

Two Maternal Representations *A Study of Israeli Adopted Children*

Beatriz Priel, PhD

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Bela Kantor, PhD

Bar-Ilan University

Avi Besser, MA

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Using an object relations perspective, the representations of birth and adopted mothers in a sample of 52 nonreferred adoptees were studied. To better understand the specific effects of adoption on the construction of 2 maternal representations, birth and adoptive maternal representation of adopted children was compared with that of nonadopted children. In addition, the effect of incongruous representations of birth and adoptive mothers on adoptees' externalizing and internalizing behaviors was explored. Compared with nonadopted children, adoptees' representations of the mothers appear as more concrete and less benign. Among adopted children, representations of the birth mothers were found to contain split negative aspects of the adoptive mothers. Moreover, the differences between birth and adoptive mother representations were found to associate with adoptees' externalizing behaviors.

Beatriz Priel, PhD, and Avi Besser, MA, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel; Bela Kantor, PhD, Department of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Beatriz Priel, PhD, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva 84105, Israel. Electronic mail may be sent to bpriel@bgumail.bgu.ac.il.

Psychoanalytic literature suggests that adoption may have a potentially disruptive effect on development (Brinich, 1980, 1993; Deeg, 1989, 1990; Feder, 1974; Frankel, 1991; Hodges, 1990; P. F. Kernberg, 1985; Qui-nodoz, 1996). Clinical material from the psychoanalytic treatment of adopted children has defined adoption-related impairments in the child's sense of security and identity, the channeling of aggression, and the resolution of age-appropriate developmental tasks. Research on the symptomatology of adopted children reveals a high incidence of acting-out problems, such as aggression, stealing, lying, oppositional behavior, and running away, even in community samples (Brodzinsky, 1987; Brodzinsky, Schechter, Braff, & Singer, 1984).

Adoption has been conceptualized as a lifelong process that reaches its solution when the adopted child adopts the adoptive family (P. F. Kernberg, 1985); in this process, birth parents are never relinquished and continue to exist as part of the child's self. The psychoanalytical study of adoption has revealed important characteristics of the internal world of adopted children and adults in analysis (Deeg, 1990; Glenn, 1985; Hodges, 1990; Silverman, 1985). Less is known, however, about the internal world of nonreferred adoptees. In the present report, we studied a nonclinical sample of adoptees, using a psychoanalytical perspective, to explore the recurrent effects of adoption on the child's object representations.

Object representations is a basic construct pertaining to psychoanalytic (Blatt, 1974; O. Kernberg, 1976; Lichtenberg, 1983; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; Mitchell, 1988; Stern, 1989), as well as attachment (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1969), theories. In these two theoretical frameworks, object representations are assumed to mediate a child's responses to and expectations of others. The psychoanalytic construct of *object representations* refers to dynamic mental models based on both the child's experiences and the activation of fantasies and fears. Object relations are conceptualized as motivational structures that guide perception and affect the organization of past experience and future prospects. Similar basic assumptions can be found also in Bowlby's concept of internal working models; attachment theory, however, emphasizes the almost exclusive role played by the child's direct experiences with the attachment figure in the formation of internal dynamic models of relationships.

The study of adoptees' representations in the framework of closed adoptions (where the adopted family has no relations or knowledge about the birth parents) offers a unique opportunity to explore two sets of parental representations: the adoptive parents, who care for the child from birth or early childhood, and the birth parents, who are unknown to the child and to

her or his adoptive parents. In this case, we must assume that the formation of representations of the adoptive and the birth parent follows different processes. On one hand, the adoptive parent representations are construed on the basis of organized memories of real interactional sequences, as interpreted by the child. On the other hand, the representations of the birth parents are not grounded on actual experience but are affected by experiences with and representations of the adopted parents, the knowledge of having been adopted, and associated fantasy (Hodges, 1990). The clinical literature on adoption approaches this problem, defining the biological parent as a "phantom object" (Rosenberg & Horner, 1991, p. 73), a "lost object" (Deeg, 1989, p. 152), or a "hole object" (Quinodoz, 1996, p. 324).

