

Relation Problems in Internationally Adopted Juvenile Delinquents

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Abstract

Objective: Internationally adopted delinquents are overrepresented in juvenile Swedish institutions. With the purpose of investigating possible reasons for this overrepresentation, this study compared adopted delinquent adolescents and internationally adopted controls in the structure and functioning of their current relations, especially with their parents.

Methods: Internationally adopted adolescents admitted to institutional care (N=20) and non-delinquent internationally adopted controls (N=21) were compared through: a questionnaire; "family relations", a subscale in *I think I am*; "Family climate" (from *Karolinska Scale of Personality*); *Individual Schedule of Social Interaction*; and an *Attachment Test*.

Results: Bad relations with adoptive parents were more prevalent in internationally adopted delinquents compared to internationally adopted controls. Furthermore, the adopted delinquents and their parents blamed each other for the problems and the adopted delinquents reported physical and emotional abuse.

Conclusions: Internationally adopted delinquents reported more problems in their relationships to their parents than adopted controls did.

Introduction

Studies on adoption have highlighted adopted children's and adolescents' increased risk of psychological problems [1–14]. However, adoption research does not provide clear answers to the question about whether or not adopted children and adolescents have more problems than non-adopted children [11, 15], and there may be discrepancy in the results due to small clinical samples or samples biased by self-selection [16].

In the process of adoption, the infant undergoes an immense change when losing the first and well-known environment. An infant is reassured by his or her mother's voice and heartbeat and already during the first week after delivery, the child can distinguish the scent of the mother from other women [17]. Attachment is built up by the mother's adequate responses to her infant's needs and signals and the infant can slowly perceive the environment as predictable and safe. From this "safe haven", the infant can start to explore the surrounding world [18]. The attachment pattern, once established, has importance for the ability to engage in different kinds of relations and contacts [19]. When the infant experiences one or several ruptures with different caregivers, this implies constantly changing inter-

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actions where the child might perceive the environment and itself as incoherent and unpredictable. Internationally adopted infants are in addition challenged with a totally new external environment including a new language, different scents, a new place to live and new caregivers [20].

“Goodness-of fit” theories contain the idea that the match between child and parent is of prime importance in optimising the development of that child. If the match is not adequate, this can cause problems. These compatibility problems have a higher occurrence in adoptive families, as the family members are more often less similar than in biological families. Both personality and IQ scores are less compatible in adoptive families compared to biological families [21, 22]. Personality traits and temperament are partly genetically inherited and parent-offspring similarity in personality can be important in adolescent well-being [23]. Within the adoptive family, parent and child are different genetically, which may lead to specific challenges and eventually complicate the attachment process between parent and child [24]. Children can also be more or less easy to care for due to their temperament and it is crucial for the child how his or her parents adjust to the child’s temperament [19]. In international and interracial adoption, cultural and physical differences between parents and children may complicate the process of reciprocal identification. Within the adoptive family, the racial identity is not shared [25], and the adoptive parents must consider the cultural conceptions about a “deviant appearance”, which exists in western societies into which the international adoptees are placed. These prejudices affect not only the adoptee but the whole family and the relations within the family, which is a part of society and different social systems [26].

The ability of adult attachment, measured with an attachment scale during pregnancy, can predict the attachment between mother and child at one year of age [27]. When applied to adoption, the focus moved from solely concerning the adoptee to now including the adoptive mother and her ability for normal attachment behaviour [6, 28–32].

The present study is part of a larger project searching for explanations as to why internationally adopted delinquents are overrepresented in juvenile Swedish institutions. To accomplish this overall aim, many perspectives are included: psychological, somatic, psychiatric and sociological. The aim of the study was to investigate how the adopted delinquents relate to their parents compared to the adopted controls. Hereby we try to find explanations to the overrepresentation of internationally adopted adolescents in Swedish juvenile institutions. Internationally adopted delinquents and internationally adopted controls were compared with respect to attachment and social ability and in this study; test variables dealing with relations from different tests were used.

