes, lack of awareness of some officials about adoption laws in small cities, non-separation of these cases from other judiciary cases, slowness and redundancy in evaluating the adoptive family's competency), the need to appoint suitable and trained experts (arising from codes: the influence of the expert's psychological and belief state on case processes, the impact of lack of awareness about the work and its scientific basics for correct decision-making and performance, the effect of sufficient understanding of the child's and family's condition on preventing wrong introductions), the absence of a legal prohibition on subjective and non-scientific opinions of experts (arising from codes: the very bad and harmful subjective behavior of welfare experts), and insufficient welfare training for adoptive parents (arising from codes: incomplete notification about the child's condition which the family needs to know, lack of allocation of competent and unanimous consultants regarding family training, inadequate information to the family about the effects of their psychological condition on adoption and parenting, insufficient information to the family about children of the social harm group, insufficient parenting principles training to parents regarding adoption choice), and the lack of honesty and necessary transparency of welfare about the child's essential background (arising from codes: not providing information about the child's trauma as necessary for psychological follow-up, not giving the child's medical records in some cases and the consequences of suddenly stopping the child's medications), and problems due to not recognizing single mothers as guardians (arising from codes: gender discrimination in law and not recognizing a single mother despite having more responsibility and not having spousal support, need for prosecutor's permission each time for the child's medical action (time, cost, energy), need for prosecutor's permission for international travel and the time and cost and energy consumed for it), and inequality in maternity leave for biological and non-biological parents regarding newborn leave (arising from codes: lack of allocation of maternity leave to adoptive student of a few

days old infant), and lack of welfare support for parents of disabled children according to international laws (arising from codes: lack of welfare support for a disabled child after assignment).

The third concept was issues related to attitudes and worldview, which included 4 categories: stereotypes (arising from codes: pitying view, overestimating the genetic effect compared to the upbringing effect) and discriminations (arising from codes: trying to create doubt in the decision and encouraging to dissolution of the adoption contract when there's a problem, affection bias, discrimination in behavior) and prejudices (arising from codes: prejudice about the child and their past, prejudice about the child's place in the world based on personal belief judgments, prejudice about biological parents, prejudice about the choice of adoption) and issues related to lack of awareness and consequently maintaining faulty attitudes (arising from codes: parents' tendency to hide adoption to avoid potential harm, public unfamiliarity with the reasons and priorities of this choice, public lack of information about the adoption process).

The fourth concept was problems related to the resilience of couples, which included 4 categories: social capability (arising from codes: not having a lively spirit and sense of humor in couples, lack of empathy, cultural inflexibility, weakness in communication skills, issues related to lack of social support) and problem-solving (arising from codes: lack of proper planning with objectives, inability to seek help from individuals, weakness in critical thinking and creative thinking skills, weakness in problem-solving ability) and autonomy (arising from codes: self-awareness and command over duties, issues related to lack of self-belief and self-efficacy in couples, lack of awareness of current conditions and aspects and consequences of the adoption decision, ability to manage and review relations and adaptively withdrawing from problematic sources) and a sense of purposefulness and belief in a bright future (arising from codes: weakness in spiritual relations, weakness in optimism and purposefulness).

In the second phase of the research, with the aim of identifying strategies for families to adapt to their problems, the results of the first phase of the research were made available to experts related to the categories and concepts obtained, and then interviews were conducted with them. With their consent, the interviews were recorded, transcribed on the same night, and similar to the first phase of the research, coding was done using Maxqda2020 software, and 149 initial codes were obtained. Based on the researcher's understanding of the codes and their own guide writings for

identification, the researcher was placed in a strategic coherence in the coding process and directed towards

categories and then towards concepts. The results of the second phase of the research can be seen in [Table 1](#).

Table 1

Classification of Specialists' Strategies for Families' Adaptation to Their Problems