The representations of real parents are assumed to be modulated by the child's actual interactions with them, according to attachment (Bowlby, 1969), as well as object relational (Winnicott, 1965) approaches. However, representations of the unknown birth parent lack the possibility of being moderated by experience and may present, consequently, extreme characteristics of goodness or badness. Clinical case studies of adopted analysands provide evidence of both: representations of extremely bad as well as ideal birth parents. The extremely bad birth parent representations have been suggested by the analysis of cases in which these representations basically consist of negative split out aspects of the adoptive parental figures (Glenn, 1985; Rosenberg & Horner, 1991). On the other hand, different authors agree upon the assumption that young children cannot tolerate being angry at parents who have deserted them, displacing their anger instead onto the adoptive parents (Silverman, 1985); birth parent representations thus remain as idealized objects (Deeg, 1990).

The first aim of the present report was to compare representations of birth and adoptive mothers in a community sample, to explore the generalizability of the assumptions about the differences between them. Moreover, we assumed that the congruency or incongruency between representations of birth and adoptive mothers constituted a main aspect of the organization of adoptees' internal reality: Marked discrepancies between these representations may lead to a more conflictual psychic reality. Recent findings from clinical and developmental research in the area of attachment show that the lack of coherence between different internal representational models of relationships (representations of mother and father, for instance) associates with increased aggression among young children (Fonagy, 1996). Accordingly, an additional purpose of the present study was to explore the hypothesis that the discrepancy between representations of adoptive and

birth mothers might associate with the prevalence of symptomatology among adoptees, mainly externalizing behaviors.

We studied maternal representations in a sample including latency children adopted immediately after birth as well as children adopted at 2 to 3 years of age. This sample was selected taking into account clinical as well as developmental research findings about the importance of the age at adoption as a predictor of adjustment: Children adopted as newborns have been found to have better developmental chances than children adopted later on, because the latter necessarily underwent traumatic separations (Frankel, 1991; Rosenthal, 1993). In addition, the study of adopted children's adjustment uncovers important differences between infancy and early childhood and later developmental stages. Although, in general, the early development of adoptive children seems to be adequate (Singer, Brodzinsky, Ramsay, Steir, & Waters, 1985), studies consistently report that the full impact of adoption is felt when the child reaches latency, with later adoptees at greater risk (Brodzinsky, Lang, & Smith, 1995).

Latency age problems among adoptees have been related to specific difficulties in the resolution of the oedipal complex and superego formation, as well as the development of a stable and positive ego identity (Blum, 1983; Brinich, 1980; P. F. Kernberg, 1985). Because of the reality of having a double set of parents, being an adopted child imposes additional difficulties to the elaboration of emotional conflicts with, and ambivalent feelings toward, the adoptive parents. From the perspective of the development of cognitive capacities, during latency, the child's knowledge about adoption changes, becoming increasingly differentiated, reflective, and logical, admitting the irreversibility of the loss of the birth parent. At this stage, children are for the first time able to comprehend both sides of adoption, that is, having been adopted as well as given away (Brodzinsky, 1990). Latency adoptees' construction of highly idealized or devaluated birth parent representations may also be seen as transformed versions of the family romance fantasies, typical of latency children. Among adopted children who already have two sets of parents as possible identification figures (Deeg, 1989, 1990; Rosenberg & Horner, 1991), very different and even reversed versions of the family romance fantasy have been reported, such as fantasized blood ties to the adoptive parents (Hodges, 1990).

To sum up, to better understand the specific effects of adoption on the construction of two maternal representations, we compared birth and adoptive maternal representation among adopted children to maternal representations among nonadopted children, and we explored the effect of