Material and methods

Participants. The adopted delinquents (the probands, N=20) were admitted to institutional care for juvenile delinquents according to the Swedish laws for compulsory

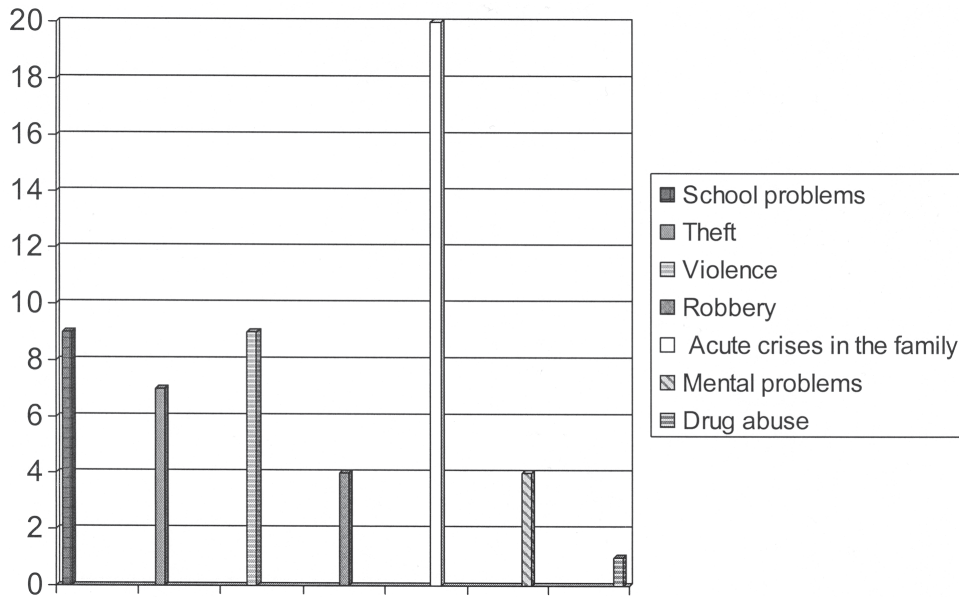


Figure 1. Reasons for placements at institutions of the adopted delinquents.

care and treatment of delinquent youths (LVU or SoL) for treatment mostly because of an acute crisis in the family, violence and problems in school (Figure 1). For information on continent of origin and age on arrival to Sweden, see Table 1 [33]. For two years (2000–2002), many recently admitted adoptees were interviewed. One institution, Folåsa, has specialized care for internationally adopted delinquents, therefore, 17 of the participants were tested at this institution. The remaining subjects were tested at three other institutions. Adopted controls (N=21) were internationally adopted adolescents living with their adoptive family (in different cities all over Sweden) and selected with the assistance of Adoptionscentrum (AC), Sweden’s largest adoption agency. AC used their membership documents to retrieve a number of subjects matched for age, gender and country of origin. From a selection of one to three names, one individual was randomly chosen: if this subject did not want

Table 1. The participants’ group adherence, N, age (Mean, SD), sex distribution, age on arrival in Sweden (Mean, SD) and the continent of origin

Groups	N	Age	Age on arrival in Sweden	Sex		Continent of origin		
				Boys	Girls	Europe	South America	Asia
1. Adopted delinquents*	20	15.7(1.2)	2.0(2.0)	13	7	3	7	10
2. Adopted controls	21	15.4(2.5)	1.2(1.1)	12	9	1	12	8
Total	41			25	16	4	19	18

* Probands

to participate the second random choice was contacted. The adopted controls were interviewed and tested in the cities where they lived. Initially, the aim was to match all subjects in the adopted control group with the adopted delinquent group: as this was difficult to execute in reality, some controls differed from the probands.

All children and their parents gave their informed consent according to the Declaration of Helsinki and the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Medical Faculty of Uppsala University.