Category	Secondary Code	Primary Code
Explaining the what, how, and why of adoption in Iran (Knowledge enhancement)	Scientific identification of adoptive families' problems	Understanding the philosophical, theological, and mythological foundations of adoption
	Clarifying scientific concepts with a focus on differentiating superstitions from correct educational practices	Correctly identifying the issue Promotion of science and action towards superstition removal
	Offering appropriate research suggestions to address knowledge infrastructure gaps	Demystification of cultural concepts Creating a suitable environment for people to become acquainted with different perspectives
	Necessity of categorizing cultural attitudes	Conducting comparative research, after acknowledging the concepts
	Necessity of teaching well-being (critical) thinking	Pathology of the state of adoption from the aspects of foster care, various dimensions, psychology growth issue Practicing thoughtfulness and having a well-being perspective
Practical Strategies for Problem Solving	Proposing the establishment of an adoption information bank	Discussing an individual's societal condition affects the whole Focusing on universal values
	Standardizing the country's adoption agencies with representation in each province	Creating questions in people's minds that lead away from dogmatism
	Selecting the most suitable officials for affairs and families based on psychological health, intelligence, and efficiency	Proposing the establishment of an adoption information bank accessible for applicants and decision-making individuals Allocating a specific organization for adoption affairs with representatives across the country and all related specialties Prerequisite of positive psychological health and free from racism
	Aligning legal provisions and issues among relevant institutions	Meeting correct decision-making criteria with adequate psychological and legal knowledge and awareness of children's conditions and recognizing their needs Operating based on science
	Using the power of media for educational matters	Taking help from dynamic jurisprudence Amending laws In-service training of human resources Necessity of reforms in the elite space of Iran
Intervention Strategies for Family Resilience	Enhancing the family's problem-solving skills	Scientifically and correctly informing the public and long-term cultural reform
	Enhancing the family's self-regulation (self-efficacy)	Enhancing the family's problem-solving skills with counseling, education, and practice
Strategies for Changing Attitudes	Enhancing goal orientation and belief in a bright future	Enhancing the family's self-regulation with counseling, education, and practice
	Attempting to redefine social norms and making desirable attitudes accessible	Enhancing goal orientation and belief in a bright future with awareness and counseling Prioritizing bilateral attitudes that can be changed faster Making desirable attitudes more accessible Grouping into thinkers and others to fight superstitions and anti-scientific beliefs Defining and scientifically examining perceived threats by opponents Preventing people from being categorized as biological or non-biological parents Normalizing this method of completing a family and familiarizing with adopters Working on social norms

Using the power of media and influential individuals	The impact of valuable individuals' attitudes on their admirers and followers
Utilizing learning techniques	Utilizing media power to influence attitudes Creating and reforming attitudes through the social learning process Attitude changes under subconscious (classical and subconscious) conditioning Attitude change through instrumental conditioning Attitude change as a result of observational learning
Creating conditions for leveraging cognitive dissonance in individuals for attitude reform	Removing situational constraints that prevent expressing attitudes Making individuals aware of their hypocrisy during cognitive dissonance Lesser cognitive dissonance effects lead to greater attitude change If they advocate for desirable behaviors in public, their attitude is influenced Careful not to replace behavior engineering with cultural building Give individuals the opportunity to think about the failure of their past behaviors Provide individuals with conditions for behavior change to reduce their cognitive dissonance
Using persuasive strategies	Making individuals aware of their personal benefit and personal experience in relation to an attitude Individuals keen on reforming the culture of adoption should be practically superior Use messengers with high acceptability Persuasion when the audience is distracted from the topic Messages that are not apparently designed to change attitudes are more effective Messengers should use messages with dual approaches Utilizing the subtle art of persuasion to change attitudes Messengers should speak with more confidence Preferably, messengers have high speech rates and attractiveness Work on convincing influencers and opinion leaders

As observed, in the second phase of the research, 4 concepts for the adaptability of adoptive families to their problems were extracted. The first concept was explaining the what, how, and why of adoption in Iran (knowledge enrichment). The second concept was practical solutions for solving problems. The third concept was intervention strategies for family resilience. Lastly, the fourth concept was strategies for changing attitudes.

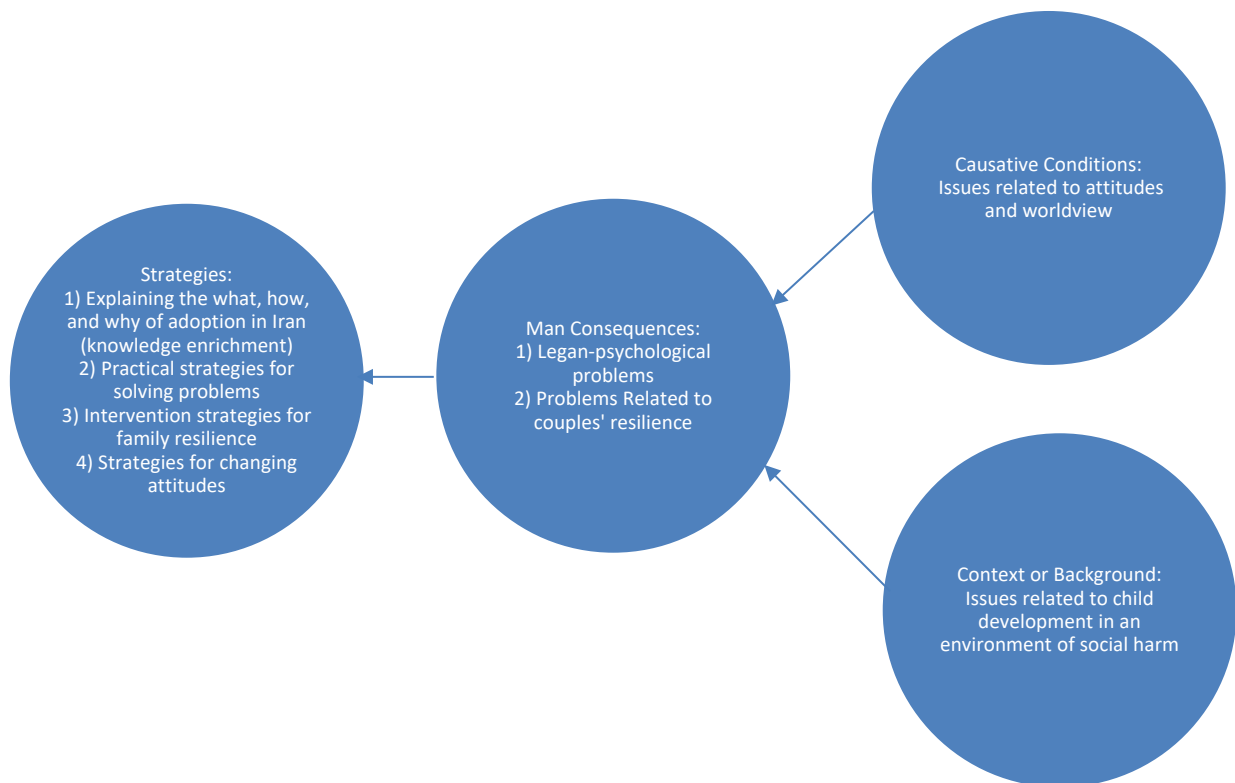
Considering the theory initially proposed by Strauss and Corbin, for a long time, some researchers proceeded according to 6 themes or central codes which included