incongruous representations of birth and adoptive mothers on adoptees' symptomatology.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 52 adopted children. Thirty-two (11 girls and 21 boys, mean age = 9.72 years, $SD = 1.69$) were adopted between 0 and 2 months of age. The remaining 20 children (10 girls and 10 boys; mean age = 10.05 years, $SD = 1.47$) were adopted between 2 and 3 years of age. The comparison group consisted of 52 nonadopted children (27 girls and 25 boys; mean age = 9.71 years, $SD = 1.40$). The adopted children were approached through the Center for Consultation and Treatment of Adoptive Families and Adult Adoptees of the Beer-Sheva area, under the auspices of the Israel Welfare Ministry. Working in close cooperation with this center, we sent, to a representative sample of families with adoptees in the appropriate age range and social class, a letter explaining our plan to conduct a study about adoptee adjustment. We then scheduled by phone a first meeting with the adoptive parents, during which we obtained their informed consent and then scheduled the interviews with the mother and the child. Out of 56 families approached, 52 were willing to cooperate. Social class was selected according to the socioeconomic status of the majority of the children served by the center. Following the existing local policy, all those adoptions are closed (identity of birth parents is not provided). The nonadopted children sample was recruited from community schools; parents and children in this group were asked to take part in a study of children adaptation in different family settings. Eighty-five percent of the nonadoptive families we approached consented to take part in this study. All the children, adopted and nonadopted, attended regular schools.

After obtaining the families' informed consent, we interviewed the children in their own homes, and the mothers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1978, 1991; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1979), as part of an extensive longitudinal research study on adoptive children and families.¹ Interviews with the children were handwritten verbatim; we found this method to be less disruptive than tape-recording; interviews with mothers were tape-recorded and transcribed.

¹ A report including data about the adoptive mothers' experiences has been submitted for publication elsewhere.

Assessment of Maternal Representations

We evaluated children's maternal representations by means of the procedure devised by Blatt and colleagues (Blatt, Chevron, Quinlan, Schaffer, & Wein, 1992), and adapted for use with children (Priel, Myodovnick, & Rivlin-Beniaminy, 1995). In the adapted procedure for children, participants are asked to talk about their mother (both birth and adoptive in the case of the adoptees), without further specifications; if the child hesitates or asks about it, the interviewer adds that they can say whatever comes to their mind. Probes are used only to make clear specific words or sentences. According to this procedure, nonadopted children were asked to talk about their mother, and adopted children were asked to talk about their biological and their adoptive mothers. The order of adoptees' maternal descriptions was randomized.

Following Blatt et al.'s (1992) coding procedure, we evaluated the *content* as well as the *structural* aspects of the descriptions. The *content* of the descriptions was assessed through the ratings of the participant's view of the parent on each of 13 dimensions, following closely the operational definitions in Blatt et al.'s (1992) coding manual. The coding of the content categories of the descriptions can be summarily defined as follows: *Affectionate* refers to the degree of the parent's active display of affection. *Ambitious* refers to the degree of the parent's pressure toward achievement. *Benevolent–malevolent* refers to the degree to which the parent's affect expresses good or bad will. *Cold–warm* indicates the degree to which the parent's interpersonal style is unemotional or loving and warm. *Degree of constructive involvement* refers to the parent's positive versus negative interactions with others. *Intellectual* refers to the extent the parent is described as emphasizing study, speculation, and interest on ideas. *Judgmental* refers to the degree the parent is described as critical or intolerant. *Negative–positive ideal* indicates the degree of admiration for the parent's qualities. *Nurturant* refers to the degree to which the parent is described as giving care and attention. *Punitive* indicates the degree to which the parent is described as physically or emotional abusive. *Successful* refers to the degree to which the parent is described as satisfied with her own accomplishment. *Strength* refers to the extent to which the parent is described as effective, enduring, and consistent. *Ambivalence* refers to the extent to which the description reflects ambivalent or conflictual feelings toward the parent. The factor analysis of the content categories revealed three underlying factors (Priel et al., 1995; Quinlan, Blatt, Chevron, & Wein, 1992): Benevolence (includes the *affectionate*, *benevolent–malevolent*, *cold–*

warm, degree of constructive involvement, nurturant, successful, and strength content categories), Punitiveness (includes the *judgmental*, *punitive*, and *ambivalence* content categories), and Ambitiousness (includes the *ambitious* and *intellectual* content categories). The negative-positive ideal content was not found in the present samples. The content categories are rated on a 7-point scale except for ambivalence, which is rated on a 5-point scale.