Questionnaire. In order to cover all questions to be answered, a fully structured questionnaire finishing with 6 open-ended questions was used. The adolescents answered a questionnaire of 84 items divided into 7 areas: health & diseases, family situation, school, friends & spare time, alcohol & drugs, criminality and adoption. About 30 items from the questionnaire were taken from the ADAD interview [34]; a fully structured interview administered at registration of all youths admitted into the institutions under the National Board of Institutional Care (SiS). The other items were specific for the adoptive situation. In a similar way, the adoptive parents answered a shortened version of the adolescent's questionnaire (34 items), which was sent to them by post. Descriptive data were presented only for the delinquent group and included the *parent's questionnaire* (N=15) and the *adolescent questionnaire* (N=20). For the adopted control group, too few questionnaires were received to make an evaluation.

I think I am – Family relations. “I think I am” is a self-estimation questionnaire for school-aged children and adolescents (7–16 years) and has been translated and standardized into Swedish [35]. The theoretical base of the method is presented by Ouviaen-Birgerstam [36]. The test consists of 72 items divided into different subscales measuring various aspects of self concept and the individual's attitudes towards: physical appearance, abilities, psychological well-being, family relations, relations to other people and the total score. As the focus in the present article was on relations, only the results of family relations, relations to other people and total score were presented: the remaining results will be presented in a later article. The reliability and validity of the test are well approved. The strongest and most distinct subscale of the 13–14 year-old is “family relations”, which accounts for 39% of the variance in overall self-estimation. The second strongest subscale is “relations to other people”, which accounts for 11.3% of the variance [35]. The scales are added and this total score reflects the subject's self-estimation: the total score is considered a more reliable estimation than the subscales, which, due to high inter-correlations, account for a lower reliability.

Family Climate. Family climate is derived from the Karolinska scale of personality, KSP, [37] and has been used in numerous studies on depressive disorder and suicidality in adult patients [38]. KSP consists of 135 statements to be answered as to how well they apply: not at all, not especially, pretty well or exactly. Six of these statements concern central family themes and the present study applied these

in order to evaluate the perceived family climate (Appendix 1). The first three of the family statements were framed positively and scored 1–4. The next three were negative and the scoring was reversed. The sum of these scores was used as a measure of perceived family climate with a theoretical range of 6–24.

Attachment Test. The Attachment test (Appendix 2) is a self-report measurement originally developed to assess adult romantic attachment styles [39] and was later translated to correspond to attachment behaviour between children/adolescents and their parents [40]. An individual's result of the attachment test, i.e. the variable "attachment", can be divided into four clusters: secure, dismissing, fearful or preoccupied [39]. As a complement, the outcomes "anxiety in attachment" and "avoidance in attachment" were also measured.

The Individual Schedule for Social Interaction. The individual schedule for social interaction (ISSI) was developed for adults [41]. The Swedish ISSI questionnaire for self-evaluation in population studies was constructed by Undén and Orth Gomer [42] and has been used with Swedish adolescents [37, 43]. The schedule is composed of four subscales: AVSI – availability of social interaction; ADSI – adequacy of social interaction; AVAT – availability of attachment; and ADAT – adequacy of attachment. The score range is 0–9, based on 9 items for each subscale, except AVAT, which has a range of 0–5 and 5 items. Each item was given a value of zero or one and the values were added within each subscale: the maximum score was 30.

Statistical methods. For comparisons between groups t-tests were performed. Analyses of differences between variances were tested with Levene's test [44]. Bivariate correlation analyses were performed (Spearman's rho, two-tailed) and the significance level was set to $p < 0.05$.

Results

Questionnaire (delinquent group). There were 4 divorces and the families had moved in average twice ($M=1.7$). As for the educational level of the parents, 40% had university education, 40% college education and 20% had high school education. On average, the adolescents had two placements outside the family before the current placement at a juvenile institution and 70% of the adopted delinquents were the eldest in their adoptive family. In some items there was some concordance in how parents and adolescents answered: As for the question whether they considered the adoptee/parent to be their "real" child or parent they answered in a similar way (Table 2a). Also for the question whether they thought there is a difference between an adoptive and biological family, they answered in a similar way (Table 2c). For the attribution of the problems, there was a larger discord between adoptees and parents (Table 2b). A considerable number of adolescents responded that they have been abused (Table 2d). For more information, see table 2a–d.