causative conditions, context, central category, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences.

Since there is no need today to follow the old model unquestioningly, and the researcher can present their own orderly theory based on their understanding, ultimately, based on the mentioned stages and obtaining an understanding and intuition developed through a systematic process called selected coding, the researcher has presented their grounded theory strategy in a model that can be seen in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1

Paradigm Model of The Study



4. Discussion and Conclusion

As stated in the findings section, in the first phase of the research for concept identification, 4 concepts were extracted: issues related to child development in a social harm environment, legal-psychological problems, issues related to attitudes and worldview, and problems related to the resilience of couples. Ultimately, it was determined that the issues related to attitudes and worldview are causal for the other concepts, which is relatively consistent with the results of some research (Gafari & Zarean, 2021).

The level of discrepancy between the results of this research and its innovation in presenting a theoretical model could be due to the different sample group and the benefit of having experts from various fields such as psychology, law, philosophy, etc., which can be considered a strength of a grounded theory research. From the second phase of the research, 4 concepts were also extracted, each harboring research suggestions for others. As observed, in the second phase of the research, 4 concepts for the adaptability of adoptive families to their problems were extracted. The first concept was to explain the what, how, and why of adoption in Iran. The second concept dealt with practical solutions for solving problems. The third concept involved intervention

strategies for family resilience. And, lastly, the fourth concept revolved around strategies for changing attitudes. Therefore, given the expansion and selection of adoption as a way to complete a family in Iran, there is a witnessed need for research in this field, and it seems that this research has managed to take an initial and crucial step towards solving these problems by identifying the challenges faced by adoptive families and proposing solutions for their adaptation. The results could be beneficial for lawmakers, law enforcers, welfare organizations, adoptive families, and those active in this field.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

The study, while comprehensive in its approach to identifying and addressing the issues faced by adoptive families in Iran, encounters several limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, the research predominantly relies on qualitative data derived from interviews, which, despite providing in-depth insights, may not fully capture the breadth of experiences across the diverse Iranian sociocultural landscape. This methodological choice restricts the generalizability of the findings to the wider population of adoptive families. Additionally, the sample

size, although adequate for a qualitative study, limits the ability to conduct quantitative analyses that could offer broader statistical insights into the prevalence and intensity of identified issues. Another limitation stems from the potential for responder bias, as participants who volunteer for such sensitive studies may have different motivations or perspectives from those who choose not to participate, potentially skewing the data. Lastly, the study's focus on the current legal, social, and psychological environments may not account for rapidly evolving societal attitudes or impending legislative changes, which could impact the relevance and applicability of the findings over time.

Researchers and media owners, especially the national radio and television authorities, are advised to pay special attention to this field and prepare programs under the supervision of psychologists and counselors specialized in this field to nurture a healthy culture of adoption in society. Conditions should be facilitated so that volunteer parents can share their experiences and researchers can conduct scientific studies in this field. This facilitates better decision-making and creates more confidence for families with a suitable mental background to start this journey. Additionally, the need for psychological support from welfare for families should be considered in planning. It is suggested that the law be reviewed and, if necessary, essential amendments be made. Furthermore, it is proposed to establish an adoption department in the center of each province with competent and specialized experts, and the qualifications of the staff of that organization be thoroughly examined. In this case, the continuous focus on legal and executive affairs of the organization would be carried out with the presence of a dedicated custodian, and thus, redundant work between organizations is eliminated. Since there is still a research gap in this area, researchers are advised to focus their studies on this group of parents and children and conduct interdisciplinary research, given the wide scope and multidisciplinary nature of this subject. Additionally, it is recommended that comparative studies on the legal status of adoption in Iran and other countries be conducted to benefit from the successful experiences of other nations.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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