Whereas the content of the descriptions provides an assessment of their qualitative aspects, the conceptual level of the description provides a structural characterization of the representation, based on Piagetian and Wernierian developmental concepts, as well as on psychoanalytic theory. Raters assess descriptions as belonging to one of five possible levels: In the *sensorimotor/preoperational* level, the object is experienced primarily in terms of its activities and is recognized only in the context of need gratification. In the *perceptual-concrete* level, the object is articulated as separated from the specific experiences of gratification and is recognized as a generalized entity with a variety of concrete and literal functions and actions. Higher level representations shift from depictive to truly representational (symbolic) functions and are characterized by the iconic property of internalized object relations. In the *external* iconic level, representation is based on concrete signs of the object; the qualities and attributes of those representations are based on specific, concrete, and manifest part properties, functions, and interests of the object. In the *internal* iconic level, representations reflect mainly an appreciation of more abstract and internal properties, such as feelings and thoughts. In the *conceptual-representational* level, the object is represented as a fully independent entity with enduring characteristics and continuity. The conceptual level of the representations is coded on a 9-point scale, including the 5 levels mentioned above (scores 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9, respectively) and 4 intermediate levels (scores 2, 4, 6, and 8).

The construct validity of this method is supported by research on psychopathology and psychodynamic treatment in adult populations (Blatt, Auerbach & Levy, 1997; Blatt, Wiseman, Prince-Gibson, & Gatt, 1991). The developmental dimensions of the model have been confirmed in the study of children (Priel et al., 1995). In this last study, the conceptual level of parental representations was found to significantly correlate with children's age and self-perception dimensions and to predict children's responses to situations involving interference in ongoing parent-child interpersonal relations.

All maternal descriptions were rated by two graduate trained raters,

unaware of the child's group (adopted or nonadopted), with one limitation: Eleven out of the 52 descriptions of the biological mothers were identifiable as mothers of adoptees because children used expressions such as "the mother who gave me up" or "my other mom." Descriptions of the remaining 41 birth mothers and all the adoptive mothers and control mothers were not identifiable as such. Interjudge reliabilities in the coding of each factor of the parental representations were as follows: .85 for Punitiveness, .88 for Benevolence, .83 for Ambitiousness, and .97 for conceptual level; reliabilities for each of the 12 content categories ranged from .62 to .88.

Intelligence Quotient

We used scores on an abridged version of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children—Revised (WICS–R; Wechsler, 1979), including the Vocabulary and Similarities subscales, to control for possible significant differences between adopted and nonadopted children. The reported correlation between this abridged version of the WICS–R and total scale score is around .91 (Glasser & Zimmerman, 1967).

Assessment of Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors

We assessed children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors by means of maternal reports of behavioral and emotional problems, using the Externalizing and Internalizing scales of the CBCL, a standardized parent-report questionnaire designed to assess behavior problems in children between 4 and 18 years. The Externalizing Problems factor of the CBCL reflects conflicts with other people and their expectations from the child such as delinquent, aggressive, and hyperactive behavior. The Internalizing Problems factor relates to withdrawn, anxious–depressed, and somatic complaints. The CBCL has high concurrent validity (above .80) and associates significantly with *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) criteria (Achenbach, 1991). The CBCL has been adapted to use with Israeli children, and norms comparing clinically referred and nonreferred children have been issued (Zilber, Auerbach, & Lerner, 1994).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

We first computed analyses comparing adoptees and nonadopted children in relation to sex, age, IQ, and symptomatology variables. Differences as to