Table 2a. Items from Questionnaire answered by adolescents and parents. Digits indicate number of persons

Items in questionnaire		Yes, beyond every doubt	Yes, most of the time	No, not always but things work alright anyway	No, I don't and this creates a lot of problems	Sum (N)
Do you see your child/parent as your "real" child/parent?	Adolescents' response	12	0	5	3	20
	Parents' response	14	0	1	0	15
Do you think your child/parents see you as their "real" child/parents?	Adolescents' response	9	3	5	3	20
	Parents' response	2	8	3	2	15

Table 2b. Items from Questionnaire concerning attributional bias

Items in questionnaire		The problems developed due to me/us	The problems developed due to us both	The problems developed due to my child/my parents	Sum (N)*
To whom do you mainly attribute the problems?	Adolescents' response	6	4	15	25
	Parents' response	1	2	12	15

* The sum is larger than the number of adolescents because they have occasionally answered two or three of the answering choices.

Table 2c. Items from questionnaire

Items in questionnaire		Yes, there is a difference	No, there is no difference	Sum (N)
Is there a difference between a "biological" and an adoptive family?	Adolescents' response	16	4	20
	Parents' response	10	5	15

I think I am. The adopted delinquents scored lower on "family relations" than the adopted controls ($p < 0.001$, Figure 2). In the variable "other relations", the adopted delinquents scored lower than the adopted controls ($p = 0.017$). Concerning "overall self image" i.e. the total sum of test scores, there was a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) between the adopted delinquents, who scored lower, and the adopted

Table 2d. Items from the adolescent questionnaire concerning abuse.

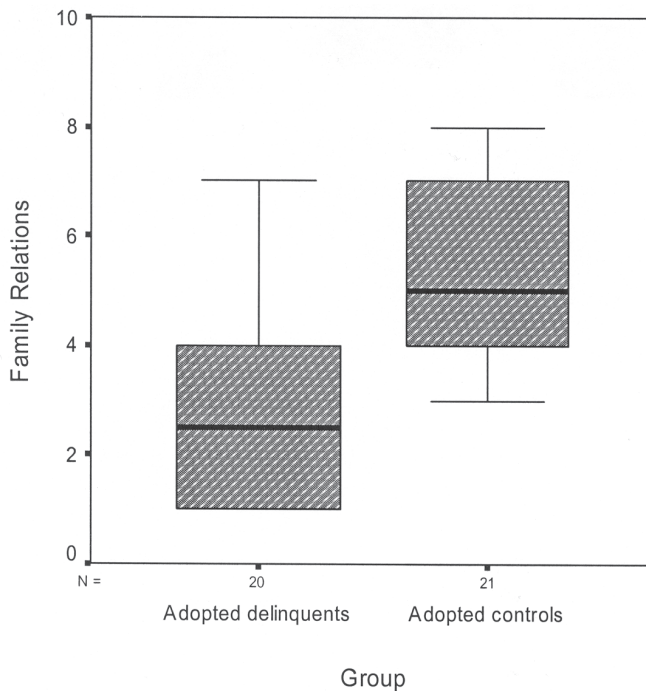
Items in questionnaire		Never	Occa- sionally	Often	Very often	Sum (N)
How often were there conflicts in your family?	Adolescents' response	1	5	7	7	20
How often, if ever, have you been physically abused?*	Adolescents' response	11	5	4	0	20
How often, if ever, have you been emotionally abused?*	Adolescents' response	10	4	3	3	20

* In two cases the abuse took place before the adoption, in one case the abuser was a relative, in six cases the adoptive parents were the abusers.

** In two cases the abuser was a non-family member, and in the rest of the cases the adoptive parents were the abusers.

controls. There was a negative correlation between “age on arrival” and the perceived functioning of “family relations” in raw scores (I think I am: $p < 0.001$). For information about means, t-test scores and degrees of freedom (df), see Table 3.

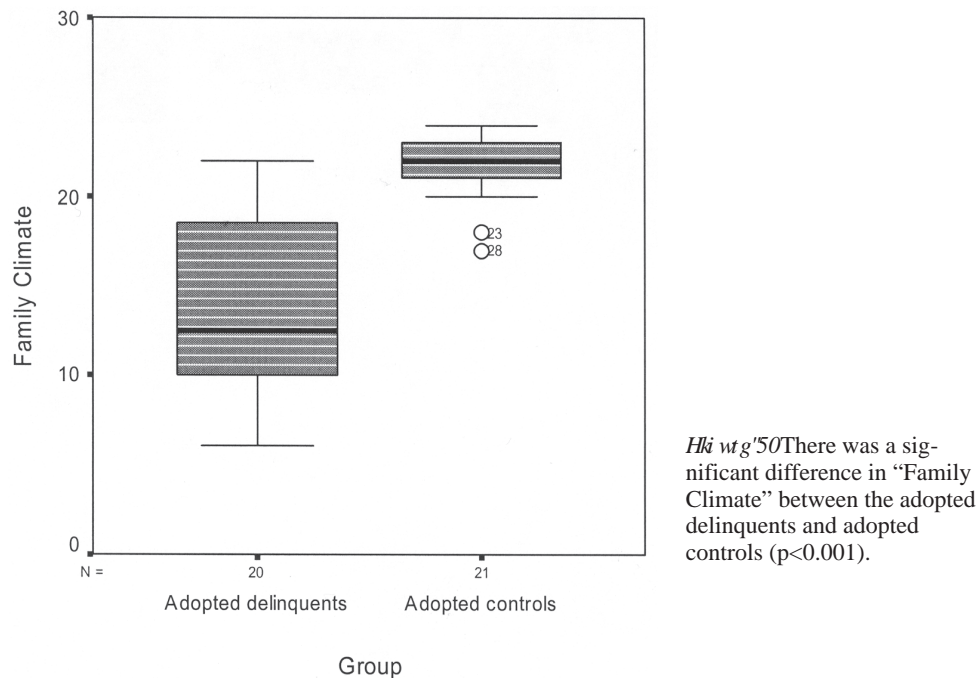
Family climate. Concerning “family climate”, the adopted delinquents scored lower than the adopted controls ($p < 0.001$), i.e. the adopted controls perceived their family climate most positive (Figure 3).



Hki wtg'40 “Family relations” (Kj kmKco ± There was a significant difference in scores between the adopted delinquents and the adopted controls ($p < 0.001$).

Table 3. Testresults overview. *** = p<0.001, **=p<0.01, *=p<0.05

Test	Adopted delinquents Mean (SD)	Adopted controls Mean (SD)	T-test	Df
I think I am – Family relations	2.75 (1.94)	5.38 (1.43)	-4.9***	39
I think I am – Other relations	4.85 (2.11)	6.38 (1.83)	-2.5*	39
I think I am – Overall self image	3.95 (1.88)	5.90 (1.76)	-3.4***	39
Family Climate (KSP)	13.50 (5.45)	21.62 (1.86)	-6.3***	23
Attachment Test – Attachment	2.85 (1.31)	1.91 (1.38)	1.88	29
Attachment Test – Anxiety in attachment	2.77 (1.03)	1.93 (0.66)	2.42*	29
Attachment Test – Avoidance in attachment	4.20 (1.76)	2.22 (1.15)	3.33**	29
Individual Schedule of Social Interaction – AVAT	4.40 (1.67)	4.57 (1.96)	-0.30	39
Individual Schedule of Social Interaction – ADAT	6.05 (2.87)	5.57 (1.78)	0.64	31
Individual Schedule of Social Interaction – AVSI	4.65 (1.76)	6.00 (1.84)	-2.40*	39
Individual Schedule of Social Interaction – ADSI	5.70 (2.00)	6.86 (2.18)	-1.77	39
Individual Schedule of Social Interaction – Sum	20.90 (6.46)	23.00 (5.80)	-1.10	39