the number of girls and boys in each group were not significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 104) = 2.60, ns$. We then computed a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with three adoption groups (early adopted, late adopted, and nonadopted) as the independent variable and age, IQ, and externalizing and internalizing behaviors as dependent variables. We found significant group differences, Wilks's $\Lambda(8, 196) = .69, p < .0001$. Although the differences between the groups in relation to the children's age and IQ were not significant, $F(2, 101) = 0.40, ns$, and $F(2, 101) = 0.81, ns$, respectively, groups differed on the incidence of both externalizing behaviors, $F(2, 101) = 19.60, p < .0001$; $M = 4.56, SD = 3.98$; $M = 11.09, SD = 8.09$; and $M = 13.90, SD = 8.30$, for nonadopted, early-adopted, and late-adopted children, respectively, and internalizing behaviors, $F(2, 101) = 7.04, p < .001$; $M = 4.21, SD = 4.23$; $M = 7.72, SD = 5.26$; and $M = 7.95, SD = 5.84$, for nonadopted, early-adopted, and late-adopted children, respectively. Contrast analyses of externalizing problems showed a higher rate of these problems among early-adopted than among nonadopted children, $F(1, 101) = 20.63, p < .0001$, and among late-adopted than among nonadopted children, $F(1, 101) = 30.73, p < .0001$. Differences between early- and late-adopted children on externalizing behaviors were not significant. Also, contrast analyses of internalizing problems showed a higher rate of problems among early-adopted than among nonadopted children, $F(1, 101) = 10.19, p < .002$. Late-adopted children showed more internalizing behaviors than nonadopted children, $F(1, 101) = 8.44, p < .005$. Differences between early- and late-adopted children were not significant.

Maternal Representations Among Adopted and Nonadopted Children

Three factors of the maternal representations were analyzed: Benevolence, Punitiveness, and conceptual level. The remaining factor, Ambitiousness, was not included because it did not show enough variability in these samples. In the following analyses, we were interested in comparing adoptees' representations of both their birth and adoptive mothers with the representations of nonadoptees' mothers. Because we compared the adoptees' representations of both their biological and adoptive mothers with the maternal representations of nonadopted children, we computed two separated MANOVAs. Note, however, that these MANOVAs are not independent of each other, because, in both of them, the nonadopted children's maternal representation is the same. Means and standard deviations of Benevolence, Punitiveness, and conceptual level scores of nonadopted

children's mother representations and of adoptees' birth and adoptive mother representations can be seen in Table 1.

Birth mother. In the first analysis, the adopted children's representations of the birth mother were compared with the nonadopted children's maternal representations. We computed a MANOVA with adoption groups as the independent variable (early adopted, late adopted, and nonadopted) and Benevolence, Punitiveness, and conceptual level of the birth mother representation as dependent variables (means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1). Differences among groups were significant, Wilks's $\Lambda(6, 198) = .61, p < .0001$. Significant univariate main effects for group were found for the three factors: Benevolent, $F(2, 101) = 28.61, p < .001$; Punitive, $F(2, 101) = 4.86, p < .001$; and conceptual level, $F(2, 101) = 8.76, p < .001$. Planned comparisons showed significant differences between early- and late-adopted versus nonadopted children in all three factors. Representations of the birth mother among early-adopted children were significantly less benevolent, $F(1, 101) = 42.96, p < .0001$; had a lower conceptual level, $F(1, 101) = 10.61, p < .002$; and were more punitive, $F(1, 101) = 8.18, p < .005$, than the nonadopted children's maternal representations. The same pattern was found when comparing late adoptees to nonadopted children's birth mother representations. Compared with nonadopted children, late adoptees' representations of the birth mother were less benevolent, $F(1, 101) = 32.53, p < .0001$; more punitive, $F(1, 101) = 4.43, p < .04$; and had a lower conceptual level, $F(1, 101) = 12.57, p < 0.002$. The differences between early- and late-adopted children on the factors of the birth mother representations were not significant.

Adoptive mother. To compare mean scores on the three factors assessed for the representations of adoptees' adoptive mothers and nonadoptees' maternal representations, we computed a MANOVA with adoption groups as the independent variable (nonadopted and early- and late-adopted children) and the benevolence, punitiveness, and conceptual level of mother representations as dependent variables (means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1). We found significant group differences, Wilks's $\Lambda(6, 198) = .82, p < .003$. Significant univariate main effects for group were found for the Benevolent, $F(2, 101) = 7.44, p < .001$, and the conceptual level, $F(2, 101) = 3.69, p < .02$, factors; differences on the Punitiveness factor were nonsignificant, $F(2, 101) = 0.50, ns$. Planned comparisons showed that early-adopted children scored lower on their adoptive mother representations of benevolence, $F(1, 101) = 4.5, p < .04$, and conceptual level, $F(1, 101) = 6.47, p < .01$, than did nonadopted children; however, the degree of punitiveness did not differ

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Birth and Adoptive Mother Representations

Representation	Nonadopted		Adopted late				Adopted early			
	M	SD	Birth mother		Adoptive mother		Birth mother		Adoptive mother	
			M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Benevolent	4.68	0.61	3.88	0.44	4.42	0.37	3.86	0.50	4.17	0.31
Punitive	2.27	0.41	2.61	0.63	2.21	0.41	2.57	0.65	2.33	0.55
Conceptual level	4.60	1.96	3.34	1.60	3.53	1.76	3.00	1.03	3.75	1.74

Note. Adopted $n = 52$; nonadopted $n = 52$.

significantly. The late-adopted children scored lower than the nonadopted children on the Benevolence, $F(1, 101) = 13.97, p < .0001$, factor, but differences on the conceptual level and punitiveness factors were not significant. Differences between early- and late-adopted children on the adoptive mother representations factors were not significant.

The analysis of the distribution of the conceptual level scores among adopted and nonadopted children representations shows that 56% adoptees represented their birth mother and 38% adoptees represented their adoptive mothers on the perceptual level, that is, their representations were based mainly on the physical characteristics of the mother. On the other hand, only 17% of the nonadopted children represented their mothers on this level.

Comparing Adoptive and Birth Mother Representations in the Adopted Children Sample

We compared birth and adoptive mother representations among adopted children by computing a within-subjects 2×3 MANOVA with repeated measures. The two independent variables were type of mother (birth mother or adoptive mother) and representations factors (Benevolence, Punitiveness, or conceptual level). Means and standard deviations can be seen in Table 1. We found a significant Type of Mother \times Representation factor interaction, $F(2, 102) = 5.35, p < .01$. Post hoc contrast analyses showed that birth mother representations were significantly less benevolent, $F(1, 51) = 24.83, p < .0001$, and more punitive, $F(1, 51) = 9.01, p < .004$, than adoptive mother representations. The differences between the conceptual level means of the representations of the adoptive and birth mothers were not significant. A representation of this interaction can be seen in Figure 1.

Adoptees' Maternal Representations and Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors

To explore the effects of the differences between the representations of birth and adoptive mothers on children's symptoms, we computed two new variables. We regressed the Punitiveness scores of the representation of the birth mother on the Punitiveness scores of the representation of the adoptive mother; the residual served as the Punitiveness discrepancy variable. We then regressed the Benevolence scores of the representation of the birth mothers on the Benevolence scores of the representation of the adoptive mothers; the residual served as the Benevolence discrepancy