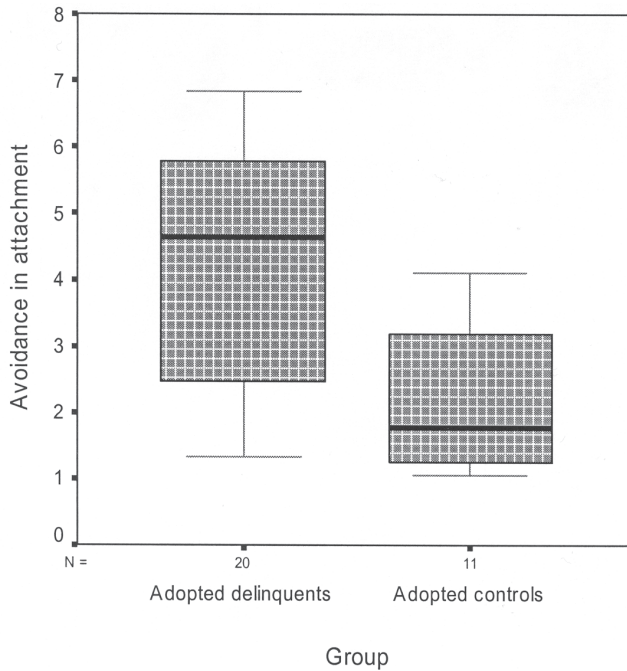


Figure 4. The outcome “Avoidance in attachment” was compared between groups. There was a significant difference ($p < 0.002$) between adopted delinquents and adopted controls.

Attachment test. In the outcome “avoidance in attachment”, significant differences were determined between the groups ($p < 0.002$): the adopted delinquents had a higher level of “avoidance in attachment” (Figure 4). In the outcome “anxiety in attachment”, there were significant differences between the adopted delinquents and the adopted controls ($p = 0.022$), where the adopted delinquents had more “anxiety” than the adopted controls. There were no significant differences between the groups for the variable “securely attached”.

Individual Schedule of Social Interaction (ISSI). For the variable “availability of social interaction” (AVSI), the adopted delinquents considered themselves as having less social interactions than the adopted controls ($p = 0.021$). For “adequacy of attachment relations” (ADAT), the adopted delinquents scored higher i.e. in a more positive way, although not significantly higher, than the adopted controls.

Discussion

The main results of this study indicated that adopted delinquents appeared to have difficulties in handling their family relations. In both the measures “family relations” and “family climate”, the adopted delinquents experienced their relations to their families, and especially their parents, as not functioning as well as was the case with the adopted controls. Measuring “anxiety in attachment” (to their parents), the adopted delinquents had significantly more “anxiety” than the controls.

As the overall aim of the study was to address the question of overrepresentation of delinquency of international adoptees in the Swedish juvenile institutions, this study included psychological, somatic, psychiatric and sociological perspectives. The tests representing these perspectives are numerous and time consuming and therefore, the number of participants was limited. Considering the small number of participants in the study, interpretations must be made with caution although the results provided a general picture indicating that international delinquent adoptees have severe problems within the area of family relations.

That the delinquents were involuntarily taken into custody ought to be mentioned, as this circumstance of “imprisonment” combined with the initial involuntary separation from their families affects how adopted delinquents answer questions about their parents and families. Nevertheless, the pathway to delinquency is often long and the relations to parents and family may have been problematic long before the time of the testing.

Questionnaire. There were four divorces in the sample (20%). Adoptive families generally have a lower level of divorces compared to the general population. Ced-erblad et al showed that 16% versus 30% have experienced their parents divorcing before the age of 18 [45]. In the present study, the level of divorces was expected to be somewhat higher in the adoptive families with institutionalized adolescents. The adoptive families had moved in average twice which was relatively high compared to another Swedish study with 208 adoptive families where the average move was 0.6 [45]. In the present study 40% of the adoptive parents were university educated: in the general population about 22% has a university education [46].