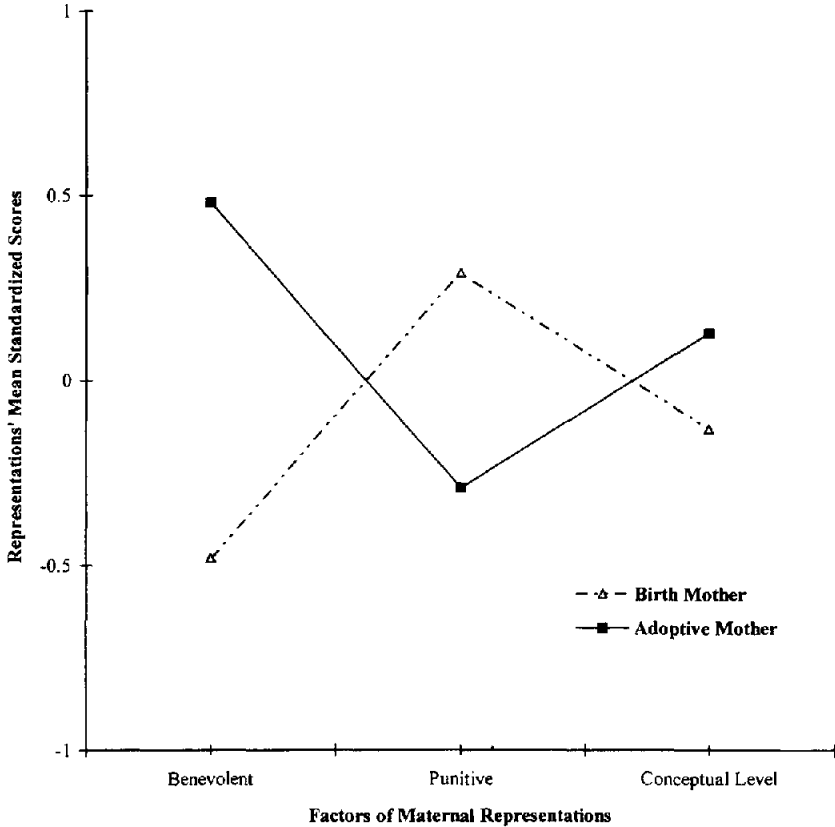


Figure 1. Interaction between birth and adoptive mother representations.

variable. These variables allowed the comparison of the effects of the differences in benevolence and punitiveness between the representations of the birth and the adoptive mothers as well as the computation of their interaction.

We then regressed hierarchically the discrepancy scores on the child's externalizing behaviors variable. Entered in the first block, the Benevolence discrepancy and the Punitiveness discrepancy variables contributed 15% to the explanation of the common variance, $F(2, 49) = 4.33$, $p < .05$; see Table 2): Greater discrepancy scores predicted higher levels of externalizing behaviors. The interaction between the discrepancy variables, entered in the second block, added 9% to the explanation of the variance, $F_{\text{change}}(3, 48) = 5.47$, $p < .05$; see Figure 2), beyond the effects of the Benevolence and the Punitiveness discrepancy variables. As can be

Table 2
*Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis of
 Adoptees' Externalizing Behaviors*

Predictor variable	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i> _{change}	Overall <i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	β
Step 1	.39	.15	4.33*	4.33*	2, 49	
Benevolence discrepancy						.28*
Punitiveness discrepancy						.37**
Step 2						
Benevolence Discrepancy \times Punitiveness Discrepancy	.49	.24	5.47*	4.97**	3, 48	.33*

Note. *n* = 52.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

seen in Figure 2, the lowest scores for externalizing behaviors were associated with the lower discrepancy scores on both the Punitiveness and the Benevolence factors.

In addition, greater Punitiveness and greater Benevolence discrepancy between the birth and the adoptive mother representations associate to

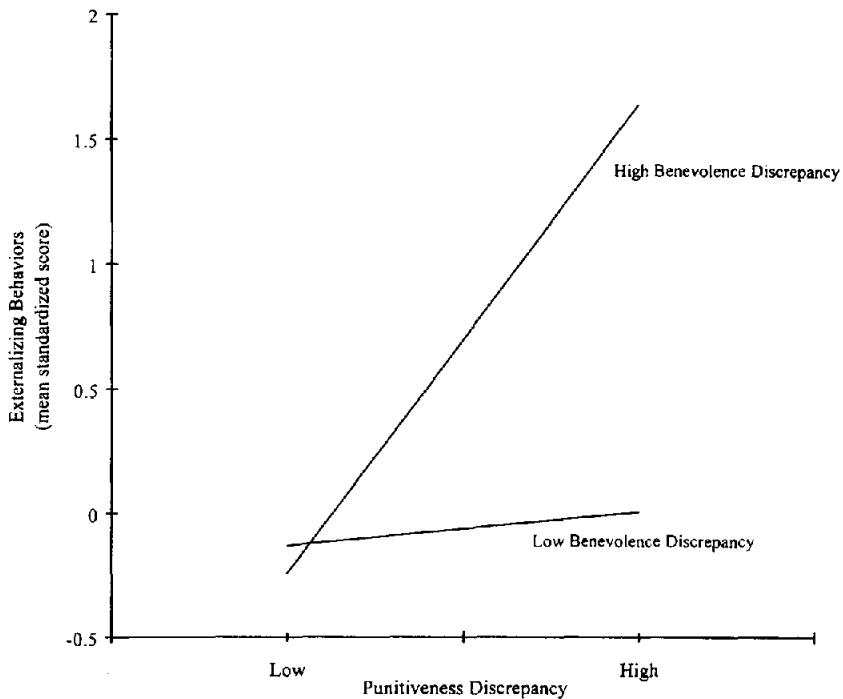


Figure 2. Interaction between Benevolence discrepancy and Punitiveness discrepancy among adopted children.

a conspicuous increase in the incidence of externalizing behaviors. However, when the difference between the Benevolence scores of the two maternal representations is small, the effect of the Punitiveness discrepancy variable on externalizing behaviors among adopted children is considerably moderated (see Figure 2).

In an additional analysis, we regressed the Benevolence and Punitiveness discrepancy scores on the internalizing behaviors variable. The effects of the differences in benevolence and punitiveness of the differences in benevolence and punitiveness of the maternal representations on adoptees' internalizing behaviors were not significant.

Discussion

We conducted a psychoanalytically oriented empirical study of maternal representations among Israeli latency adoptees. Corroborating the findings of other clinical and developmental studies of adoption, we found significantly more symptomatic behavior, including externalizing as well as internalizing behaviors. However, adoptees' scores remained in the normative range for Israeli nonreferred populations (Zilber et al., 1994). Nonreferred adopted children's relatively higher incidence of symptomatic behavior may therefore not indicate disturbance but suggest a higher risk for it.

In the present study, age at adoption was not found to affect the content and conceptual level of maternal representations or the incidence of externalizing or internalizing behaviors. Findings from previous investigations in this respect are equivocal. Although some studies point at earlier adoptions as securing a better adjustment (Frankel, 1991; Rosenthal, 1993), a recent meta-analytic study of adoptees' adjustment (Wierzbicki, 1993) has reported that the age at adoption does not explain differences between adopted and nonadopted children's overall adjustment. Perhaps the relevant variable to be studied in this context is the late-adopted children's experiences until they got adopted, and not just the age at adoption.

A main finding of the present study is that adoptees' maternal representations have a lower conceptual level and are less benevolent and more punitive than nonadoptees' maternal representations; this characterization is true for both the representations of the birth mother and of the adoptive mother. These findings suggest that having been given up may add a basic negative dimension to adoptees' world of representations. Moreover, our results suggest the possibility that adoptees' maternal

representations, mainly the representation of their biological mother, are still rather concrete and physical. In many cases, we found that these physical representations take in the self as a point of reference, reversing the usual developmental process: Parental representations originate in the child's self-image. Symbolic representations of the birth mother among adoptees seem to develop later than maternal representations among nonadopted children. One may speculate that adoptees' capacity to construe a symbolic representation of their two mothers may probably require a rather advanced elaboration of the loss of the birth mother.

The comparison between representations of adoptive and birth mothers within the adopted children sample reveals that the two have similar conceptual levels but that birth mother representations are significantly less benign than the representations of the adoptive mothers. These results reiterate previous findings according to which the conceptual level dimension associates with the individual's level of maturity and is relatively constant and independent of the content of the representation (Blatt et al., 1992; Priel et al., 1995). In addition, the finding that representations of the birth mothers are significantly less benevolent and more punitive than the representations of the adoptive mothers supports theoretical and clinical suggestions that the birth parent is conceived as containing the splitted negative aspects of the adoptive parent (Glenn, 1985).

The association found between latency adoptees' splitting on the basis of two maternal representations and externalizing behaviors corroborates basic psychoanalytic assumptions about the importance of an integrated internal world of representations for normal development, as well as the relations between splitting and aggressive behavior. Externalizing symptoms may constitute a defense against incoherent internal representations, as suggested by prior research with younger children (Fonagy, 1996); internalizing symptoms, on the other hand, did not associate with the two-mothers-based splitting in the studied sample of nonreferred children. However, note that any broad generalization about adoptees' adjustment should be qualified, because the meanings and connotations of adoption may vary in different cultural and historical contexts.

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