There was an attributional bias in which the parents and adolescents “blamed” each other for the problems. The adolescents may be immature and angry with their parents because of involuntary placement in the institution and therefore have difficulty in taking responsibility for the emergence of problems. As for the parents, it was remarkable that only one parent took on responsibility for the problems, instead they thought the children were solely responsible. The attributional differences could also be a sign of a lack of optimal matching (mentioned in the introduction) (i.e. goodness of fit) between the adoptee and his/her parents. It has been established that the adoptive parents are well above average concerning educational level [45, 46] whereas their children have an average IQ of 85 [33]. This is only one example of differences that might exist between the adopted delinquent group and their parents. The lack of “goodness of fit” probably caused obstacles concerning effective communication. At the time parents and adolescents filled in the questionnaire, all constructive communication appeared to have ceased and instead they claimed it was the “other’s” fault. These attributional differences validated the bad relations between adoptive parents and adolescents as measured in the tests.

A large percentage of both adolescents (80%) and parents (67%) thought there was a difference in being a “biological family” and an adoptive family. Similarly, some of the parents and the adolescents did not see the other part as their “real” child or parent. What these answers mean is difficult to interpret in an exact way; although

there is an indication of recognized ambivalence about being an adoptive family. These last statements could also be seen as validating the bad relations within the adoptive family. The level of past and current physical and emotional abuse reported by the adopted delinquents was high and needs to be taken seriously.

I think I am, Family Climate and Attachment test. The adopted delinquents demonstrated more problems compared to the adopted controls in “family relations”, “overall self image”, “family climate”, and “anxiety in attachment”. However, in the variable for “other relations” (i.e. relations outside the family) there were no differences between the groups, the bad feelings are only associated with attachment figures and family. Considering the importance of good family relations for an “overall self image” in early adolescence, we chose to present the result of “overall self image” here, as this result supported the data on “family relations” (see Methods).

ISSI. “Adequacy of attachment” is a measurement rated by the adolescents on how well the attachment process has developed. One result that deviated from the overall picture was that the adopted controls were less satisfied with their attachment relations than the adopted delinquents were. For overall results of ISSI, i.e. the sum of the variables, the delinquents had a mean of 21 and the adopted controls had a mean of 23. The mean should be above 20 to indicate a “good enough” functioning social network, consequently the two groups scored in the average range.

In the negative correlation between age on arrival into the adoptive home and results on “family relations” (“I think I am”), an older age on arrival was associated with low scores on the family relations scale. Therefore, age on arrival could account for some importance concerning a good attachment to adoptive parents: other variables that could be important include the number and quality of pre-placements. These are all variables that have an impact on attaining a safe attachment to the adoptive parents and environment.

The mean age for adoption in the delinquent group was relatively high (2 years), and earlier studies have determined a strong relationship between age of adoption and developmental impairments, particularly in the area of emotional, social and behavioural development [8, 47]. Howe [48] focused on age at placement in relation to later contact with the adoptive mother: many adoptees are still in contact with their adoptive mother but those placed for adoption after the age of two years were less likely to maintain regular contact and more likely to have lost contact with her completely. Age alone may not constitute the whole risk; it is possible that the child has suffered neglect, abuse and deprivation and has therefore adopted defence mechanisms and coping strategies that are brought into the relationship with the new caretakers [48, 49].

An older age on arrival appears to lead to some disability in attaching to the adoptive parents. The adoptee might have several separations and a history of neglect, trauma or physiological/neurological deficiency that causes complications and renders difficulties in forming a normal attachment once they arrive in the

adoptive home. The adoptive parents might have difficulty attaching to an older child, who may be traumatised, sad or angry. The adoptive parents might also interfere with a normal attachment process due to their own specific traumas, grief and inability to attach [28–32, 50]. This is a difficult situation and can require professional help to resolve, and is a reason why adoptive parents are now included in the search for criteria affecting the attachment process.

Divergent results concerning the effect of the age on arrival in the attachment process have been presented. The importance of age on arrival has been demonstrated [28, 51, 52]; whereas others have found that the most influential factor is not age on arrival, but the parents ability to invest emotionally in their child [53]. By measuring “maternal sensitivity”, i.e. the mother’s ability to perceive and correctly interpret the child’s behaviour and signals, Stams et al [6] found that in the transition from early to middle childhood, the maternal sensitivity of adoptive mothers decreases compared to biological mothers. The authors discuss if the genetic disposition of the child i.e. temperament, appearance etc becomes apparent in early adolescence and a lack of identification causes the adoptive mother to withdraw. The process of a safe and secure attachment cannot be over estimated and appears to influence social and cognitive development more than other factors such as sex and temperament [29].

The present work deals with the problem how adopted delinquents and adopted controls experience their relationships with their parents and severe discords were herewith identified. Adopted delinquents have much more dysfunctional family relations compared to adopted controls. This could be a part of a more complex web of causality in explaining the overrepresentation of international adoptees in juvenile institutions. Although poor family relations may contribute to the adopted adolescent’s well being, they might not alone be responsible for the delinquency. Both the exact chain of causality for international adoptee’s higher rates of delinquency and how much the adoptive adolescent and the adoptive parents contribute to the poor relations need clarifying.

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APPENDIX A

Items from KSP constituting “Family climate”.

Statements about family climate from Karolinska Scales of Personality (KSP): item number in the scale (in parenthesis) and scoring range for how well the statement applies.

I have always liked it at home (32)	1–4
My family life has always been harmonious (50)	1–4
In my family there has always been concord (58)	1–4
There has been more quarrelling in my home (compared with other families) (64)	4–1
As a child I sometimes wanted to run away forever (77)	4–1
My parents were never really understanding (104)	4–1

APPENDIX B

The Attachment Test

The relationship to your parents

Sex: _____ Age: _____ years

Instructions: The following statements concern how you in general perceive your relationship to your parents. Answer each statement by saying how much you agree with that statement. Write a number on the empty line in front of the statement.

Do not agree at all			Neutral	Agree totally		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

- I prefer not to show my parents how I really feel.
- I worry about being abandoned.
- I am very comfortable being close to my parents.
- I worry a lot about my relationship with my parents.
- Just when my parents start getting close to me, I find myself pulling away.
- I worry that my parents will not care for me the way I care for them.
- I get uncomfortable when my parents want to be very close.
- I worry a fair amount about losing my parents.
- I do not feel comfortable opening up to my parents.
- I often wish that my parents feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for them.
- I want to get close to my parents, but I keep pulling back.
- I often want to merge completely with my parents and this sometimes scares them away.
- I am nervous when my parents get too close to me.
- I worry about being alone.
- I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my parents.
- My desire to be very close to my parents sometimes scares them away.
- I try to avoid getting too close to my parents.
- I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my parents.
- I find it relatively easy to be close to my parents.
- Sometimes I feel that I force my parents to show more feeling, more commitment.
- I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on my parents.
- I do not often worry about being abandoned.
- I prefer not to be too close to my parents.
- If I cannot get my parents to show interest in me, I get upset or angry.
- I tell my parents just about everything.
- I find that my parents do not want to get as close as I would like.
- I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my parents.
- When I am not friends with my parents, I feel somewhat anxious and insecure.
- I feel comfortable depending on my parents.
- I get frustrated when my parents are not around as much as I would like.
- I do not mind asking my parents for comfort, advice, or help.
- I get frustrated if my parents are not available when I need them.
- It helps to turn to my parents in times of need.
- When my parents disapprove of me, I feel bad about myself.
- I turn to my parents for many things, including comfort and reassurance.
- I resent it when my parents spend time away from me.